

PEARL PRIMUS

Pearl Primus, the youngest of the four-star moderns, flared into a dancer overnight and literally leaped into fame. Since her first appearance at a Y. M. H. A. Audition Winners' Concert in February 1943, she has become better known to the lay public than many of her older colleagues. That appearance led to a long engagement at the New York night club, Café Society Downtown, then a two-week concert season with a large company at the Belasco Theater, another Broadway engagement at the Roxy with a larger company, and repeated performances in the Y. M. H. A. and Students Dance Recitals series, always to sold-out houses. In the fall of 1946, Ruth Page, ballet director of the Chicago Opera Company, invited her to play the Witch Doctor in *The Emperor Jones*. Early in 1947, the young woman who had intended to minister to her race as a physician, received the Newspaper Guild's Page One Award for her interpretation of Negro culture through the dance, interrupting her first transcontinental tour to attend the annual Page One Ball at the Waldorf-Astoria as an honored guest.

In the spring of 1948 she received a Rosenwald Fellowship for nine months research in Africa. She had applied for the Fellowship in order to keep her group together to do a ballet on James Weldon Johnson's "Go Down, Death" from *God's Trombones*. But it was not granted for that, nor at all until the president of the organization happened to see her perform some of her African dances at a concert in Nashville, Tennessee. When he learned that she had never been to Africa, he felt that steps should be taken at once, that the Rosenwald Foundation owed it to themselves and to the world to send her to study the authentic forms at their source. This fulfills the young scholar's ambition to compare and contrast for herself the types she has been studying (she had intended to get to Africa somehow, anyway) and to finish her thesis for the doctorate she is working for at Columbia University. Like Katherine Dunham, Pearl is an anthropologist.

Her primitive dances came out of books, reinforced by racial memory and a deep respect and love for the traditions of African

culture. Her modern dances come out of modern racial problems. It is through her knowledge of modern movement that she is able to give the basically allied primitive movement artistic form, retaining the native flavor while shortening and clarifying the dances. It is as a modern dancer that she is able to give impact to the contemporary theme—when that theme concerns her. When she tries to go outside the felt experience and create an abstract dance in modern style, as in *Trio*, with its regulation Statement, Counter-statement, and Conflict, she produces an exercise rather than a composition of any real urgency. She can toss off a humorous number like *Study in Nothing*, a solo dialogue with piano, or the duo, *Mischievous Interlude*, with its unexpected curlicue at the end, or a happy little *Folk Song*, irrespective of race, because humor and folk feeling are universal.

But there is no good in trying to separate her from race, and no reason for it. As an artist ambassador of her race, she has something that no white dancer can give, something it is immensely important for her to give. She is intensely Negro. Her skin gleams dark against the silver bracelets and dangling ear-rings she loves to wear. Her hair is a bush of black, which she delights in tying up in rutilant kerchiefs. Her big brown eyes, with their expanse of whites, look out from jungle distances. Her person recalls the far land of her remote ancestry. Her voice bespeaks the composed, college-bred American girl of today.

She presents the African, Caribbean, and American Negro rhythms with excellent stagecraft, but with less showmanship than Katherine Dunham, though she is a more powerful dancer. She does not glamourize her material, does not overstress the native pelvic movement, instinctively avoids personal contact with her audience. She does not over-refine her art as some Negro artists, inhibited by the stigma of racial inferiority, are wont to do. With dignity and pride (and perhaps some idealization) she sets forth the ancestral customs, the hopes, aims, and struggles, the inherent grandeur of her people. There is only occasional dullness in all this dignity. The performance is rife with rhythmic excitements and emotional undercurrents, except where she dwells too dotingly on tradition. Her stocky body, now copper, now bronze in the changing lights,

is extraordinarily supple for its build. The manifold muscular activity in the shoulders, the pulsations of the diaphragm, are something straight out of Africa; but the element of trained athleticism in her co-ordination, speed, and skill, is strictly North American.

The primitive dances, done with fervor and reverence, and presented as "Dark Rhythms," do not all have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Some of them drift and fade from view, giving an illusion of continuity. They are not, and could not be, authentic replicas of the tribal dances that last from six to eight days and nights. They are choreographic compositions derived from the tribal dances, lasting from three to seven minutes. Within that small frame (her ensemble and group works are longer) Pearl is careful not to breach the spirit of a single movement or gesture.

