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Music and the Iraq War

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MONDAY, MAY 3, 7:00 P.M.
**An Evening with
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DANCE

What's Up, 'Doc?'

A new interpretation of Martha Graham's 'American Document' pushes all the right buttons

BY JOEL LOBENTHAL

For those who say that polemics and aesthetics can't entwine without mutual nullification—or can't do it so far as dance is concerned—I say balderdash. Then I direct the skeptic to a "re-imagining" of Martha Graham's 1938 "American Document" that proved riveting and cathartic when shown as a "work-in-progress" at Dance Theatre Workshop last month. It's a collaborative project between today's Graham troupe and SITI Company, an ensemble-based theater group, along with its artistic director Anne Bogart and playwright Charles L. Mee, Jr. They'll bring it to the Joyce in June for a one-week season—and it's not to be missed.

Graham originally conceived "American Document" as a response to the shrieking Fascists whose rants were filling her radio waves. She devised a highly personal, national self-portrait as eclectic as the country's own population, which resonated with the vigorous agit-prop theater staged during the Depression. Recitation and movement provided a platform in "American Document" for a retrospective of iconic American voices, weighted toward the progressive. In 1989, Graham re-choreographed it and used different texts and a new score that replaced Ray Green's original. The current revision references what remains of the 1938 original: a few minutes of filmed record as well as Graham's surviving notebooks and scenario. The texts have been updated as well, addressing issues as topical as curtain time. Today, when it sometimes seems unlikely that a functioning democracy can survive in this country, "American Document"'s proud but unflinching look at what has made this country great and what has diminished it is singularly apropos.

Graham organized her original "American Document" around the pretext of a minstrel show. I would imagine that she was using that frame with some sense of irony as well as a genuine awareness of the long centrality of this institution to American popular performance. Nevertheless that would probably not go over so well today, and the conceit has been largely jettisoned and is referred to as "vaudevillian." Vestigial homage is paid to Graham's idea, however, when the new "American Document" opens with a high-stepping cakewalk, essential component of the minstrel show, performed by the entire cast of actors and dancers. They launch the piece on a note of jubilation, a surge of history and a surge of high spirits. The purported host for the evening titles himself Tom the Interlocutor, another conceit borrowed from minstrelsy.



By Costas

"American Document."

Throughout this "American Document," text does what it does best: It give us an explicit, if sometimes ambivalent, message. And dance does what it does best by finding formal correlatives both more universal but also more content to principally provide sensual, architectural and decorative interest. Rather than recreate any stretch of the irretrievable choreography, the current production uses known steps from the archival material as motival elements that are combined and recombined. The stage pictures are dotted with islands of autonomous movement, or crisscrossed with polyphonic strands. Often the movement is closely synchronized to the text, while not precisely illustrative.

Interpreters of text and movement each get to exchange roles. Speaking is not the strongest point of dancers, but the Graham performers are not bad at all when they transgress the dancer's traditional silence. When the SITI actors, not all of whom are svelte, take the plunge and move in exact tandem with the professional dancers, they seem to convey (in classic Graham style) that where there's a will, there's a way. American "can-do" could be the epitaph to Graham's own career. She was a very late starter in dance who made an indelible contribution to it. The indomitable will of a heroine in the process of self-actualization was an everlasting subject of her work.

Graham's original "Document" included critiques of the founding Puritans, and this contemporary redux provides national manifestos of reform and empowerment as well: the way that those ideals have been betrayed, most notably in a harrowing series of dispatches from Iraq.

"That's as far as we've gotten," Bogart announced after a last unison ensemble. Less than 10 percent of the roughly hour-long work remains to be constructed. I don't think anybody—performer nor spectator—will leave "American Document" with his complacency intact.