

DANCE REVIEW

Two works by Martha Graham make the company's EVE Project at Jacob's Pillow transcendent

By **Janine Parker** Globe Correspondent, August 16, 2019, 3:58 p.m.



Leslie Andrea Williams, Charlotte Landreau, and Jacob Larsen in Martha Graham's "Appalachian Spring." (GRACE KATHRYN LANDEFELD)

BECKET — In the opening of the great 20th-century modern dance choreographer Martha Graham's 1944 "Appalachian Spring," we see an apt illustration of one of her famous sayings: Movement never lies. As each of the four main characters enter we get an immediate sense of who each is, and what each is feeling, even if those feelings are

complicated.

The mighty Martha Graham Dance Company is performing “Appalachian Spring” and other works this week at Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival. The company is looking fine and strong, and the dancers gave the kind of deeply committed performances that keep the Graham repertoire vibrant and yes, relevant. Indeed, though the company is now bringing in outside choreographers to create new works to augment the Graham repertoire, it so happens that it’s the Graham works (“Appalachian Spring” and the 1936 “Chronicle”) that make this week’s program transcendent.

Isamu Noguchi’s iconic set for “Spring,” with its spare evocation of the bare, brave new frontier the characters have joined, looks cozy rather than crowded on the Pillow’s Ted Shawn stage. The idea of the land’s breadth is adequately suggested by the way the performers gaze out into a believable distance. Aaron Copland’s beloved score is full of vivid delights.

The excellent cast breathes three-dimensionality into these elements and brings beautifully executed details to Graham’s choreography. As The Preacher, longtime company member Lloyd Knight, costumed in his handsome frock coat and wide-brimmed hat (Graham often designed the costumes herself), is suitably fervent, yet with a subtle sense of humanity. Natasha M. Diamond-Walker is both grounded and prescient at The Pioneering Woman. Lloyd Mayor, The Husbandman, is earnest, stoic, with a slight undercurrent of fear; The Bride, Anne O’Donnell, bubbles with an excitement that, like the ruffles on her mauve dress, sometimes shimmers flirtatiously. Even the cartoonishly bouncy choreography for the four bonneted, wide-eyed Followers — So Young An, Laurel

Dalley Smith, Marzia Memoli, Anne Souder — is elevated by the overall vibrancy of this production.

With sections titled “Spectre-1914,” “Steps in the Street,” and “Prelude to Action,” Graham’s abstract 1936 “Chronicle” is a rousing call; that the cast of this viscerally driving, physically vigorous dance is all female is intoxicating. The work is filled with powerful imagery, particularly in the extraordinary solo sections for the main figure, performed on Thursday afternoon by Leslie Andrea Williams.

In the opening segment, Williams, in her long, wide black-and-red skirted costume (another Graham design), surges about the stage with hypnotic force, manipulating the layers of the skirt so that they become wings, and she’s a gorgeous, giant bird. She drapes the layers over her head and conjures the section’s titular spectre. Williams doesn’t just match the larger-than-life costume: she seems to expand it, avoiding potential melodrama by embracing the intentional drama. Hers is a huge, formidable performance, but the other lead, Memoli, and the nine ensemble women, offer similarly scintillating, if more necessarily restrained, performances.

The program is titled The EVE Project, in honor of the upcoming centenary of the passing of the 19th Amendment; accordingly, the other works on the program are by women. The three short, but evocative “Lamentation Variations” offered here are by Liz Gerring, Michelle Dorrance, and Aszure Barton. The longer piece, Maxine Doyle’s and Bobbi Jene Smith’s new “Deo,” to an eerie score by Lesley Flanigan, is an abstract dance inspired by the mythology of Demeter and Persephone. Instead of a narrative, however, the dance for eight women is composed of a series of haunting images, many of which appear and

disappear in Yi-Chung Chen's hazy, nightmarish lighting. In Karen Young's textured-yet-gossamer buff-colored shifts, the women are at once vulnerable and invincible.

The cast dives headlong into this choreography's extremes, which include precariously deep arches and hunched, carapace-like backs. Much of the imagery is striking, but some of it is overdone, so much so that the work is uneven. But nothing could overshadow the impassioned strength, heart, and commitment — and, to be sure, top-notch proficiency — offered by these dancers on this rare, glorious afternoon.

MARTHA GRAHAM DANCE COMPANY

At Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, Becket, through Saturday. Tickets \$35-78. 413-243-0745, www.jacobspillow.org

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