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## The games people play, according to Martha Graham's 'Secular Games'

Debra Levine – March 4, 2019

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Secular Games (1962) choreography by Martha Graham

Saturday night's across-the-board brilliance encompassing both classic and contemporary modern dance at the Younes & Soraya Center for the Performing Arts, aka The Soraya — an evening of nearly ecstatic, unwavering quality by the Martha Graham Dance Company — had *Secular Games*, dating from 1962, as a standout.

I loved the dance's spare Jean Rosenthal set, three little sculptural platforms punctuated by gymnasium ropes descending from the ceiling. And I loved the costumes — good old-fashioned leotards and tights, based on an original design by "*Secular*"'s choreographer, Martha Graham. That muscle-hugging gear looked very handsome on the current crop of Graham dancers.



secular games (1962) martha graham dance company, photo: luis luque

Indeed as the curtain rose on a tableau of wow-inducing, bare-chested male hunks that screamed, “We aren’t in 1962 anymore, Martha!” several in the audience audibly gasped. Graham always liked bulky men ... Robert Cohan comes to mind, of course Paul Taylor, but good god! You could almost feel the house mentally adjust to the prospect that with these gorgeous specimens we would pass the evening. That was perfectly fine by me. I don’t believe I’ve witnessed a group brandishing the Graham name so chock-filled with lithe, facile, gifted, grounded, versatile, capable, confident dancers.

In a [pre-performance panel discussion](#) (disclosure: I moderated the event), artistic director **Janet Eilber** admitted that the bar is much raised in terms of the physical capabilities of the dancers the company now attracts. It’s one of the signs and signals that the Graham company — along with its intense, personal, and even political repertory — is enjoying a robust renaissance.



sexual politics courtesy of martha graham photo: luis luques

Another sign is that a hot choreographer like **Pam Tanowitz**, whose aesthetic (if not her philosophy, she was quick to clarify at the panel) has been strongly influenced by Merce Cunningham, but who now — presumably attracted by working with these top-rung dancers and what choreographer wouldn't be — enjoyed the world premiere of her latest work, *Untitled (Souvenir)*, Saturday night, a commission by MGDC.



ta ta! right out of the Olympics photo by luis luque

What better way for the savvy Ms. Eilber (she is elegant but also mischievous) to showcase her company's newfound, ahem, *beefcake*, than in a work that at its inception was intended as a showpiece for bravura male dancing? The delightfully tongue-in-cheek *Secular Games*, with its oh so carefully planted physical jokes and readable choreography (it spools in 1962 time, which means you can imbibe it thoughtfully) gave deep pleasure. (Tanowitz used a retro tempo in her highly minimalist, very downtown work as well.) The entwined shapes, the show-offy tricks, the barely disguised competitive jousting, all impeccably delivered.

"Secular" opens, as mentioned above, with a staid tableau. Slowly slowly movement is introduced. But it arrives in a funny way, in an athletic ball passed between the men. It's a gentle 'ice breaker.' It's a funny pun. The men have balls. It also introduces risk. Will they catch it? Or miss? So the dance has drama. It breaks up the frozen forms. So the dance has action. And it gradually unites them. Tossing a ball strings them together. So we have not just solitary figures, but a cast. They morph into a community doing something together. Creating a world never looked so simple. So smart. So fun. So lovely. That's why "Secular" is the work of a master.

The Graham company's third visit to the Soraya ascended to art heaven on the cushion of exquisite live accompaniment by classical musical ensemble **wild Up**, teamed with the Graham company by Soraya Executive Director Thor Steingraber, a man with a mission.

Steingraber said, "Janet reminded me that Graham traveled with musicians, performed with live music, and commissioned new orchestral pieces for many decades. In that spirit, it was important that we repeat the Graham and wild Up partnership this year by supporting a world premiere with live music."

Wildup's aural magic carpet floated from the pit — and the dancers stepped onto it. The ensemble's dance-sensitive founder/composer/conductor, Christopher Rountree, is a vigorous throttler of the crescendo/diminuendo, welling the room with sound and then cranking it down, especially for the delicacies of the Caroline Shaw string quartets (expanded by Rountree for chamber ensemble) that accompanied the Tanowitz piece. In the pretalk, Rountree shared his view that for many of the evening's composers (William Schumann, Robert Starer Irving Fine, and Wallingford Riegger), their best work arguably stemmed from Graham commissions.



"Secular" reached its drollest point with a very appealing woman caught between two less-than-attentive men (to her). The men are interested by each other. This circles the viewer back to the dance's opening moments, indicating that the posing male peacocks were not by accident. With the launch of the Graham company's two-year running EVE Project auguring an exploration of female themes through dance, this moment in "Secular" reads as a little disguised take on the breakup of Graham's marriage to Erick Hawkins. This fillip infuses the dance with memory, emotion and ideas. Imagine all of that ... in one dance!