

FIRST STEPS IN AN OLD ART

Written for "The Listener" by
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LAST month the New Dance Group presented its third annual programme in Wellington. Who are these people? And what have they been doing for three years? These questions may have been asked before this, but for some reason, no attempt has yet been made to answer them. This is such an attempt, first, because in three years certain interesting things may emerge, and secondly, because the director of the group, Philip Smithells, is soon to go south to a university appointment, and it seems unlikely that the

could become suddenly rich and precise, how a fall or a leap properly made could be both dramatic and exhilarating.

The second half of the programme was "Themes from an Unfinished Major Work"—some of the images which might fill the mind of a man imprisoned. The most effective of these was "Monotony" which was performed twice, as the *leit motif* to all prison life. It was very simple, I remember; a line of dancers slow-stepping, quickening as the music quickened, the nervous rhythmic walking of the utterly bored, then slower again until the line is at rest, kneeling, head down, facing the audience. The heads raise, stiffly, jerkily, one after the other, and a spotlight flashes briefly on each blank face. If the other dances were not as direct and striking as this, they were no less suggestive. I think most of us that night felt we were seeing for the first time glimpses of an instrument subtle and flexible, promising a richness greater in some ways than the arts of drama, music and design could give alone. The next year I joined the group, which so far had worked only with women.

THE programme presented in 1946 showed a considerable technical advance, though it did not develop in quite the way one might have expected. Where the first programme had been tentative, this was now far more formal, and where then the emphasis had been rather more on rhythmic patterns of movement, the new programme was dominantly musical. This year we were able to present a "Major Work" lasting 25 minutes, which we worked at for four months. A woman is shocked into feeling by the impact of war, and develops a more resilient self to combat these influences. The war goes on, and others make demands on her, asks that she work for the war, insists that she be faithful to the man away fighting, denounces her for succumbing to the man who has come to the land to use it as a base. Gradually, the new hardness in her assumes a life of its own, subduing and finally triumphing over the other more sensitive side of her nature.

The woman was represented by two soloists who used the main body of the stage for their narrative; on a platform set well back, Society was danced by a chorus, acting sometimes as commentator, at others a participator in the action. There was some fine mass movement and grouping here, often in a limited area, and it was most pleasant to dance. Some liked it, others found it difficult to follow the two lines of action at once, some felt the theme was obscure, and others said it was sloppy. This may have been because we found, when we set to work on Brahms' first piano concerto, that his

musical themes were worked out at a different pace from our dramatic theme—sometimes the music was too fast for us, and we had to telescope our idea, hence the obscurities; or if it was too slow we had to fill in until it seemed to work our way again, and hence here, the sloppiness.

Perhaps the most successful dance of the 1946 programme was "Spiritual and Blues," to music by a modern French composer, Alexandre Tansman. The music evokes in the simplest way two moods characteristic of the Negro—the hymn-like dolour and submission of the spiritual, and the rhythmic melancholy of the blues. The dance was exactly parallel, a perfect translation of the musical mood into dance, and fully within our technical range. There was a poetic quality in the frieze-like group at the back of the stage, arms upward, fingers splayed, and wide unmoving eyes, in the crouched figure at the right, moving slowly on to her back, a small, neat, sophisticated cameo. Subdued lighting on the black tunics gave just the right touch of rich sadness.

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THE 1947 programme was in some degree recapitulation, since seven of the 13 dances had been on the two earlier programmes, though some had now been modified. Of the new dances, Symphonic Variations, to the music of César Franck, was the group's most ambitious attempt to illustrate musical form, danced by two opposing groups, similar in character to the two main



New Dance Group will be working again in quite its present form.

In the note to the first programme presented in 1945, these words appeared which can stand as a statement of intent for the group:

A group of us have been experimenting for six months or so on some unconventional dance themes. Most of the group have had some dance experience, but no two have had the same background. We were anxious to avoid the well-trodden and too worn paths of ballet, operatic, or acrobatic dance, and the type of interpretative dance that reeks with sentimentality. No one of us was an expert—but with the aid of a non-dancing chairman, we evolved more or less democratically the theme to be shown in this demonstration.

The 1945 programme was in two parts, the first an insight into the workshop of the dance, its training and techniques, the second the dance itself, built on these techniques. For, as the programme pointed out, a dancer cannot be plastic and adaptable without certain basic disciplines and knowledge, and the first part showed how these disciplines were undertaken. We saw arm movements, falls, progressive waltz movements, rhythmic patterns, and movements derived from daily actions. We saw how differently a dance might be discovered; through submission to the structure of music, or to its quality, or through a dramatic idea, for which music had to be found or devised. We saw how a simple movement focussed in a certain way

