

McGehee guides dancers

Choreographer turns myths into movement

By LINDA ZAREMBA

The York dance department has been the scene of visits from many fine guest teachers and choreographers, and right now it has one of the best of both. Helen McGehee is here to teach and mount a piece involving some of the students for their Christmas concert.

Helen McGehee has been involved with Martha Graham (one of the leaders of modern dance in the U.S.) for about 25 years and in the Graham company for approximately 20. She has worked with her own collection of people for about 20 years, doing choreographies whenever she could, although the group is not a permanent one.

She has been a member of the dance faculty of the Juilliard School since the inception of its dance department. More recently she has held many workshops and been a guest teacher throughout North America and Europe.

DON QUIXOTE CHAPTER

The work she is doing with the York students is called El Retablo de Maese Pedro, and is based on a chapter of Don Quixote. It has been done previously, and this is the fifth cast.

The work is based on a puppet show originally done in 1925. There was a puppet show within

the play and two different sizes of puppets were used: small ones to represent the puppets, larger ones to represent the humans. Helen uses only dancers, inspired by the music, which is as much fun as the piece itself.

The piece is very different from the one she brought to York last year, entitled I am the Gate. Based on the myth of Cassandra, who was given the gift of prophecy by Apollo, but cursed so that no one would ever believe her predictions, the work was a very intense, pained experience.

KENT STATE

Helen spoke of one of her students at Juilliard who performed it for her graduation. The graduation took place the day after the Kent State killings, and all the vibrations went into her. Somehow she assimilated the futile deaths into the death she was about to undergo in the dance. The performance was electrifying.

Helen believes a gift like that is given perhaps once in 10 years, but that once it is inside a person, it is never lost; it remains somewhere in the memory, and repeats itself again and again in that person.

Helen prefers working on pieces with some

dramatic background rather than simply abstract movement. Her Latin and Greek studies at college, and the mythology she learned as a child, have been a reservoir from which she has drawn many choreographies.

She was always more interested in the myths than in Biblical stories, because of a child's feeling that pantheistic religions are more fun than monotheistic religions. She said monotheism is the only doctrine which decrees that the earth and its life are to be used at man's discretion or indiscretion. Religions which believe that trees and rocks have souls or deities in them would be considerably better off ecologically than ours, she maintained.

TRAVEL AND DISCIPLINE

Helen McGehee is successful in her work because she is a student of the world. She reads a great deal and acquaints herself with the places she visits through its present-day authors. Her creativity springs from her travels, music, books, new friends, death.

She feels you must cherish life and use it well; she has disciplined both herself and her body. At 6 a.m. she gives herself a ballet barre (warm-up class) to maintain the technique in her body

before teaching anyone else.

TALENT AT YORK

She enjoys being at York, although teaching is not as physically rewarding to her as performing or choreographing. She sees a lot of talent here, but says it will take time to develop just as the standard of the Juilliard school took time to develop.

She credits York's programme with a sense of vision, due to department head Grant Strate's ability to see the field as a totality, and not merely as performance or teaching.

Helen lives in New York with her husband Umana, an artist, sculptor and designer, who often designs sets and costumes for Helen's works. They have a large loft in which they live and work; her studio is getting crowded with his sculptures, but she doesn't seem to mind.

Umana designed the sets for El Retablo, which she will present here on December 18, 19, and 20 during the student dance concert. Helen also designs costumes for her own works and some of Martha Graham's.

Helen McGehee is an exciting person to watch and her energy seems always on call; but there is a real solidity to her and her work.

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