

# At 85, she's the Shakespeare of modern dance

By DONNA OLENDORF

The last place one would expect to find the Martha Graham dancers two evenings before their Detroit opening would be the aisles of Bonwit Teller. But that's where they were last week.

And waiting to welcome them were Detroit's dance aficionados—veteran season ticket subscribers such as Gene Granovitz, and patrons of the Music Hall like Dick Rochon and Brenda Beron—who had been invited by Bonwit's to share cocktails and hors

d'oeuvres with the company members. When the limousines bearing the dancers arrived, the crowd craned their necks to see if Martha Graham herself was with the troupe. No, a spokesperson said. Graham had been detained in New York "making last

minute costume changes." Once that news was digested, the guests settled for the next best thing. Her dancers, who embody the essence of Graham's vision now that she no longer dances herself, were there en masse, and they were eager to talk about what it's like to work with the 85-year-old matriarch of modern dance.

"Speaking with her is like going to the source," said Janet Ellbr, a six-year veteran of the company. "She's very demanding, but that's what makes her work so excellent. Compared to the rest of the dance world, she's always had a vision of what theatre is."

"As drama students look to Shakespeare, dance students look to Martha Graham. Her repertoire represents the foundation of modern dance," echoed Peter Sparling, a former Detroit who has also been a company member for the past six years.

While it is Graham's ability to transform emotion into dramatic movement that is the basis for her genius, the dancers explained that it is her system for teaching this technique that will be her legacy in years to come. One of her foremosters, Isadora Duncan, also mesmerized audiences, but she was never able to codify her steps into a system for dancers to study. Consequently, her art died with her. According to her dancers, the Graham technique, which is practiced in such far away places as Vietnam, is a technique which is emotionally, as well as physically, demanding.

She expects us to be physically perfect, but also to go inside the characters we play and bring something out. We learn as much about our lives as we do about dancing," said Diane Gray, the senior company member, who has been with the troupe for 14 years.

"In her style of choreography, the movement is not just seen, it is also felt. It comes from deep within the

body. So, you feel as if it's happening to you," added dancer Tim Wengert. Because Graham must now convey specific dramatic images by talking to members rather than by showing them through dancing, working with her can be a frustrating experience when communication signals get crossed.

"Once you understand what her words mean, it's better," said Wengert.

"The work is never boring, but it can be maddening. Sometimes you feel driven to despair she demands so much. When both sides don't understand, it's frustrating," he added.

Although she is an exacting teacher, Graham is not a close-minded zealot who rejects dancers simply because their dance background differs from hers.

"She doesn't care what kind of training you've had. It's that spark of movement she's looking for," said Wengert. "As she once told me, she did not set out to destroy something that took 300 years to develop." In fact, he said, many of her dancers have now had ballet training.

Graham still choreographs all the dances her company performs. This year's repertoire includes some of her classics, such as "Lamentation" and "Appalachian Spring," as well as several new dances, such as "The Owl and the Pussycat."

One dancer admits that during some of her heavy works "entertainment is the last thing on your mind," but adds that other works are "pure fun."

The company's Music Hall performances mark the last leg of a two-month road tour.

## Hanuka focus for meeting

Business and Professional Group of Hadassah will meet at 2 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 17 at Northgate Apartment Clubhouse in Oak Park.

Mrs. Rose Buchhalter of Southfield, president, said a highlight of the meeting will be the lighting of the Hanuka candles, and a rendition of the historical story of the holiday.



Once the guests swallowed disappointment that the legendary Martha Graham would not attend the party they were quickly engrossed in animated conversation with the Graham troupe, including Diane Gray, center, and co-manager Jim Nomikas, who met dance aficionados Brenda Beron, left, and Dick Rochon, right. (Photo by Linda Solomon)



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