Moments of Miracle

Six Miracle Plays. Manuscripts selected and arranged by Natalie Hays Hammond. Guild Theatre, February 5 and 12, 1933.

MR. JOHN CHAMBERLAIN in his "Farewell to Reform," a book, at times brilliant and always absorbing, on the rise, life and decay of the progressive mind in America, has a remark not without application to the case of the miracle plays in the recent production by the Stage Alliance. Speaking of President Wilson, he observes that because of his "anesthesia to detail, the suspicion will not down that he admired the British system, not so much for its flexibility as for the opportunity it provided for a man of presidential timber to take the spotlight. . . ." Sometimes I think it is thus with our theatre: you can do all sorts of things on Broadway—if you have the money—but the charm lies in the chance for the spotlight. This sort of thinking led to some of the attitudes toward the Miracle Plays. What was the idea? How could anybody expect to make a go of such a venture?—meaning make money or a hit. What was the intention? Was it to reanimate these old pieces from sacred and dramatic history? And what was Miss Martha Graham, already established as an important dancer with her own style, doing *"dans cette galère"*? Why, too, if you were going to spend money producing, not put it on worthy American work that had not got a chance?

The first query, about the odd idea of such a venture, derives from the vast wonder of a nation with so much money and so much to go from, if not to go to, that it has not learned to satisfy itself in its own special quality or need by forms of culture. Since life is made up of many elements, is it not conceivable that some of the producers, players and audience have things in them that this production expressed or enriched or, out of an old thirst in a semi-desert, for a moment satisfied? As for reanimating a primitive dramatic form—a process usually academic and self-conscious and pseudo—is it not possible that the living interest in these plays depends rather on their power to reanimate us? As to a dancing already fixed in its style, that can mean only already dead. As to that chance for the American product, where are all these great untried creations, is there some secret masonry of excellence?

The program of the six numbers differed heavily in value and in the production given each. At this point criticism can take root. But in general the roots of the sort of critical thinking that I have indicated lie in one fact: people insist on seeing what they have made up their minds they are to see—in this case revived miracle plays; they refuse to take a thing for what it is, reading it in the language it is speaking. With any work of art we must either read the language it speaks, and so judge it, or else know we cannot read its language and so not judge it by what it is not. The language chosen for these six numbers was essentially the dance, sometimes with music, sometimes with the dramatic text supplied by readers at either side. Out of the great volume of miracles and mysteries six were chosen, three of them from French manuscripts, the thirteenth century "La Nativité" and "Les Trois Rois," and "Les Trois Maries" from the eleventh century. "The Miraculous Birth and the Midwives" appears to be an adaptation from one of Hone's "Descriptions"; "The Magdalen" a part only of a play; and a passage from the Chester plays serves for "The Lamentation of the Virgin Mary." I should be disposed to say, also, that there was the miracle of a packed house at the second performance of the program, and that Miss Martha Graham at her best had such moments of grace, delicate profundity and inspiration in motifs poured into her as would in the era of the plays themselves have been counted divine.

Miss Hammond's costume designs were good both where they were simple and where they ventured into a gentle Gothic ornament. In the piece with the two midwives, played by young monks, the squares of brown and white made a fine variation from the usual, and historically later, Franciscan brown, and carried the scene off to some terra-cotta memory, little figures to be adored by peasants in small shrines and rocky grottoes. Some of the designs had the simplicity and stillness of wood; the dress, of velvet in three shades of rose, for the "Lamentation" was that of the Our Lady, the Queen of Heaven. In all the costumes there was nothing arrant; and the degree to which they were realistic and not realistic seemed to me right. Miss Alice Laughlin's settings, almost stage properties they were, always sparse, always pure, were admirable.

