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## Martha Graham Dance Company's Political Dance Project: Old times feel like ours

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NEW YORK -- What might a BP oil-spill dance look like? Or an I-was-gouged-by-Bernie-Madoff solo? The recession expression, in movement?

Maybe we'll never know. Maybe that's a good thing. But 80 years ago, when a financial crisis and an environmental disaster captured America's attention, modern dancers were among the leading chroniclers. They were the new mythmakers, turning sharecroppers, Okies and nameless urban drudges into tragic heroes, just as their counterparts in photography and folk song did.

Ripping from the headlines, in fact, empowered the field of modern dance, then in its infancy, and moved it out of the theoretical and into real life. That's still a good place for it, as the Martha Graham Dance Company demonstrated Wednesday night in its Political Dance Project, which looks at works of the 1920s and '30s by Graham and her contemporaries. The series of four programs continues at the Joyce Theater through Sunday, where the first shows have sold out and demand has been high for the remaining views of little-known reconstructions mixed in with Graham staples such as "Appalachian Spring."

Few choreographers today put politics onstage. In this post-postmodern era, the field has shied away from the provocations of the AIDS works of the 1980s and early 1990s, which was perhaps the last time dance wrapped itself around an issue. Individual dancemakers may take on topical subjects, as Doug Varone did in "Alchemy," inspired by the Daniel Pearl beheading, or as Paul Taylor's "Banquet of Vultures" crucified George W. Bush. But such works are rare in an art form that, broadly speaking, has settled comfortably into self-consciousness. Dance is mostly about dancing. But between the world wars, when this country was leveled by the Great Depression, and fascism was looming overseas, the activist women who were forging a new art form took up the common man as their muse.

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Thus, on Wednesday's program of solos assembled under the title "Dance Is a Weapon," we saw a searing portrait of assembly-line slavery in "Time Is Money," from 1934. A voice-over and photographic montage introduced each of the works, placing them in the context of what was going on in the nation and the world at the time (a smart move). During a labor protest in Chicago, "50 workers are shot," the narrator intones. "Ten die.

"Jane Dudley made a dance."

Did she ever. "Time Is Money" is a psychological study of industrial deadening, a soul in rigor mortis while the body still twitches to the clock's demands. There's nothing self-aggrandizing in this work; in an extraordinarily captivating performance, Maurizio Nardi hinted at a factory worker's repetitions, the monotonous ticking away of his life, the silent anguish inside. At one point he hunches over, pumping one shoulder up and down like a piston; but that muscular vigor dwindles and weakens, until he's just circling a limp hand, watching as the power spins out of his body, out of his grasp. Adding to the innovations of this bit of bottled despair was the accompaniment: not music, but a spoken poem by Sol Funaroff, with deliciously vintage lines about "the bourgeois formulas for increased dividends." Actually, given our own financial crisis brought to us by Wall Street greed, that doesn't feel so vintage.

If dance can indeed be a weapon, this was the sharpest blade of the bunch.

In "Time Is Money" as in the others, simplicity was the hallmark. Eve Gentry's "Tenant of the Street" (1938), all humps and tilts, was like a line drawing come to life. (Never heard of Gentry? Pilates fans, she is your hero; the longtime disciple of Joseph Pilates helped formalize his method.) As bums multiplied throughout the Depression, they also became invisible; but Gentry's street urchin, in a magnetic performance by Carrie Ellmore-Tallitsch, refuses to be ignored. She locks eyes with us in her slow, hunched progress across the stage. But along with the spare emotional focus and physical tension, what made this solo so arresting was its stylized abstraction. Gentry worked in bold, elegant deco lines, making visceral the lean loops and streamlining that energized the decorative arts of the 1930s. It was fascinating to see that style as a movement motif.

Other works had the sentimental appeal of period pieces, such as Isadora Duncan's 1924 "The Revolutionary," with the pounding piano chords of Scriabin's Etude, Op. 8, No. 12, and dancer Tadej Brdnik crumpling to the stage but shooting his fist in the air like a banner. There was more than a little overstatement in this piece that Duncan created for herself, but Brdnik's compact explosiveness sharpened the simple, repeated movements.

Sophie Maslow's 1941 "I Ain't Got No Home," part of her "Dust Bowl Ballads," responded to the devastation of the Plains brought on by the rise of agribusiness and ruinous dust storms that drove people off the land. Accompanied by Woody Guthrie's "I Ain't Got No Home in This World Anymore," this work was about the unbent spirit; in Lloyd Knight's rhythmic jig and airy jumps you read the will to carry on. But that man doesn't exist anymore, if he ever did; this piece, sweet-tempered as it was, felt like a fairy tale of Americana.

Graham's "Panorama" (1935), an impressive sweep of crowd formations featuring dance students, and her "Sketches From 'Chronicle'" (1936), gave a good sense of why she became the dominant modern-dance voice of the time and why Dudley, Maslow, Gentry and others are known mostly to dance historians today. Graham was the consummate showman, a supreme commander whose group works crested in wave after wave, spilling

forth images of strength, fury and the conquering resolution of an army of goddesses. Of course, her works are brilliantly crafted, and the dance vocabulary she created is unparalleled. (And the Graham company has never looked better in it.) But this program also spotlighted Graham's grasp of the times and how she turned anxiety and fearfulness into power.

It's clear in "Appalachian Spring," the familiar 1944 paean to the frontier, which was given a new context in this program of political dance. As the company's artistic director, Janet Eilber, told the audience before the curtain went up, it was intended by Graham and her musical collaborator, Aaron Copland, as their contribution to the war effort, to lifting the nation's spirits. There is no finer distillation of the country's courage and independence, and it felt all the more impassioned Wednesday, with Blakeley White-McGuire as the Bride, Samuel Pott as the Husbandman, Nardi as the Revivalist and Katherine Crockett's radiant Pioneering Woman.

But there's another political statement embedded in this series. It is Eilber's declaration of a new mission for her company -- as a living museum.

A museum! You could hardly make a more incendiary claim in the dance field. Being devoted to old work is not fashionable. What you typically hear from dance companies whose founders have died but that are still carrying on, is: We're not a museum. By which they mean, don't think of us as display space for relics. We'll still have premieres!

So will the Graham company. Tuesday's opening of this series featured a theatrical piece by Anne Bogart called "American Document," a premiere that reinvents Graham's 1938 work of the same name with the use of actors, poetry and blogs from U.S. troops in Iraq.

"We feel the field of modern dance in general needs to come together to embrace its legacy, and we're demonstrating that," Eilber said in an interview this week. "And to give a home to these endangered works." In a field that has been tragically negligent of its past, that is a radical notion. As "Dance Is a Weapon" proved, radical notions still have legs.