

# GREAT AMERICAN DANCERS DORIS HUMPHREY CHARLES WEIDMAN

NATION'S CRITICS PAY TRIBUTE

*from Coast to Coast*

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## Dancers Score In S. F. Recital

By ALFRED FRANKENSTEIN

When Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman and their dance group concluded their first San Francisco performance yesterday afternoon at the Curran Theater the audience rose and cheered and applauded both loud and long. For we had witnessed what seemed to one observer to be the most mature, most wisely created, most completely realized group composition in the modern dance vein that this city has so far been privileged to see. "New Dance" was its title. Miss Humphrey is its main author, although one of its high moments is credited to Mr. Weidman.

"New Dance" is a symphony in movement, and a great one. It is obviously the creation of one who sees both life and art whole, rounded and true. It is not the product of academic experiment in new dance forms, sterile of meaning except as an exercise in possibilities. Still less is it dependent upon suggestion and association outside itself. It is altogether of the dance as a fine art of plastic human action, speaking its own self-sufficient language, its utterance altogether charged with vitality, power and idealism.

### POSITIVE THEMES

"New Dance" represents the growth of the individual in relationship to its fellows in an ideal state," one reads in the program note. Well, maybe it does, but it seems to me no more "representative" of anything than a symphony by Beethoven is representative. But, just as the Bonn master's symphonies carry implicit within their musical patterns a dramatic conflict worked out to a spiritually affirmative conclusion, so this dance piece states its masculine and feminine themes, develops and intermixes them through tension, growth and contrast, finally carries them over to joyous resolution and release.

It is a work in the grand style, heroic, vivid, amazingly rich in choreographic ideas, as sonorous to the eye as Beethoven or Brahms to the ear. It never halts in its organized flow, never relies, as do so many group compositions both of the ballet and the modern school, upon the tableau, but constantly lives. And many a choreographer with a hundred dances at his disposal fails utterly to create the sense of big mass movement that Miss Humphrey here achieves with 13 performers.

The modern dance has been too exclusively a feminine province, and part of the fine significance of "New Dance" is its exploitation of the virile element. Mr. Weidman's special star performance, however, was in his own story piece entitled "The Happy Hypocrite," after the satiric tale by Max Beerbohm.

This was a gorgeous, uproarious fantasy, wonderfully inventive in the action, which was always choreographic, but was deliciously pantomimic, too. The work has genuine dance form.

### SUPERB VEHICLE

It is a superb vehicle for the comic dance personality of Weidman himself as the Lord George Hell who is transformed by a mask into Lord George Heaven, as well as those of Sybil Shearer as the lord's mistress, Edith Orcutt as the Merry Dwarf, Katherine Litz as the unspoiled object of Lord George's affections, and Jose Limon as the maker of the masks. (Limon also played a very big part in "New Dance.") One of the things I liked best about "The Happy Hypocrite" is that it seems to be the product of an American sense of humor.

One felt an American kind of comedy at work, both in the choreography and in the music by G. Herbert Elwell.

And so the first local concert by the Humphrey-Weidman group goes into the record as one of the season's outstanding successes. Yesterday we saw only a small part of their total repertoire. One hopes they will be back with more before many months have passed.

## HILARITY FEATURE OF DANCE RECITAL

By JOHN MARTIN

When an audience leaves a dance recital laughing gayly, as Doris Humphrey's and Charles Weidman's audience left the Guild Theatre last night, that is news. As if deliberately to prove that the modern dance is not necessarily devoted to solemnity, both dancers ostentatiously snubbed the tragic muse and went in for unabashed hilarity. To make the paradox complete, it was Mr. Weidman, usually the comedian of the team, who introduced the nearest thing to a serious theme in his new work, "This Passion," while Miss Humphrey turned wholeheartedly to Thurber and farce in her new work, "Race of Life."

"This Passion" is the tersest and best built of all Mr. Weidman's larger works to date. He has chosen in it to develop simultaneously three completely separate themes, allowing them to borrow suspense and vitality from each other through contrast. One theme pictures in fairly broad pantomime a sordid triangle murder, another shows in a more fantastic style a world that has become acclimated to air raids and other military horrors, and the third theme deals in terms of abstraction with "the aspiration to a saner order."

The first is the most successful, largely because of Miss Humphrey's excellent performance in an unaccustomed medium. Mr. Weidman has compelled her to lay aside her usually aristocratic air and become a frowsy vulgarian, which she does with complete conviction. The air-raid theme also contains a number of amusing moments. Mr. Weidman, José Limón, George Bockman and Katherine Manning have the

other roles, and the work as a whole is well performed. Its music is by Norman Lloyd.

Miss Humphrey's "Race of Life" is pure nonsense, based on the drawings and story by James Thurber of a family bent on winning wealth. With "Excelsior" written on their banner, they encounter Indians, marital infidelity and bad dreams, but eventually scale the heights and gain apparently fabulous amounts of gold. As Dorothy Parker's program note says, "Anything may be read into it or left out of it without making a great deal of difference."

Both in her choreography and especially in her characterization of the materfamilias, Miss Humphrey has caught the indescribable Thurber sense of comedy. Aided by a marvelously shapeless costume (presumably designed by Pauline Lawrence, though uncredited on the program), she assumes the amoeba-like figure of a Thurber woman to perfection, and maintains the same style in all her movements. José Limón is her husband and Charles Weidman their little boy, who accompany her on the campaign for success, but it is obviously she who rules the expedition.

Edith Orcutt has a ridiculous bit as a "Beautiful Stranger" who involves Father in a momentary affair, and she plays it superbly. George Bockman, Sybil Shearer and Katherine Litz constitute other menaces to the family's progress, and carry on with fine humor the general foolishness of the thing. Nor does Vivian Fine's musical setting miss a single opportunity to be as disarmingly silly as the stage doings. Certainly Miss Humphrey as a character actress and farceuse has been keeping something from us all these years.

Neither of these works, to be sure, comes under the heading of pure dance by any stretch of the imagination. To prove that the company has not deserted its former field, "To The Dance" with music by Clair Leonard, and "Variations and Conclusions" from "New Dance" with Wallingford Riegger's music, respectively, opened and closed the program.

The audience was a very large one and manifested its pleasure in no uncertain terms.

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