

phonic moments. It is saved by the inclusion of the work of Sidi Mohammed Yguerbuchen, an Algerian composer, who if he did not actually write the native music (one has no way of knowing) at least decided which recordings and which native pieces were to be used. It is certainly due to him that we have the exquisite background for the streets of Algiers' Casbah: a great brouhaha of native horns, Kabyle flutes and drums, together with sad lost wisps of bal musette tunes on the accordeon. There are Sud-Oranais pieces played on the strange chalumeau-like instrument that sounds like the human voices of the same region; and actual *Touchiats Algérois*, wonderful and ridiculous bastard numbers from the Casbah's cafes. (Piano four octaves with embellishments, flute, drum and tambourine.)

What is particularly fortunate about this track is the fact that the ever-present music in the street-scenes makes for greater realism: life in the Casbah *is* one long sound-track like this.

There are two remarkable moments: the murder scene using the mechanical piano with drum accompaniment (although René Clair used much the same device years ago it seems to me) and Frehel's song, where she sings to one of her own records on a wavering and scrapey gramophone. These two identical voices, sometimes falling one on top of the other, and sometimes being an immediate echo one of the other, become the Past and the Present, giving the scene great dramatic force which is due in no way to the visual images.

## WITH THE DANCERS

BY EDWIN DENBY

MARTHA Graham has now presented to New York her two dance works, *El Penitente* and *Letter to the World*, which are full of interest and full of poetry. *El Penitente* looks like a Mystery Play. A young woman and two young men come on the stage carrying a bright banner. Their manner is collected and cheerful, and at once gives the sense of a religious festivity. You watch them act out a play which tells that though man's duty to Christ is hard, his pain is relieved by a Divine Grace visiting him in turn as a virgin, a seductress, and a mother. Sometimes they use their banner as a little curtain from which emerge supernatural apparitions; once, they strip off the cloth, and the frame suddenly is

a cross. When the play is over, the three performers add a little dance of jubilation in their character as farmers. The style of gesture reminds you of New Mexican primitives – the votive pictures and bultos. It suggests – as they do – a double emotion of unlimited space all around and of solid weight at the center, there where you are. There is an apparent naiveté of timing and placing which is charming in detail and carried through with distinction. All this might be true either of a real Catholic piece or of an exquisite tour de force. But the dance seemed to me to have a poignancy other than Catholic and a reality beyond that of charm. The gestures are not made so much for their symbolic meaning as for

their shape and rhythm as dancing; the dancing does not exploit its own limpidity, invention, and restraint, but moves you by its dynamics as a whole, a personal meaning which makes the form real, which makes the religious style real, too, but in an oblique way. Partly because the scenes between the man and the woman are placed down stage, partly because they are the most expressive, partly because it is Miss Graham who dances in them, it was not the relation of man to the Divine but the relation of a man and a woman that seemed the true subject. On me the effect was that of a tender and subtle love poem, a real love held sweetly nearly in suspense by a remote terror. It was as though Miss Graham had used the Spanish-Indian farmers' expression of religious faith as a metaphor for her own faith in the strangeness love can have. It is a sincere and touching and very attractive work, whether you choose to describe it in these terms, or find better ones.

*Letter to the World* is a longer, richer, and more uneven piece. Much of it is not clear to me after seeing it once. But it contains such astonishing passages one is quite willing to forgive the awkward parts it also has, and remember it as a masterpiece. *Letter to the World* is about Emily Dickinson. There is a legend that Emily Dickinson fell in love with a married minister, whom she saw once or twice and might have run away with. On the stage you see the garden door to a New England house and a garden bench. You see a woman move about as though she were dancing to the rustling in the trees and with the odd swirl of the breeze. She appears and disappears mysteriously, suddenly or delayed, like a leaf, or a mouse, or a word. Other figures, too,

appear, sometimes one, sometimes several. You see a tall and dominating woman in black, you see a crowd of stiff boys and girls, you see a solemn and violent man, and a boy who is ironic to the heroine and exuberant alone. The heroine herself appears at one point in a funny dress with trousers under it, and plays games with herself like a school girl, even upsetting the bench and doing happy stunts on it. Much later, the man pays little attention to her, and in the end, according to the program, "out of the tragedy of her loss will be born the poet."

