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Review: Bent by the Pandemic, the Graham Company Dances On

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The Martha Graham Dance Company's return to the Joyce Theater featured a premiere, classic repertory and an intriguing experiment in reconstruction.



Alessio Crognale and Leslie Andrea Williams in Andrea Miller's "Scavengers," a premiere.
Credit: Brian Pollock



By **Brian Seibert**

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The oldest of American dance troupes, the Martha Graham Dance Company weathered the early phases of the pandemic better than most. Its virtual offerings drew treasures from the company's great archive and [experimented with various reframings](#), effectively making the case for the continued relevance of Graham's work in these times.

On Tuesday, the company returned to the Joyce Theater for a week of in-person live performances, and although the pandemic is not over, the first program felt in many ways like the ones before the world changed: uneven renditions of classic repertory, a mediocre premiere, an intriguing experiment in reconstruction. The custodians of Graham's legacy soldier on.

The premiere was "Scavengers," by Andrea Miller, who is having a moment, debuting her first piece for the Graham company on the heels of [her first work for New York City Ballet](#). Started before the pandemic and finished after an 18-month break, the work seems to address human connection. Four duets precede a solo interrupted by blackouts.



In introductory remarks, Janet Eilber, Graham's artistic director, characterized Miller's work as "elemental, or primal." In "Scavengers," those qualities manifest mainly as infantile. Men and women cling to each other. In the first duet, a woman in a deep squat cradles a man; in the second, the woman is like a child, cradled and dragged and swung.

Later partners crawl under bridges made by the other's body and cradle each other, too, before forces pull them apart. The blackouts in the final solo — the kind that confuse an audience into applauding too soon — direct attention to how the torqued, twisting soloist (the supple Anne Souder) keeps going.

That's what the whole dance does: flow on attractively, if ineffectually. Might the title refer to the bits of choreography that echo Graham vocabulary you can see elsewhere in the program? Pam Tanowitz's "Untitled (Souvenir),"

on this week's alternate program, [samples Graham much more wittily](#). And, anyway, these dancers don't need to scavenge. They're in charge of the store.



The exceptionally grounded Williams in Graham's "Appalachian Spring." Credit: Melissa Sherwood

That job is hard enough. It's been a long pandemic, and in "Diversion of Angels," Graham's 1948 celebration of different kinds of love, many dancers didn't quite look up to the full rigor of Graham technique. (The steely exception: So Young An.) In "Appalachian Spring," Graham's canonical wartime evocation of pioneer resolve, the exceptional groundedness of Leslie Andrea Williams as the Pioneering Woman shifted the gravity of the work away from the central couple. More than usual, her character seemed the one holding up everyone else.

The soloist in Graham's "Immediate Tragedy" has no one but herself to keep her upright. The work, made in 1937 with the Spanish Civil War raging and fascism on the rise, was lost. But Eilber recently reconstructed it from descriptions and photographs. (It was also the source material for [one of the company's 2020 virtual experiments](#).)

The result looks a bit like a series of photographs strung together, but the connective tissue of Graham technique binds it into a convincing dance. A new score by Christopher Rountree highlights hints of Spain in the choreography: a bullfighter stance and a version of a bent-backed flamenco turn with the emphasis on the bent spine to express an unbreakable spirit.



Xin Ying in the reconstruction of Graham's "Immediate Tragedy," from 1937, as the Spanish Civil War raged and fascism was on the rise. Credit: Melissa Sherwood

With the stark clarity of Graham's 1930s work, the solo (excellently danced by Xin Ying) shows a two-fisted woman advancing, then contracting or hinging to the floor, then advancing again. It's less about an immediate tragedy than a long slog in the face of adversity. In other words, its abstraction makes it completely current, a dance for the state of the company and the state of the world.