

THE MINEFIELD

1937-1947

When I think of Chicago in the late nineteen thirties, the Depression still at its height, in the summer the Southside and the Loop hotter than Trinidad in July but without the compensations, in the winter colder than Iceland, I think of how carefully I had to tread to keep from stepping onto some hidden trap and being blown into nowhere. My whole American experience, in Chicago before Cabin in the Sky, Broadway 1939, on tour 1939-40, the struggles to hold the company together in Hollywood and touring the West Coast, <sup>two years of touring the rest of the United States and Canada</sup> the departure of our Company for Mexico, <sup>after our tour managed by Sol Hurok</sup> 1945, to our return to Hollywood, to our departure from <sup>another</sup> a brief American tour to Europe in May 1948 seemed to be fraught with dangers, small and large, through which I had to lead an inexperienced company of dancers, singers and musicians, to say nothing of my inexperienced self. A Touch of Innocence and Island Possessed ~~aside from~~ Journey to Accompong and Dances of Haiti, tell of my life until I returned from the Caribbean. *The Minefield edges painfully*

*but with many rewards*



Dunham

Much of this book is about Chicago. I tried to write around it, to bury it

## PROLOGUE

in my unconscious, then found

turn

to

at that time

especially on hot  
summer nights

In this book I must look again at Chicago, which I loathed for many reasons; climate, poverty at the back door of riches, <sup>age stunts</sup> dense air pollution, ~~especially if the wind was blowing from the west~~, - the stockyards; slum and stockyards smells settling over the south side, ~~On the South side~~ racial discrimination, ~~essentially complacent middle class life style~~ <sup>Class pressure</sup> racism (still, these 40 years later), and political corruption. ( I

have only been aware in recent years of political corruption being a way of life in some communities. Chicago is one, East St. Louis where I am today, another, even my adopted magic Island, Haiti, has quite an active history of this way of life. <sup>the noise of the</sup>

<sup>elevated railroads, the L', and the crush of mid-town traffic.</sup>

\* But suddenly

And still Chicago had and still has some remarkable people. Ruth

<sup>doors opened far beyond my expectations.</sup>

Page and Mark Turbyfill had helped me get a school started in the bohemian artists' colony <sup>on Harper Avenue</sup> near the University before I left for the Caribbean. That was so far out of the way for our middle-class Negro\* students that Mark Turbyfill, poet and opera ballet dancer, and Ludmilla Speranzeva, formerly of the Chauve Souris and Kamerny Theatre in Moscow scoured the mid-town, (~~the~~ called the 'Loop' because elevated trains going from the ghetto Southside didn't for the most part continue north but made a loop and returned south. The same for trains coming from the northside and its suburbs), looking for space

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\* Only 'Colored' and 'Negro' were approved by the Chicago Defender and other Black publications, 'Black' came with the Negritude movement that swept Africa, the Caribbean and America in the '50's and '60's.



Dunham

*Available*  
by the hour in some *mid town* established studio.

(X) ~~Through these faithful friends~~ *Tourmanova* I met Adolph Bolm and Celli and Argentina and Karsavina and ~~Massine~~ *and through him* and others of the Ballet Russe and Kreutzberg and the American designer, Quill Monroe, ~~and others~~ *of the great artists* foreign artists, Chicago being the last stop for many of them in the United States. Most of these companies took a few days in Chicago before returning to the East Coast and Europe or South America. Many of their lead dancers or the stars themselves would teach in Chicago for three or four days, and of these lessons I took advantage, often going without meals to pay for them. Through Ludmilla's intervention, ~~however~~, some offered me scholarships which meant that I must have seemed to have some promise. But my ballet technique was weak and I suspect that some of them felt themselves to be in some way *contributing to* helping pay a debt to the downtrodden ~~Black~~ *negro* race as they saw it in America.

*Vera Monroe's introduction to Bolm, Shapiro, and others was a but Indian dances took me, where appearance was not rare.*  
*back to the west - Udey - Shapiro - where appearance was not rare.*  
Our small ensemble ~~was~~ *from before my field trip was reassembled and* finally taken in by Bernice Holmes, who at that time had a thriving ballet school. This must have caused a certain amount of disruption in her clientele, as most of her pupils, and their mothers or housekeepers who brought them to her classes had never dreamed of sharing a dressing room with a 'Negro' or 'colored person'. The exotic and prestigious combination of my patrons must have been of some help in finding other studios to rent an hour or two here and there. I have always had a warm spot for Vincenzo Celli because often we would run into each other on a freezing corner waiting for a studio to be free of its occupants so that we could rush to a warm dressing room, our allotted studio having cancelled out; *more than likely* his ~~because~~ of not being able *to start of last financially* to pay, mine chiefly because I added to *our* the classes more and more of those southside black ones who were to be the nucleus of the *future* Dunham Company.



