

The New York Times

Shocking Congress in the '60s

Martha Graham Troupe at the Joyce



Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Myth and Transformation Maurizio Nardi, center, and Blakeley White-McGuire of the Martha Graham troupe at the Joyce Theater.

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Published: February 22, 2013

The theme of the current season of the Martha Graham Dance Company is “Myth and Transformation” — how choreographers use old stories to make contemporary statements. The use of myth can be a powerful method for tapping into the timeless, but the transformations can also say more about the period when they were made than about the period in which they were set.

On Wednesday at the Joyce Theater the first of three programs in a two-week season opened with Graham’s “Phaedra,” from 1962.

In her introductory remarks, Janet Eilber, the company's artistic director, recalled how members of Congress denounced the dance's lewdness, and she set it in the context of miniskirts and free love.

As usual, the politicians were upset for the wrong reasons. In the Greek myth that "Phaedra" recounts, Aphrodite causes the queen to lust after her own stepson, with fatal consequences. By today's standards, the choreography is far from explicit about that lust, though it is clear enough. In the final image, a leering Aphrodite spreads her legs as far apart as they can go.

The trouble is that Aphrodite doesn't do much except leer. Whether in response to the 1960s or to more internal forces, "Phaedra" represents a coarsening of Graham's art. As Phaedra's husband, Theseus, Tadej Brdnik manages to slap his thighs with dignity, but it's not Blakeley White-McGuire's fault that her Phaedra is no more than a victim.

When she thrusts a knife toward her crotch, it's hardly an endorsement of the sexual revolution. A stylized vision of Phaedra's mother copulating with a bull presents female sexuality as a curse. This isn't "Sex and the Single Girl" (published the same year). It's an aging artist (Graham was pushing 70) applying her sure storytelling skills to rage at involuntary desire.

The rage of Achilles is the driving force of "The Iliad," but the Achilles in Richard Move's "The Show (Achilles Heels)" isn't so much angry as vain, sealed off in his beauty. He gazes into his hand as if it were a mirror. The heels he wears are high, gold and sparkly.

The work, made for the White Oak Dance Project in 2002 and paired with "Phaedra" as a more recent example of myth transformation, is certainly of its time in the games it plays. Achilles appears on a "reality game show." The dancers lip-sync dialogue from Hollywood Golden-era films of the story, mocking

clunky exposition while making use of it.

Is the cheapening an indictment of the present or an indulgence? Should the sniggering at dramatic old voices extend to Graham, whose technique Mr. Move borrows for Helen of Troy (majestically embodied by Katherine Crockett)? Mr. Move's dance won't decide, though its magpie style achieves moments of poetry. It's best at expressing the tenderness between Achilles and his lover, Patroclus.

Achilles speaks in the recorded voice of Mikhail Baryshnikov, who originated the role. That's a dancer's armor to wear, but Lloyd Mayor, an apprentice with the company when Mr. Move chose him, has everything that the role requires, except celebrity: a beautiful face, sculptural technique. One thing Mr. Move knows for sure is how to pick 'em.