

Martha Graham
and Dance CompanyPlymouth Theatre
Jan. 21 to Feb. 2, 1946

ONCE AGAIN the mystery of Martha Graham's intuition and the magic of her ceaseless invention were laid before the public in a mid-season series of fifteen concerts at the Plymouth Theatre. In addition to the advent of her new work, *Dark Meadow*, Miss Graham and her company presented a repertory of recent works, including *Salem Shore*, *Deaths and Entrances*, *Every Soul is a Circus*, *Herodiade*, *Letter to the World*, *Appalachian Spring* and *Punch and The Judy*.

The lavish repetitions of these works provided a magnificent opportunity to travel once again with Miss Graham the tortuous path of existence that has brought us from the tensions of the false calm of half a decade ago to the threshold of to-day's new deceptive security in "peace," and that has marked as well that period of Miss Graham's creative activity which may be designated as one of variations on her mature artistry.

The wonder of all great art is its ability to be pertinent no matter what its setting in time or place, and so it is again with Martha Graham's new dance. *Dark Meadow* has gone back to a vaguely primitive place, a stylization of prehistoric Mexico, perhaps, and to a fantastic time in the development of the passions of a world, part animal, part insect, part plant, part human: a "Mythology of Nature." Against this stable pantheism, represented by deistic

figures of an earth mother, "She of the Ground," a primordial, oriental man-creature, "He Who Summons," and a group of atavistic figures whose concern is with the ecstatic fulfillment of earth rites, Miss Graham, in the role of "One Who Seeks," moves with a bewildered despair of fluctuating intensity in a tangential relationship to the other figures, never able to identify herself completely with their acceptance of the mystery of nature. In the end, we are left without certain knowledge of an end to her search. Whether it is possible once again to relinquish despair to the passion of earth and new life we cannot know now. That we must try, that it is all that we can do, is the conclusion of *Dark Meadow*.

For many, it may be that this knowledge alone will be the end of wisdom and the small comfort to the life of anxiety which has been our recent lot. This is the more subtle conclusion of

Dark Meadow when all its aspects have been considered, and when Miss Graham's art is summed up at this point by a comparison with her other recent works. Reviewing them, from *Letter to the World* to *Herodiade*—which in turn have their roots in the cynicisms, satires, and transitory illusions of her earliest dances—we can come close to an understanding of the forces which have molded her art and which have led inevitably to the tragic predicament suggested in *Dark Meadow*.

Letter to the World makes the first statement of complete self-knowledge. Accomplishing this by references to universal desires, fears, and joys, its pictorial illumination of a poet's inner life makes it still one of Miss Graham's strongest works. From its triumphant maturity, like the first flush of adult confidence which was our deceptive state before the war, grew the horrendous knowledge of the price which our too-late wisdom extracted, and in *Deaths and Entrances* is revealed the real horror of our viciousness, guised at first in ignorance, but laid bare by its consequences in world conflagration.

It is one of the great wonders of Martha Graham's art that her intuition directs her to the most propitious inspirations for her dances. Thus in *Deaths and Entrances* emerges the first suggestion of the classic tragic figure which is realized fully in *Herodiade*. It is this epiphany of the tragic Muse, this embodiment of the unhappy fate of Western man, his personal apprehensiveness, which sets the stage for the torture of the three sisters and the self-conquest of the woman before her mirror, and which provides us with the severest possible form from which to plunge into the contrasting world of nature in *Dark Meadow*. We have passed through the door with the Woman in black in merciless self-possession, only to be confronted with the actuality of our trial in an unfamiliar world whose innocence is beyond our reach; and a new search begins.

Martha Graham knows instinctively the eternal cycles of nature as surely as the ancient Toltecs; the unveiling of the creative impulse in nature throughout this latest dance reveals as much. (It is in four sections, run together but labeled separately: "Remembrance of the ancestral footsteps," "Terror of loss," "Ceaselessness of love," and "Recurring ecstasy of the flowering branch"). Yet there is a distinction between knowledge and faith.

An apposite description of this poignant fact, revealing the sources of the tragedy of *Dark Meadow*, is presented by Palinurus (Cyril Conolly) in his

autobiographical testament, *The Unquiet Grave*: "I am now forced to admit that anxiety is my true condition, occasionally intruded upon by work, pleasure, melancholy, or despair." Quoting Stekel, he goes on: "Anxiety is repressed desire. . . . It is the disease of a bad conscience! . . . —*misère!* We are all serving a life-sentence in the dungeon of self." This is the disease of the twentieth century, subtly infected by the slivers of egocentricity from which none have escaped. It has eaten to the heart and poisoned faith, leaving but a rational belief to tolerate existence and uphold despair.

Ironically, it has left vision of innocence intact, and it is this vision, of unclouded clarity, which Martha Graham has brought to twentieth century art in the form of a modern morality. Like T. S. Eliot, to whose rationalized mysticism she is perhaps closest, she then has to use devices of emotion underscored by symbol, of free image asterisked and parenthesized with metaphysics. It is the terror of their time.

