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Dance

DANCE REVIEW

The Spirit May Suffer, Yet Still It Endures

By GIA KOURLAS

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Dance Review | Martha Graham Dance Company

A Martha Graham dancer is like a baseball player at bat: taut with nerves, a seemingly still form quivers on the brink of something momentous. As muscles spiral internally, a punctuated release sends the body into another stratosphere. It's not subtle, but the Martha Graham Dance Company, performing a new program on Wednesday night at the Skirball Center for the Performing Arts, teemed with individuals who grasped the power of Graham's movement rather than its potential for parody.

The evening began with "Lamentation Variations," commissioned in 2007 to commemorate the anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks. At first a silent film of Graham performing her solo "Lamentation" was shown; next Aszure Barton, Richard Move and Larry Keigwin respond choreographically. For reasons good and bad, the brief works do much to show why Graham's singular vision remains so vital.

Ms. Barton and Mr. Keigwin produce fairly lightweight fare in which the fervor of Graham's solo is reduced to a bundle of nervous ticks. But Mr. Move's work, danced by Katherine Crockett, is otherworldly in its simple depiction of grief. As Ms. Crockett enters the stage on demi-point with her elbows raised sharply to camouflage her beautiful face, a stream of light hits her body. Slowly tilting forward and backward she creates a portrait of fathomless sorrow and loneliness.

Mr. Move understands the beauty in strength, and in this glimmer of an artist reacting to two potent muses — Ms. Crockett and Graham — he produces a work of blistering authenticity. On Saturday afternoon a new variation, choreographed by Bulareyaung Pagarlava, will be introduced to the mix (featuring the incomparable Fang-Yi Sheu).

In the thrilling "Sketches from 'Chronicle,'" a reconstruction of portions of a 1936 dance, Graham offers a response of her own — to the fascism brewing in Europe at the time. For the first section, "Spectre — 1914," Jennifer DePalo, who has grown immeasurably in the solo, conveys the underlying vulnerability of rage. Leading the percussive second section, "Steps in the Street," is the engrossing Carrie Ellmore-Tallitsch, and in the final "Prelude to Action,"

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Graham offers an answer to the devastation of war in which the spirit of humanity, led by an exuberant Ms. DePalo, lives on.

In “Errand Into the Maze,” from 1947, Graham loosely retells the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur from the perspective of Ariadne. (In Graham’s work women rule.) The delicate Miki Orihara, flickering effortlessly among fear, joy and agitation, wrestled with and ultimately conquered Tadej Brdnik’s menacing Minotaur. Taking fluttering crisscross steps over a rope placed onstage, her maze, a personal journey that deepened incrementally, was one of the mind.

The program concluded with Graham’s “Maple Leaf Rag,” a slight work from 1990 set to Scott Joplin that pokes fun at the cerebral seriousness of modern dance. The fine comedic team of Blakeley White-McGuire and Maurizio Nardi served it well, as did Ms. Crockett’s over-the-top rendition of a Graham dancer, but it festers in a place of frivolity — everything the radical choreographer was not.

The Martha Graham Dance Company performs through Saturday at the Skirball Center for the Performing Arts, 566 La Guardia Place, at Washington Square South, Greenwich Village; (212) 352-3101, skirballcenter.nyu.edu.