# MARTHA GRAHAM AND COMPANY IN AMERICAN DOCUMENT

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ISADORA DUNCAN, Ruth St. Denis, and Martha Graham seem part of the same continuous line. Each of them by the dominance of a unique personality created an epoch in theatrical dancing apart from the classic academic tradition of the rest of the Western world. The work of each has used for a basic impulse a structure of philosophic or moral concepts which has served them better than collaboration with great musicians, painters, or poets. Isadora's Greece was a native expression of Californian pantheism at the expansive end of the last century. Ruth St. Denis's discovery of the East reflected a search for absolute ideas of Oriental truth which Emerson shared and which Fenellosa furthered. Martha Graham finds the expression of her deeply American attitude in her own America. The subject matter of her "American Document," as it immediately proclaims, is our time, our place, our dangers, and our chances of survival. It is the most important extended dance creation by a living American, and if there has been another in any other time more important, there is no record of it.

"American Document" is conceived on the basic skeletal structure of a minstrel show. It opens and closes with a parade of participants, using gestures borrowed from minstrel strut and cake-walk. Its episodes are linked by drum rolls and fanfares of acrobatic movement. Its solo numbers are projected against a choral background. It utilized Ray Green's coherent musical score of a spare consistency. It employed a male voice as oracle, comment, and interlocutor declaiming statements from classic American papers. Its episodes commenced with an introductory duet, a preamble for a grave circus, a kind of annunciatory dominant chord of motion from which the rest of the symphony was to be amplified. There followed an Indians' lament for the spirit of the land they had lost, then a statement of Puritan fury and tenderness, an elegy of the emancipated Negro slaves, and a finale of contemporary self-accusation, a praise of our rights, and a challenge to our own powers to persist as democracy.

Graham's work had the sober, frank sincerity of a Thanksgiving hymn heard in the open air. Its surface finish resembled some useful Shaker wood-turning. Its exalted plasticity of formal movement was as proud and objective as a New Bedford whaler's figurehead. The Puritan duet, with Graham in severe white, her partner naked except for white shorts and a dark coat of tan, had as antiphonal Jonathan Edwards's terrible words on fornication and damnation spoken against parallels from the Song of Songs. The tenseness of its emotion, the extreme projection of restrained physically, rendered the adolescent elements in the audience uncomfortable. Its solemn purity was hard for the shy-eyed of all ages to take. It is so serious that it can only touch those who have the courage to look at it. Happily, most of the audience were too occupied in experiencing it to be frightened of its feeling.

In a short notice there is no space for the complete analysis this work demands. The use of the voice, the dominance of the ideas back of its creation, the quality of Graham's idiosyncratic gesture formulating just what she meant to say, were all miraculous. Graham in her Indian solo was a monument for which the vanishing American has waited three centuries, built from native folk gesture and ritual movement. In the end, in a plain bright red dress, with her dancing balance of suavity and abruptness, her somber levity and steady stops, she seemed an incarnate question of everything we fear and hope for in our daily lives.

Her own dance group, clothed in simply cut clothes of clean transparent colors, made their first entrance like a troupe of erect peacocks driving a chariot. Miss Graham's partner was Erick Hawkins. His strong, solid, angry human dancing provided a splendid support, a positive male presence. Since he had ballet training, he was unacceptable to some of the "modern" dance purists, who were too prejudiced to look at him with clean eyes. Graham's use of a dancer trained in another classicism showed that elasticity which makes her unique in an experimental field. Hawkins, in the questions voiced at the end of the piece, stood and walked like a workman's best idea of himself as a dancer. Nor shall I forget for a long time the presence of the interlocutor, Housley Stevens, Jr., or his beautiful manly voice and arresting appearance, so open and yet so decently serious. He also moved like a dancer, and he spoke grave and alarming words with splendor, because he understood and meant them.

"American Document" should be presented in New York not as an ordinary Sunday-night "modern" dance concert but as a legitimate theatrical creation. It is dance-drama of the first importance.

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