RELIABLE EVIDENCE OF GREATNESS

by Marcia Siegel


The greatness of Martha Graham is already a legend despite the fact that its central character is still alive; it was achieved through an intense concentration on the dance, although it has always involved the collaboration of major artists in other fields; it is founded on the insistent theme that dance cannot be expressed in words, but it nevertheless inspired some of the most thoughtful dance writing that has ever been put to paper.

These random and seemingly paradoxical thoughts are prompted by the reissuance, in paperback form, of Merle Armitage's 1937 anthology, Martha Graham. The book is part of a continuing project by Dance Horizons to reprint dance classics of all periods at accessible prices. This volume was made from the original plates, including drawings, photographs and art-moderne design and typography. Its format as well as its protagonists invoke respect and a certain nostalgia. They just don't make them like that any more.

Everything about Martha Graham's achievement is heroic, beginning with her consciousness of her own importance as an innovator in art. Today, when she receives the highest honors her field can offer, and makes ritualistic appearances on the lecture platform and the stage, the prizes and the performance are meant to celebrate the whole legend, not solely its present chapter. For those who cannot remember the days of Graham's greatest power, and who are afraid today's tributes may play them false, books of this kind are a ray of light.

In it Graham's contemporaries gave their estimates of her genius at the time of her greatest impact, with a freshness and sincerity quite different from the melodramatic blurbiage that surrounds Graham wherever she goes today. The book also contains Graham's now classic statements about her work as she made them at the moment of discovery. "It takes ten years to make a dancer," she still tells the audiences, but the fire that once must have leapt in her eye has flickered down to starlight and the voice has a rehearsed nobility; and it rolls over us like Scripture as we reflect instead upon the awful years of a dancer's mortality.

At the time this book was first published, only 11 years after her first New York solo concert, Martha Graham had already begun her pioneering efforts in every field which she now dominates. She was using music composed for and intentionally subordinate to her choreography. Wallingford Riegger and George Antheil, who contributed to this volume,
were among the earliest of her musical collaborators. The list was to include nearly every major orchestral composer in this country during the next three decades. She had already interested Isamu Noguchi and Alexander Calder in designing sets for her, revolutionary theatrical designs that made the backdrop-and-wing convention all but obsolete for the dance. She was looking for a uniquely American style of dance that was to find its expression through her own body and intellect. Her way of moving, formulated into a precise technique, is one of the cornerstones of all modern dance training. Her concept of the American spirit gave rise to compelling documents like “Frontier” (1935) and to the startling abstractions of “Primitive Mysteries” (1931). It was only after she had discovered these American roots that she could transcend them in her later works on the Greek epics and Biblical themes. She began to develop a company that would express as a group the personal movement concepts she had put into her solos. The company, which made its first cross-country tour in 1936, was the proving ground for many dancers who went on to become today’s artists, innovators and teachers.

Along with Martha Graham in those crusading days of the 30’s, Charles Weidman, Doris Humphrey, Helen Tamiris and others were searching for American dance, and together, in their separate ways, they found it. There is another giant figure looming over their efforts, the figure of Louis Horst, and it is to Horst, not to Miss Graham, that Merle Armitage’s book was dedicated. In a sense, this is only fitting, for Louis Horst, as musician, composer, writer, editor, critic, teacher, codifier and disciplinarian, gave a verbal context to the work of these often inarticulate dancers, and found the connections between their medium and the historical mainstream of art. Louis Horst symbolized all of the subsidiary talents that contributed to Martha Graham’s work and that are still indispensable to any dancer. A chapter on his importance, by Margaret Lloyd, the late dance critic of the Christian Science Monitor, is included in this book.

One of the most astonishing results of the magnetic attraction Martha Graham had for professionals outside the dance was the quantity and quality of discussion about her that found its way into print. Among the contributions to this variegated collection are essays by Stark Young and Lincoln Kirstein, excerpts from John Martin’s New York Times reviews, a biography by Winthrop Sargeant, and space diagrams of five Graham dances by designer Arch Lauter. The selection of Miss Graham’s own statements was drawn from 24 publications over a ten-year period. How many newspapers today will take the trouble to interview a dancer? I once offered to arrange an interview with Paul Taylor for a newspaper in a town where Taylor was appearing. I was told if he were a baseball player they might be interested. Only one New York newspaper has a full time dance critic on its staff, and the number of dance commentators who can publish anywhere with any regularity is pitifully small.

Part of this problem is undoubtedly economic: the volume of dance advertising in the daily papers does not justify the expenditure of editorial
space. The audience is small and its purchasing power is thought to be even smaller. In contrast, the phenomenal popularity of music recordings and sound equipment accounts for substantial advertising revenue, and thus permits more space to be devoted to music analysis and criticism. In a recent, not untypical, Sunday New York Times the gaps in the record advertising pages were filled by pertinent statements from Morton Feldman, David Amram and Charles Wuorinen. Advertising for musical instruments, music scores and music teaching plans supports more than one periodical. Dance has no product to sell but itself, and these days it's just too expensive to publish for love alone. Outside of the meager dance press, a handful of working critics, and a few courageous book publishers, what we are able to read about dance is served up straight from the press agents' can and twice as tinny.

But an equally serious cause of our diminishing dance literature is the dance climate, which may be less stimulating to writers than it once was. In art as in national affairs this is a period of reform, not revolution. The ferment in artistic circles today concerns not the quality of art but its politics, economics, patronage and prestige. The chroniclers of today's culture are not philosophers and critics, but surveyors, documenters and historians. Dancers are more interested in perfecting the things Martha Graham tried than in overturning them. They want to make a living, not to make history. Although we have many fine artists in dance now, we have no heroes.

Perhaps it is a characteristic of heroes that their achievements should be embellished, and finally obscured, by the legend that glorifies them. Certainly with a dancer we have very little else to go on. Graham's dances have not been notated. She opposes revivals, and if they are undertaken for a special occasion, as were "Frontier," "El Penitente" and "Primitive Mysteries" three years ago as a memorial to their composer, Louis Horst, they are apt to disappear immediately from the repertory. Her few films are almost as elusive as the performances they sought to capture. Books like Merle Armitage's Martha Graham may be the only reliable evidence that remains, except, of course, our memories.