The use of readers for the text instead of lines spoken by the dramatic personages I thought a very good scheme. It freed the dancers and mimes from speech and made their conveyance of their matter more flowing and lovely, less checked with the concrete, able the more truly to dance the meaning. It was more as if the simple statues in the choir, or far up on a *reja's* ledge, were there, complete in their own presence, around which the music or the words arose, complete in themselves also, and all three, dance, words and music, running to one single whole. Technically it seemed to me interesting because it served to stress the separate elements that compose a work in the theatre, each one of which by doing purely and tensely what has been assigned to it, is both itself and something else also, like, as Plotinus said it, a singer in a song.

Miss Alma Kruger read the women's lines admirably, only now and then releasing into the reading a personal element that left a kind of emotional sediment outside the miming. Mr. Paul Leyssac read "Les Trois Rois" and "Les Trois Maries" in a noble and perfect French that might well have brought us to our feet. The placement of the tone, the impersonality of the sense, and the progression of the distributed tonic stress would have been somewhat too astonishing had it not been for the perfect suspension of the line as a whole and the infallible taste. The slight foreign tinge to Mr. Leyssac's English reading only served to give it the needed removal, to perfect the scansion, and to develop to their full metrical volume words that our actors, partly from lack of training, partly from our wholesale lack of standard, do little with, such words, for a single example, as those ending in *ble*.

In the work of the players was illustrated one quality that the theatre needs at its core. I have never seen young women and young men playing with such gentle honesty

and tenderness as these did, never so whole an absence of exhibitionism or straying ego-mindedness, never so simple a will to do what the moment wanted, which was, of course, largely what Miss Graham had wanted of them. Certainly on those among them who were at all sensitive the pieces themselves must have cast some degree of mood, but it was the teaching and directing of Miss Graham that most gave them that hush, regularity, and absorption without gush. Apart from the strong coaching, it amounted to a kind of spiritual animation entering into them from a lovely and intense mind.

The various numbers came off, as might be expected, unequally. The first was too long without a stricter ritual. "The Magdalen" suffered for want of a Satan not merely young and decadent but forceful in evil, and by its moving too far in the direction of a dance pantomime. Miss Graham's "The Lamentation of the Virgin Mary" was in many parts beautiful, marked with eternally surprising and exquisite motifs, and finding at its close the right tragic knowledge for this woman in whose heart all man's pain was prophesied forever. The middle portion especially of this dance was less good. There is, I think, one thing to say that will find the main source of the trouble. This artist in her experience has not before now danced to an accompaniment of words. She made the mistake of dancing too much to the words' concrete meaning. She should have taken them as she might a stream of music supplying only the substance that she on her part would create in her dance medium. The concreteness of the words does not concern her; it lies within their own special element.

"The Miraculous Birth and the Midwives" and "Les Trois Rois" were the two numbers entirely beautiful. Mr. John Glenn's St. Joseph, so quiet, so uninsistent, like a peasant's *santo,* and so right in movement, was excellent. For the other figures and their encounters in the action Miss Graham had inventions in place, grouping and gesture that were remarkable. Sometimes they were motifs—the Virgin after the doubts and the miracle, laying her cheek in St. Joseph's palm, or the shepherds' breaking into a dance as they moved toward her, or the monk-midwives kneeling whenever the angel passed, circling around the group with the Virgin and child—in these and many other motifs the invention was of a sweetness and imagination for which words can be only silly. The intelligence shown in the handling of the naïve, too, was notable. The naïve, on the stage, so soon as we recognize it as meant to be naïve, is no longer so. The one element out of the primitive naïveté of these plays that can remain a veritable quality is directness in statement, simple faith in the validity of the emotion and action; and this Miss Graham achieved in genuine creation. As to her entrance into a new field, I do not think she has done so. She had already, before this, admitted, as a part of her growth, that there is a great deal besides psychological projection of the dancer's self. On days when one's viscera are not at home, there are angels of wonder and life that may visit us from other creations, other spirits. The continuity of thought, forms and beauty is no more to be denied than the continuity of one's biology. The birth of any new living thing is, to a true artist, always torment, but the flower of it has the sweetness for the moment of pause and perfection. And then the torment again and for a moment again the peace. And when all this stops and you are dead, you fatten or teach, or satisfy your critics, or contract a tour.

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