



Pioneering spirit: Martha Graham Dance Company's triumphant return

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By *Ivy Lin*, 31 October 2021

This week the [Martha Graham Dance Company](#) returned to New York's Joyce Theater and Program A might have been called "Martha's Greatest Hits". You had *Diversion of Angels* and *Appalachian Spring* on the same program – the modern dance version of comfort food.

Diversion of Angels (1948) is a joyous study of romantic love – its structure of three contrasting couples would be recycled by everyone from Jerome Robbins (*In the Night*) to Alexei Ratmanský (*Odessa*). In *Diversion*, the yellow couple was youthful, the red couple passionate, the white couple serene. The work's charm is its straightforward mood – no darkness descends upon these couples. I was particularly impressed with the regal Natasha M Diamond-Walker and Alessio Crognale as the White couple. Diamond-Walker was able to maintain an almost sculptural stillness while dancing.

Next up was *Immediate Tragedy*, a reconstructed solo (Janet Eilber prefers the word "reimagined") as the choreography has been lost, so the steps are taken from photographs of Martha Graham dancing the original. The solo has Martha Graham's DNA all over it – you could imagine her making it work with the strength of her personality. It is also littered with many of Graham's favorite steps, particularly that extreme leaning side *developpé* and the trademark hand/arm gestures. Anne Souder is not Martha Graham, but she is an excellent dancer. I enjoyed the *Immediate Tragedy* solo immensely.

[Andrea Miller](#) presented the new work of the evening, a dance called *Scavengers*. A few things about Miller's works in general: they tend to go on too long. *Scavengers'* structure was three rather overwrought duets, followed by a tortured solo for a female. The solo had several teaser blackouts, where people would start applauding, only for the lights and music to begin again. I appreciated how the solo paid homage to Martha Graham – the final mood of the piece seemed

to be that of a female finding independence after several failed relationships – but it's not a work I'd be that eager to revisit.

Appalachian Spring closed out the evening. It's probably Martha Graham's most popular work and Aaron Copland's score and Isamu Noguchi's costumes have become as iconic as Graham's choreography. It's a full-throated, enthusiastic display of the American frontier spirit. The story is simple: a newlywed couple settle into their new home – their promise is endless, their optimism undimmed. For this reason, it's also somewhat dated, a bit like a John Wayne western.

However, the craftsmanship is timeless. Graham's choreography for the Bride and her husband (Laurel Dalley Smith and Jacob Larsen) progresses from eager to serene as night falls.

Diamond-Walker was riveting as the Pioneering Woman – what authority! But the best choreography goes to the Preacher. The Preacher was originally played by Merce Cunningham. The fast, direction-changing jumps and low-to-the-ground steps were Cunningham specialties. But the Preacher is the one character who exhibits depth and growth – he seems tortured and like an outsider. He finally blesses the newlywed couple and departs, no doubt to gather more followers. Lloyd Knight was excellent here, completing all those frantic jumps with ease.

The company looks in amazing shape. There was not a weak dancer among all the performances of the night. The women in particular now exude more Graham-like authority than I remember in the past. The feeling at the end of the evening was one of triumph, with the future of the Martha Graham Dance Company looking as optimistic as the frontier couple in *Appalachian Spring*.
