N.Y. "Times"
Jan. 24, 1946

A WORLD PREMIERE DANCED BY GRAHAM

'Dark Meadow,' to Music by Carlos Chavez, Presented in Series at the Plymouth

By JOHN MARTIN

Martha Graham last night presented the world premiere of "Dark Meadow" in her dance repertory season at the Plymouth Theatre. The work was commissioned for the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation's festival at the Library of Congress in 1944, but Carlos Chavez did not complete the musical score in time. Whether or not he has yet completed it would be difficult to answer from last night's presentation; it is utterly without theatrical or choreographic quality, pure paper-and-ink music, and long stretches of it sound like so many pages out of Czerny.

That Miss Graham has been able to make a dance composition against it is inexplicable. Its rhythmic plan and its phrasing are tenuous in the extreme, but she has justified them by the almost constant employment of a free choreographic counterpoint, which not only avoids a totally static stage, but actually creates a certain excitement. What she has done is a miracle of sheer invention, but invention not on an intellectual plane, but on the subjective level of pure intuition.

The work emerges as an extremely archaic ritual. According to the program note it is "a reenactment of the mysteries which attend * * * the adventure of seeking." If that seems vague it is no more so than the general purport of the action. There are four subtitles: "Remembrance of Ancestral Footsteps," "Terror of Loss," "Ceaselessness of Love," "Recurring Ecstasy of the Flowering Brance." All of them are implicit in the choreography, but if there is an overall objective in the composition it remains obscure.

There are many small properties and four monolithic objects (all beautifully designed by Isamu Noguchi) which may well have symbolic meanings, but seem rather to be used simply for their effectiveness as theatre devices.

The work as a whole, indeed, would seem to be best approached from this angle, with its meanings allowed to fall where they may. As a piece of abstract theatre, it is thoroughly fascinating, however bewildering. It is full of suspense and surprise and, for the conservative-minded, shock.

Its actual choreography is magnificent; there are group passages that are superbly original and formally conceived, there are solo passages for both Miss Graham and Erick Hawkins that are quite wonderful, and May O'Donnell (badly costumed) also has at least one scene that is beautiful. Under the curious remoteness of its surface there is somehow an essential warmth that separates it altogether from mere perversity and manipulation and gives it emotional integrity. Whatever substantial favor it may win with the public undoubtedly will stem from that, but it is likely to be slight. There is, however, never a dull moment for those who can take it!

The evening opened with "Salem Shore" and closed with "Every Soul Is a Circus." The audience was extremely large, contained distinguished representatives of all the ats, and sat in rapt attention.