

# Martha Graham's Dancing Is Source of Controversy

## Double Barrelled Review by Herald Writers Reflects Varying Reactions to Art

By MARION PARK LEWIS, Jr.

The Carmel Musical Society, in presenting Martha Graham, the chief exponent of the American Dance at the Sunset School Saturday night, gave the Peninsula a cultural thrill and something to think about, to say the least. Inasmuch as Martha Graham has never presented her own compositions on the coast before, the audience was practically uninitiated; consequently the remarks made by its members revealed a naivete that was almost warranted.

To the person who made the remark that it didn't seem much like dancing, I would like to reply that of course, most of us who are accustomed only to the frothy ballet, the barbaric tap, or the sentimental scarf and garland types of dancing, could not at first grasp the beauty of anything so starkly vivid and meaningful.

To the person who said he was stunned because he could not understand it, the answer would be, that perhaps a person who listens to a Beethoven concerto for the first time, is a bit stunned also. Audiences that are accustomed to being entertained by a dance concert seem to resent being presented with dances that are anything but escape to a "form that is merely decorative."

Martha Graham has tried to create a dance of "integrity and substance" as she calls it. She is most patriotic in the sense that she uses only the American scene as her store house of ideas, the pioneer woman of her "Frontier" and the parsimonious Puritan in her "Act of Piety" are the most striking examples of her theme source.

She feels that American dancers can never make vitally creative the foreign dance forms; he must see and use the meanings now deep rooted and essentially American, the feeling of young, virile and vigorous pulsative progress. She says "An American dance is not a series of new steps—it is a characteristic time beat, a different speed, an accent, sharp, clear staccato." Consequently her movements seem objective to a point of harshness, comic, a little vulgar and almost cruel. No wonder people don't want to be presented that way to themselves; they would like to believe their country sweetly undulating and sentimental, which it never was.

It is said that this philosophy of

the dance has made Martha Graham establish her own bodily technique to best express the characteristic feelings of America. It is true that a technique based on an impulse from the center of the body for every movement, is expressful of the American throb of life, but I am inclined to believe that part of her technique is based on her physical limitations which she has turned to her advantage. In most cases her movement so masterfully controlled and directed was breath taking in its virtuosity, but in the composition "Ekstasis—two lyric Fragments," her lack of flowing movement seemed pitiful (I feel sure there is some flowing movement, even if it is not sentimental in the American life.) Perhaps the foregoing statement answers the women who insisted that "every single movement was beautiful."

To continue about bodily technique, she has characteristic movements and gestures that are apt to spring out in every dance. Besides the central impulse a frequently seen movement was the extension of one leg obliquely upward to the side. After this had been done in most of the dances, and when toward the end of the program in the middle of the composition "An Act of Piety" this gesture was repeated, one woman was heard to say, "Good lord! there goes that leg again."

Martha Graham has some very definite ideas on how to begin a program. Her opening number, Praeludium, Number Two," was a triumph in composition. (A modern dancer, by the way, for those who haven't heard, is her own composer, her own costume designer and stage setter, and has much to say about the music she uses.) Each number following came up to the fine standards of synchronized elements of music, costume, and decor to heighten the dance itself.

The second number "Lamentation" was shocking in that it was not a posing, as is common, to convey no feeling any deeper than that expressed upon the death of a pet bird. It depicts such deep pain that at the end one is left with a stitch in his heart.

In "Frontier" as well as a person would dare to put in words and meaning of a dance, we could get the feeling of great space and solitude and waiting; the feeling of the tramp of horses and men, of lurking danger, of hardship, of

the gayness that the song "Old Susanna" gives us, and above all, a serenity and calm of work well done.

"Saraband" was such an ironic exaggeration on the low stiff bowings of a court dance that one of the audience simply "couldn't understand why she would grovel on the floor in such a beautiful dress."

Let me comment on this remark of one gentleman, "she knows nothing of elementary feeling." His statement might be well founded, however, I think Martha Graham's approach to her art is intellectual, and the very fact that she has set up for herself such a difficult technique, is apt to kill spontaneity. Of course, it to be debated whether or not true feelingful art can spring from a form that has not yet been made, for the artist, a spontaneous medium.

By WINIFRED HOWE

"To seek the essential spirit of the country, to impart its sense of life, to enrich, illuminate and intensify the American scene becomes the object of the American dancer."

The above excerpt from Martha Graham's "credo," as published in Virginia Stewart's symposium, "Modern Dance," is her answer, in part, to a somewhat bewildered public.

WHAT THEY SAY

Much discussion and controversy has followed Miss Graham's dance program at Sunset Auditorium on Saturday evening, under the auspices of the Carmel Music Society. One hears everything from the frank comment, "I don't understand a thing she was doing" to two far stronger statements, "I didn't like it at all because there wasn't any beauty in it" and "She's the greatest dancer I've ever seen."

This is no place for a defense of modern art. It is here to stay in spite of our protests, and in another generation or two, the world will begin to catch up with it. The creative artist is always some fifty years ahead of his public.

Those in the audience Saturday evening who longed for the familiar beauty of the so-called "interpretative" dancing of Isadora Duncan forgot, perhaps, the uproar which followed her emancipation of the dance from its meaningless formalities. The next generation will be in tune with Martha Graham, but they will decry the art of someone younger who expresses the age she lives in.

STIMULATING EXPERIENCE

The question is, on the other hand, whether Martha Graham succeeded in what she set out to do, and to that the answer can only be an individual one. A tenth generation American, she is one of a small band of pioneers who are not content to ape European culture, but who seek to inter-

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pret America in art forms which are indigenous to this country. To the writer, her program on Saturday evening was a stimulating experience, both to the mind and to the senses.

The opening "Praeludium" seemed a translation into symbolic movement of the restless rhythm of our time. "Frontier" depicted the spaciousness of our land which, strangely enough, Americans are less apt to feel than visiting foreigners. Two ropes were skillfully placed on the stage to lead the eye out of the picture and to suggest the expanse which the dancer seemed to contemplate.

The "Act of Piety" pictured Puritan tradition at its sternest and most fantastic symbolically costumed in a smouldering red. Color plays an important role in Miss Graham's interpretations, both in costume and in lighting effects which she unfortunately was not able to carry out in full at this performance.

Another impressive number on the program was "Lamentation" in which the dancer struggled tensely to free herself from the emotion which bound her as her tight fitting garment bound her body. This was the essence of grief in which idle gesture played no part.

Both "Satyric" and "Satiric" humor brought chuckles from the audience as the program progressed, and the remaining dances were projections, with unfailing originality of concept and perfection of technique, of various abstractions which also varied in comprehensibility on first sight.

The musical background, furnished under the direction of Louis Horst, was as ultra modern as the dance it supported, emphasizing every gesture with an exciting combination of wind instruments, drum and tom tom, in addition to the piano.