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The Martha Graham Company at the Performing Arts Center: A Contrast of Phases and Themes

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Martha Graham, whose pioneering efforts helped to change the direction of dance in America and throughout the world, continues her influence through the efforts of the Martha Graham Company. Or rather the company performs her works. The repertory of the current company includes both recent Graham works such as "Ecuatorial," "Frescoes," and "The Owl and the Pussycat" choreographed in 1978, and earlier works such as "Night

Dance Dimensions

Journey," 1947 and "Embattled Garden," 1958.

These works, which were included in performances by the Graham Company at the Performing Arts Center in Milwaukee, October 29-31, 1979, contrast phases and themes in Graham's career.

The earlier works benefit from Graham's insight into classical and biblical

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myths. In "Night Journey," Graham depicts the powerful revelation of incest through an episode from the myth of Oedipus. Tiresias, the blind seer, confronts Jocasta the queen with the truth that her lover and husband, Oedipus, is in fact her son. The dramatic tension of this work provides one of the great dramatic moments of twentieth century theater. Yuriko Kimura evokes the full range of passion as she portrays Jocasta in this performance of a dance of death.

The choreography of the later works is thin by comparison. Its steps are simply steps and the themes are whimsical rather than substantial. It is as if the powerful element of spirit which invades every movement of the earlier works has simply vanished. Even the beautiful dancing of Yuriko Kimura does not rescue "The Owl and the Pussycat" from intellectual and spiritual poverty. It is cute and nothing more.

If the choreography has changed, so have the dancers. Yuriko's dancing stands out miles above the others. Her superior artistry reveals an understanding of Graham's dances that eludes most of the dancers of the present company. Technical virtuosity is not lacking in the other dancers. They may even be superior in physical attainments to dancers of previous generations, yet their movements are frequently simple movements.

The dancers are exceedingly well trained but the movement vocabulary and style of Graham's dances appears somehow alienated

from their bodies. The effect is jarring; it is as if we are looking at museum pieces in a strange setting.

Absent from the later pieces are the sets of Isamu Nogucci. The sets greatly enhance the earlier Graham themes. Interestingly, these sets are as effective in a museum setting as they are on the stage. A recent retrospective exhibition of Nogucci's works at the Philadelphia Museum of Art included a selection of sets for Martha Graham dances.

On reflection I am pleased for any opportunity to see a performance of Martha Graham's choreography. The experience is, unfortunately, less than satisfactory without the guiding figure of Miss Graham.

By Curtis L. Carter