



# The Dance

By Louis Biancolli

## Copland-Graham Ballet Blends Best of Two Arts

Garnished with a prize-winning score making front-page news last week, Martha Graham's annual spring season opened before a houseful of blithe and knowing devotees at the National Theater last night.

Featuring "Appalachian Spring," with a score by Aaron Copland that snared the Pulitzer award, possibly accounted for some of the surplus turnout last night.

Anyway, luck was with America's high-priestess of la danse moderne. The chance timing was excellent. With the air still warm with Pulitzer talk, Martha Graham slips into a New York theater with the one composition making the headlines — and a local premiere at that. She rates it.

### Ballet and Music Blend.

The work, based on social and religious ways of early Pennsylvania settlers, was commissioned by the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation and first rendered in the Library of Congress as part of an annual chamber music festival last October. Reports from Washington were glowing.

Reports to Washington about last night's rendering ought to be just as glowing. For anybody questioning the Pulitzer committee's wisdom in making the award was in a minority of one last night.

While the Graham and Copland technics run apart in places, substantially "Appalachian Spring" is a fine sample of fusing ballet and music idioms in a smooth blend. Where gaps do show, I think the Copland score outpaces the Graham choreography. Fuller patterns are needed at times; also brisker and more rugged ones.

### Healthy Trend.

In some ways "Appalachian Spring" as ballet shows signs of healthy new trends in Miss Graham's outlook. The folk note comes through in more tonic style and some group sequences are geared to rhythms and symmetries that meet standard ballet at least half way.

Basically, the technic is strictly Graham, especially in sequences featuring the dancer herself. The leg and arm geometry is there, with the overtones of feeling ob-

liquely brought out in cubist-like imagery. When you get the hang of it, her pantomime speaks volumes. When. . . .

"Appalachian Spring" is fairly simple in plot and even simpler in setting. All you saw was the frame of a house, with only a few boards nailed up. The place is a Pennsylvania settlement in pioneer days. Talk of a "promised land" and "a new Eden" is rife. A couple begin building a home, a revivalist chants a litany of fear and hope.

### Pioneer Theme.

"Spring was celebrated by a man and a woman building a house with joy and love and prayer," said the program. "By a revivalist and his followers in their shouts of exaltation; by a pioneering woman with her dreams of the Promised Land." In two words, Appalachian Spring.

Thanks to Miss Graham's fine-wrought symbolism and Mr. Copland's stirring score, you felt the pioneer fervor of early American ground-breakers. You shared the dreamer's vision of a promised land to the west. You sensed the fire and brimstone in the preacher's voodoo-like dance.

In fact, the revivalist (Merce Cunningham) had the most gripping moment in the ballet—a solo of fanatic paroxysm, mounting in a fury of jungle-born rhythms. Music and dance joined in stunning power there.

### Miss Graham Dances.

Miss Graham herself danced the role of The Bride, and Erick Hawkins was superb as her partner. May O'Donnell poetically registered the faraway thinking of the Pioneering Woman. The gifted hand of Isamu Noguchi was seen in what the program called artistic collaboration.

Also listed last night were "Salem Shore" and "Deaths and Entrances."