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MARTHA GRAHAM GIVES NEW WORKS

'Letter to the World' and 'El Penitente' Are Danced at Mansfield Theatre

By JOHN MARTIN

Martha Graham, assisted by her dance group, made her first appearance of the season last night at the Mansfield Theatre in a long, full and exciting program. Before an audience that filled every square inch of standing room, after many applicants had been turned away from the box-office, she revealed two works new to New York, "Letter to the World" and "El Penitente," and repeated that penetratingly tragic farce, "Every Soul Is a Circus," from last year's repertoire.

In all of them her personal performance was a matter of incomparable artistry in a style which can no longer be called dance, as that term is conventionally used, but must be described as a kind of surrealist theatre. If surrealism is anything but a fancy school of painting, if it is a delving into the hidden truths that underly the surface of things and the projection of meanings that defy rational statement, this is assuredly surrealism in its best sense.

Presented Last Summer

Both the new works were originally presented last Summer at the Bennington Festival. Since then "Letter to the World" has been completely made over much to its advantage. It needs still another session of remaking before it can be said to live up to its full potentialities, for it is a tremendously experimental work, but even in its present shape it provides a memorable experience. Dealing with the life, and more especially with the legend, of Emily Dickinson, it seeks to project the essence of the woman by means of a montage of her emotional experience. When it is successful, as it is a great part of the time, it is extraordinarily successful, capturing the flavor of some of poet's most radiant lines and making them unimaginably poignant.

The first section, "Life Is a Spell," has an intangible loveliness that carries one with it into this strange world concocted partly of reality, partly of imagination, in which symbols mingle with fairly explicit gesture and dance movement is punctuated by the spoken word. "Gay Ghastly Holiday" possesses some macabre phrases that are likely to remain long in memory, and the penultimate section. subtitled "Leaf at Love Turned Back," is a tremendously moving presentation of a tortured soul conquering itself.

Merce Cunningham Solo

The middle of the work is weak, partly because Miss Graham herself is offstage much of the time and partly because it is overlong. From the solo by Merce Cunningham called "Dear March, Come In," though it begins charmingly, through the "fairy queen" and the picnic episodes, there is little that could not be entirely omitted with advantage. Certain group passages both earlier and later seem commonplace and even parts of solos by Miss Graham and one long duet with Erick Hawkins toward the end are dullish amid so much that is eloquent and beautiful. Also on the debit side one would put Hunter Johnson's musical score. But even with such reservations there are so many moments of exquisite intuition that "Letter to the World" becomes an important work and a uniquely original accomplishment.

Besides Mr. Hawkins and Mr. Cunningham, fine assistance was provided by Jane Dudley as the Ancestress and by Jean Erdman, who read the glowing Dickinson verses with admirable simplicity and fitted them charmingly into the choreographic pattern.

"El Penitente," with music by Louis Horst, is a mystery play built around the ritualistic material of the sect of that name which flourishes in the Southwest. Couched in a deliberately naive and oversimplified style of movement that is chiefly patterned pantomime, it achieves its ends with fine clarity and conviction.

All in all, an evening of high distinction and deep artistic satisfaction of a wholly adult nature.