Dunham

I did indeed have to step carefully over this particular minefield to retain the dignity that was my most precious holding, and still to find a spot where we could feel free and I could begin creating ~~from~~ on the mass of material I had brought from the West Indies.

I must in this book re-create the anxieties of Chicago and New York, a cross country tour with Cabin in the Sky, then Hollywood, San Francisco, Mexico, some films, the Hurok tour, and again New York. All of this ~~period was~~ heavily set with explosive devices of one kind or another. I learned to feel out ~~at first meeting~~ the theatre managers who would be ~~in spite of our pretensions~~ condescending, (fortunately not too many) the audiences which would be ~~at first~~ resistant to any extravaganza of overtures, the hotels where I might manage to stay because of a white husband or secretary, an entire white ~~staff~~ <sup>stage crew</sup>, this latter ~~actually~~ union dictated. Those were difficult times. I became more and more aware of arthritis in both knees, ~~especially if I was under stress, which was most of the time~~ but more and more alert and, strange to say, creative.

At first, true to character as portrayed in Touch of Innocence, I acted, even created, intuitively, and leaned heavily on my affective self. My life was made up of a mother lion's protectiveness toward the Company members, my turbulent romance with John Pratt, a guilty feeling towards my University professors and the Rosenwald and Guggenheim Foundations ~~for their lost investment~~ <sup>what I thought to be</sup> in my academic self. ~~At least I thought so~~ <sup>later</sup> and didn't realize until that Foundation boards and University professors often know more about us than we do of ourselves. They watched my career with curiosity and a kind of benevolent tolerance, even approval. They saw much in me which I didn't see in myself.



aware of requests for appearances not altogether to my liking. Incendiary parades and speeches were more and more frequent. I found one excuse or another to avoid too close affiliation with something about

which I knew so little and which seemed a camouflage for ~~potential~~ <sup>deception</sup> violence and hypocrisy. Where I would attend (rarely) parties in dismal ballrooms or candle lit artists' studios I noticed that the attempt to mix the components racially was undeniably heavy-handed. Rumor had it that the young white women dancing with and accompanying black young men, students or working class, were very often recruited from prostitutes and girl friends of so-called labor leaders. I was fastidious about with whom I danced, and about smells and food which, no matter where or at what price <sup>Refreshment</sup> admission, was invariably sandwiches

of unevenly cut <sup>black</sup> bread and bologna or salami, <sup>sausages</sup> with assorted pickled cucumbers and hard boiled eggs. The drinks were of course bathroom <sup>and soft and hard cheese</sup> confected gin or cheap red wine. <sup>or home made beer</sup> Somehow I could not equate the <sup>my noisiness did not keep me from getting heated because of us seemed to be conducting a</sup> ~~these noisy gatherings was not quite right for me, but not being politically aware, I did~~ ~~ferocious touting of Marx and Lenin with my beloved, sheltered~~ ~~I now~~ ~~know, halls of learning which I continued to frequent as often as possible~~ ~~we would dance at a fund raising party, and the remuneration was most welcome.~~ ~~sible.~~

One cause I embraced with open arms. That was the Spanish Civil War. I was proud of the Lincoln Brigade without knowing exactly what it was, and fervently practiced heel stamping and castanets as often as I found studio space to rehearse, and Vera Mirova to coach. The 'Spanish Earth' was my first ballet of protest against social injustice, otherwise known <sup>then</sup> as facism. The John Pratt costumes were in earth tones, brown <sup>black</sup> and grey, and in felt, the movement of which was fluid yet ponderous. Much of the music was recordings of 'La Niña de Los Peines'. The 'Saetas', lament of the prostitutes as the procession of the Virgin passed through the streets of Spain on Good



have been my introduction to the 'Kama Sutra' of Vatsayana. Meyer was and still is a fine writer. We saw <sup>Meyer and Maude</sup> them periodically in Chicago.

They frequented the Dill Pickle Club, our rival off-beat little theatre on the North Side. <sup>at much later they went to Sarah, then to</sup> ~~But much later they went to Sarah, then to~~ <sup>at the Gertrude had become a country they came to settle</sup> ~~Returned disillusioned, though I didn't find out the reason why~~

By now everyone in my acquaintance knew that I was suffering from arthritis, my life-long nemesis. As a child, going up and down stairs was frequently painful, and that may have been the reason why I invariably fell out of a tree as soon as I climbed it. In high school I was forced to give up <sup>high</sup> jumping, though I did hold a record <sup>approximately 4'8"</sup> for some time. At first, it was only pain in my knees, <sup>at any extra effort</sup> which I learned to support, (our family doctor, Dr. Williams, would now and then prescribe ~~an~~ a <sup>medly</sup> ineffective white powder, much in appearance like his antidotes for <sup>summer</sup> my malaria or my mother's headaches.) Finally, one morning in a high school gym class, an excruciating pain shot up the shin bone of my <sup>right</sup> leg when I landed on a mat under the bar. Reluctantly, I stopped high jumping, then, gradually, all the sports in which I had some indication I might excel.. But I would not give up dancing. Many times in Mark's or Ludmila's classes I would be roundly scolded for my dilatory plies.

