

Modern Dance Forms

BY PAUL DOUGLAS

It is hoped that the following article will stimulate further discussions on the relative values of our modern dance forms. By no means is this stand that of NEW THEATRE. It presents the personal opinion of Mr. Douglas, whose article, by the way, has been considerably shortened because of space limitations. Those who differ with those evaluations expressed by the writer are urged to send in their comment and discussion.

No one has yet written an analysis of the relationship between content and form in the modern dance. As a result, many dancers have merely adopted existing techniques and used them to express material for which those techniques were never intended. Some dance critics have limited themselves to a discussion of whether or not thematic material has been significant and then in an unrelated manner have gone on to an "aesthetic" appreciation of composition, choreography, movement, etc., as though they were two different entities. This approach is completely undialectical because it overlooks the fundamental truism that content and form in any art medium are inseparable. It is my purpose to help clarify and perhaps provoke discussion upon this most vital problem which has been given much thought in the other arts, but seems to have escaped the attention of the modern dance world.

With the exception of the Martha Graham group, there is neither a creative force nor a substantial audience except in the New Dance League. Where else is it possible to see such interest and activity? Like other new movements, the New Dance League has attracted many elements who are using the opportunities presented to them to exhibit their work without understanding the medium in which they desire to express themselves and therefore seizing upon what has already been created without first stopping to analyze whether it could be used. The dance is perhaps one of the most difficult mediums of expression, and to trifle with it is to weaken and ruin its potentialities as a revolutionary weapon.

It is important to trace briefly the evolution of modern dance forms and their relationship to the content or subject matter for which they were used. The modern dance flourished mainly in Germany and in the beginning evidenced itself chiefly in the mechanistic form of the Rudolph von Laban School.

The post-war disillusionment manifested itself in Middle Europe where the modern school, which reached its criterion in Mary Wigman, refused entirely to draw from the world of reality. It assumed a defeatist attitude and found inspiration for its work in mysticism. There was a tendency toward a preoccupation with fate, a

"back to the earth" symbolism, and an appeal for beauty to an objective world completely unrelated to the dancer herself. The social forces which caused this escape were neither understood nor was there an attempt made to cope with them. This resulted in an ego-cult, which rhapsodized "art for art's sake."

The space through which Wigman projects herself is always filled with imaginative spirits of a metaphysical world. Even her affirmations are concerned with chasing away bad spirits of an outer-cosmos. Thus her technique is solely adaptable for the formulation of mystic ideas and has logically become a useful "art" for fascist Germany where Wigman continues to function.

That Wigman's form is of no use to the dancer struggling with contemporary problems is evident when we consider the work of some of her students. Abramovich and Groke were featured recently as Europe's greatest dancers and appeared in New York this winter. Their thematic material was devoid of importance and their movement was confined to hand exhibition. Kreutzberg, who years ago flashed across the horizon because of his superb technical facility has contented himself with a continued repetition of his old dances in which he leaps beautifully but says nothing. Consider too, the promising solo work of Jane Dudley and Miriam Blecher. Originally students of the Wigman School, they have found it necessary to discard the fundamental features of that technique in their modern dances (*Time is Money, Cause I'm A Nigger*).

The Democratic traditions expressed in the Declaration of Independence were the greatest creative force in American art. It produced a Whitman in poetry and Isadora Duncan in the Dance. These great artists believed in the equality of all men and fought for the preservation of those rights attained through revolution. Duncan was the highest development in the bourgeois dance. She had unbounded faith in the values of bourgeois democracy and believed that they could be used for the good of all classes. The technique and forms through which she projected her faith were progressive, in that they were related to the thought content and ideals which she stood for. She rejoiced in the accomplishment of the common man, in the freedom from the yoke of oppression which the Declaration of Independence had supposedly accomplished and which American bourgeois democracy was supposed to foster and develop. To aid her dance she used music most expressive of that ideal which she worshipped (Beethoven, Songs of the French Revolution, etc.). She was consistent too in her constant struggle to glorify the dance as a

healthy, normal, beautiful and natural function of the human body and did more to rid that art of the inhibitions placed upon it by outmoded convention than any of her predecessors. Here chief contribution in the realm of movement was her understanding of the worthlessness of the ballet technique as a truthful expression of her contemporary life.

Her technique was characterized by an erect affirmative stance and a free use of every part of the body, arms extended upward as though accepting and rejoicing in the universality of mankind. The movement was distinguished by a freedom of action and a flowing rhythm and she moved through a large expanse of space. *These fundamental characteristics of her technique are more closely related to our modern dance than the dance forms of any other modern dancer.*

Duncan's limitations lay in the fact that her free flowing gracious technique and her love for humanity was based ideologically on an acceptance of the indestructibility of society as it was then known to her. She was creative just so long as the culture of which she was the highest dance expression was progressive. She broke down when that culture broke down, but her value and importance cannot be underestimated. She showed more truthfully than anyone before her that creation can be beautiful only when it is wholly related to the objective world in which it lives and of whose problems it is an expression.

