

the dance

Chicago Girl Handles Assignment In ILGWU

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Katherine Dunham Doing Things Well in Her Job As Instructor of the Dance; Would Found Theatre

THE task of gathering, labeling and pigeon-holing the Negro's contributions to the storehouse of the American folk dance is a laborious, detailed one.

The business of improving on primitive rhythms, expressing original ideas in the age-old modes of the dance; interpolating them into the spirit of modern trends, is still more difficult, but Katherine Dunham is meeting each challenge.

Who is Katherine Dunham? She's the slim, syrup-hued supple-muscled young Chicago woman who is dance director at Labor Stage down on 38th street between Sixth and Seventh avenues.

Katherine Dunham's reticence is her major failing. She seems influenced by the same code that keeps men of science and medicine from hiring press agents until a theory or discovery has been proved and found to be true. For that reason, the name, Katherine Dunham, has been absent from the headlines, while her work, monumental in character, continues.

Wants to Establish Dance Theatre

"My ambition," she told me quietly the other night when I chanced into one of the rooms of the Labor Stage theatre workshop, "is to establish a theatre of the dance in which we would utilize to the fullest extent the folk material of the Negro in the broader sense.

"By that, I mean," she went on, as she crossed a well-rounded calf over her knee and fumbled in a monstrous purse for a cigaret, "we want to express interpretations of the American as well as the West Indian Negro idioms of the dance. Idioms with which Negroes would be particularly familiar."

Since Katherine Dunham showed little desire to take the lead in discussing herself, I had to do all the asking. She told me she had been awarded a Rosenwald Foundation Fellowship in 1936 and another in 1937 on which she studied folk dancing in all parts of the West Indies. She said her studies—she went as an anthropologist since she was working on her master's degree at the University of Chicago—carried her into the British and French as well as the Dutch West Indies where she spent considerable time gathering information on the customs and terpsichorean vogues of the native populace.

Thirteen Artists In Her Chicago Company

Miss Dunham was awarded a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship in 1938 and she used it to further her studies of the dance.

A native Chicagoan, she still has her own dance group in that city.

"They were presented at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago on November 23, 1939," she said. "Thirteen artists comprise the group.

"They do a full ballet in every concert and also give dances which are popular folk and primitive rhythms."

Katherine Dunham came to New York last September and joined Labor Stage, the theatre workshop of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. Since that time, she has organized a Labor Stage dance group that includes 14 students from the ILGWU rolls; persons who come to the labor center for cultural recreation.

"They are to dance in concert with symphony and chorus at the Windsor Theatre on January 28," Miss Dunham said. "My regular dance group came to New York to give a concert at Steinway Hall and at the Young Men's Hebrew Association in 1938.