

Review: Exploring Nature and Nightlife at Martha Graham

Martha Graham Dance Company brings two premieres and a classic to the City Center Dance Festival. The best new work? A soulful score by Jason Moran.

By Gia Kourlas

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Isn't it distressing when the oldest dance on a program has the most to say about the present? And more disconcerting when that dance feels it could have been the newest?

Not to slight the dance itself: Martha Graham's "Chronicle," from 1936, is as spellbinding and prescient as ever. Created in a response to rising fascism in Europe after Graham refused an invitation to perform at the Olympic Games in Berlin, it has become more and more relevant in recent years. That is definitely distressing.

But the premieres presented by the Martha Graham Dance Company on the opening night of its season at City Center Dance Festival tell a different story. There was "Canticle for Innocent Comedians," a sluggish series of vignettes by eight choreographers, led by Sonya Tayeh, and "Cave," an uncomplicated, raucous transform-the-stage-into-a-club experience by Hofesh Shechter.

When it comes to commissioning new works, the Graham company generally runs in the opposite direction of its founding choreographer — mystifyingly so, as if the company, the oldest dance troupe in the United States, is vying to become the next random repertory group. Moving forward is not only desirable, it's necessary, but the choice of new choreographers can be confusing beyond their brand names. These choreographers rarely show new sides of the Graham dancers — technically assured, individual and, more than most, attuned to their inner emotions — as much as they stamp their style onto them.

Even when the company members sell this choreography, what are they selling? The ability to be, like so many other dancers all over the world, generically versatile? If the dynamic, powerful Leslie Andrea Williams stood out in "Cave," it was because she had already conquered the stage in "Chronicle." But by the end of the evening, for several of the other dancers, it was hard to put faces to names.



Jacob Larsen and So Young An in "Moon," the existing Graham section of "Canticle for Innocent Comedians." Brian Pollock

This was apparent in “Canticle for Innocent Comedians,” a new production inspired by Graham’s 1952 ode to nature, in which dancers bring the elements — sun, earth, water, et cetera — to dancing life. The work has been revived over the years, but it was never recorded in its entirety. Only one section, “Moon,” was filmed, for the documentary “A Dancer’s World.”

In the new “Canticle,” that segment retains Graham’s choreography, which hints at what might have been. In a luminous and lyrical duet, So Young An and Jacob Larsen, bathed in cool moonlight, are continually drawn toward each other. In a dramatic moment, she pliés deeply and he picks her up from behind. Facing out, she wraps her legs around his torso as he swings her up and down, finally lowering her headfirst onto her shoulders. It’s a rush, just as “Wind,” danced by Laurel Dalley Smith and choreographed by Robert Cohan, was a poetic rendering of a fleet, lithe body caught in a breeze and pausing to show the stillness between the gusts.

But remaking a dance with basically just the structure intact is a tricky proposition, especially with something like “Canticle,” which, by all accounts, was breathtaking. As a Juilliard student, Paul Taylor watched it and was inspired to become a choreographer. As he wrote in “Private Domain,” his autobiography, “The whole dance was the loveliest, most impressive, most magical thing I’d ever seen.”



A scene from “Canticle for Innocent Comedians.” Brian Pollock

In the new version, many of the vignettes blur and lose distinction, perhaps owing to the assortment of choreographers. It was hard to tell exactly what the dancer Lorenzo Pagano was up to in “Sun,” which was created by Tayeh, who also presided over the opening and closing dances, and the interludes. Writhing from here to there with his chin raised to a peculiar degree, he was a slithery sight, arching his back and rolling up and down from the floor as if showcasing the effects of too *much* sun: sticky, slow, affectedly lugubrious.

Much of the choreography ignored this new production’s best part: its soulful commissioned score by the jazz composer and pianist Jason Moran, who performed live on Wednesday. By turns, it was soft and tender, full of grit and power — the opposite of the cloying solos and duets that dominated “Canticle.” The music, as it kept reawakening itself, was magical.

The other new work, “Cave,” had a back story, too. The ballet dancer Daniil Simkin wondered something along the lines of: What if a rave was infused with choreography? (This begs a question: Why would you want it to be?)

Simkin, who returns to American Ballet Theater as a guest artist this spring, has been living in Berlin and soaking in club culture. He dances in the piece, too, and is credited as its creative producer.

Shechter, an Israeli choreographer based in London, is adept at moving packs of dancers across a stage, a skill he uses in “Cave.” The dancers begin spread horizontally before converging in and out of groupings that keep their bodies low to the ground like boneless wisps of silk as their arms float above their heads. Simkin is an airy kind of dancer; as much as he tried, he couldn’t match their earthy force.

The moody, pulsating “Cave” is a closer and a party all in one, but as it rides along its relentless beat, it’s clear that this is little more than manufactured fun — a reason for the crowd to clap along to the music, credited to Âme and Shechter. Choreographically, “Cave” is little more than a series of flash mobs, in which the men increasingly threw themselves into the action — and into the spotlights — to an almost embarrassing degree.



Moody, pulsating: “Cave,” with choreography by Hofesh Shechter. Brian Pollock

The section that was the most visceral was one featuring the women — bouncing, undulating and spinning, they transformed into a coven of spirits. Here, they were Graham dancers once again, though their movement was starkly different. Along with their abandon and speed, there was also something else at play: the contained fury and feeling of “Chronicle.”

As a collective, eerily in tune with one another, they reflected Graham’s early, transformative all-female works in which a new way of moving, rooted in the pelvis, was born. They were distinct, primal; their dancing had more to it than a body and a beat. It seemed unintentional, but “Cave,” in conversation with “Chronicle,” finally had something to say.

Martha Graham Dance Company

Through April 10 at New York City Center, Manhattan; nycitycenter.org.