Little wonder then that *Dark Meadow* is underlined at every turn by literary symbol, sometimes as theatrical property, sometimes as pantomimic gesture. This is not new in Miss Graham's dancing, but it is perhaps less intrusive elsewhere. Everything conspires toward it here. Isamu Noguchi's décor collaborates most willingly, and each of the four symbols on the stage sacrifices its original strength of form, through mechanical manipulation, for the sake of intellectual probing. Thus, at the end of the dance, the stage is like an inversion of itself, its inner mysteries having peeled open and unfolded in a disenchanting and sometimes embarrassing manner which destroys that earthiness that is the magic strength of the first part of the dance. These four phallic symbols differ from the prehistoric originals from which they are derived, in their cautious and ambiguous use: the result of a hedging of personal passion through consternation.

The double symbolizing of the eternal ecstasy of natural creation, by means of a literal "flowering" of one of the tall trunk-like forms and the distracting introduction of the "flowering branch" at the climax of a beautiful group dance are underscorings which

add nothing to what has been said more excitingly in movement. The appearance of three ancient sex fetishes follows a similar pattern; and the solo dance, "Terror of loss," using a long black scarf as a sort of mobile womb into which and from which the "One Who Seeks" alternately tries to escape, suffers from its physical striving to re-

alize its intellectual concept. This over-taxing of technique transfers anxiety as an emotion in the dance to an emotion of concern in the spectator for the struggles of the performer.

It is with such use of symbols as these that Miss Graham's dancing falters and becomes a substitution for movement expression. It must be said that it is an engaging deception, but its validity in dance-drama becomes questionable when it is compared with those movements in her art when Miss Graham is concerned wholly with expression through dance movement, as in the exceedingly sensitive group dance, "Ceaselessness of love," mentioned above. This dance, together with the opening group dance, occupying a few gripping moments of silence, seem the most impressive sections of *Dark Meadow*, for here are direct communications of experience without the confusion of pictorial explanation.

The "Ceaselessness of love" dance, actually a Sarabande, is truly wondrous in its invention. The consummation of love which it describes has the slow-moving elegance of underseas plants, the trembling formality of the mating of butterflies. The use of the later stylization of the Sarabande (originally a bawdy dance of Spanish origin), but incorporating again the love act as its subject, is another intellectual triumph, but enough in restraint to allow a moving piece of dancing. Particularly beautiful also are the solo dances by May O'Donnell as "She of the Ground," in a magnificent green cape, and Erick Hawkins as "He Who Summons," with its finely executed turning falls.

In her welcome revival of the more formal uses of the group, Miss Graham indicates her awareness of the future direction of expression away from the probing of personal frustration. Without applying the scalpel unfairly to Martha Graham herself, we can wonder rightly whether or not her personal art can take this direction. Surely her perception is accurate, but her belief is of to-day, as it rightly should be, and *Dark Meadow* leaves us with a promise of tomorrow, but with little certainty of its fulfillment. This minimizes

in no way, but rather points up the profound service which Martha Graham has rendered contemporary arts and understanding by her revelation of modern fury through self-exposure.

Much of the over-occupation with symbol in *Dark Meadow* may be due to its necessary length. The score, commissioned for Miss Graham by the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation in the Library of Congress, and

composed by Carlos Chávez is over-long and, on the whole, unsuited to theatre. Its many very beautiful passages become apparent after several hearings, when familiarity with the rich choreography of the dance leaves room for its intimacy. It has a simple, song-like, almost folkish quality, which one feels would come off better as chamber music.

The costumes by Edythe Gilfond contribute a fantastic variety and indicate derivations from many sources that add to the primitive and non-human quality of the work. Miss Graham's costume alone seems out of character as well as out of key in color and intensity with the other costumes and the set. "One Who Seeks" appears to be a person of spent passions and uncertain drives; flaming red may be questioned as suited to garbing these characteristics.

The expert performances of the Graham company have been taken for granted so long that it is easy to forget how much is owed to the sincerity, precision, and clarity in the artistry of the supporting cast. May O'Donnell's roles in *Herodiade* and *Dark Meadow* were danced in masterly fashion and enlivened by her complete identification with the utterly different natures of the two characters. Merce Cunningham's "March" has become a classic, and his solo, to his own choreography in *Appalachian Spring*, brings new life to a piece whose backward-looking is indicated in its sub-titled explanation, and he restates here a faith in the magic and power of movement itself.

Erick Hawkins did the best dancing of his career in *Dark Meadow* and thereby helped to make up for the wordy and almost motionless sermonizing of his solo work, *John Brown*, which was presented several times. Yuriko's sensitivity and precision, Nina Fonaroff's sensibilities—for which one would like to see more expansive roles—and the competence of Ethel Winter, Marjorie Mazia, Pearl Lang, and Nantanya Neumann aided immeasurably in making the season a complete success. Mark Ryder, David Zellmer, and

Douglas Watson especially, despite the handicap of inexperience, acquitted themselves well. Jane Dudley and Jean Erdman returned to lend their incomparable support to *Letter to the World*, and Angela Kennedy provided the necessary imperious flippancy for her role in *Punch and The Judy*.

Louis Horst's empathy for the performers was again revealed in his sensitive and unobtrusive handling of the orchestra, which was always at one with the dancers. Special note should be made of the new costumes for the prin-

cipals in *Appalachian Spring* which add considerably to the youthfulness and lyricism of the piece.

Altogether, this was another of Martha Graham's unforgettable contributions to significant theatre.

R. L.