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DANCE REVIEW

Integrating Ensembles to Build a Hybrid Work

By CLAUDIA LA RUCIA

After proudly making note of the [Martha Graham Dance Company's](#) 84th season, the troupe's artistic director, Janet Eilber, allowed herself a small joke, telling the audience at the Joyce Theater, "We do have a different group of dancers with us tonight" rather than the original members.

The line drew chuckles, but it cuts to the heart of the Graham company's continuing identity issues. The dancers are different, the times are different, but the repertory remains. How to honor it in 2010, to give it context and relevance?

The troupe has tried many answers to this question since Graham's death in 1991. The results have often been squirm-inducing. But Tuesday night's premiere, a collaboration with the theater director [Anne Bogart](#) and her Siti Company, suggests that Ms. Eilber, a former Graham dancer, is getting closer to the mark.

This isn't to say that the work, "American Document (2010)," doesn't have some major flaws. But the cross-disciplinary project, part of an overarching preservation initiative the Graham company is starting, raises the possibility of an intelligently broader mandate. Imagine future collaborations with the [Wooster Group](#), Target Margin Theater and Big Dance Theater, to propose one wish list.

But to the premiere at hand: "American Document (2010)," inspired by filmed excerpts, photographs and Graham's notes about her 1938 dance "American Document," was created and performed by members of both companies. The ensembles are fully integrated, and it is fascinating to see the Siti actors trying on Graham's striking language, pistoning and pumping through the air with aplomb, even as the dancers try out a few spoken lines.

Graham's theatrical archetypes can seem dated to contemporary eyes. But here her movement is stripped to its muscular, angled attack, with lunging forward thrusts and arching leaps conjuring ideas of American space and speed (aided by Brian H. Scott's vibrant lighting design). How exciting to see the dancers arrow across the stage, or watch the burly Leon Ingulsrud swivel his pelvis and propel himself sideways as he recites a bit of [Jack Kerouac's](#) "cold dusk run to Santa Barbara."

Elsewhere, [Charles L. Mee's](#) script, which draws heavily on American literary classics, falls into simplistic bombast and self-consciousness. In one section the usual clichés on war and torture are doled out. In another, the narrator, Stephen Webber, repeatedly asks, "What is an American?," only to have the cast respond in various languages.

It's a pity, given that Graham herself offered a far more stirring answer to that question. The full, visceral tension and release of her modern dance technique flooded the stage in the night's other work, "Sketches From 'Chronicle,'" a partial reconstruction of the 1936 work she created in response to European fascism.

When done right, this clarion call of a dance, set to Wallingford Riegger's martial score, brooks no resistance. And Tuesday night's cast, led by the incandescent Jennifer DePalo, did more than right by this classic. Graham's choreography may not always sit comfortably in the 21st century. But it remains a true, living American document.