

DANCE MAGAZINE REVIEW

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Martha Graham Dance Company

Joyce Theater, NYC

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Reviewed by Lynn Garafola

Context is the Graham company's new buzzword. A year ago that meant super-titles describing the action in Graham's *Clytemnestra*. This year it means spotlighting the radical politics of her work of the 1930s. With curated programs (five in one week) to "provide audiences with new points of access to the art form," MGDC, according to its latest press release, intends to take its cue from the art world and become a "living museum," preserving not just its founder's legacy but the classics of modern dance generally.

The two programs I saw accomplished this with varying degrees of success. *American Document* (2010), a partnership with Anne Bogart's SITI Company, is a remake of Graham's long-lost *American Document*—a meditation on what it meant to be an American in 1938, with readings from the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, and the sermons of Jonathan Edwards. Charles L. Mee, who wrote the new script, never quite finds equivalents of those iconic texts, and he wastes too much time evoking yesteryear's small-town America with readings (one from *Green Grow the Lilacs*, the play that inspired *Oklahoma!*) that fail to convey the radicalism of Graham's ideas of democracy and racial justice. Mee is on surer ground in the second half, where he stitches together a critique of the Iraq War, anti-immigration hysteria, the health care system, homophobia, and AIDS policies that the Graham of the 1930s would surely have supported.

Bogart deftly melds her performers into a single unit. Dancers speak and actors move—including Leon Ingulsrud, the descendant of Graham’s interlocutor—with unexpected facility. Signature Graham phrases, contributed by the dancers, run through the piece, eloquent and liberated in their new context. James Schuette puts everyone in individualized street clothes, and this, coupled with the varied body types and voices of dancers with accents from around the world, conveys a vision of multicultural harmony.

“Dance is a Weapon,” conceived by MGDC artistic director Janet Eilber, exemplifies the company’s new themed approach. Linked by a media montage created by scholars Victoria Geduld and Ellen Graff, “Weapon” moves from an uneven series of Graham-era “political” solos to a reconstruction of Panorama, a fascinating 1935 work danced by 31 students from the Graham School, Talent Unlimited High School Dancers, and All-City Dancers. The program culminated in a thrilling rendition of Steps in the Street (which distills and intensifies themes from Panorama) and Prelude to Action, led by a stunning Jennifer DePalo. Casting men in solos originated by Isadora Duncan and other women seems to undermine the idea of historical context.

Eilber deserves a lot of credit for taking chances on these kinds of curated programs. And, perhaps even more, she deserves praise for giving so many public high school students the chance to experience and perform Graham’s work.