

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Saddling Up and Feeling Spry at Martha Graham

Under the banner “American Legacies,” the Martha Graham Dance Company dusted off a classic, “Rodeo,” premiered a companion piece and welcomed FKA twigs for a guest solo at City Center.



By Siobhan Burke

April 19, 2024

The Martha Graham Dance Company won't turn 100 until 2026, but evidently it's not too early to start celebrating. The company is commemorating the milestone with not one, but three New York seasons, the first of which opened on Wednesday at New York City Center.

“We couldn't fit it into one year,” Janet Eilber, the company's artistic director, said in a curtain speech, adding, “We're feeling pretty spry for our age.”

Under the title “American Legacies,” the season includes a new production of Agnes de Mille's “Rodeo,” her 1942 ballet set on a ranch in the American Southwest; the New York premiere of “We the People,” choreographed by Jamar

Roberts to music by Rhiannon Giddens; and Graham's "The Rite of Spring" (1984), among other works.

Some of this feels more dated or dutiful than spry, but one part of the gala program on Thursday really had the theater buzzing: a guest appearance by the British singer-songwriter FKA twigs. The company connected with her on Instagram last year after FKA twigs, who grew up training in a number of dance styles, including the Graham technique, shared one of its posts.

In her interpretation of Graham's brief comic solo "Satyric Festival Song" (1932), she held nothing back, imbuing its springy jumps, quizzical glances and whole-body shudders with both carefree self-assurance and reverent focus. She may not have the chiseled contractions of a lifelong Graham dancer, but she knows how to hold an audience's attention. Introducing her, the longtime company dancer Lloyd Knight called FKA twigs "the newest member of the Martha Graham Dance Company family."



In her interpretation of Graham's brief comic solo "Satyric Festival Song," FKA twigs held nothing back. Rachel Papo for The New York Times

Will we see FKA twigs again on its stages? Celebrity collaborations in dance are often strained, manufactured for marketing purposes. But this one — while surely good for ticket sales — seemed to stem from a genuine mutual admiration. When the curtain went down, you could hear the dancers screaming for her backstage.

Perhaps fueled by the excitement of this opening act, the company looked extra electric in the two works that followed: "Maple Leaf Rag" (1990), Graham's lighthearted sendup of her own melodramatic impulses (the final piece she choreographed, at 96); and her "Rite of Spring," which is set to Stravinsky's 1913 score and reveals those impulses in a less satirical light.

Compared with another famous “Rite” recently danced in New York (Pina Bausch’s at the Park Avenue Armory), Graham’s is decidedly heavy-handed, with a foreboding male character (the Shaman) overseeing the sacrificial ritual against a backdrop of storm clouds and intermittent strikes of lightning. Yet the work managed to transcend these limitations on Thursday, thanks to the vibrancy of live music by the Mannes Orchestra and, most of all, a heroic performance by Xin Ying as the Chosen One, the maiden selected for sacrifice.

While every bit as clear and controlled as the emphatic chorus of dancers around her, Xin also offered a kind of energetic counterpoint, a ghostliness, as she staggered and convulsed toward her fate, her long, black hair unpinned by the cast’s other women in a moment of eerie intimacy. When left alone, mercifully uninterrupted for a short spell, Xin let the hard edges of the Graham vocabulary blur and dissolve, not hiding her exhaustion in this marathon of a role — and surmounting it again and again. Entrapped at various times by rope, fabric and the grasp of men holding her aloft, she seemed to cling to life as ruthlessly as the forces taking it from her.

“Rodeo,” which was presented on Wednesday alongside “We the People” (on a program that closed with “Maple Leaf Rag”), depicts communal rituals of a more upbeat variety. Originally performed by the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, “Rodeo” tells the story of a cowgirl who just wants to fit in with the guys, its choreography woven with square dancing, tap dancing and a whole lot of gestural lassoing. Laurel Dalley Smith brilliantly embodied this plucky protagonist, her physical comedy supported by impeccable technique, whether she was miming a trot on horseback or flopping to the floor in a sullen bout of heartache.

Much has been done to dust off the old ballet. Most notably, the revival features a new arrangement of Aaron Copland's score, by Gabe Witcher, for a six-piece bluegrass band that played live with an almost voluptuous richness. New costumes in saturated colors, by Oana Botez, light up the stage. Yet the story itself remains frozen in time, and seen through a modern lens, it's a little bit sad. Brushed aside by the cowboys, mocked by more ladylike ladies and left out of group dances, the denim-clad cowgirl seeks acceptance, which she finds only after replacing her pants with a floral skirt. *That* gets the guys' attention.



The longtime company dancer Lloyd Knight in a powerful solo in Jamar Roberts's "We the People." Rachel Papo for The New York Times

Commissioned as a contemporary companion to “Rodeo,” “We the People,” Roberts’s first work for the Graham company, forgoes de Mille’s emphasis on coupledness — and straightforward storytelling — painting instead a more impressionistic portrait of collective power and protest. It opens with a solo in silence for the always arresting Leslie Andrea Williams, who anchors the haze-filled space with her grounding presence — a slow, sustained inhale giving rise to urgent swerves of the torso.

As the plucking and strumming of Giddens’s score (also arranged by Witcher) kicks in, Williams is joined by an ensemble that has been poised in the shadows behind her (all costumed in denim by Karen Young). Throughout the work, the group’s movement exudes a confrontational, ready-for-battle attitude. Facing the audience head-on, the dancers hold fists in front of their faces or high in the air. A solo for Lloyd Knight, who makes potent use of slowness and stillness — especially in one backward, twisting hinge — reads as a direct and piercing reference to the institutional violence inflicted on Black men.

Roberts meets the music head-on, too, with angular poses jabbing into one count after the next. It could be a metaphor, in movement, for not mincing words about America’s legacies.