

Moderns In Review

By GEORGE BEISWANGER

FIRST PERFORMANCE



Martha Graham appeared Dec. 26 at the 46th Street Theatre, N.Y.

Martha Graham

A packed house gathered at the Forty-sixth Street Theatre on the night after Christmas to welcome Martha Graham and her Dance Company to Broadway for the first time in two seasons. Besides the comedy ballet, *Punch and the Judy*, in an excellent performance, the program consisted of *Salem Shore*, a new solo dance, and *Deaths and Entrances*, first presented last summer at Bennington College in a rehearsal showing.

Salem Shore, "a ballad of a woman's longing for her beloved's return from the sea," is lyric in feeling and style. It taps a vein of poetic, even "sweet" dance. There is strength of design in the shifting, eventually tragic moods of the dance, brought into focus on bits of scenery and props—fragments of a house and a ship and a twisted circle of sea-drift in whose coils love's fate is bound. Words, spoken behind stage, release each succeeding variation in feeling or would have done so, had they come clearly over the microphone. For *Salem Shore* Paul Nordoff has written a fine score, and it was nicely played by the small ensemble of piano, woodwinds, horn and bass fiddle, directed by Louis Horst.

Deaths and Entrances

To judge from a single seeing, *Deaths and Entrances* is one of the most extraordinary works of Martha Graham's career and the major event of the dance

year so far. If for no other reasons than the brilliance of its invention, its fecundity of dramatic gesture and the released virtuosity with which it is composed and performed, it is going to be a "must" for dancers and dance-wrights — no matter of what persuasion—whenever it is performed.

What *Deaths and Entrances* is and does beneath its astonishing surface will, I think, form the object of discussion, argument, study and commentary for many days to come. I am just as sure of the work's importance as I am aware how unclear an indication of its substance I can give here.

The dance stems in idea from the lives and intense relationships of the Bronte sisters, but journeys on its own into the mysteries of the heart. In its cast of ten there are still three sisters and they are shut up within the walls of an ancient house. Their flame burns fiercely but the heat is turned within where hopes and fears, longings and rages continually recreate an inner, almost mythological world to the flame flashes backwards to the children the sisters once were, the experiences that once brought agony or joy.

No Fashioning of Pain

One thinks of *Letter to the World*, but here there is little distilling of bitter into sweet, little fashioning of pain or happiness into outer art. Instead, the memories, the longings, the fantasies attach themselves by "imagination kindled at antique fires" to things about the house — a shell, a goblet, a vase, a couple of chessmen — fetiches around which the terrible obscurities of the inner life coagulate to flash and glow.

If in *Pillar of Fire* Hagar had been left with her frustrations, if the house had closed about her, if all she had to cling to eventually were her sisters and the magic tokens of "the remembrance of things past," that would be *Deaths and Entrances*.

In short, alongside this work, the Tudor masterpiece is a fairytale any aunt might feel free to tell her nieces. I think one will have to go beyond O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*, to James Joyce, to the Steinbeck

of *To an Unknown God*, to the symbolist poets or to Freud himself to find anything comparable in substance and treatment. Add the fact that *Deaths and Entrances*, with all the darkness of its material and the obscurity of its movement, is a "bright" work, a genuine "legend of poetic experience" as it bestows emotions upon things—and you have something!

Not Easy to Understand

It is only truth to add that the new work will not win its way readily. It is not easy to understand, and when understood, it will disturb. There is little formal dance as such in the work. Its line is more continuously and consistently dramatic than anything else Martha Graham has done. And there are no spoken words to call the turn. It is going to need the repeated attention given as a matter of course to the larger and more difficult works in literature, music and the other arts, and that seems difficult, if not impossible to arrange.

For *Deaths and Entrances* Hunter Johnson has written a score more nearly adequate than the one he did for *Letter* but still cantankerous or empty in spots. It was effectively played by the small orchestra.

The stage was simply and effectively set by Arch Lauterer; Edythe Gilfond's costumes were at her usual excellent best; the lighting was finely handled by Jean Rosenthal. And the work was superlatively danced by the whole company, which was in splendid form for the entire evening.