The modern "Dances of Protest" have form, originality, communicable content. They are quick with complaints against oppression, as well they may be. They reveal the aspirations of the advanced. They present her race in favorable aspects. A progressive step, and a novelty in the Negro arts (save journalism and literature) would be for her to use the modern dance as a means of racial criticism, pointing out the flaws of character and attitude that help to hold back the race, as other moderns have exposed the white man's evils in dances of social criticism. She would thus enlarge not only the general understanding of her people, but her people's understanding of themselves.

Over a late and long Sunday breakfast following her first Boston concert, Pearl told me how she became a dancer in spite of herself. She was born in Trinidad, but as her family came to the United States when she was three, and she has not since visited the West Indies, her knowledge of the Islands comes through hearsay. Her mother, whom she describes as tall and lovely, with an English accent, was such a beautiful social dancer that she was called the Queen. Her grandfather was one of the great voodoo drummers, so popular he was given the name "Lassido," a term of endearment. It was not until Pearl became a dancer that her relatives began remembering for her. Now they all look back to the old folklore, dancing out the steps and movements, telling her why this was done this way and that the other. She has had a few lessons and made a

few appearances with Belle Rosette. Otherwise her Caribbean background has been handed down to her within the circle of family and friends. It was in her blood, but it did not come out in dancing until she had trained for quite another career.

She was educated at Hunter High School and Hunter College, New York, graduating with a B.A. in biology and pre-medical sciences. For a time she took health education courses at New York University, and returned to Hunter for her M.A. in psychology. She expected to achieve an M.D. rather than the Ph.D. she is now working for, but the training was all turned to good account. The biology, pre-medical, and health courses gave her an understanding of the body; the psychology, of the mind; and the anthropology, of mankind. At college she was a track and field star, played badminton, tennis, hockey, la crosse, was indeed, an all-round athlete and sports lover. Even as a child at Sunday School picnics, she invariably won at racing.

When Pearl left Hunter, where no issue was made of color, she was shocked at the racial prejudice that confronted her. What she had heard about only vaguely became real enough when she tried to get a job as a laboratory technician and none was open to her. She tried and tried for jobs, any job, going constantly down the scale, till at last she landed one as a vegetable picker. And all the time she was working for her master's degree, she had a string of jobs, in factories, in shipyards, as welder, burner, riveter (it was wartime then), and in several other places and capacities. In 1941 she was employed in the wardrobe department of the National Youth Administration, and when they needed an extra for their part in the "America Dances" production, they took her on because there was nobody else around. She was very bad at first. She had had a little clog and folk dancing at Hunter High, a little modern dance at Hunter College, but her feeling for movement had not been awakened. Suddenly she felt a change of heart. It happened overnight. She gave her performance everything she had, and the audience singled her out for applause.

From that moment Pearl loved movement; but just as she got interested, the NYA Dance Group came to an end. Then she heard

of an audition for a working scholarship at the New Dance Group, and it meant working. It meant two hours of washing floors, cleaning toilets, and other menial labors, for two hours of instruction. Nothing daunted, she was one of thirty-seven dancers trying out, and one of the few to make it. She had no idea what to do at the audition, so, doing what came naturally, took a flying leap. The qualities of spontaneity, speed, and power were instantly recognized. Her first class baffled her completely. When she found the girls stretching and limbering, she wondered what it was all about. "Aren't you going to warm up?" they asked her. "Who, me?" she replied, "I don't need to warm up, I'm warm enough." She was hot with anticipation and did not know that dancers warm up their muscles before using them.

Later she studied at the Martha Graham School, the Y. M. H. A. School, and with Charles Weidman. But in the early days, at the New Dance Group (where she now teaches in addition to having a studio of her own), dancing was an aside to working for her master's and working for a living. Part of the time she posed as a photographer's and artist's model. The photography was all right. It didn't take long and she could wear clothes. The going got tougher when one artist asked her to pose in the nude. She did it, though, and came out none the worse. "It was not the stillness I minded, but the nudity." She learned the value of stillness, and how to make good use of it, preparing her lessons mentally or creating little dances for the fun of it, "never dreaming I'd want to become a professional dancer."

