

Dance

TAKING OVER New York's plush Ziegfeld Theatre, Martha Graham and her dance company were seen in a limited engagement during which two new works were featured. The first was Erick Hawkins' *Stephen Acrobat*, which promptly proceeded to throw the New York dance experts into an outside loop. John Martin of the *Times*, one of the country's most outspoken Grahamites, curtly dismissed it as "pretty embarrassing. Better skip this one." The *Tribune's* Walter Terry, also one of Graham's supporters, swallowed hard a few times and delivered himself of a few guesses, concluding that it was "a confusing bit of choreography." Irving Kolodin of the *Sun* opined that the allegory of original sin might have played a part; beyond that he could not state.

Only two characters are present—Stephen Acrobat and The Trainer. Both speak, but only Erick Hawkins, as the acrobat, dances to music by Robert Evett. Symbolism is rampant; one of the props is a Noguchi tree, in which is snugly fitted a big, red apple. The acrobat seizes that apple with grim results. On my program I find scrawled the following lines that were spoken: "As golden as the air you're swinging in;" "The tree has a yellow voice," and other such bits of poetry. When the apple is eaten, Hawkins signifies distress, rolls on the ground, and lets the audience know that "his swing is broken." Upon which the trainer sepulchraly declaims: "Stephen, you fool, you chose to eat from the logical tree of knowing good and evil." The apple is returned, and more stage business follows.

It's all very confusing, but the general idea might be that Stephen represents one who does not know when to leave well enough alone, while the trainer is a sort of Greek chorus mixed with an overlooking god, or guardian angel, or some such thing. Whatever the ultimate meaning, the dance is too obscure in symbolism to be entirely satisfactory.

Errand Into the Maze is more forthright. Also danced by two people—Martha Graham (the choreographer) and Mark Ryder—the action concerns itself with "that errand-journey into the maze of the heart in order to face and do battle with the Creature of Fear. There is the accomplishment of that errand, the instant of

Martha Graham

Season

Presents Two

New Works

triumph, the emergence from the dark." This faintly suggested the legend of the Minotaur, and when Ryder came out dressed in a mask resembling Picasso's Bull of Guernica, there was no doubt. Miss Graham proceeded to choreographic battle with the monster, which eventually obligingly succumbed. It was exactly what one would expect from the program hint; and while not the most subtle work or one of Graham's most interesting creations, it had the virtue of intelligibility. Gian-Carlo Menotti's score was serviceable as far as the action went, but judged abstractly it was full of Stravinsky formulae and other modernistic rhythmic clichés.

Other dances that were presented included *Dark Meadow*, *Letter to the World*, *Appalachian Spring*, *El Penitente*, *Deaths and Entrances*, *Herodiade*, *Punch and the Judy*, *John Brown*, *Every Soul Is a Circus*, and a revised version of *Cave of the Heart*. This writer, not overly taken with Graham techniques, viewed them with mixed emotions and a mental leit-motif from Gilbert and Sullivan: "And everyone will say, as you walk your mystic way, 'If this young man expresses himself in terms too deep for me, why, what a very singularly deep young man this deep young man must be.'"

At best Graham's dances bring real intensity to their subject matter—an intensity that throws illumination upon facets of life and emotion. That is the function of all great art; but Graham does not maintain that level with any great degree of consistency. Despite her flair for the theatre—her choreographic ingenuity, her skill in handling group patterns on the stage—her message inclines toward subjectivity to such a degree that it is often lost even to the specialist. Over-subjectivity can lead to works of art like *Finnegan's Wake* or the *Cantos* of Ezra Pound, where the strain involved in puncturing the meaning may not be worth the artistic result. *Dark Meadow* and *Stephen Acrobat*, among others, are works of that calibre.

Graham's work has incessant symbolism, something that can greatly irritate after a spell. The program notes give an idea: "an errand journey into the maze of the heart." Why not merely an errand, or a journey? "A legend of the heart's

life." ". . . a woman waits with her attendant. She does not know for what she waits; she does not know what she may be required to do or endure." "The action of *Dark Meadow* is concerned with the adventure of seeking. This dance is the re-enactment of the Mysteries which attend that adventure: Remembrance of the ancestral footsteps; Terror of loss; Ceaselessness of love; Recurring ecstasy of the flowering branch." "The scene is laid in the shadow world of her imagination." And so on.

There is little relief in tension, with one humorless, grim dance following another. Even the so-called light ones, like *Punch and the Judy* or *Every Soul Is a Circus*—dances that send Grahamites off into absolute howls of belly-laughter—impress more callous listeners as no different, essentially, from the more serious ones, outside of an occasional burlesque turn of the wrist, shrug of the shoulder, or lift of the eyebrow. The perpetual symbolism, moreover, is only too often encased in a pretentious hedge-row of second-rate poetry, and the philosophical content is nervous, on the borderline of abnormal psychology.

Classic ballet idealizes the woman; Graham makes her sexless. In her probings and symbolism, woman becomes less an object that is than one who stands for something that has little to do with woman *per se*. Resting uneasily in the back of many observers' minds after a few evenings of Graham dancing is a notion that much of the philosophical-psychiatric content is not only adolescent but limited in expression by the lack of plastic freedom resulting from Graham strictures of movement. Which statement will probably bring down the wrath of all true believers, who believe that modern dance has solved all problems of movement. They will claim that such an opinion shows a complete lack of sensitivity toward a profound excursion into the subconscious, together with an utter lack of sympathy for what Graham is trying to do—and they could very well be correct.

—H.C.S.

Scene from Graham's *Deaths and Entrances*.