The passages for the other characters, except the *Death* dance for Jane Dudley and the *March* leaping dance for Merce Cunningham did not seem very interesting; but many of those for Miss Graham are extraordinary for their devious grace, their unpredictable and fascinating current. Often they have a round buoyancy like that of waltzing, with poignant gradations of greater and less airiness. Her funny dance, *The Little Tippler*, is a sort of polka of impish pranks, like Thoreau's squirrel — "all of his motions, even in the depths of the forest, imply spectators as much as those of a dancing girl." And altogether wonderful is her sitting on the bench toward the end, half turned from the audience and reflective in a pure, Victorian attitude; with a passionate heroism of repose that has all the amplitude of Isadora Duncan. The continuity of a lyric line, the contrast of dynamics (the sense that a gesture is not always a thrust but often a caress), both of these are a new development in Miss Graham's way of composing; as is also the use of different kinds of projection (the sense that she dances at times more publicly for the audience, at times more privately for herself). From many points

of view *Letter to the World*, no matter how uneven it appears at first sight, is a moving and noble work one cannot praise too highly.

Miss Graham's technic is as always impeccable. And she has three fine dancers with her, Jane Dudley, Eric Hawkins and Merce Cunningham, who by each having a dance character of their own throw her personal quality into relief. Cunningham, the least finished dancer of the three, delighted me by his humor, his buoyancy, and his wholeness of movement, a singleness of impulse like that which makes Negro dancers so graceful. The empty lightness of his upheld arms when he leaps I have never seen elsewhere. I did not think the music for *El Penitente* (Horst) had much character of its own; but I liked that of *Letter to the World* (Hunter Johnson), which, though modest and gentlemanly, contributes another personality to the piece.

### III

The other top novelty of these two months was the Balanchine-Stravinsky-Tchelitchev *Balustrade*, presented by the Original Ballet Russe. It was a ballet in the best Diaghilev tradition, a collaboration of first class artists where one can expect to feel movement, look, and listen with the same degree of sensibility. In such collaborations you can see the poetic quality of dancing better, because you are in the company of several different people who all believe in poetry; and if several different people do, it must be true the world over. When there is only one artist present at a time, there is mostly something pathetic and provincial about the theatre; one feels too sorry for him to pay undivided attention. At any rate it is a fact that such collaborations created the Diaghilev tradition; the tradition

that dancing can be as poetic (or if you prefer, as serious) as any other art; the tradition that painters and musicians should not give up their character when they work for dancers; the tradition that a dance evening is a natural pleasure for a civilized person. A tradition of this sort seems to me agreeable in New York as it was in Paris.

*Balustrade* is danced to the Stravinsky *Violin Concerto*, music that seems to me easy to go along with from the rhythmic side. The choreography too is easy to go along with from the rhythmic side, as it is full of references to our usual show dancing, the kind you see anywhere from a burlesque to a Hollywood production number. I noticed two elements or "motifs:" the upstretch on the down beat; and one knee slipping across the other in a little gesture of conventional shame. Both are impersonal enough. The first syncopic element Balanchine enlarges into the liveliest and lightest ensemble variations; the second element—one of gesture—he elaborates into a long acrobatic trio, in which all sorts of "slippings across" are tried of legs, of bodies, of arms; and this trio ends by a separation, the girl looking reproachful, the boys hanging their heads in shame. How strangely such a concrete moment tops the abstract ones before it; a discontinuity in one's way of seeing that is bridged by the clearness of placing and the sureness of timing.

*Balustrade* is complex (or "contradictory") in this way as the eye adds up its successive phases. Its novelty is that it is not complex at each moment in the manner we are accustomed to. The individual part has almost no countermovement, no angular breaking of the dance impulse or direction. The impulse is al-

lowed to flow out, so to speak, through the arms and legs, which delineate the dance figure lightly, as it were in passing. As they do in our show dancing. This is all something else than the "European" style of the thirties. There is in this "undissonant," "undeformed," or "one at a time" manner a kind of parallel relation to Miss Graham's new manner in *Letter to the World*. Once more, dancing like any living art has moved ahead of what we had come to think of as the modern style; and this time without even any manifestos to warn us.

I must add that in *Balustrade* the costumes are bad. Though they have style, and a sort of super-Hollywood pruriency, after the first minute or so they look like a bunch of rags cutting the line of the body at the knee, obscuring the differentiation of steps, and messing up the dance. And the trio costumes look too publicly sexy, they take away from this dance its mysterious modesty. Still it was right of the management to take a first-rate painter for a work of this kind; an artist's mistake is infuriating but it isn't vulgar.

