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World-class review of ballet and dance.

Steps in the Street

It seems fitting that as the world held its collective breath over violent threats from the US White House, the Martha Graham Dance Company would perform “Chronicle,” an anti-war statement from 1936, as the centerpiece for the opening of its New York City Center season. The strong Graham women leave behind an indelible impression with that powerful work. Program A of the company’s centennial celebration has the Graham classics, “Divisions of Angels” and “Chronicle,” bookend two new works: a solo for Lloyd Knight by Jamar Roberts, performed to live percussion by Stahv Danker; and “En Masse,” by Hope Boykin, to music of Leonard Bernstein.

Performance

Martha Graham Dance Company: Graham100 Centennial Celebration, program A, “Diversion of Angels” / Jamar Roberts's “To the Brink and Back” / Hope Boykin's “En Masse” / “Chronicle”

Place

New York City Center, New York, NY, April 9, 2026

Words

Karen Hildebrand



Marzia Memoli and Zachary Jeppsen-Toy in "Diversion of Angels" by Martha Graham. Photograph by Melissa Sherwood

The buoyant "Diversion of Angels" features three lead couples who represent different stages of love. It's the women I watch, their bright costumes drawing my eye against the tawny neutral of the other eight dancers (all remarkable performers). Anne Souder brings a calm containment to the role of woman in white, representing mature love. So Young An is flirty in erotic red, making an X repeatedly as she tips far into a side leaning arabesque, then catches herself with a contraction of the torso. Marzia Memoli dazzles in yellow with the bouncy vigor (and unbound hair) of young love. She flies to sit on the shoulder of her partner, and her series of leaps across the stage are so lofty and quick, they read as flashes of fireflies. I can't think of a better way to open the evening.

After a brief pause, a shirtless Lloyd Knight in tights performs "To the Brink and Back," a new solo by Jamar Roberts that crackles with tension. Knight takes a position adjacent to percussion artist, Stahv Danker, who is seated behind a drum kit at the rear corner of the stage. Balancing on one leg, Knight contracts his torso and rotates. Tonally, he's a taut wire. The music and movement speak to each other, with both matching and contrasting conversations. A nice series of small hops cinqs up with taps on the snare drum. A long pause near the end teases as an ending. But no, Knight recovers for the true ending—a long backward lean on the floor, the drums growing faint, a final crash of cymbals.



Lloyd Knight in Jamar Roberts's "To the Brink and Back." Photograph by Isabella Pagano

Hope Boykin's "En Masse" renders the dynamics of a community for seven dancers costumed in unisex aqua jumpsuits: "Together we try, we fall, we restart, and grow," states the choreographer in a program note. "Alone, however, our failures scream and endurance is tested." The most exciting element is the music from a 1980s collaboration between Graham and composer Leonard Bernstein. A score by Christopher Rountree includes excerpts from Bernstein's "Mass" and a recently discovered piece by the composer, believed to have been created for Graham. Boykin's movement is built around this music, with sections that are separated by blackout moments but otherwise blend together. Boykin overuses a line-up format, often with one dancer positioned apart. The penultimate section is nicely athletic and playful, with wavelike unison arm movements. Lighting for the final section silhouettes the dancers' against the rear scrim—a nice visual change, but the flattening effect strikes me as dull. The dancers perform beautifully, yet I miss the precision of the stylized Graham movement vocabulary.



Laurel Dalley Smith and Leslie Andrea Williams in “Chronicle” by Martha Graham. Photograph by Melissa Sherwood

Which makes me all the more grateful for “Chronicle,” in three parts, following intermission. Part I, “Spectre,” opens with a solo Leslie Andrea Williams wielding a massive black dress lined in scarlet. When standing on a platform the dress flows all the way to the floor, rendering Williams larger than life. She sweeps the skirt around her head and shoulders, forming a shroud to frame her face with red. Part II, “Steps in the Street,” is for an ensemble of ten women who enter by stepping backward into the space with a precise halting pace. Every dancer performs that step exactly the same—they become an assembly line moving with the elbow of one arm jutting forward at shoulder level, the other hand crossing the torso to rest on the opposite hip, eyes downcast. I could see the suggestion of a phantom rifle in their arms, carried in a processional military salute. The dancers take little staccato popcorn jumps, legs kicking into a stag leap or a wide second position. A serpentine line evolves, the dancers raising their arms overhead in a changing array of angles that could be read as thought bubbles full of bold typography—protest posters, maybe. The kinetic drama of the repetitive arm movements is exciting to watch, accentuated by Wallingford Riegger’s music performed live.

Laurel Dalley Smith projects a commanding presence as lead dancer for “Steps,” and also returns in a duet with Williams for part III, “Prelude to Action.” The fierce Williams, now in a white dress with black markings that suggest armor embellishments, kicks her skirted leg in a wide arc with arms raised above her head to the melody of a military march. When

Smith walks on her knees, I wince with the pain. The dignity and strength of these women cast a power I could feel safe with, were it to activate today in the world.

Karen Hildebrand

Karen Hildebrand is former editorial director for *Dance Magazine* and served as editor in chief for *Dance Teacher* for a decade. An advocate for dance education, she was honored with the Dance Teacher Award in 2020. She follows in the tradition of dance writers who are also poets (Edwin Denby, Jack Anderson), with poetry published in many literary journals and in her book, *Crossing Pleasure Avenue* (Indolent Books). She holds an MFA from the Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College. Originally from Colorado, she lives in Brooklyn.