

MARTHA GRAHAM AT THE CROSSROADS

By ROBERT LAWRENCE

THERE was opportunity last Sunday afternoon, at one of the regular subscription events in the dance series of the Lexington Avenue Y. M. H. A., to see Martha Graham and her troupe in two of their most representative numbers, "Every Soul Is a Circus" and "Letter to the World." Miss Graham has become something of a performing rarity this season, limiting her appearances to subscription cycles at the upper and lower ends of town in educational auditoriums. The exorbitant cost of giving a dance program within the Broadway area has brought about this absence, in addition to, undoubtedly, the difficulty of training a large new male wing for her company to replace those dancers who have been called into service.

No matter where she plays (and the Kaufmann Auditorium of the Y. M. H. A. happens to be a distinctly pleasant place), Miss Graham is worth traveling to see. She remains one of the most picturesque and radiant dance personalities of our time, a woman whose intensity projects to the farthest corner of the hall.

It has been announced that Miss Graham is at work on a new project. This would be well, because the two works in which she appeared last Sunday seem no longer durable within the present metamorphosis of dance. They are, rather, concert nuggets passing for theatrical enterprise—like doing Handel's "Messiah" with costumes and scenery—and represent a state of indecision in Miss Graham's career.

"Every Soul Is a Circus" offers a devastating, self-admitted satire on her own technique without pointing the way to any positive solution; and "Letter to the World," inspired by the poetry and personality of Emily Dickinson, is anti-theatrical in its lack of progressive action, despite an outward flavor of the proscenium. It is for Miss Graham to fix now the line along which she wants to move—a continuation of abstractionist concert style; the dance drama of Loring and De Mille; the contemporary theater-ballet of Doris Humphrey; or a new direction of her own. The flaws to be found in last Sunday's performance lay in their indication not so much of a trend as of an evasion, of a convenient shore upon which long-distance swimmers perch themselves for rest rather than ride out again among the waves.

In "Every Soul Is a Circus," Miss Graham follows a dangerous method for audiences when she advances symbols that do not symbolize. The argument of the work is clear enough—the story of a vain woman who desires, within her life, to be solo performer, heroine of a love triangle, partner in an amorous pas-de-deux, and who ends her career without a crumb of the cake she had wished to have and eat. Now this is, despite a comic depiction of life as a circus ring and of the protagonists as ringmasters and clowns, an essentially tragic story.

Through a mode of treatment that most often satirizes neither ideas nor situations but dance technique itself, Miss Graham confuses her audience by leading them to expect symbolism of plot and thought where no such means are intended. And, in her employment of a well made and clever but brittle score by Paul Nordoff, she has divested "Every Soul Is a Circus" of the last possibility of a curve—as opposed to angles—which its stark choreography so sorely needs.

"Letter to the World" poses a more courageous problem in its attempt, largely unsuccessful, to unite poetry and dance. The spectacle of a member of the cast, who recites at intervals the text of Emily Dickinson, rushing onto the stage breathlessly, declaiming a few verses at high tension, and then speeding off into the wings while the next danced section begins, suggests certain episodes from Shakespeare's Ophelia or portions of the recent "Ladies in Retirement" that hardly go with the somber outward mood Miss Graham has tried to generate. Aside from the matter of impression, which is always surface, the use of poetic extracts rather than plot does basic harm to "Letter to the World" in that it swells the architectural scheme beyond natural proportions. There is no conciseness in the work. Evocative power, yes. Distinction, of course. Everything to do which Miss Graham turns her hand is bound to have quality. But in the difference of effectiveness between "Letter to the World" and Antony Tudor's "Pillar of Fire" (the latter of

which has been built on the identical New England theme of frustration, only pointed up by narrative form), there lies the gulf between concert-bound and theatrical dance. The former work is perhaps superior in taste and discretion; but it lacks dramatic cogency.

Although Miss Graham's pacing in individual dance is perfect, her over-all timing seems fallible. "Letter to the World" is twice again too long for its most complete measure of eloquence. This length arises from a lack of plot

concentration, the substitution of a poetic for a dramatic scheme, the absence of subordinate characterization—only the Woman and Her Ancestress being clearly drawn. For the rest, we have shifting groups of dancers whose functional purpose is clear but who seem to be more at the mercy of the poetic text than at the compulsion of a vital, through-folowing force.

Miss Graham's two leading men, Erick Hawkins and Merce Cunningham, lend her able support, but they seem—particularly Mr. Cunningham, who rarely varies from one work to another—to be more in the nature of abstractions than people. When the human impulse runs as deep as the basic idea of "Letter to the World," with its craving for experience, the result calls for characters of flesh and blood—even when they exist only in the mind of the heroine. The dry, unfruitful score for "Letter" by Hunter Johnson underscores more imperatively than Nordoff's far better music for "Every Soul Is a Circus" the need of curve and amplitude (as an epidermal covering for sinew) which the Graham repertoire must answer, in common with every other theatrical form, if it is to hold the stage.

These strictures apply to choreography. Miss Graham's actual dancing last Sunday adhered to the finest standards. The company, though necessarily reduced from its consistency of last season at the Guild, performed very well. Production details were handsomely thought out and mounted. But now that Miss Graham is in the theater, apparently to stay, the writer would be happiest in seeing her become of the theater.

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