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"Dance Observer"

GRAHAM DANCERS GIVE NEW WORKS

Crowded House Greets Performance.

By IRVING KOLODIN.

To a passerby, the jostling and milling that preceded entry into the Mansfield Theater last night might have signalized the unscheduled appearance there of the newly inaugurated President. The better informed, however, realized that this was merely the trial by fire preliminary to viewing the very much scheduled appearance of the uncrowned queen of the American dance, Martha Graham. It is not probable that many of those present would have exchanged privileges with the day's visitors to Washington.

For Miss Graham was showing two new works, and there was no assurance that the performance would be repeated. As the evening developed, there was evidence that one of them, at least, was worth the effort needed to reach one's seat. This was a lengthy fantasy based both on the poetry and the personality of Emily Dickenson, entitled "Letter to the World." Out of a melange of spoken lines, bits of scenery, period costuming (New England of the last century) and movement, Miss Graham has evolved what might be reasonably described as the first authentically American ballet. The cloistered, mystical atmosphere of Dickenson's poetry is reproduced with almost baffling directness, in five scenes that flow irresistibly from one to the other. Some of the best movements that Miss Graham has yet designed, both for herself and her company, were to be found in the sequence called "The Party," and the level thereafter was consistently high. If "Our Town" was a landmark for the American stage, "Letter to the World" is equally one for its dance.

So far as performance was concerned, there was equal virtuosity in the preceding "El Penitente." But (as the title suggests) this was a subject as remote from a native orientation as "Letter to the World" was close to one. It is, rather, another evidence of Miss Graham's attraction to primitive cultures, this one associated with the practices which still flourish, according to the program, among "the Penitentes of Old and New Mexico." The work is as parched, dry and sun-baked as the locale of its origin and, despite the fine performances of Erick Hawkins, Merce Cunningham and Miss Graham, decidedly limited in its interest. The program ended with "Every Soul Is a Circus." Among the assorted merits of the evening was the consistent quality of the music used by Miss Graham, composed by Louis Horst, Hunter Johnson and Paul Nordhoff. Mr. Johnson's score for "Letter to the World," indeed, had imaginative values beyond mere rhythmic support of the dancing.