She was then engaged in research on primitive dances, an outgrowth of her student work, and also a balm for the wounds inflicted by racial discrimination. It gave her confidence and courage to learn of African culture; it gave her a sense of background, of belonging to an aristocracy of the spirit; for the Africans were a proud and honorable people, a rich and happy people, before the white man went in and exploited them, she said. She visited libraries and museums, consulting all the pictures available, taking two or three lines from one book and half a line from another, slowly piecing together a dance. She had to watch, in adapting her

source material, to keep each tribe and each dance of each tribe separate.

When a dance was finished she checked it with her African friends, many of them students at Columbia, who were not dancers but knew the traditions so thoroughly they could detect the slightest error. Then she checked the rhythms with the two native drummers—Norman Coker, a doctor and dancer, too, who came from Africa with Asadata Dafora, and knows all the intricacies; and for the West Indian dances, the Haitian, Alphonse Cimber, equally versed in Caribbean ways. They corrected and instructed her in the fine details, like keeping the fingers closed or open, the niceties of rolling shoulders, or skimming across the stage on the flat of one foot. Now Pearl could write a book—and may—or give a lecture—and does.

Her first dance, *African Ceremonial*, was made after the first six months of research. Its point of origin is the Belgian Congo. The legend is that once a year the priest appeared before the people and, standing on a high rock, sacred and remote, performed the fertility ritual until he fell, received the ministrations of special attendants, and vanished. Pearl recreated the legend, compacted it, preserving the virility of the movement while modifying the pelvic rotation. "It should have more drums," she said. "What you heard on one drum would in Africa have been played on three. One man would give the steady beat, the deep rhythm, boom, boom, boom, and the others would carry the more complicated rhythms in the treble. The smaller the drum the more treble it is, and treble notes, being shorter, can complicate more readily."

Pearl was a switchboard operator when the opportunity to present *African Ceremonial* arose. A fellow clerk who had seen her practicing techniques at odd moments, told her about the auditions at the Y. M. H. A. Jane Dudley fitted her into one of her costumes, and with the primitive and a dance to the spiritual, "Hear de Lans a-Cryin'," (and still with no intention of becoming a professional) she won her chance to appear in the subsequent "Five Dancers" concert on a joint program with Nona Schurman, Iris Mabry, Julia Levien, and Gertrude Prokosch. On that memorable

Sunday afternoon she repeated the *Ceremonial* and gave her first performances of the modern solos, *Strange Fruit* (a man has just been lynched), *Rock Daniel* (a lesson in jazz), and *Hard Time Blues*, all of which became famous.

Strange Fruit is based on the poem by Lewis Allen. It does not follow the verse or its rhythms, though until recently the poem was spoken by a narrator. In Boston, Pearl omitted the recited words for the first time, because she had nobody to speak them properly, and found that the dance went better without them. With no sound but the brush of her garment, the swish and thud of her bare feet and fists, the dancer hugs the earth, beating it, flinging herself upon it, groveling in it, twisting her sinuous body into fantastic shapes across it, now fleeing, now facing in timid fascination the invisible sacrificial tree which is the focus of the dance.

The spectator knows at once that this is a woman's reaction to a lynching after it is over. What woman he does not know. Pearl says it is not one beloved of the victim, but one of the lynch mob who had been screaming and shouting in animal fury with the rest. Then, the act accomplished and the satisfied mob departed, this one, drained of the poison, stays behind, realizing with grief and terror what has been done. It comes through to different people in different ways—the right way for modern dance. It is noteworthy that here she identifies herself with a white person, and has the acumen to see, even in a lynch mob, the possibility of remorse.

Hard Time Blues, to a record by Josh White, is phenomenal for its excursions into space and stopovers on top of it. Pearl takes a running jump, lands in an upper corner and sits there, unconcernedly paddling the air with her legs. She does it repeatedly, from one side of the stage, then the other, apparently unaware of the involuntary gasps from the audience. The feat looks something like the broad jump of the athlete, but the take-off is different, she tells me, and the legs are kicked out less horizontally. The dance is a protest against sharecropping. For me it was exultant with mastery over the law of gravitation, and the poor sharecroppers were forgotten. "Going up in the air does not always express joy," she explained. "It can mean sorrow, anger, anything; it all depends on

the shape the body takes in the air." So what appeared to be a triumphant assault was evidently a projection of defiance or desperation.