### III

No doubt if the Loring *Man of Midian* or the Tudor *Verklärte Nacht* had appeared in the repertory of the Ballet Theatre, I should have reason to include them in a list of important events. Both of these choreographers are of the greatest interest. Both are humane, personal, and poetic; Tudor is exquisite, Loring is bold in attack; both are extremely intelligent dancers. Together with Dolin they are the real strength of the Ballet Theatre, and Dolin is, as the whole world knows, one of the best of classic stars, always agreeable, always unaffected, always ample. The Ballet Theatre itself is already well established as a major com-

pany. Its engaging quality is that it does not try to be "Russian." Its lack of sufficient stars, its lack of quality in decoration, its momentary lack of a full orchestra are regrettable but do not cancel its inherent merit. I find a more serious defect in too great a proportion of ballets intended as Broadway entertainment, making more or less witty jokes but neglecting the terrific or tender poetic possibilities of dancing. There is a disproportion in the Ballet Theatre between the elaborateness of the ballet apparatus (even reduced) and the warmth of emotion it arouses. It is like an elaborate party where everybody is presentable and nobody opens up. Ballet that does not fill the stage with warmth is a foolish spectacle, and if our ballerinas mistrust the Italian - Russian - French kind of warmth they might see what they can learn from Miss Hayes and Miss Cornell; and possibly the management itself should value artistic personality above Broadway presentability.

However all this may be the natural uncertainty in a young company anxious not to load itself down with academic rubbish, looking for fresh dancers and a fresh repertory. As it is, the Ballet Theatre repertory is well worth acquaintance, with Tudor's *Dark Elegies* very beautiful indeed, and his *Jardin* and Loring's *Billy the Kid* both important works. *Billy*, though uneven and occasionally absurd, is in many ways the most original piece the company does, because of its sense of American open space, and American open time; also because of its Americanisms of gesture, which come so well from some of the dancers; also because its climaxes are not dancing and not *forte*, but are acting and *piano*; and of course because of its music. But *Billy* is

less to the credit of the Ballet Theatre than to that of the Ballet Caravan which first commissioned it.

The Ballet Theatre novelties this year, *Gala Performance*, *Pas de Quatre*, *Capriccioso*, and *Three Virgins and a Devil*, are all right (the first is even "dandy-iste") but not particularly novel. The dancers are all talented and sincere and I can add nothing to the praise given them here last year by Peter Lindamood. I was much moved by Nemchinova in *Swan Lake*. She brought on the stage the

radiance of the great style, and showed again how enormous is the difference, even in a technical point, between the competent and the imaginatively real.

### III

Anna Sokolow's recital was interesting on account of the three Revueltas pieces played. As a dancer, Miss Sokolow has a very fine thing, the innocent style, but though like a little girl she can be innocently wonderful, that only happens a few times in the course of an entire evening; too few, really.

## OVER THE AIR

—By CHARLES MILLS—

**E**VEN the most ardent modern-music lovers have at the present moment no reasonable complaint of neglect by the radio. A mere listing of all the contemporary works heard during the last two months would completely fill this column. However rare and temporary, that is a grateful condition. Let us hope that it will become more usual, more standard. Indeed it must if the networks are to keep pace with our expanding cultural needs.

WNYC runs off with major honors for sending out its American Music Festival to the metropolitan area. Whether the festival presented our most important and significant works may be open to question, but certainly a fairly varied, interesting cross-section of American talent was covered. Aaron Copland's *An Outdoor Overture* made a favorable opening for the first concert, but what followed was a let-down both in musical quality and as radio entertainment. *Station W GZBX*, a satirical suite by Philip James, turned out to be an unfunny re-

minder of the good old days when radio was peppered with static and other objectionable noises. As a piece of concert music it is merely a specifically dated commentary: as radio music it's too much like the object of its parody. George Gershwin's *Concerto in F* for piano and orchestra brightened up things for a moment, but the orchestral texture of this piece is not clean enough to sound well on the air and its musical interest wears thin. *Abraham Lincoln Walks at Midnight*, Elie Siegmeister's choral work, sounded dull and pretentious without any compensating virtues of strength or logic. A moment of freshness came to the program with Morton Gould's *Spiritual* for string choir and orchestra, but that soon stretched out too long; some sections are a trifle overwritten. Gould's gifts are best perhaps in lighter vein. The closing work, Deems Taylor's *Highwayman*, for baritone, chorus and orchestra, is music ripe with slushy harmonies, thick, heavy orchestration, and stale, derivative ro-