

By Margaret Lloyd

Martha Graham and her Dance Company filled Boston's Jordan Hall for two performances recently, and to some observers what they saw was so much hocus-pocus, to others a set of cryptograms they couldn't quite make out, and to still others it was poetic imagery in movement. Or, for all this writer knows, there may have been those to whom it was just movement.

Now it must be admitted that to see Miss Graham's dances for the first time, or after a long lapse of time, is a fairly startling experience; to be asked to step cold from her concert pieces of seven or eight years ago straight into her most advanced theater works, as Boston audiences were, is something of an order. Whether due to audience apathy or resistance, or to dancers' travel weariness, at the first, a Friday night performance in a musical subscription series, the disappointment was general.

But at the free-lance Saturday afternoon performance all was changed. Then was felt the old electric atmosphere, Miss Graham at her most glorious, and the company in top form. This was less a matter of technique than of the spirit. It is when through the physical medium the spiritual values are illumined, when more is felt than is seen, and when the audience, held in gracious unity, responds, that the poetry speaks.

Miss Graham presents her images of mood and emotion without labels. She gives all the clues she wants the public to have in her rather sketchy and often poetic program notes. There remains, however, the common denominator of fundamental human experience. From this common denominator, the writer, a humble layman who by no means knows all the answers, is setting down what she saw or thought she saw (it is not possible to describe all she felt) for her fellow laymen, realizing that her view may be quite unlike that of her neighbor, may be quite contrary to the artist's intention.

The Boston programs included two of the three works commissioned, in both music and choreography, by the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation for the Coolidge Chamber Music Festival at Washington last October—"Appalachian Spring" (score by Aaron Copland) and "Mirror Before Me" (score by Paul Hindemith). The third work, "Imagined Wing" (score by Darius Milhaud) seems to have been summarily dismissed. "Appalachian Spring," seen at both performances, won all but the most diffident with its serene and glowing simplicity. Its influence was benign, like that of lyric poetry. Mr. Copland called his score simply "Ballet," but he filled it with American folk flavor and the lyric spirit, as well as music of fountainless freshness and clarity. Miss Graham did not call her part of the work a ballad, yet

in its singing cadences, in its secret laughter, it is like a ballad of the American folk.

Isamu Noguchi's décor suggests a small house in the wilderness, with front steps and a single rocking-chair to make it home. There's a side porch bench that in due course serves for a semblance of church service, and a fence that indicates pastures and woodlands—all America—beyond. The costumes, designed by Edythe Gilfond, spring from the colors of earth: scaling in tone from dark of the soil, to light of grain growing in the sun.

Into this frontier setting the characters enter slowly, one by one: The Revivalist (Merce Cunningham) in solemn garb and preacher's hat; the Followers (Nina Fonaroff, Pearl Lang, Marjorie Mazia and Yuriko) in livelier hues; then the Pioneering Woman (May O'Donnell) dress softer, warmer, and large sunbonnet, and finally the Husbandman (Erick Hawkins) in light workmanlike plainclothes and the Bride (Miss Graham) in a lovely ripe-wheat colored gown.

The characters take their places in various attitudes on stage. As the action unfolds the groupings constantly change. Those who are not dancing assume new positions of inaction. One of the marvels of the Graham style is the ability to sit or stand immobile for long periods. The result is a beautiful restfulness in the atmosphere of the whole piece.

Now the enchantment, or puzzlement, or irritation (according to the beholder) begins. Is the Pioneering Woman the Bride's mother? Scenes of tenderness between them say she is. She is strong and handsome and does some extraordinarily difficult looking things, involving balance and extensions. Her face is alight with a kind of exaltation and love. At one juncture she seems to be comforting her son-in-law. Perhaps she is no particular mother, but an embodiment of deep, compassionate (and non-possessive) mother love.

No mistaking the Revivalist's volcanic dance of exhortation. His wild leaps and bounds, his frenetic contortions, are probably part in earnest, part showmanship—like certain revivalists of the past. But he points a finger at the bridal couple. Is it of warning, a righteous denunciation of sin, or a Puritanical denunciation of joy? Later he places a benedictory hand on the bridegroom's shoulder. All's well at the end. The Followers surround him, fondly

attending, admiring. They dance their unusual measures with zeal.

The Bride has a dance of joy, a very ecstasy of joy, a joy so big she cannot contain it. She whirls and runs and blows phanton kisses. Gently, carelessly, she rocks her arms. Is it her dream of the child to come? She bends to the ground as if playing with



Martha Graham and Erick Hawkins

in Miss Graham's Composition, "Appalachian Spring"

little children. She is radiant in her womanhood. She bears within herself all fruitfulness. She is teeming with life. Demure beside her husband, she dances with him, calm, happy. But joy mounts high in her again. She swirls into the air as he swings her by the hand. He lifts her (in ballet lifts with Graham adjustments) and the lifts radiate their happiness. He has an odd assertive theme of his own that he repeats now and again.

There is a poignant darker passage. While the other characters are turned, back to the audience, heads bowed in prayer, the Bride dances alone, a troubled, questioning dance. What doubts and fears assail her? Is it suffering, or the dread of suffering? Is it self-integration after self-searching? Is it individual prayer?

At the end the characters depart as they entered, slowly, one by one, leaving the Bride and the young Husbandman alone together in their house, she seated in the rocking-chair, he standing behind her, hands held over her shoulder in delicate embrace. It is right out of the family album, yet there is grandeur in this moment of sculptural dignity and repose.

We have seen the building of a home, the building of a community, the building of America. But what we have seen we do not know. It is afterwards, when overtones and undertones come clustering into memory, that we begin

to discover something of what we have seen and felt.

This is the first of two articles. The second will appear in an early issue.