

WITH THE DANCERS

By MARY F. WATKINS

THE Six Miracle Plays which the Stage Alliance—in other words, Natalie Hays Hammond, Alice Laughlin, and the dancers' own Martha Graham* staged last Sunday evening at the Guild Theater and which are being repeated there tonight, offer some confusion of mind to the observer. They might quite as well have been called mystery plays or problem plays, the mystery being why they were given, and the problem to find the precise angle of approach to the subject applied.

Anachronism at the Guild

It should be stated immediately, however, that no matter what the answer, the whole provided an enjoyable, even an impressive esthetic adventure, and that every once in a while during the course of the evening there came a moment when players, and therefore audience, seemed fleetingly to recapture something of the childlike and artless quality of the history-dimmed originals. Most of the time, unfortunately, the flavor was quite otherwise, being molded in a deliberate naïveté and stylization which substituted conscious art for simple faith. The proceedings were quaint, the settings unobtrusive and in the proper key, the costumes amazingly evocative in color and design, but the production remained persistently modern theater, intrinsically inimical to its subject.

From the dance angle the whole affair takes on a different perspective entirely and was to a large degree successful. Those of us who witness consistently season after season the best and the worst efforts of the dance recitalists have long since become aware of the fertile field which medieval research offers to the modern choreographer. Our chief pioneer has been Miss Angna Enters, but half a dozen other prominent dancers have made use of the same themes in their own manner, either by direct or indirect implication, and in every case such compositions have proved among the most interesting which any of them have offered on their programs.

Pageants and Symbols

The Middle Ages were devious but not subtle, and religious art was the highest form of emotional relief then obtainable. Their direct method of expression compromised only with their resplendent sense of color and form, and was limited only by medium and by a skill as elementary, stark and frank of impulse as the daily existence of the artists themselves. Theirs was a life illumined by a perpetual pageantry, a spiritualism soaring upon a ladder of symbols. It was not an eloquent day for words, hence it was the heyday for miming. Is it any wonder that the modern dancer falls upon this period with glad cries and uses it to restate her own art in its translucent terms?

So out of the confused tapestry of criss-cross purposes which is so fer-

ently exhibited on this occasion Martha Graham's is the one figure which emerges triumphant. Had the production been frankly designated as a dance stylization based on medieval miracle-play tradition no praise would have been too high for the result.

The Star Performer

Miss Graham herself is, in every fiber of her artistic nature, eminently equipped for such work. Her physical presence, which is at once human and wooden, intimate and remote, spare and beautiful, might have served as the model for any of the saints on the cathedral porticos; her personality, alternately ardent and withdrawn, flowers in grotesqueries such as Villon and his contemporaries might have recognized as their own conceits. Her style and her art, ceremonial, shorn of superfluities, angular, rigid, recollected and humble, relate her congenially to those elder artists who worked unwittingly, even as she now works in the supremest sophistication.

The mimetic design of all six pieces, pre-eminently "Les Trois Rois," "La Nativite" and "The Miraculous Birth and the Midwives," is, as many of the dramatic critics who reviewed the piece recognized, really a dance as we use the term today. Taken as such, confusion as to purpose and point immediately fades away and leaves a splendid pattern inviting admiration and the desire to contemplate its richness again and again.