Miss Graham At Mansfield in Dance Recital

Two New York Premieres Mark First Broadway Appearance of Season

By Walter Terry

A cheering audience which jammed every available cranny of the Mansfield Theater greeted Martha Graham last night on her first Broadway appearance of the season. Two New York premieres distinguished the occasion in the forms of "Letter to the World" and "El Penitente." Both were presented at the Bennington Festival last summer, and both have been changed since that time. "Letter to the World" is the major work, and I am glad to report that since last summer it has been transformed from a baffling and dull work into an oftentimes exciting theater piece. The story of Emily Dickinson is its theme, and in it Jean Erdmen speaks the poetic lines of Emily Dickinson which all the world may read, and Miss Graham dances the wild and restless hidden self of the poetess. It is a richly dramatic idea and one that is admirably suited to the intense style and rather mystic mood which mark the Graham dance.

In color, music and movement the work is built on contrasts, clashings and fusions. At one moment Miss Graham will represent a mood of pure hilarity and then turn, shuddering, to a desperate fear of death. As a background for this rampant emotionalism in a vivid woman, there is the gracious and reserved setting and actions of well-bred New England. Miss Graham is nothing short of magnificent in the role of the secret self, and she draws clearly and strikingly the hidden fears and passions and moments of breathless beauty which united in the making of a great, articulate poet.

But, although "Letter to the World" is strides ahead of where it was last summer, it still needs more revision, and drastic revision. This time it should not be so hard to alter it, for it is purely a matter of length—it is almost twice as long as it should be. First of all, it is not possible to sustain such a series of unrealities for so long, and, secondly, the dramatic impacts are so many that it leaves an audience exhausted before the work is near finished, thus dissipating the really exciting finale of the ballet. As it stands the dance student could, perhaps, enjoy all of it, but the average audience member would find it infinitely more rewarding if each episode were sliced to a minimum.

"El Penitente" is a beautiful ritual dance, unfolding the story of those Penitentes of our Southwest who dance each season the Crucifixion. This theater piece is a highly stylized treatment of this celebration, and the figures of Mary, Christ and the Penitent move with the stiff terseness that suggests that this same ritual has been danced for so long that all its gestures have been set by time and custom. Martha Graham danced the sweet and tender Mary Virgin, the alluring and later penitent Mary Magdalene, and finally the sorrowing, compassionate Mary Mother. Erick Hawkins was splendid as the self-flagellating Penitent, for you could see him as a simple peasant boy honored at being chosen for the one who bears the cross and feels the bruises which once his Saviour felt.

The evening closed with "Every Soul Is a Circus," Miss Graham's hilarious and sometimes tragic view of a silly frustrated woman who wants to be the starring attraction in her particular world, but is constantly thwarted by fate, the ringmaster of her circus world. Erick Hawkins and Merce Cunningham danced well in this work, but first honors went to Martha Graham for a characterization that evoked everything from chuckles to guffaws. Louis Horst directed the evening's music, and Arch Lauterer was in charge of staging.

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