

THE DANCE

By WALTER TERRY

Martha Graham

CAMBRIDGE, Mass., May 3.—A new dance work brought to a close the Harvard University three-day symposium on music criticism when Martha Graham presented "Night Journey," commissioned by the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation in the Library of Congress, at the Cambridge High and Latin School this evening. The composition, with a score by William Schuman, is the latest (and perhaps the last) in a cycle of Graham compositions deriving their inspiration from the myths and drama of ancient Greece. "Cave of the Heart" had shown the influence of the "Medea" story and "Errand Into the Maze," though not dealing directly with the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, had found its roots and form in the legend.

"Night Journey" is more specific in its link with Greek drama, for its major characters, Jocasta, Oedipus and the Seer, are quite definitely the characters of Sophocles's "Oedipus the King." It is this close identity with a specific drama which suggests that "Night Journey" may be the last of the Greek cycle. Miss Graham is wont to reach for universal elements in drama and to avoid the use of definite characters. I would guess that the very closeness of "Night Journey" to "Oedipus the King" augurs a shift to a different source of dance stimulus.

The work is not, of course, a movement version of the Greek drama. The action, though physically placed in Jocasta's room, actually occurs in her heart at that point "when she recognizes the ultimate terms of her destiny." As she clutches the cord with which she is to hang herself, her mind rushes back over the incidents which led to her doom and her body reflects in its anguished movements the horror and tragedy which stabbed the spirit of a woman cursed to be, unwittingly,

the wife of her own son and the mother of his children.

As Jocasta, Miss Graham at first gives violent expression to the tragedy of her predicament. A leg sweeps high, the figure is suspended for a moment, the limbs part and the body simultaneously sinks and falls to the floor in majestic despair, in full prostration. A tortured run along tortuous paths of escape, trembling hands beating the air in frantic pleas to the deaf gods, all actions of appeal and of evasion fail and Jocasta pauses to lash herself with memories of the past. The Seer enters to convey his prophetic



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Choreographer of a new dance work, "Dark Journey"

message, trembling as he indicates a dread destiny, and then comes Oedipus to Jocasta, first as her child, then as her hero-husband and finally as the self-blinded cause of her tragedy. Throughout the action of the principals, the chorus, Daughters of the Night, mirror immediate tragedy, augur the remorseless rush of doom.

Miss Graham has created a fine and stirring work in "Night Journey" and her own performance as Jocasta is generally a brilliant one with but passing weak spots which will be cleared up with further performing. Erick Hawkins makes a handsome and tragic Oedipus and dances in less studied manner than normally, permitting his actions to spring easily and logically from the compulsions of the drama. Mark Ryder is splendid as the Seer, for he makes the figure at once inexorable and sympathetic, a link between the decrees of fate and the hopes of man.

Mr. Schuman's score provides a dramatic base for the choreography and serves, admirably to augment, to accent and to echo the course of dance action. The stage designs of Isamu Noguchi also lend form and purpose to the action. I particularly liked the glittering yet distorted bed which focused upon and symbolized the nature of the evil tragedy which beset Jocasta and Oedipus. "Night Journey" has not, on the basis of a single performance, attained its intrinsic excellence. There are weak portions, a blurred transition or two, but they are minor and will undoubtedly be solved by the tightening up process all new works undergo. The audience cheered the premiere lustily and heartily applauded Miss Graham and her company in "Dark Meadow," which opened the program.

and sculpturally clear.

At its climax Jocasta and Oedipus are frozen in a half-seated crouch, bound up in a tangle of rope. The Seer then divines the oracle, Oedipus frees himself from Jocasta. He snatches up an omen—a great painted eye—reads in that his identity, pierces his own eyes and rushes out. The chorus, in a dance of farewell, also abandons Jocasta. Alone, she runs in circles, her body heavy and low like a wounded animal's. Finally we see her again in the light outside her room. With great quietness she winds the rope around her neck.

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By this compression Graham reduces the massive action to terms she can control. But with fresh invention she also creates the atmosphere of a heroic-primitive age—in the stiff violence, the shuddering contractions, the majestic repose of her chorus.

The choric dances, stately or frenzied, are her best foil. As

Jocasta she herself is moving in her humaneness and her restraint. But Hawkins, although he has a certain proper air of impetuous haste, is only Oedipus in embryo. The careful groupings are also at times made ragged by the intrusion of Ryder's large bulk which seems to eat up space. And Noguchi's décor, in its whited sepulchre style, is naive and heavy. With a delicate twist of gauze that reaches from floor to flies he does ingeniously provide an antechamber for the bedroom. The other fixtures and props, however, are over-size, macabre toys.

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But the pace and brilliance of the dance drama satisfy us and for these we are largely in debt to Schuman. Unlike Undertow, which demanded program music, Night Journey has a unified thematic growth. Its tensions mount steadily by blocks of sound that seem in their effect on the nerves intolerable until they are finally resolved. Its patterns also give Graham exactly what her dance style needs most—abrupt, harsh rhythms, staccato phrases that are brief and insistent, long-held steely notes against which she seems to lean and swell. Schuman draws wonders, in volume and variety of sound, from the chamber orchestra. Among contemporaries his talent for large-scale theatre is impressive indeed. Here it recalls the Strauss of Elektra.

Night Journey was preceded on the program by Dark Meadow, with Graham, Hawkins and May O'Donnell in their usual roles.

Both works, conducted by Louis Horst, had the advantage of support from players of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. How stimulating and rare it is to hear the music so clearly articulated—and how much better we are then able to see the dancing.

This clarity was a special pleasure for the distinguished musicians and scholars gathered in Cambridge High and Latin School on May 3. Many had never seen Graham before. They followed her with deep curiosity. It should be recorded too that they gave Dark Meadow, a myth of Graham's own invention, their close attention. But Night Journey, with its universal appeal and universal challenge, won their excited approval.