

# fjord

## **American Legacies**

In late April at New York City Center, the Martha Graham Dance Company began a three-year celebration of its 100th anniversary. The four City Center performances were collectively entitled "American Legacies." A friendly full house greeted this "oldest company in America" whose mission, as the artistic director, Janet Eilber, said in her pre-performance remarks, is both to preserve Graham's work and to carry modern dance forward.

### **Performance**

Martha Graham Dance Company: "Appalachian Spring" and "The Rite of Spring" by Martha Graham, "We the People" by Jamar Roberts

### **Place**

New York City Center, New York, NY, April 19, 2024

### **Words**

Eva S. Chou



*Anne Souder (front) with Martha Graham Dance Company in "Appalachian Spring."  
Photograph by Melissa Sherwood*

The program I saw, on April 19, featured two Graham works and a commissioned premiere. The 1944 "Appalachian Spring" has become part of our dance consciousness; Jamar Roberts's "We the People" follows on and revises its notion of a pioneering America.

"Appalachian Spring" set the tone for the evening—no fear of large subjects or large generalizations. This was true, too, of the dance's composer, Aaron Copland, who was also intending to capture an idea of America. Elsewhere in *Fjord Review*, Karen Hildebrandt has reported on a lecture-demonstration

from the Graham company that used the choreographer and composer's correspondence to illuminate the dance.

For her picture of America, Graham looked to the past, with a nineteenth-century rural setting for *Bride, Husbandman, Pioneering Woman, Preacher* and his young female followers. To accommodate the various members of this community, Isamu Noguchi's spare set asymmetrically partitions the stage. A simple framed wall slants up from downstage left, its upstage portion filled in by the clapboard side of a house, its downstage portion ending in a silhouetted porch and rocking chair. "Representing newly settled land," a chunk of split-rail fence marks the stage's downstage boundary. The third element is a tree stump, centered upstage, providing a small, slightly sloped platform on which the Preacher stands. In the space thus defined are danced the lightly narrative lines, which intersect.



Easiest to follow is the new couple's story. The Husbandman (Jacob Larsen) is the third of the figures to walk on, after Preacher and Pioneering Woman take slow, measured steps to assume their place onstage. When he enters, he first goes up to the wall and touches it softly, gravely, then turns and begins to walk to the rail fence. He senses the Bride (Anne Souder) behind him and turns: a beautiful moment as they face each other. There is a parting, a wedding, another parting; at dance's end, they are on the porch, she seated, he behind her, as the others leave. Throughout, the two dancers maintain a connection with each other.

As with the other dances, the solo of the Pioneer Woman (Leslie Andrea Williams) is full of what we have learned to recognize as Graham's distinctive contractions and gestures. Though her name makes the Pioneer Woman's role clear, I have trouble understanding her place in the narrative. The

authoritative start of Williams's solo was clear, however: one bent leg lifts slowly to the side, where a contraction holds it in weighty stillness. The movements of the Preacher (Alessio Crognale-Roberts) are different still, now cannonball jumps with no apparent preparation, now steps punctuated by sudden, fierce freezes. One could see how Merce Cunningham was the original dancer. The fire-and-brimstone solo shows why the Preacher is named "Revivalist" in some programs. Frenzy was the strongest part of Crognale-Roberts's performance.

This aloof figure's four Followers (So Young An, Meagan King, Devin Loh, Marzia Memoli) move with quick, lively steps that alternate with a squatting and scuttering whose mechanisms are hidden under their long skirts. The rapidity is well done, but the grounded heaviness required even in skimming motions was harder to achieve. All the while, their hands flutter and frame their faces, fetchingly bonneted; even when they hold their hands in stylized prayer position, the elbows flicker in and out. They lie down, roll around, and raise their hands up to the Preacher to receive his hat, so he can dance. "Groupies," Janet Eilber suggested. Or perhaps a kind of revivalist ecstasy?

In the world Graham depicts, prayer is dominant and, given the period, perhaps evangelical. It seems significant that the Followers have the first dance and that they introduce the hands in prayer that all the dancers use in their solos, albeit without the fluttering. The new couple kneel in prayer at one point in the Preacher's solo; later, a solemn procession appears to be religious. This aspect of what Graham captures for her Americana is perhaps the least generalizable feature.



**Leslie Andrea Williams in Jamar Roberts's "We the People." Photograph by Isabella Pagano**

The season premiere, Jamar Roberts's "We the People," with an original score by roots singer-songwriter Rhiannon Giddens, has already been reviewed here. I will only speak to how the work fits in to the season's overall theme, for, like "Appalachian Spring," it seeks to define an American legacy. For his title, Roberts chooses to quote the first words of this nation's political declaration of group identity. His dance likewise asserts a group identification in which confrontation is key.

By carving the stage into a dark warehouse of a space with minimal light filtered from above, by dressing the dancers in Everyman denim clothing, and especially by the choreography, "We the People" marks this group as defiant and barely restrained in its anger. Nearly throughout, the dancers face the audience squarely. They are unified, for all perform the same movements at the same time. Four do step forward for solos, however. The first (Leslie Andrea Williams) begins in silence and rooted to one spot, to extraordinarily dramatic effect. By the last and most naturalistic of the solos (by Lloyd Knight), in the most naturalistic of the solos (at one point he struggles against his hands caught behind his back), we understand that the silence, the rootedness, and the fact of facing front is a dance vocabulary of confrontation. The "People" comes into its own through confrontation. This hard-hitting portrayal of group identity is likely familiar to twenty-first-century audiences.



**Martha Graham Dance Company in Graham's "The Rite of Spring."  
Photograph by Isabella Pagano**

The evening's final work was Graham's 1984 "The Rite of Spring." Like Copland's *Appalachian Spring*, Stravinsky's 1913 commissioned score has become famous in its own right. Here "American Legacy" probably refers to the idea that any work by Martha Graham is part of the legacy of American dance, for the work itself does not seek to define an American legacy. Rather, it joins at least half a dozen well-known versions of Stravinsky's score and plot.

Like many of these dances, Graham's follows the suggestion in Stravinsky's subtitle, "Pictures of Pagan Russia," to set the rite at a distance—in this case, in an unidentifiable time and culture. There is a victim in this spring rite: the Chosen One is selected to die while all on stage watch and some assist. In Graham's choreography, everyone is in the grip of a pattern they cannot control. The men, clad only in black briefs that make their physicality both powerful and vulnerable, move in unison, walk with rigid steps and bodies, jump explosively but to a limited height. The women are costumed to appear nude from the waist up. In contrast to the men, they attach to one another by hands or at shoulders, and walk or half-run in a stylized manner to a different rhythm from the men. Even the Shaman's movements are ritualistic, demanded by the chorus as much as under his own command. (Lloyd Knight turns in another powerful performance, this time with minimal, circumscribed movements.)

Early on, the Chosen One is designated to dance to the death. From then on, she is in constant, intense motion. (Marzia Memoli gives a powerful, exhausting performance, the more vivid for the slightness of her person.) At one point, she submits to the Shaman encircling her upright body in a thick rope all the way up, transforming her into a roped column. But there is much more to come. She is subjected to every variation of ordeal by both male and female choruses. The result is exhaustion beyond exhaustion. One hardly felt that Memoli was only performing; the exhaustion surely penetrated to her core. There should be a warning similar to "Graphic Language Ahead."

Though Stravinsky's percussive music no longer shocks, what *is* shocking is the unending desire to make yet another version. The fascination with the music's story seems to be not with human sacrifice—that is, human cruelties—but specifically with the ritual death of virgins, which surely opens a window on a different set of preoccupations. It is an open question what kind of human legacy is examined.