At all events, the dances had their first audience cheering, and in a Sunday article John Martin did some cheering, too. As a result of three eloquent paragraphs, Pearl wrote him asking if he thought she should become a dancer, and with his encouragement made the decision that has by so much enriched the American dance. The next step was into the night life where jaded sophisticates get a kick out of innocence. As later in young Susan Reed, with her zither and sweet folk-singing, then in Pearl Primus, with her freshness and exuberance, her speed and elevation, here was a new thrill for them. In this foreign atmosphere, Pearl remained unspoiled and unspoilable. She was not even tempted to smoke a cigarette, and continued to drink milk in preference to cocktails. It was a better job than scrubbing floors or answering a telephone, and it gave her more time for study, research, and composition.

Magic is discounted by most educated Negroes today, she says. They feel she is going back to superstitions they have outgrown and that it is a mistake to dwell upon them. She feels that she is showing the beauty and dignity of the African traditions, which should be preserved as a record of racial culture and as a part of the American Negro's background. It is a muscular culture, she admitted, mainly a singing and dancing culture, but not wholly a physical thing since it expresses the deepest and sincerest beliefs of a people. In a land whose villages may at any time be raided by animals or an enemy tribe, where raging storms may blow the huts away, or where nomadic tribes must fight for subsistence and fend off beasts of prey, it is natural that physical prowess should be highly esteemed. Something of this she declares in her *Dance of Strength*, in which the warrior beats his muscles to display power, a custom common in the Sierra Leone region.

From more benign territory comes her *Dance of Beauty*, celebrating the Watusi tribe, who live peacefully in the hills of the Belgian Congo and grow to be seven feet tall, or, with some assistance, taller. Their heads are bound from babyhood to give length to the cranium. They wear long robes and high headdresses. The

women, not unlike their sisters under the skin, are willing to undergo a little discomfort for the sake of fashion. They bear twenty pounds of iron on each foot to train themselves to move in the correct stately manner. "These are the elegant people of the earth," Pearl cried in jubilant voice. (She is a short girl.) But the dance, even when done *con amore* by Pearl herself, is inclined to be static with stateliness, and does less justice to the people than her ecstatic description of them. Trouble, like sin, makes art more exciting.

The Negro Speaks of Rivers, to the poem by Langston Hughes and music by Sarah Malament, is one of Pearl's best. It is beautiful with undulating rhythms over deep-flowing currents of movement that wind into whirlpool spins. She pivots on one knee or circles the stationary bent leg with the free leg, leaning her body in a long slant away from the traveling foot. The pale soles flash, the brown toes clutch and grasp, the dark fingers spread wide, the whole body sings:

I've known rivers ancient as the world
And older than the flow of human blood in human veins . . .
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

Her chaste intensity and passionate imagination carry to a sweeping finish. She has no hesitancy in assuming the male as she does the white identity. In *Shouters of Sobo*, to a Trinidadian chant, she is again the priest, with loquacious body and swinging bell summoning the people to the forest rites. *Te Moana*, a study in African rhythms, *Myth*, a Melanesian Pygmalion and Galatea, symbolical of creation, *Caribbean Conga*, and *Afro-Haitian Play Dance*, often done by her supporting dancers, are full of changing rhythms, including the syncopation that fathered jazz.

Pearl is not choreographically limited to the solo or small ensemble. She expanded *African Ceremonial* into a group ritual for the Roxy show. She re-staged, in Helen Tamiris's absence, the Dahomey tribal dance which she originally led, as well as the white group dances for the touring *Show Boat*, which, by the way, she considers at least two decades behind the Negro times. She cannot approve of artistic segregation. She believes the Negro artist should be accepted as an American artist, allowed to speak as one human

being to another, regardless of race. She cannot forget the wrongs done her race, yesterday and today. In her own people is the inevitable common denominator of humanbeingness for her. From that denominator she goes out to all people. Her solo, *Motherless Child* (to the sung spiritual), with its querulous search for comfort, is dedicated to all the lonely ones in the world. *Chamber of Tears* ("No, there is no music. Only a beating in my breast . . . even like the ticking of a clock"), to a poem written by herself, is, though it could hardly exclude racial suffering, an incantation of world sorrow.

