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Raucous and Wrenching

Martha Graham Dance Company at City Center Festival

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Presenting a curious combination of repertoire and new work on April 9th, Martha Graham Dance Company's 96th season continued this spring as part of the City Center Dance Festival, which also featured Paul Taylor, Ballet Hispanico, and Dance Theatre of Harlem. Including a Martha Graham classic, a world premiere from UK-based choreographer Hofesh Shechter, and the New York premiere of a dance that actually merged archival choreography from Graham with contemporary choreographers, the evening showcased the undiluted power of the Graham technique, as well as its limits, particularly when applied to new, looser-limbed movement vocabulary.

Program A began with Graham's "Chronicle," created in 1936; the same year that Graham turned down an invitation by the Nazi regime to dance at the Olympics in Berlin, Germany. The all-female cast rendered the evocative images and despair of war with a sharp, almost militaristic attention to detail.



Leslie Andrea Williams in Martha Graham's "Chronicle." Photograph by Brian Pollock

The first section, "Spectre—1914," found dancer Xin Ying in a profile posture, her large black skirt covering the pedestal she sat upon. Her big, warning gestures sliced and pulled at the air before she picked up the gigantic skirt, tossing the the layers of fabric up and down and revealing the red lining underneath. She moved deftly in and out of those waves, which was no small feat given the size of the skirt, and wrapped it into a red shroud that engulfed her body.

One of the many pleasures of watching Xin perform Graham repertoire is the newness and feeling of spontaneity she brings to the ultra-specific choreography that is nearly a century old. Her presence makes the work feel so immediate, you are either transported back in time or made to

wonder whether this dance was created for any number of conflicts currently in our news cycle. The marching sound of the war drums added to the dread as Xin's lament exploded in a sequence of swirling hair and kicks. As a final, disturbing image, she stretched the fabric behind her body in a sort of noose as small rhythmic pulses emanated from her torso.

The second section, "Steps in the Street," began in silence as Anne Souder backed out of the wings, shifting one foot behind the other. Her arms assumed a now iconic position: one arm bent to touch her shoulder, head tilted toward it, and the other arm cradling her waist. She crisscrossed the stage, smooth and sharp, sliding only to catch herself in a hard stop between each step. Soon more women joined her, all clad in austere black dresses, tracing their own patterns with the same reverse trudge. Their hands clenched into fists as they jumped relentlessly, crossed their wrists overhead, pounded their thighs—there were so many fists, that each open palm gesture, whether offering or begging, felt even more powerful. The effect was like stepping into a Käthe Kollwitz painting. Souder threw herself into dramatic back bends as masses of women streamed past her in a sorrowful migration. Her open palm found her shoulder and she melted back into her initial pose, exiting in silence the same way she entered, though this time her arm extended in one last entreaty before she was swallowed by the wings.

The last section, "Prelude to Action," brought Xin and Souder together, joining forces in a dance of resilience. Xin weaved through the ensemble as if a superwoman, dressed now in a white and black color blocked dress, all wide stances and triumphant arms. Along with the ensemble, they charged ahead full of purpose, culminating in a ring of barrel turns encircling Xin. Fanning out to face the audience for the finale, they followed up every battement and sauté that rocked them back, with big

steps forward. Graham’s portrayal of “the devastation of spirit which it [war] leaves in its wake” and her “suggest[ion of] an answer” remains impactful due in no small part to the spirited interpretation of the current MGDC artists.



Martha Graham Dance Company in “Canticle for Innocent Comedians” by Sonya Tayeh. Photograph by Brian Pollock

Sandwiched in the middle of the program, “Canticle for Innocent Comedians” was a real question mark of a work. Conceived of by Eilber, with Sonya Tayeh leading the choreography, “Canticle” offered a series of vignettes, each one an ode to forces of nature: “Sun” (choreographed by Tayeh); “Earth” (by Allene Dance); “Wind” (by Sir Robert Cohan); “Water” (by Juliano Nunes); “Fire” (by Yin Hue); “Moon” (recreated

from Graham's 1952 work of the same name); "Stars" (by Micaela Taylor); and "Death/Rebirth" (by Jenn Freeman). With such an eclectic group of choreographers, a new score from jazz pianist Jason Moran, and groovy tie-dyed gowns for all by Karen Young, "Canticle" was set up like a supergroup.

The curtain rose and three lines of dancers undulated in and out of formation, interlinked and breathing as one body. The smoke surrounding them added a note of melodrama to what seemed to be an awakening of demigods. The more-than-mortal Lloyd Knight and Richard Villaverde tackled a highly physical duet from U.K.-based Alleyne Dance (twin sisters Kristina and Sadé Alleyne), linking up in unexpected ways as "Earth"; Souder and Xin were playful as "Water" in a flowing, kaleidoscopic duet from Juliano Nunes; and a cabal of men seemed to cast a spell in the driving rhythms of Yin Yue's "Fire." Later, Laurel Dalley Smith and Lloyd Mayor showed a command over Micaela Taylor's quirky and quick moves for "Stars," in a contemporary style most unlike Graham. And yet, Graham's dreamy "Moon" section, featuring Knight swooping up Anne O'donnell, stood out for its ability to conjure a glimmer of light in the middle of the night. "Moon" was so crystallized, it put all the issues a cut and paste project like this risks into stark relief.

Throughout, Tayeh's thoughtful choreography for the ensemble acted as a palate cleanser between the elements, but ultimately, the completely divergent sections and movement vocabularies ended up feeling too random, too disconnected from the live piano. And no matter how confidently the dancers grasped each of the different styles presented, the work failed to coalesce.

The finale of the evening was a grand celebration by Hofesh Shechter entitled “Cave.” Co-produced by Studio Simkim, the work also featured guest artist Daniil Simkin. A club atmosphere pervaded from the opening bass line, thanks to the electronic music from the German house/techno duo Âme along with Shechter—who is known for making music to accompany his dances—and the stark lighting from Yi-Chung Chen. The vibe set, dancers peeled out of a long line upstage, opening their bodies up to what sounded like an underwater heart beat. With little sways and gestural tics, their arms reached up, palms upturned in a gesture of worship or reception. As the volume pumped up, their feet started to find the folk dance stomping that remains a motif in Shechter’s work; as the tempo quickened, their bouncing edged toward, though never quite landed, the ecstatic. Something held on too tight in the carriage of their bodies, lending it the look of aerobics rather than an expression of primal release.

The audience hooted and hollered, reveling in the rave-like energy and clearly enjoying the spectacle of their favorite dancers getting down. Their freestyling solos were certainly the best part: Knight on the floor twerking, Lorenzo Pagano twirling his shirt over his head, Simkin pirouetting without a care, and Leslie Andrea Williams leaving it all on the floor, perhaps the only dancer to be fully possessed by Shechter’s rapturous spirit. No matter the abrupt ending, “Cave” was certainly a crowd pleaser, lifting the spirits of everyone there and sending us all out dancing into the night.

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