I offered no explanation, thinking my silence would will away the pain, <sup>and feeling embarrassed by its handicap</sup> I don't remember how I met Max Obermayer, a Viennese dermatologist who

arrived with that influx of gifted scientists ~~in 1945~~ just before and during World War II. It may have been by way of Julian Lewis, a young research professor at the University. Julian Lewis I would have met at one of Bertha Moseley Lewis' (no relation) receptions as, with his green eyes, fair skin, krinkly light hair and two years' post graduate study in Paris, he was surely of the typical Chicago 'Colored'

but remained faithful to her Cuban theatre



very brusque, and only reasonably sympathetic. He must have realized that there would be no 'cure' but he was then experimenting with bee venom injected directly into the knee joint. I dreaded those bi-weekly sessions more than I have anything since, even a gold and fever treatment in Buenos Aires. It was a kind of unique pain, like slowly freezing on the corner of Michigan and Randolph in dead of winter waiting for a South Side bus with sidewalk and streets like glass and a hundred kilometer wind doing its best to push you out of whatever doorway you might be huddled in. *It ended in a sharp, feverish throbbing. Someone had decided that*

It seems that at the time of my treatments ~~bee~~ farmers suffered hardly at all of osteoarthrit~~is~~. Bee venom was extracted from a number of these insects and injected into the cartilage between patella, tibia and fibula. *unclustered agony* It ~~was~~ the concentrated stinging of a *hive of* ~~hundred~~ furious bees. My knees would swell, and they were hardly back to normal before the routine would be repeated, and while it may have done some good, I *would not* ~~cannot~~ until today *swear by it* ~~tell~~. This doctor ominously predicted that if I didn't stop dancing I would not be ambulant after two years. This spurred me on to greater effort, to more choreography for others, to more stretches and off-the-knee exercises to build support for my ailing connectives. I have always stressed <sup>an emphasis</sup> the inner rather than the outer muscle. At that it was not <sup>at</sup> all unusual to see *old school especially in the ballet* ballerinas with protruding shoulder blades, muscular arms and lower legs, and thrown forward chests and backward buttocks. These things have fortunately changed due to the revision in ballet teaching inspired to a great extent by George Balanchine. For me they are serious defects which detract from the economy and purity of line so necessary to meaningful choreography.



on campus, runny nose and all. I have always been astounded by Jimmy's prolificacy and talent for recall. In writing, he and Meyer Levin, from differing ethnic environments have covered thoroughly Chicago of that period and earlier, during the depths of the great Depression. *Now Studs Terkel.*

I don't think of myself as having been <sup>profligate</sup> ~~profligate~~, but Blum's Vogue and silk stockings were not why my brother had sacrificed from his own Rockefeller fellowship to help <sup>me</sup> through my non-working drought periods. He reminded me of this in no uncertain terms when he was forced to enter a sanitarium for a year for tuberculosis. Then I realized how aside from academic overwork he must have deprived himself of necessary food and medical care.

We were the prime motivators of the New Negro rage. ( It was more than a vogue). In Chicago we were inundated by <sup>Media - films and lectures and photographs</sup> waves from Paris and New York. Picasso and the cubists, Gershwin and W.C. Handy, Nancy Cunard and Noble Sissle - even without realizing it we were touched by them. More than that, <sup>felt ourselves to be</sup> we were the New Negro. We survived the shock of going from <sup>relative</sup> ~~total~~ freedom on our own territory <sup>to being refused service</sup> ~~in Mid Town restaurants~~. <sup>most</sup> in Mid Town restaurants (unless we frequented only those carefully reconnoitered.) Even on campus I felt totally estranged at lunch time at Ida Noyes Hall. There was one lunch room where people who knew each other both on and off campus gathered. It was always crowded, and I suspected when Frances and I braved the first frosty silence as we entered that we were pioneers, with the exception of my brother who, if he ever ate lunch, had such a following of powerful professors and high intellect peers that he did just about as he pleased. ¶ One

and I  
day when Frances were sharing a cream cheese and pimiento sandwich, her favorite, or an olive nut one, my favorite, with a small coca cola



Book I

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