

American Document (1938)

Choreography. . . . Martha Graham
Music. Ray Green
Costumes. Edythe Gilfond

Original program notes

This is a documentary dance. "Our documents are our legends – our poignantly near history – our folk tales"

American Document stems from our national background. Its form is built loosely on the minstrel show, which is closely associated with American life and drama. Action opens with the "walk around," a parade of characters. A repetition of this "walk around" serves to divide the episodes throughout the piece, as the curtain does in theater. The work is dramatic, but not drama. Essentially documentary, American Document progresses from the Indian Episode, to the Puritan, through the Emancipation period to the present. Words are spoken on the stage by an interlocutor to bring into focus the action of the dance. The lines spoken by the interlocutor are from the Declaration of Independence, a letter from Red Jacket of the Senecas, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, Jonathan Edwards sermons, the Song of Songs, Walt Whitman's poems and other important American letters. American Document is an adventure in theater made necessary by the broad scope of the choreographer's idea.

Excerpts from the text of *American Document*

Entrance: Walk Around; Cross-Fire

The Interlocutor

Ladies and Gentlemen, good evening
This is a theater.
The place is here in the United States of America
The time is now – tonight

These are Americans
Yesterday and for days before yesterday –
One was Spanish
One was Russian
One was German
One was English
Today these are Americans

First Episode: Declaration

An American –
What is an American?

1776 –
Five men wrote a document.
its name rings like a bell.
Here it comes:
Declaration!

We hold these truths to be self evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

Second Episode: Occupation

America – what is America?

It is a great continent, a new world.

1811-
The words of Red Jacket of the Senecas
Lament for the land
Listen to what we say
Listen to what we say
There was a time when our fathers owned this great island
Their seats extending from the rising to the setting sun.
Listen to what we say.
But an evil day came upon us. Your forefathers crossed the Great Waters, and
landed on this island. They found friends not enemies. They asked for a small
seat. We granted their request, and they sat down among us.
Listen to what we say.
Our seats were once large and yours were small. You have now become a great
people and we have scarcely a place left to spread our blankets.
Listen to what we say.
They wanted more land
They wanted our country
Listen to what we say
You have got our country.

The full text may be found in Needham, Maureen ed., *I See America Dancing*, pp. 206 – 215.
Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002.