

Martha Graham Back in High Dance Form

By LOUIS BIANCOLLI.

New York's biggest dance fever to date spread last night to the National Theater, where Martha Graham's Dance Company opened a repertory season in brilliant form. A gathering of inner-sanctum votaries greeted her warmly.

Grouped on the program were three Graham classics, *El Penitente*, *Deaths and Entrances*, and *Punch and The Judy*. Tonight's program contains *Salem Shore*, *Every Soul Is a Circus* and *Miss Graham's* masterpiece—*Letter to the World*.

Launching a whole repertory on a nightly schedule would have appeared rash gambling some seasons back, that is for the Graham brand of diversion. But the marked groundswell of art appreciation has caught up even with *la danse moderne*.

Freshly Creative.

While the highly personal, at times baffling Graham idiom, will never equal Russian ballet's prompt appeal, growing numbers of dance devotees are finding the once arid-seeming style easier to take. There wasn't an out-of-

place giggle in the house last night.

Naturally Miss Graham's sketches, even spare pantomime like *El Penitente*, based on old Mexican rites, aren't always clear down to last elbow angle. Not all of Miss Graham's meaning—literal or poetic—comes through, at least never all at once.

But, then, most fresh creative art is like that, and Miss Graham is one of our foremost creative artists, as dancer and choreographer both. Having forged her style and found new ways of showing conflict and fusion in art, she makes no concessions. That's the spectator's job.

Last night's renderings again stressed the improvisational side of the Graham technic. Not that the dances were impromptu. Far from it. Every detail was prob-

ably rehearsed to strictest precision. Yet, the illusion of spontaneity was strong.

You got the impression that every member of the company was so completely en rapport with idiom and mood, each intuitively felt the rightness of even the crudest-seeming shuffling and hopping in the sum-effect of Miss Graham's plan.

Awkward, Beautiful.

Yet, even without granting the premises, anybody—choreographic illiterates included—could sense the flashes of real beauty in last night's program. Miss Graham's own lyric genius in molding line never seemed freer. Patterns never snarled up. Fade-outs resolved like music.

Of course, Miss Graham's own dancing is the best excuse for her idiom. Maybe I should say the best justification. Working out little webs of imagery through myriad twists and turns of anatomy never appeared strained. In fact, ordinarily grotesque posture seemed frozen music at times.

The rest of the troupe—including Erick Hawkins, Merce Cunningham, Sophie Maslow and Jane Dudley—all proved worthy of Miss Graham's company. Music, decor, costumes again showed the smooth fusion of factors typical of the Graham school at its best.