

THE DANCE

By EDWIN DENBY

Abolitionist Lecture

"JOHN BROWN," the premiere on the program of Martha Graham and her company at the National last night, is a gesture-demonstration that enters a plea for the defense of the abolitionist hero—a plea part danced, part spoken. The first words suggest an identification of John Brown and Christ and the piece that follows hardly makes him a more earthly character. "John Brown" is a fine Sunday-school lesson, but it will hardly soften the hearts of unbelievers.

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The text, mostly Brown's own words, with some questions put to him and answers he made after he was taken at Harper's Ferry brings fragments of the noble Biblical forensics of the period. It is well spoken by Mr. Hawkins and by Mr. Will Hare, a non-dancing interlocutor, who sometimes corroborates, sometimes mildly opposes. The movement is in gesture sequences—in biographical order—which Mr. Hawkins executes with superb exactitude, as a series of

large assertions. They have a sharp outline and a sense of weight reminiscent of "primitive" American painting; they lack variety of flow or rhythmic lift.

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Evidently Mr. Hawkins intended the effect to be a series of large assertions, and intended to present the figure as a hieratic martyr. Fine was the moment he rises from his litter to accuse his accuser; the hanging, too, was interesting in gesture, but it appeared to take place several times. The symbolic resuscitation was weaker. Though I was unconvinced by the piece, a friend of mine, who was thrilled, assured me it was fine example of Japanese Noh drama.

The score was by Charles Mills. The decorative props by Noguchi were arranged with his knowing effects of perspective and included some charming little trees.

"Every Soul Is a Circus" and "Appalachian Spring" were also on the program. The house was sold out. There will be an additional performance on Sunday night, repeating the program of Saturday night.