

REVIEWS OF THE MONTH

Dance Observer, June-July 1944

Martha Graham and Dance Company

National Theatre
May 7 to 14, 1944

DANCE history was made in the week of May 7 to 14 when Martha Graham and her company gave eight superb performances at the National Theatre. With Miss Graham, the soloists, and the group at their superlative best, such a retrospective show of eleven of her dances, dating from 1930 to 1944, could not have been other than memorable. For audience and reviewer alike, it is an occasion for scanning the fourteen years' repertory, dance by dance, yet at the same time certain matters concerning the current season must get into the record. Let us begin, then, with the factual report.

In the chronological order in which they were composed, the following dances comprised the week's programs:

- 1930 *Lamentation* Zoltan Kodaly
Martha Graham
- 1931 *Primitive Mysteries* Louis Horst
Martha Graham and Dance Group
- 1935 *Frontier* Louis Horst
Martha Graham
- 1937 *Deep Song* Henry Cowell
Martha Graham
- 1938 *American Document* Ray Green
Martha Graham, with Erick Hawkins, Merce Cunningham, Ethel Butler, Marjorie Mazia, Sophie Maslow, and the Dance Group
- 1939 *Every Soul is a Circus*
Paul Nordoff
Martha Graham, with Erick Hawkins, Merce Cunningham, Jane Dudley, Nina Fonaroff, and Group
- 1940 *El Penitente* Louis Horst
Martha Graham, Erick Hawkins, Merce Cunningham
- 1940 *Letter to the World*
Hunter Johnson
Martha Graham, with Jean Erdman, Erick Hawkins, Jane Dudley, Merce Cunningham, Sophie Maslow, Nina Fonaroff, Marjorie Mazia, and Group
- 1942 *Punch and the Judy*
Robert McBride
Martha Graham, with Erick Hawkins, Jane Dudley, Ethel Butler, Angela Kennedy, Merce Cunningham, Nina Fonaroff,

- Pearl Lang, John Butler, Robert Horan, David Campbell
1943 *Salem Shore* Paul Nordoff
Martha Graham
- 1943 *Deaths and Entrances*
Hunter Johnson

Martha Graham, with Sophie Maslow, Jane Dudley, Ethel Butler, Nina Fonaroff, Pearl Lang, Erick Hawkins, Merce Cunningham, John Butler, Robert Horan.

Even more than other modern dancers, Martha Graham has heretofore eschewed revivals and repertory. When *American Document* was presented earlier this season it represented practically the first such occasion, and a welcome one, even though as a complete work it has never stood at the head of her achievements. The script has always seemed cumbersome and the setting and costumes which have been devised for this latest presentation are, to say the least, on the side of the obvious. Nevertheless the reappearance of *Document* was hailed for the valid reason that its magnificent group choreography is in a style which has been disappearing from more recent compositions. Certainly the total disappearance of any style or form of which Miss Graham is so uniquely the master is unthinkable.

More notable is the restoration to the concert stage of the earlier *Primitive Mysteries*, which still stands as one of the finest works that has been created in the modern American dance idiom. Kinetically ecstatic, visually luminous, the impact of *Mysteries* derives from uncompromising economy of its design. Once we thought of it as stark, yet eloquence fairly bursts through its stylized patterns.

A particular high light of the spring season was the evening of May 10 when Miss Graham held the stage with the revival of the three solos, *Frontier*, *Lamentation*, and *Deep Song*. Once *Lamentation* too was regarded as stark. The acute concentration of its movement constricted the breath. Today we find it romantic, and it moves us still. With every gesture, with every taut fold of costume, Miss Graham has literally molded the monumental lineaments of grief.

To many, *Frontier* seemed to mark a new direction, a warmer, more intimate spirit, a more "understandable" Martha Graham. For its lyricism, for

its evocation of shimmering space, for the novelty of its decor and the haunting quality of its music, it was loved on the night of its first presentation as it has been loved through countless repetitions ever since. But it is never safe to predicate a "change" in Miss Graham. Following the new tenderness in *Frontier*, *Deep Song* was again as tempestuous and distorted as any of its forerunners, as *Primitive Canticles*, *Frenetic Rhythms*, *Act of Piety*. Springing from the beginning of the war in Spain, its theme has not cooled with the years nor Miss Graham's impassioned externalization of it. Somehow in this revival *Deep Song* seemed more penetrating than ever before.

The lovely "ballad," *Salem Shore*, again shares in the lyric quality of *Frontier*. Its spaces open out to sea instead of to the plains, instead of prairie fence a ring of driftwood holds in a woman's heart. Beside the earlier numbers, the new solo of 1943 stands as a development rather than in contrast. Its abstraction, which may be missed upon the first seeing, is not the plastic abstraction of *Lamentation* but rather the subjective abstraction of *Letter to the World*.

Drawing something from the same source of inspiration as the earlier *Mysteries*, the lore of the Southwest, *El Penitente* was composed for trio in 1940. Although its treatment differs in nearly every respect from that of the group dances, it has the same ingenuous directness, its two-dimensional quality giving it a remoteness which protects the action of its characters from too literal an interpretation. The elaboration of its properties and decor for the current presentation, however, robs *Penitente* of the unaffected innocence which at first made it wholly believable.

As for the later works, what more can be written? *Circus* and then *Letter*; *Punch* and the *Judy* and *Deaths and Entrances*.

Seeing them all in one week in this way seems to establish once and for all that *Circus* and *Letter* have at least not been surpassed by *Punch* and *Deaths and Entrances* which followed them. *Circus* retains its freshness to the last shrug. *Punch* must take its place as a slightly less successful sequel, though goodness knows, to assign to second place a comedy so scintillating is scarcely deprecation.

Of the two serious works, *Letter to*

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the World remains, to this reviewer, the greater. More evocative, more rounded, more powerfully climaxed, its episodic form permits interludes of humor touched with poignancy, which only serve to sharpen the inevitable pace toward tragic fulfillment. The unfolding of *Deaths and Entrances* is no less absorbing upon re-seeing than at first, but it is seen more clearly to reiterate a single note, build up a single dominant atmosphere and underline a single compelling mood. This is not to gainsay its subtleties but rather to acknowledge the expertness with which they are designed to sustain the inexorable temper of the piece.

It would be impossible to leave a consideration of the eleven dances in the spring repertory without an official bow to the brilliant company, and especially the several soloists, who danced them. We should mention in particular the performances by Jane Dudley, Jean Erdman, Erick Hawkins and Merce Cunningham in *Letter to the World*; by Sophie Maslow and Mr. Hawkins, and a greatly improved reading by Mr. Cunningham as Interlocutor in *American Document*; by Misses Maslow and Dudley and Messrs. Cunningham and Hawkins in *Deaths and Entrances*. Nina Fonaroff all but stole the show, as usual, in *Punch and the Judy*; in addition she revealed a flair for other than child roles when she appeared for the first time as the First Arenic Performer in *Circus*. Sophie Maslow and the whole augmented group gave a sensitive and moving performance in *Primitive Mysteries*.

A small orchestra conducted by Louis Horst was excellent on nearly all occasions. Jean Rosenthal lighted the production effectively. Credits for decor and artistic collaboration for several of the dances are due to Isamu Noguchi and Arch Lauterer. Costumes, most of which were by Edythe Gilfond with a few by Charlotte Trowbridge and Louise Brune, were exquisite.

L. B.