In the summer of 1944 she visited the Deep South, where "the Spanish moss hangs like a crape over everything, is a fungus that creeps through everybody," to see what she could see of Negro dancing there. It was all in the little rickety old churches, to which the workers go after the long day in the fields (time and a half overtime without extra pay) for recreation. They have no hills to hide their dances in as the West Indians do, so satisfy their atavistic longings under the sanction of the church. The religion in both places is a superficial coating of Christianity over the inbred pagan superstitions, and the movement can be traced straight to African origins.

Now, as in plantation days, the preacher is the core of Negro society. He is the witch doctor of the South. His voice supplies the deep rhythm of the drums. He hardly bothers to articulate but goes on, after a few words, with a wordless drum-beat intonation that incites the people to frenzy. He himself dances. Pearl saw one preacher doing a perfect modern back-bend to the floor. The people go wild, half in the belief that the spirit of the Lord possesses them, half in surrender to barbaric impulses. They tremble all over. Tears stream down their faces. They spring into the air, shooting their arms up as they go, and, at the peak of the jump, begin to curve them down close to the body, hands meeting in a stab at the breast with the descent. The ascent is not of joy but of anguish over their sins (an un-African activity) in African movement.

The people are confused by the conflicting symbols. The sign of the cross looks to them like a simplification of a similar gesture which in Africa is symbolical of calling down help from a specific

power. They are bewildered by the act of kneeling, for their ancestral blood tells them one never kneels to the gods, one dances and sings to them. (Pearl has expressed something of this conflict in her *Santo*.) Then there are snake-like undulations on the floor, in worship of Damballa, until the crawling bodies actually take on the semblance of snakes to the self-hypnotized participants. It is mass mesmerism and you can't help being drawn in, Pearl says. More than once she found herself on the mourners' bench without knowing how she got there; and the people did look like snakes.

She visited sixty-seven of these shabby little churches, as well as open-air revivals and "spur home" prayer meetings, in Georgia, Alabama, and South Carolina. Not daring to take notes ("It would have meant death"), she took part in the services instead. She lived with the sharecroppers and tried to work in the fields with them, but on their frugal diet could not stand the long hours of unremitting toil. Her imagination had gone ahead of her in her attempt to put the lot of the sharecropper into *Hard Time Blues*, and so far, this and other early compositions that came out of books and out of hearsay, are her best. The Southern experience saddened and deadened her for a while. Facts are harder than fantasy. But the fact that the Negro remains a physical person, an ignorant, superstitious person where he is still suppressed, given the lowliest and cheapest kind of labor, denied his rights as a free man (and it is not only in the South), is the very stuff of the fantasy that quickens and reveals.

In the late fall of 1947, Pearl was starred and ill-starred in a badly managed Negro musical called *Calypso* in Boston and *Caribbean Carnival* in New York. She was utterly miserable in it, and all but buried alive. Her ballet, *Zinge*, was too concert for its surroundings. The group action, though pierced with the outcries that are as much a part of native dancing as the drums, was not as rousing as the informal passages she had choreographed for the production. Her devotion to authenticity kept her standing on a tree-stump, immobile except for sporadic gestures in the arms, until a last-minute stomping dance of violent muscularity that was soon over. *Roookoombay* replaced *Zinge* in New York to no better effect. At the last Boston matinee the star, who had done less dancing than any-

body, was seen punctuating the finale curtain with a series of high jumps like exclamation points. She might as well have been a trained seal. Fortunately the show closed in short order and Pearl's contractual chains were broken.

She was overflowing with creative ideas, her big work, *Go Down, Death*, still in the future. Squatted on my living-room floor in dungarees and one of her brother's flannel shirts, she told me about it. Her round face radiated the celestial glories, her strong, stubby hands embraced the skies, as she quoted the verses about Death's downward ride "past suns and moons and stars," and then, with Sister Caroline in his arms, "up beyond the evening star, out beyond the morning star . . . On to the Great White Throne." The Preacher was to remain unseen, so that the audience could create him. She knew exactly what she wanted to do. She had been studying choreography with Doris Humphrey, and it had opened a whole new world of movement to her. She had learned how to explore a phrase and extract every possible variant of it before letting it go. Doris counselled her not to be too held by tradition, but to make a freer translation of the primitive into the modern, in her own way.

"Doris says I can make this a wonderful thing if I really create the movement."

But Pearl was also studying ballet—"to give the figure of Death a feeling of lift."