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'American' Teamwork

Martha Graham Dance Company and SITI Company join forces for a new production

By Susan Reiter



Credit: Costas Cacaroukas

Talk about cross-training! As part of an unusual and exciting collaboration, each morning before rehearsals, Martha Graham Dance Company dancers have been joining the members of The SITI Company in their Suzuki Actor Training Method class, and then the Graham dancers would return the favor, as the actors joined in their Graham technique class. This intensive preparation was part of the process through which Anne Bogart, the acclaimed director who is SITI's co-founder and artistic director, shaped a 21st-century edition of *American Document*, a landmark but long-lost Graham work from 1938.

Incorporating text spoken by a male

"interlocutor," *American Document* was a response to the political ferment of the 1930s as well as Graham's move into more overtly dramatic territory. Graham was examining the idea of what it means to be an American and how the principles and beliefs on which the country was founded applied to her time. Working with Bogart and playwright Charles L. Mee—a longtime member of the SITI Company, who wrote the probing and vivid *bobrauschenbergamerica* that SITI recently revived to great acclaim—10 Graham dancers and six SITI actors joined in this collaborative venture that re-envisioned the ideas and purpose of *American Document* in today's terms.

In 1989, two years before she died, Graham herself returned to *American Document*, which had remained in repertory and toured extensively through the mid-1940s. She turned to the same texts (including passages by Walt Whitman and Thomas Paine, the Declaration of Independence, the Song of Songs, a fiery Puritan sermon, the words of a Seneca Indian chief and the Emancipation Proclamation) she used in 1938. But she eliminated the minstrel-show format that shaped the original, replaced the Ray Green score with one by John Corigliano, and included a role for none other than Mikhail Baryshnikov, a loyal Graham supporter and frequent guest artist at the time. Reviewing the 1989 adaptation in the *New York Times*, Anna Kisselgoff described it as "a stream of Joycean free association" and wrote that Graham's "oblique form of poetic expression is effective."

Fast forward two decades and Janet Eilber, a former leading member of the company who has been artistic director of the Martha Graham Center since 2005, had been contemplating ways to re-imagine *American Document*. "It's always been so tempting, because there is so much written about it. There are fabulous Barbara Morgan photographs, a five-minute film clip of the original and a published script. We actually have Martha's handwritten notes, which we don't have for a lot of other ballets," she says in a recent interview. She describes the existing resources as a "blueprint" from which to build.

She considered dividing the work into sections that could be shaped by various choreographers. But then the Graham Company found itself in residence in Saratoga Springs, where SITI Company has also long had a residency, and an interesting symbiosis took place. "We met and realized how much we have in common in terms of our training, our aesthetic and approach to character and emotion through physical gesture. Because Martha's work is so much dance theater, I decided that a theater director bringing *American Document* to a new place would be most interesting. Anne connected to the material so quickly, because she is an expert in forms of American Theater and she just dove in. I did not give her any restrictions other than that we didn't want a big set. So we talked about logistics, but artistically I tried to leave it open.

"Because SITI's process is so collaborative, we've all had input. It's a group effort. We've all contributed and guided throughout the whole process." Actors and dancers will share the stage very much as equals—dancers sometimes speak, and the actors join in rousing sections of ensemble movement. "It was decided early on that this was going to be a community," Eilber says. "We feel that is part of the message of this *American Document*

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