Symbolism and Surrealism in the Dance

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By Francis Steuben

It is curious how many people have accepted Martha Graham as High Priestess of the Modern Dance and how few can really claim to understand her rites. The critics themselves are subject to this schizophrenic indulgence, as indicated by their reviews of "Dark Meadow," which had its first performance this season during a two-week repertory run at the Plymouth Theater. The metropolitan reviewers were almost unanimous in their praise of a "major dance work," yet many reluctantly admitted they didn't know what it was all about.

The cryptic "libretto" states: "The action of 'Dark Meadow' is concerned with the adventure of seeking. This dance is the reenactment of the Mysteries which attend that adventure." Now, Webster says that mysteries are "rites to which only privileged worshippers are admitted, after preparatory ceremonies and under obligations of secrecy." It is a tribute to the hold Miss Graham has on her passionate devotees that the worshipful atmosphere implied in the definition prevailed in the theater during the performance.

Under no obligations of secrecy, I confess that the heavy burden of symbolic decors, both portable and stationary, which was borne by "Dark Meadow" served to cancel out almost all of its kinesthetic dynamics. There are passages in the opera which communicate themselves visually to the onlooker as exciting figurations, notably in the group sections; and Erick Hawkins does some of his best dancing as the protagonist in "He Who Summons." But having granted that, I must frankly admit resentment at having to pierce through a mumbo-jumbo of symbols—Dionysian or Freudian—in order to fit them into the pattern or the purpose of the argument.

Miss Graham's use of esoteric objects—little beribboned darts, angular branches shooting out from behind scenes—undoubtedly mystify the innocent and titillate the initiate, but I find it inartistic and old-fashioned, in addition to being distracting. "Dark Meadow" makes a fetish of fetishes.

The modern dance has had a hard time establishing direct lines of communication with its audience. The past decade has seen a prolonged struggle on the part of dancers to arrive at a more evocative and a more communicative language of gesture. Witnessing the dance rendered sterile by private obscurities, and seeing this rendition receive critical acclamation, I wonder whether the modern dance is not now beating a retreat.