

NEW MASSES

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Martha Graham's Art

The major new work of a modern dancer.



MARTHA GRAHAM, America's greatest modern dancer, recently gave her first Broadway recital in two seasons before a sold-out house. Two new works were presented: a solo, "Salem Shore," and "Deaths and Entrances," which used, in addition to Miss Graham, a company of nine dancers. "Punch and the Judy," also a group work, concluded the evening.

"Salem Shore," a ballad of longing for the return of a man at sea, at this first showing, had little to recommend it choreographically save an intensity of projection on the part of the soloist. The music by Paul Nordoff was a definite impediment. A score that had neither melodic nor rhythmic interrelation with the dance, it refused to remain in the background but kept piping itself into a prominence far in excess of duty.

"Deaths and Entrances," the major new work, concerns three sisters (the Bronte sisters are suggested prototypes). It tells of "the restless paces of the heart on some winter evening. . . . There are remembrances of childhood, certain dramatizations of well-known objects, dreams of romance, hatreds bred of longings and madness. . . . There are deaths and entrances of hopes, fears, remembrances, dreams, and there is ultimate vision." [From the program notes.]

This remembrance of things past is externalized by the evocation of three remembered children and the struggles between "the dark beloved" and "the poetic beloved" for the possession of one of the sisters. The episodes, building to a climax of profound personal frustration and almost insane bitterness, are fragmentary, tangential, oblique—a panorama of long-submerged experience summoned up out of a deep well of loneliness.

It is to the credit of Miss Graham's unquestionable talent, her great personal

Martha Graham's Art technique, and the brilliant support of her company, that this framework, overladen with symbolic as well as psychiatric terms of reference, does not obscure powerful sections of highly charged dancing. It is doubtful whether the rapt audience was completely privy to the "plot"; but it certainly was not left untouched by the passion of the movement; the uncanny integration with Miss Graham's moods of Jane Dudley and Sophie Maslow, the two other sisters; the stolid hardness of Erick Hawkins contrasting with the incomparable liveness of Merce Cunningham.

Martha Graham's art has always been characterized by constant experimentation with new forms and new contents. "Letter to the World" several years ago marked the advent of a new trend. Miss Graham's programs are no longer dance recitals. They are theater—the unique theater of Martha Graham. The company is no longer a cohesive group of dancers in the formal choreographic sense. They are "characters," as listed on the program. Here we are meeting up with a type of poetic, symbolist theater where the "drama"—the poetic line—is projected through movement rather than words. The primacy of choreographic composition in the dance has made way also for a special pattern of dramatic movement, which uses an objective symbol as a point of departure for the dramatization of subjective emotions.

This pattern, which takes the real and makes it possess truth only in the realm of the imaginary, has set its seal on all of Miss Graham's recent works. "Deaths and Entrances" calls itself "a legend of the heart's life." "Letter to the World" is "laid in the shadow world of Emily Dickinson's imagination." Even her two comedies—and Miss Graham's sense of the comic is as incisive as it is exquisite—do not depart from this mold. "Every Soul is a Circus" projects the escape of a silly woman into a psychological circus of her own. And in "Punch and the Judy," Judy escapes her daily existence with Punch by fleeing "into a dream world with Pegasus."

It is not within the province of a topical review of this sort to expand on the philosophic implications of such thinking as it manifests itself not in an isolated instance, but chronologically over a period of time. This reviewer hopes to be pardoned the indiscretion of quoting from his own review of Miss Graham (NEW MASSES, March 11, 1941) on the premiere of "Letter to the World." "Her works exposed a creative impulse which was ego-centric, not social; an inner vision which was mystic, not derived from the real world; and evolved a statement which was negative, not affirmative."

That still holds for "Deaths and Entrances."

FRANCIS STEUBEN.