DANCE NEWS
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GRAHAM AT HARVARD: May 3, Auditorium of the Cambridge High and Latin School.

Night Journey, the ballet Martha Graham brought to Harvard for its Symposium on Music Criticism, is spectacularly daring. No subject can be grander than the Oedipus myth and none, thanks to Freud, more immediate to us. Graham treats it with bold realism. She is, in this work, unequivocally direct.

Her new directness is partly a response to William Schuman's score which is remarkable for compactness and expressive force. As one would expect after his Undertow, it presents the classic theme of incest without compromise. And yet, though severe in its demands, it suits Graham's temperament, as she once said of her own style of dancing, like her skin.

All the action focuses on one pin-point of time—the moment before Jocasta's suicide. We see Graham first in a cone of light at the extreme right of stage, with a rope in her hand. She is preparing for death. A long doomsday note from the horn seems to hold her up, but when that breaks she rushes, panting with horror, into her room.

Reviews Life

Here she reviews her life, as in a swift flashback before drowning. She falls on the bridal bed, a gruesome structure shaped vaguely like the bones of the pelvis. A chorus—six "Daughters of Night"—and a Seer (Mark Ryder) pass before her in a ritual dance. Oedipus appears (Erick Hawkins) not as the great king of Thebes but in his extreme youth. With Jocasta he moves from a series of archaistic steps in profile—Graham's way of indicating the remote past—through a series of embraces in which she alternately suggests sensual passion and maternal love.

This pas de deux is Graham's personal revelation of the drama's core. It is not easy to take, we are not comfortable as it unfolds. But the great subject itself is profoundly disturbing and Graham obviously intends not to dispel but to intensify that disturbance with a binding image of it. The plan is ornate, the execution certainly, in spots, awkward. But it is, for all that, a striking passage, powerful in conception

and sculpturally clear.

At its climax Jocasta and Oedipus are frozen in a half-seated crouch, bound up in a tangle of rope. The Seer then divines the oracle, Oedipus frees himself from Jocasta. He snatches up an omen—a great painted eye—reads in that his identity, pierces his own eyes and rushes out. The chorus, in a dance of farewell, also abandons Jocasta. Alone, she runs in circles, her body heavy and low like a wounded animal's. Finally we see her again in the light outside her room. With great quietness she winds the rope around her neck.

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By this compression Graham reduces the massive action to terms she can control. But with fresh invention she also creates the atmosphere of a heroic-primitive age—in the stiff violence, the shuddering contractions, the majestic repose of her chorus.

The choric dances, stately or frenzied, are her best foil. As Jocasta she herself is moving in her humaneness and her restraint. But Hawkins, although he has a certain proper air of impetuous haste, is only Oedipus in embryo. The careful groupings are also at times made ragged by the intrusion of Ryder's large bulk which seems to eat up space. And Noguchi's decor, in its whited sepulchre style, is naive and heavy. With a delicate twist of gauze that reaches from floor to flies he does ingeniously provide an antechamber for the bedroom. The other fixtures and props, however, are over-size, macabre toys.

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But the pace and brilliance of the dance drama satisfy us and for these we are largely in debt to Schuman. Unlike Undertow, which demanded program music, Night Journey has a unified thematic growth. Its tensions mount steadily by blocks of sound that seem in their effect on the nerves intolerable until they are finally resolved. Its patterns also give Graham exactly what her dance style needs most—abrupt, harsh rhythms, staccato phrases that are brief and insistent, long-held steely notes against which she seems to lean and swell. Schuman draws wonders, in volume and variety of sound, from the chamber orchestra. Among contemporaries his talent for large-scale theatre is impressive indeed. Here it recalls the Strauss of Elektra.

Night Journey was preceded on the program by Dark Meadow, with Graham, Hawkins and May O'Donnell in their usual roles. Both works, conducted by Louis Horst, had the advantage of support from players of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. How stimulating and rare it is to hear the music so clearly articulated—and how much better we are then able to see the dancing.

This clarity was a special pleasure for the distinguished musicians and scholars gathered in Cambridge High and Latin School on May 3. Many had never seen Graham before. They followed her with deep curiosity. It should be recorded too that they gave Dark Meadow, a myth of Graham's own invention, their close attention. But Night Journey, with its universal appeal and universal challenge, won their excited approval.