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Martha Graham Introduces Dark Meadow To New York During Two Week Season

By ROBERT SABIN

BACK to the beginnings of mankind goes Dark Meadow, the new work which Martha Graham introduced at the Plymouth Theatre on Jan. 23, on the third evening of her two weeks season which ran from Jan. 21 through Feb. 2. In the form of an archaic ritual Miss Graham has revealed man's struggle with the mysterious forces of nature, his horror of death, his worship of fertility and of the goodness of the earth, and his sense of spiritual transference. Carlos Chavez's music for the work had been commissioned by the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation for the festival of 1944, but he did not complete it in time for that occasion. Isamu Noguchi has designed a beautiful decor, consisting of monolithic objects, which at times are used as phallic symbols or altars and at other times become geometrical elements in the choreographic design. And Edythe Gilfond's costumes are also keenly imaginative, avoiding the suggestion of any specific race or period yet definitely indicating a very ancient time.

If some people were slightly stunned by Dark Meadow, the principal reasons are probably that the work is completely intuitive and that it is unlike anything that Miss Graham has done in recent years. Her program note about "the adventure of seeking" and "the recurring ecstasy of the flowering branch" was clear enough to those who have followed her artistic development for many years and who are acquainted with the psychological background of contemporary art. But to the public-at-large it probably was more misleading than helpful, since it said just enough to encourage the literal-minded without explaining anything.

No one, however, could fail to be excited by the magnificent movement in Dark Meadow. Since the days of Celebration and Primitive Mysteries, Miss Graham has not woven so physically absolute and so rich a choreographic design. The dance of the three men and three women halfway through the work is perhaps her supreme achievement in sheer plastic beauty, and Erick Hawkins, as He Who Summons, and May O'Donnell, as She of the Ground, both have exciting roles. Mr. Hawkins, in fact, has never danced so well as in this work. Miss Graham's performance as One Who Seeks has a hypnotic power. The movement is built in spirals and turns, infinitely varied, but always maintaining the spell. Also notable was the sensitive dancing of Yuriko and of Douglass Watson, a new and brilliantly gifted member of the company. David Zellmer and Mark Ryder, who returned to the company this season after several years of war service, were both in excellent form, as were Pearl Lang, Natanya Neumann, Marjorie Mazia and Ethel Winter.

Mr. Chavez's score could scarcely be called good music for the dance, since it has long passages which are diffuse and rhythmically vague. But it does have a primitive flavor, and Miss Graham has succeeded in making the spectator feel that it is exactly right by sustaining the intensity of emotion and strength of line on the stage.

Merce Cunningham, Jane Dudley and Jean Erdman were seen in their familiar roles in Letter to the World, the two latter as guest artists. Punch and the Judy has been completely revised by Miss Graham and it is vastly superior in its present form. Angela Kennedy danced the role of one of the Fates in Punch and Nina Fonaroff's Child was as delightfully odious as ever. The rest of the repertoire was made up of Appalachian Spring, Herodiade, Every Soul Is a Circus, for which Paul Nordoff has revised the score, Salem Shore, Deaths and Entrances and Mr. Hawkins' John Brown, which had its premiere last season.

It is impossible to give adequate attention to the individual performances in these highly different works in so brief a space. Suffice it to say that the entire company was in brilliant form and that Miss Graham has never been more radiant.

Louis Horst, musical director of the company, led the chamber ensemble with the rhythmic instinct of a born dance conductor. The little orchestra played the difficult scores very creditably. Helen Lanfer was the pianist.