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Graham Dancers Applauded

By A. J. WARNER

Martha Graham and her Dance Company gave a performance in the Eastman Theater last night that belongs in the ranks of the controversial—its partisans found it brilliant and Miss Graham, an artist of remarkable powers of evocation, while to others the evening meant little or nothing.

If ballet is, in essence, the most abstract of the arts that work in the medium of flesh and blood, the most remote from actual life, as the late A. B. Walkley, the English critic, said of it, then Miss Graham's creations are certainly the greatest abstraction in the present world of the dance. Each of the three numbers on her program could mean anything any spectator chose to see in it, or nothing at all. They deal entirely with intangibles, and their admirers may claim that what they signify literally is unimportant; that they have formal values which make them inevitable in their circumstances, as one writer has remarked of them. It is easy to pay tribute to the precision and the technical prowess shown by Miss Graham and her assistants, but I confess that this highly stylized form of ballet is not my dish of tea.

Macabre Stuff Elusive

"Deaths and Entrances" is probably the most famous work presented last night. It is described as "a legend of the heart's life" and it is concerned with those things which are impalpable, quite mad, violent and unrealistic. I found it difficult to follow and elusive. Those who like it maintain that its emotional impact is tremendous. The action takes place in a room and in the corridors of an ancient house and it deals with three sisters "doom eager" to fulfill their destiny. It is macabre stuff and full of what might be termed symbols.

Miss Graham's choreography and her dancing were, in their own unique field, virtuosic, and though it conveyed no meaning to me I shall not soon forget the moment when she hides a blue goblet behind her skirt and suddenly plays it as if it were part of a game of chess. If the language of this ballet spoke to one intelligibly, as no doubt it did to many in the audience, it would probably be the equivalent to a thrilling psychological melodrama, peopled with tortured spirits. But as it was I was the tortured spirit, unable to decipher an unrationalized dream, yet aware that it had a strange power. May O'Donnell and Pearl Lang were the other sisters, and they, together with Erick Hawkins and the various members of the company, gave Miss Graham highly trained and expert support.

Uncanny Polish

"Appalachian Spring," with music by Aaron Copland, which was commissioned for Miss Graham by the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation, has to do with the celebration of Spring—by a man and woman building a house with joy and love and prayer; by a revivalist and his followers in their shouts of exaltation, and by a pioneering woman with her dreams of the Promised Land. Here again was the very essence of that which is abstract, its surface details vague, its quality intangible, yet vivid, and danced with uncanny polish by the company, headed by Miss Graham and including May O'Donnell, Merce Cunningham, Nina Fornaroff, Pearl Lang, Marjorie Mazia, Yuriko and Erick Hawkins.

"Every Soul Is a Circus," which was given as the final number, turned to satiric comedy and proved the least obscure and the most popular offering of the evening, the choreography deft, and the performance full of imagination and cleverness. Miss Graham was the Empress of the Arena and Erick Hawkins appeared as the Ring Master. Louis Horst is the musical director of Miss Graham's organization.