

Martha Graham goes gay in 'Every Soul Is a Circus'!

By JOHANNA LAWRENCE

Last night at the Philharmonic auditorium dance followers had an opportunity to see in actuality that dancing, as every other worthwhile art medium, goes in cycles.

In this instance the cycle is Martha Graham's and it follows and points up her growth as an outstanding contemporary American dancer. It is to be remembered that no less than four years ago, when Los Angeles saw her in her first tour as a modern dancer, her medium was a completely abstract one. Later it developed into a tense and significant documental form and last night with her local premiere of "Every Soul Is a Circus" we saw it further expand into comedy, comedy in which satire, broad humor and characteristic "Grahamesques" are essential to its telling.

"Every Soul Is a Circus" is a grand example of her showmanship both in choreography and in performance. For, here, in direct contrast to the tense and historical "American Document," Miss Graham makes the most of every American's love of "fun poking" and does it so thoroughly, with such splendid timing, miming and understanding that the audience responds with wholehearted enthusiasm and spontaneous laughter.

"Every Soul Is a Circus" takes its title and background from a poem by Vachel Lindsay: "Every soul is a circus, every mind is a tent, every heart is a sawdust ring where the circling race is spent."

That it is not a literal circus but one of "ridiculous situations and silly behavior" as pointed out in the program note but heightens its interest. It is full of romantic illusions and much of the effectiveness of the telling is accented with an adroit use of props and dramatic costuming.

True, on many occasions Miss Graham lapses into such cliches as coy gestures, exaggerated shoulder shrugging and other overworked comic gestures, but instead of detracting from this picturization of the "circus of every woman's life," it serves admirably in her well planned choreography.

Eric Hawkins gave a splendid performance as the ring master, Mercier Cunningham was effective as the acrobat and Nelle Fisher well cast as the first arenic performer. Yes, "Every Soul Is a Circus" is a truly delightful satire and warranted the bravos that it brought forth.

The program opened with "Columbiad," a new solo in Martha Graham's repertoire this season. It is an American theme based on an American Ode to Freedom written by Timothy Dwight in 1777. Though

Miss Graham employs repetitious phrasing and props to emphasize its abstractions—much in the manner of "Frontier"—it lacks the distinction and strength of this favorite.

"Columbiad" is weak as a curtain raiser and on second thought would be weak at any point in the program. The use

of a red and blue scarf in variations of Javanese movements to represent the "colors," plus characteristic Graham gestures and effective costuming, added nothing to this poor second "Frontier."

"Frontier," which served as the opening number of the second half of the program, needs no reviewing. This is one of the finest solos in Miss Graham's group and one that gives fresh inspiration on each viewing with its well established delineation of American plains people and the strength which built this land.

"American Document" was the fourth and last dance of the program. This documental dance of the progress of our country, freely patterned after a minstrel show in its telling with Houseley Stevens Jr. the interlocutor reading the impressive words from the declaration of independence, the Song of Songs, Walt Whitman's poems and Lincoln's Gettysburg address, keys the dance pattern, was gripping and inspirational. Repeated viewing but served to draw attention to the wide scope of its appeal and the brilliancy in which the subject matter is handled. The sincerity of the dancers further emphasizes its epic quality.

Here, in truth, is a dance that is "good theater" and, if one wants to think of it in this light, a splendid document of Americanism. Particularly effective, if one can divorce one part of this dance from the whole, was the Puritan episode with the beautiful plastic duet of Martha Graham and Eric Hawkins.

Here again, one is most impressed with the work of Eric Hawkins who has grown in strength since last season.

Houseley Stevens Jr.'s part as the interlocutor merits praise as does the dancing of the entire ensemble in keeping "American Document" keyed to its impressive pitch.

Plaudits again go to Louis Horst for his musical direction and to Edythe Gifond whose costuming is so essential a part of the whole.

Los Angeles (Cal.) "News" 7/10/40
Mar. 1, 1940.
Los Angeles (Cal.)