Not understanding the richness and importance of the material which existed in our own country, dancers such as Ruth St. Denis and Michio Ito, etc., went to the far flung corners of the earth (the Orient, India) for their subject matter. They were able for a while to satisfy the needs of an audience who believed that all the pageantry which they were witnessing was a faithful artistic reproduction of life as it existed outside of America. That the basic problems which existed all over the world were fundamentally alike was unknown to the politically backward and temporarily apathetic enthusiasts of these schools. Ruth St. Denis and her followers were symptomatic of the beginning of a decadent culture unable and unwilling to utilize the life force of their time. Their mystic pictures were untrue because the far flung corners of the earth where they obtained their sources were as much affected by the class struggle as the more advanced countries. There too, the battle between the old and the new was raging and any art that did not express this struggle was unreal and could not survive. The St. Denis School was not rooted in America and it was totally unrelated to anything contemporary. This is obvious to us now, particularly when we remember

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that her dancing became so lifeless that instead of projecting dance forms, she had to resort to spectacular pageantry. It is difficult to associate any contributions of hers in terms of movement.

The social isolation of the dance continued even into the years after the crisis had set in, but there were changes in form. The Wigman School because it seemed to represent at least outwardly our machine age greatly influenced the dance in America. Some of the disciples of St. Denis were quick to seize upon the German School as a base from which to develop their own ideas.

The most important figure who emerged from this development was Martha Graham. No longer satisfied with the oriental pageantry of her teacher and yet unaware of the forces within society which were revolting against the destruction of the best traditions in our culture, she became the most developed bourgeois dancer since Isadora Duncan. The very important difference between the two is that Duncan functioned for a rising bourgeoisie and Graham still functions for a declining class, desperately attempting to find values where they no longer exist. Duncan expressed values related to the social forces which were most vital at the time she lived, because to her there was still the possibility of fulfilling the hopes which seemed to be the aims of democracy. Now those hopes and aspirations exist only in the aims of the revolutionary proletariat. Martha Graham being a bourgeois dancer seems to be seeking *external* values wholly unrelated to the dynamic struggle of existing social forces as a source for her material.

Her influence has been so great that those engaged in the development of the modern dance have accepted her success and used her forms without appraising from a dialectic standpoint whether or not her technique can be used in the expression of newer and more vital ideas. They have assumed that because she possesses a great deal of technical skill and perfection in her execution that it is important for them to use at least part of that technique for the expression of their content. Thus, the inseparability of form and content is forgotten by those who in their eagerness to use the dance as a revolutionary weapon seize upon forms which have been perfected for the projection of ideas totally different and sometimes completely at odds with progressive thought and material.

The perfection of Martha Graham's dancing is limited to her own ideology. She will be remembered as the greatest dance exponent of the last stages of capitalism struggling in its final agonies to salvage something out of its chaotic and decaying torment. Her contribution is analagous to that of Proust in literature. Such a contribution cannot be underestimated for it gives us a clear picture of that world we no longer want and a

better and greater incentive for building a better world.

A recent attempt by Graham to apply herself to vital subject matter should be studied. This was in *Panic*, the play in verse by Archibald MacLeish for which she devised the movement. It was a failure because the dance was unrelated to the thought content and idea of the play. Thus instead of there being a synthesis of verse and movement, the dancing seemed superimposed upon the play often distracting from the beauty of the poetry. This was no accident and the result will be similar in all instances where there is no understanding on the part of the creator of the relationship between form and content.

There is discernible in Graham's recent group dances, however, a noticeable change. In *Celebration*, for instance, a greater use of space and more elevation is attained than ever before. This, I believe, indicates the influence of some of her students, who from an ideological viewpoint are more advanced than Graham herself. The change is encouraging. The group has superb technical ability. But it will be wasted unless they continue to depart even more radically from the fundamental features of the Graham dance forms.

HICKS: That's the stuff. That's
telling yuh... gotta be prison...
sorry. I'd do the same thing again
thing again.
LEE: Sure. (A pause.)
HICKS: Yuh better hear it, Lee.
LEE: Good luck, kid...
HICKS: Yeah—Good luck to you.
LEE: I'll be seeing yuh.
HICKS: (With determination.) Ok
sundag. His face is tight.)

Curtain

THE PRIZE PLAY CONTESTS

Private Dickie by Albert
Menz received the approval
of the judges for first prize
in the New Theatre League
American League Against
War and Fascism play con-
test, but second and third
prizes have not been decided
upon as yet.

Announcements of the prizes
were given by the League
at the NEW THEATRE
play contests.

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Theatre League at 100-45 Street,
New York. Private Dickie written
under the name of Albert Menz
any other name. T. J. may without notice
in order to expel. The winning
of first prize winning play *Private Dickie*