

# THE DANCE

By EDWIN DENBY

## Appalachian Spring

MARTHA GRAHAM, that always extraordinary artist, opened a five-day repertory season with her company at the National last night, in a program that included the first local performance of "Appalachian Spring," a new work the score of which by Aaron Copland has just won the latest Pulitzer music prize. The new work had been a striking success when it opened last fall in Washington at the Coolidge Festival for which it had been commissioned. And last night a brilliant audience welcomed it as the real artistic event it is.

"Appalachian Spring" is—as usual with Miss Graham's works—different from previous ones in style and like them in the convincing integrity of its differentness. It presents a pioneer celebration in spring around a newly-built farmhouse in the Pennsylvania

hills in the early part of the last century when the country was still thinly settled. Miss Graham is the young bride whose house it is to be, Eric Hawkins the young farmer-husband. The ceremony presents their emotions, joyful and apprehensive, their new domestic partnership invites. An older pioneer neighbor (May O'Donnell) suggests now and then the rocky confidence of experience. And a revivalist (Merce Cunningham) with a band of four ecstatic girl followers reminds the new householders at this sacred moment of the strange and terrible aspects of human fate. At the end the couple are left quiet and strong in their new house.

All the characters are by turns playful and earnest and Miss Graham who has suggested in the course of the piece the community aspects of girl-child, of wife, of wife and mother and neighbor has near the end a wonderful passage as the individual human being

each person in a community remains.

The dance style of the piece is abrupt and angular and it suggests in this way the rude pioneer artefacts of the place and time it describes. It suggests farmer vigor and clumsy farmer mirth. Dance episodes are joined to realistic passages which set the frame. But the more striking novelty in Miss Graham's choreographic style in "Appalachian Spring" is that each character dominates the stage equally, each is an individual dramatic antagonist to the others. So the piece is no passionate monodrama of subjective experience but an objective conflict united in its theme.

"Appalachian Spring" has a mysterious coolness and freshness,

## Martha Graham



In "Appalachian Spring"

and it is no glorification by condescending city folk of our rude and simple past; it is, despite occasional awkwardness, a credible and astonishing evocation of that real time and place. To show us our country's ancestors and our inherited mores as real is a feat of genius no one else who has touched the pioneer subject in ballet has been able to accomplish.

The company, and quite particularly Mr. Cunningham in a thrilling passage, were excellent. The stage design by Noguchi struck me as too sophisticated and selfconscious but it served. Mr. Copland's score however is a marvel of lyricism, of freshness and strength; and with thirteen instruments he seemed to have a full orchestra playing. The musicians under Louis Horst played admirably.

The opening number on the program was Miss Graham's solo "Salem Shore," first presented last year and danced by her last night with a lovely youthfulness. Its picture of the waiting captain's wife, with its strange aqueous motions and seashore play, was once more a triumph of unforced impersonation. There is no American actress more sincere than Miss Graham, and no dancer more strikingly and strangely inventive.