MUSIC

Brooklyn "Eagle"
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By Miles Kastendieck

Martha Graham Introduces 'Appalachian Spring in Opening at the National

What Spring means to Martha Graham was revealed in the striking new ballet, "Appalachian Spring," presented by her with her company at the National Theater last night. This is no ordinary Spring in the Appalachians, but as usual with Martha Graham is symbolic of the Spring of young America looking toward new frontiers with an ecstasy of high hopes. What it conveys of the emotions of a man and woman building a house, of a revivalist in the frenzy of communicating his beliefs, of a pioneering woman dreaming of the promised land of the West: all this is the substance of the ballet. To lovers of ballet, "Appalachian Spring" is an exciting event.

Just as in her previous work with psychological ballet, so in this newest work Miss Graham has the uncanny ability to communicate the intangible to an audience by tangible means yet leave the audience groping for some tangible way to express what it has witnessed. The emotional impact and the meaning of "Appalachian Spring" are more readily felt than clearly discerned, and each individual may interpret details according to his own perception. The fact remains that Miss Graham puts across her intentions and does it with a new sense of beauty.

A simple setting, a kind of primitive, suggests a bit of porch (with rocking chair), part of a house, a fence and a beach. In and among these dance the pioneering woman (May O'Donnell), the revivalist (Merce Cunningham) and his followers, the husbandman (Erick Hawkins), and the bride (Martha Graham). They express the "Spring" of their lives; that is all, for there is no story or plot. What each does, how the followers follow what virtuosity there can be in the revivalist's "act" are things only to be seen, not described. The dancing is superb.

Aaron Copland's Pulitzer-Prize score deserves the award. Typical of the composer, it has that artistic economy of means and of expression which has by now not only distinguished but established the "Coplandesque" style. He has met the problems of the choreographic script with considerable insight into mood and purpose, solved them with signal success, and enhanced the work by the very nature of his music.

The remainder of the program comprised works introduced last season: "Salem Shore" and "Deaths and Entrances," each underlining again the peculiar gift of Martha Graham in creating psychological ballet and her unique success in arousing audience enthusiasm about it and about her dancing. She continues at the National for the whole week.