

Payback Time

Dollars From Diva to Diva

By [Thomas F. DeFrantz](#) Tuesday, Jan 23 2001

Better late than never! The [Doris Duke Charitable Foundation](#) has given the [Library of Congress](#) \$1 million to support the [Katherine Dunham](#) Legacy Project. According to LOC rep [Vicky Risner](#), the project will "purchase archives from Dunham, preserve the materials, and expand educational programs at the [Dunham Museum](#) in [East Saint Louis](#), Illinois." Risner and [Caribbean Cultural Center](#) founder Marta Vega—a Dunham devotee—did the down and dirty of writing the grant application. Vega says, "The Legacy Project will define the scope of Miss Dunham's work, and see if it can be brought together." A tall order. Kennedy Center honoree Dunham, now past 90, has done it all: Broadway, Hollywood, a Ph.D. in anthropology, college teaching, several books, activism. She created a seminal dance technique, directed a company, and became a priestess of the vodun. Friends Harry and [Julie Belafonte](#) recently transplanted her to Manhattan. Insiders say the move was crucial.

In East Saint Louis, Dunham was bedridden. Now she's walking a bit, lecturing, and writing again, halfway through an autobiography titled *Minefield*. She's finished 400 pages. "Looking back, I see how I was stepping on very dangerous ground." Truth. In 1951, after she made *Southland*, a ballet about lynching, the [U.S. State Department](#) tried to shutter her company. "We remained standing in spite of walking through the minefield."

A million dollars won't buy a shortstop. But don't expect complaints from Vega: "We hope the grant, which only covers a portion of the work to be done, will encourage other funders to come forward." For Dunham, this payback is personal, since Duke was a friend. "Doris would travel to see our shows and take dance lessons. So this is a double pleasure for me." Miss D., the pleasure is ours.