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Martha Graham Dance Company re-creates Depression-era works

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Robert Johnson/The Star-Ledger



Jennifer DePalo dances in

Martha Graham's "Sketches from Chronicle" choreographed in 1936.

NEW YORK — Every dancer must have physical courage, the willingness to leap and risk her skin.

The artists of the Martha Graham Dance Company, which opened on Tuesday at the Joyce Theater, hold nothing back.

Even the students from the company's school, marshaled on the revolutionary parade ground of Graham's 1935 "Panorama," approach the movement unflinchingly, with the curiosity and appetite of young predators. To watch them take off, legs extended in a stylized long-jump, is to see baby hawks testing the air.

Physical courage, however, is only part of the story this season, which launches the "Political Dance Project" with a new version of "American Document" and with a series of Depression-era solos grouped under the title "Dance Is a Weapon." These productions prove that company director Janet Eilber and her team have moral courage, too.

"American Document," re-engineered by director Anne Bogart as a collaboration among actors and dancers, employs provocative texts culled from American literature and the internet. These documents demand to know what it means to be American in an age of foreign wars that kill innocent people, government-sponsored torture, immigrant bashing and the ongoing challenge posed by feminism.

Solos like Eve Gentry's "Tenant of the Street," and Jane Dudley's "Time Is Money" question an economic system that has resulted in homelessness and exploitation, while offering marvelous opportunities to dancers Tadej Brdnik, Carrie Ellmore-Tallitsch, Lloyd Knight and Maurizio Nardi. The image of the woman in "Tenant," bowed and emaciated, her arms stiffly clutching what must be her last hope, is especially powerful.

These programs unearth a history of political activism in dance that has been all but forgotten in the wake of McCarthyism and the rising tide of post-World War II prosperity.

Some might argue that Graham did not pursue a political agenda after the 1940s, yet it is clear that foundational works like "Heretic" and the original 1938 "American Document" explored volatile social boundaries — between the individual and the group, between Native Americans and European settlers, between lovers and religious zealots, between men and women — and that these frictions shaped the choreographer's aesthetic.

What separates the new "American Document" from Graham's work is not its political concerns, but a post-modern approach to movement that embraces the relaxed and the pedestrian.

Stylized elements drawn from Graham's vocabulary — the stiff-legged walks and sharply cupped hands — are purely decorative here, with the technique simplified so actors can perform it. Inevitably this gives the actors an advantage, so what really registers is the sense of intrigue and adventure, as sparkling Kelly Maurer retrieves a briefcase filled with our shared history, and the spaced-out idealism of Leon Ingulsrud, as he recites a passage from "Dharma Bums."

The choreographic centerpiece today remains the duet that Graham choreographed for herself and Erick Hawkins, at once a manifesto of sexual liberation and a tantalizingly ambiguous portrait of power relations between men and women.

This duet now appears on the same program with Graham's 1936 "Sketches from 'Chronicle,'" in which an all-female ensemble led by Jenifer DePalo and Miki Orihara respond to the threat of fascism with a resolve that is all steel and electricity. Typically American in their self-reliance, these women, having won the right to vote in 1920, are capable of handling anyone who tells them not to meddle in politics.

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