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THE NEWSPAPER OF SILICON VALLEY

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ARTS+ENTERTAINMENT



JOHN DEANE

Christophe Jeannot as the preacher in "Appalachian Spring."

Graham's dance masterpiece is all-American

By Mark Whittington
Mercury News

Baseball, apple pie, Martha Graham. Some things are pure American.

Modern dance legend Graham sought to capture the American spirit in her most famous work, "Appalachian Spring," with its music so American that it's familiar even to folks who've never seen any dance.

STILL DANCING

Martha Graham Dance Company survives financial turmoil.

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The Martha Graham Dance Company brings "Appalachian Spring" to life at Stanford next Wednesday.

"It speaks to the bones of Americans, maybe not in a way that we can articulate but certainly in the look and the feel and the American hope for the future," says Janet Eilber, the artistic director of the Martha Graham Center in New York.

It is Graham's most accessible work, in part

because of the Pulitzer Prize-winning score by Aaron Copland. They were a uniquely American pair: She was a descendant of Miles Standish; he was the son of Jewish immigrants from Lithuanian shtetls.

Their collaboration can be traced in the letters exchanged by Graham and Copland as they created the ballet, which premiered in 1944. They sent scripts back and forth and exchanged ideas. It was Graham who suggested using the Shaker tune "Simple Gifts." But it was Copland who steered Graham

Martha Graham Dance Company

Program: "Appalachian Spring," "Cave of the Heart," Sketches from "Chronicle"

Where: Memorial Auditorium, Stanford University

When: 8 p.m. Wednesday; pre-performance discussion at 6:45 p.m.

Tickets: \$28-\$46; (650) 725-2787; <http://livelyarts.stanford.edu>

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Online Extra

For links to "Appalachian Spring" video and audio clips from the Martha Graham Dance Company, go to www.mercurynews.com/entertainment.

DANCE | Copland, Graham captured America's essence

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away from the story of Medea and suggested the American themes of religion, marriage and the frontier.

"They didn't have a common vision. They were coming from very different places. They were not in sync at first," says Howard Pollack, a music professor at the University of Houston and the author of "Aaron Copland: The Life and Work of an Uncommon Man." "There was a lot of evolution," he said.

"Graham and Copland wanted to distill the essence of America into this work," says Eilber, who will be reading from their letters at a pre-concert talk. "From Davy Crockett and Pocahontas to Uncle Tom's Cabin' and Harper's Ferry. The Civil War. American religion. They roamed through the topics."

Graham's movement captures the American personality, Eilber says. Risk-taking. Athletic. Full of space and speed.

Copland's music does the same, says Stanford music professor Jonathan Berger. Angu-

lar. Syncopated. Crisp. Clear. Simple diatonic harmonies.

What will audiences see?

Iconic themes, characters

It is a simple story — the tale of a rural American couple on their wedding day. The characters are iconic — the Bride, the Husbandman, a Pioneer Woman, a Revivalist and his Followers.

"People are often surprised at how stripped down the choreography is. It's not sentimental. It's plain-spoken American dancing," Eilber explains. Graham included familiar American gestures — a square dance do-si-do, thigh slapping, even a simple handshake.

Some other themes:

■ **Love:** The roles of bride and groom were originally choreographed for Graham and the love-of-her-life. "Like all of Martha Graham's dances, there was a personal theme and then she would put that into a much more universal context," says Yuriko, an 85-year-old San Jose native who was one of the Followers in the original cast of "Appalachian Spring." It was her first role with the company, and she is

still teaching its dancers in New York City. "This was very, very personal. She was in love with Erick Hawkins. ... This whole sense of frontier, of space and adventure. Should she get married? To her that was a big adventure," said Yuriko, who only uses one name.

■ **War:** Both the original wartime audience and today's can relate to the Civil War subtext. "Both Copland and Graham considered this work to be their contribution to the war effort. They wanted something that showed America's fortitude," Eilber says.

■ **Religion:** Audiences often chuckle at the depiction of religion as portrayed by the evangelist's followers. But the preacher has dark undertones. "There's humor and there's sadness," Pollack says.

■ **Frontier:** "All of the collaborators were interested in space," Eilber says. Copland talked of the vistas in his music. Even the fence in Isamu Noguchi's simple set and Graham's choreography extend the frontier out over the audience.

Different titles

Just don't go looking for spe-

cific references to Appalachia or even spring. Copland always called his music "Ballet for Martha." And Graham didn't actually name the work until a few weeks before the premiere, taking the title from a line in a Hart Crane poem.

"You get a real sense of bravery, confidence and optimism," says Dalia Rawson, a ballerina who learned two Graham dances for Ballet San Jose Silicon Valley.

The dancers are taught to tap into the emotional core of the characters and into a feeling of community, she says. But it was the almost painterly look that struck Rawson as she sat in the audience watching "Appalachian Spring" when the San Jose ballet performed the work in 2003.

"I was overwhelmed by how it looked. It's very evocative in a simple, well-structured way. You understand it immediately."

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