

ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

Commentary: What a smoldering L.A. needs now is Martha Graham Dance's 'Appalachian Spring'



Anne Souder as the Bride in the Martha Graham Dance Company's current revival of "Appalachian Spring." (Melissa Sherwood / Martha Graham Dance Company)

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The century-old dance company is on tour with an old work that brings the gift of new life. The tour is a reminder that the late, great Martha Graham got her start in Southern California.

During the dog days of summer of the 2020 COVID-19-related closures, "[Appalachian Spring](#)," seemed a worthy addition to a pandemic playlist. Aaron Copland's score to Martha Graham's classic ballet offered the gift of simplicity, an evocation of open landscape and, most important, of spiritual renewal. Its promise of a new life proved balm for trying times.

Here we are, in [fire-devastated Los Angeles](#), once more in need of renewal. This time, thanks to a tour stop of the Martha Graham Dance Company at Segerstrom Center for the Arts on Saturday night, “Appalachian Spring” once more showed the way.

Let our story begin in 1911, when 16-year-old Graham and her father rode a ferry to L.A. from Santa Barbara to see the exotic dance sensation Ruth St. Denis.

For St. Denis, dance could be a mystical, philosophical and sexual pursuit, encompassing traditions from the far East, Native American cultures and Hollywood. Graham was an instant convert. From that moment on, she knew what her mission in life would be.

The performance was at the [Mason Opera House](#) downtown at 1st Street and Broadway. St. Denis and her partner, dancer Ted Shawn, soon founded the Denishawn School downtown, where Graham got her start. As dance historians well know but our town has well forgotten, modern dance began in Los Angeles.

However much the shocking destruction of neighborhoods, of favorite haunts and of classic L.A. architecture reminds us to cherish history, L.A. remains a city that cavalierly shuns history. The fact is that far fewer of our landmarks have been lost to environmental disaster than to unnatural development. We dispose and build. We create, for better and for worse, a continually changing city.

Denishawn is now ancient L.A. history. By the early 1920s, Graham had moved to New York. There is nothing overt about “Appalachian Spring” to remind us of home. Copland was a Brooklynite. The ballet concerns the wedding of antebellum South settlers in a Shaker village in Pennsylvania.

The ballet had its premiere at the Library of Congress in 1944. Its abstracted scenario is a kind of back to the basics, expressing the sanctity of home, devotion and nature. The couple is starting out together with little. Japanese American sculptor Isamu Noguchi’s elegantly minimalist set, influenced by Noh theater, offers but a hint of a house’s framework. All is sliver thin.

Yet L.A. and its fires, the Ukraine war, even Hollywood, haunt “Appalachian Spring.” Copland and Graham exchanged early ideas about the ballet in 1943 while the composer was in Hollywood composing music for “The North Star,” a big-budget film starring Anne Baxter and Dana Andrews, about the Nazi occupation of Ukraine. The climax is a horrendous German burning of a village, as striking for its visual imagery as for its agitated music. Copland composed an hour’s worth of music for the film.



In the end, “The North Star” managed to alienate just about everybody. The Russians were annoyed that the subject was Ukraine; the Ukrainians were offended by Copland’s Americanization of their folk music and by Ira Gershwin’s lyrics. The Soviet Union was soon no longer our ally, and the picture was viewed as left-wing Communist propaganda. A decade later, it was edited for television to turn the Ukrainians into bad guys.

The film ends with villagers fleeing the fire, in hope of returning and rebuilding when the war is over. “Appalachian Spring” was, for Copland, that restoration but a rebuilding in an entirely new spirit. No more excess, material or musical. A calm, inspiring acceptance of nature, not a dominance over it. His is a score that lifts not only Graham’s dancers aloft with quiet assurance but also the hell-and-brimstone preacher — and the listeners as well.

To take in “Appalachian Spring” today is to see the unseen. A time not quite yet for action but reflection. A time to let nature sink in. To remind us to notice, just as the fires remind us to notice all that we took for granted before the current fires.

That includes L.A.’s hidden-in-plain-sight Noguchi. The sculptor was an Angeleno, born in 1904. His mother, however, took him to Japan when he was 3 to escape the racism in L.A. after the Russo-Japanese War. Most of his life was spent in New York, but he returned to L.A. late in life, in the early 1980s, for two important projects.

One is a sculpture garden, “California Scenario,” hidden between office buildings a short walk from the Segerstrom Center. It is a little-visited haven that surveys our relationship to water, desert, power and agriculture with a jaw-dropping relevance to the present. It was empty when I dropped in before the performance Saturday.

There is also a contemporary Noguchi sculpture, “To the Issei,” on the plaza of the Japanese American Cultural & Community Center in Los Angeles. Its quiet beauty is easy to miss, even on San Pedro Street in bustling Little Tokyo. The project was championed by then-Mayor Tom Bradley with a \$1-million contribution from the Community Redevelopment Agency, a bit of City Hall history we too cavalierly allow to be forgotten.

The Graham Company’s revival of “Appalachian Spring” is part of the ensemble’s centenary celebration. It is the oldest dance company in America. Saturday’s cast displayed more feistiness and less gravitas than was common in Graham’s day. Times and bodies have changed. Copland’s score was recorded, not very well, and blasted too loudly. But Noguchi’s set, many times lovingly rebuilt over the years, looked as good as ever. And even with some of the mystery missing in dance and music, the core was there.

The company itself has done an admirable job of its own reinvention. It has become a regular collaborator with [Long Beach Opera](#), one of the country’s most meaningful reinventers of opera. The Segerstrom program included a new dance, “We the People,” with a lovely score by [Rhiannon Giddens](#) and somber choreography by Jamar Roberts. The company also presented the brilliantly reimagined and obviously pertinent Graham dance “Immediate Tragedy,” a solo featuring the exquisite Xin Ying, and Hofesh Shechter’s chaotically thrilling “CAVE.”

But it was the certain quietude of “Appalachian Spring” that seemed to beg us to let artists and architects, environmentalists and permaculturists, first be invited to provide a vision. Only then can we begin to propagate an “Appalachian Spring” rejuvenation of our fire-scorched winter.

In the meantime, may I recommend the two (out of more than 150) recordings that most lovingly capture the Copland-esque love of the land. They are Leonard Bernstein’s transcendental 1984 recording with the Los Angeles Philharmonic and Michael Tilson Thomas’ glowing 1999 recording with the San Francisco Symphony.

As a last request, would someone please restore “The North Star”? The available print is awful. A screening with the score performed live, followed by “Appalachian Spring” danced live, could be exactly the statement L.A. now needs.

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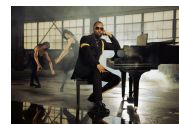
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