Graham Dancers Prove Puzzle At Eastman

Jan. 30, 1945

By NORMAN NAIRN

MARTHA GRAHAM and her ~~dance company~~ came to the Eastman last night and left a large audience completely bewildered by her first two offerings, "Appalachian Spring" and "Deaths and Entrances." Presumably it was their introduction to the modern dance, the new form as evolved by Miss Graham. If there was one person in the whole auditorium who understood what it was all about, diligent search failed to unearth that person.

Fortunately, for the sake of this reviewer and 99½ per cent of the audience, there was some relief and something to understand about the finale, "Every Soul Is a Circus."

The toughest assignment a reporter can have is to be asked to write about something of which he is absolutely ignorant. So let's not call this a review, please! Rather let's consider it as the impressions of a highly puzzled and baffled layman who pretends to be no expert on the art of the dance.

This wasn't ballet—it was the MODERN DANCE. I approach the task of comment with fear and trembling, for I confess to knowing absolutely nothing about this kind of art—if it be such, and presumably it is—nor could I find anybody who considered it anything but futile. I'll be excoriated for that by the dance modernists, no doubt, those with whom such dancing is a cult, similar to the cult of artists whose paintings can be hung upside down or crosswise without making any difference.

Let me grant that Miss Graham is a superb artist, and in FDR's words, repeat it again, and again and again. Grant also that she was given extraordinary support by Erick Hawkins, Merce Cunningham, May O'Donnell, Nina Fonaroff, Pearl Lang, Marjoria Mazia, Ethel Winter, Yuriko. I think her program here was a terrible mistake. We are accustomed to, and love ballet, which carries a story, but this seemingly pointless and endless stuff, however artistically done, doesn't register. It was the first time in all the years I've been covering concerts and recitals that people in numbers walked out on a performance.

And the music! Aaron Copland was the composer for "Appalachian Spring," Hunter Johnson wrote the music for "Deaths and Entrances," and Paul Nordoff for "Every Soul Is a Circus." Maybe I've been brought up wrong, but I always supposed that music for the dance should not distract. This was all dissonant, austere, angular, and stood out like a collection of sore thumbs. A whole evening of it was just too much to take. Modern dissonance was bad enough, but when the orchestra didn't even play in tune, it sounded pretty primitive.

I presume the performance of Miss Graham and her assistance could be called brilliant and vivid. I presume the movements were expressive, but of what I wouldn't know. Also I suppose it was all stimulating, fascinating, but I wouldn't know about that, either. It must have been a terrific lot of hard work, but for what? We're really not educated up to it, poor, provincial people that we are and too much devoted to the obvious. But, please, no more modern dance—at least for a long while. We've not been educated to it.

ROCHESTER, N. Y.
Democrat and Chronicle