

Performances capture boundless joy, abject despair

By Susan Broili : The Herald-Sun

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DURHAM -- Strong performances of masterworks in Thursday's American Dance Festival program made for a dramatic, emotional and exhilarating evening of dance. The program featuring the Martha Graham and the Lar Lubovitch dance companies continues tonight at 8 in Duke University's Page Auditorium.

To describe Martha Graham's work as intense does not begin to cover its emotional depth or visceral effect, or the workout it presents for dancers in its percussive footwork and balancing acts.

The 1936 dance "Steps in the Street" begins in silence as 10 women take the stage. With one arm bent, bodies torqued, they look grief-stricken, beaten down. They move back and forth, restless, with a loss of direction that connotes homelessness wrought by war. The most compelling moment comes when a single dancer moves among the group but headed in a different direction, as though truly lost in the streets.

In introducing the dance, the company's artistic director, Janet Eilber, tells the audience that Graham had refused Adolf Hitler's invitation to perform at a festival held in conjunction with the 1936 Summer Olympics because she could not identify with the Nazi regime and because Jewish members of her company were not welcome.

Elizabeth Auclair becomes a sackcloth of sorrow in the 1930 dance "Lamentation" as she stretches a body cowl of purple jersey and collapses inside it while she sits on a bench for most of the dance. At times, she looks like a ghost of herself, pale and wasted by grief. Once, she slips down into the fabric tube, with only her hands showing, as though sinking in sorrow. In the final image, she's completely inside the fabric as she leans her torso way down at an angle and does not look human at all but rather like one long, piercing wail.

In contrast, the 1948 "Diversion of Angels," bursts with exuberance. This dance about love literally has dancers head-over-heels as men hold women upside down. The sustained, tender attention the Couple in White (Katherine Crockett and David Martinez) give each other communicates a love that lasts. Graham also uses the stage as a canvas with broad, angled slashes of movement and streaks of color as when women in red and yellow flash across the stage. At one point, Jennifer DePalo, in yellow, appears to windmill herself through space.

Love of life and each other and the sheer joy of dancing to beautiful, heartfelt music come across in the performance of "Concerto Six Twenty-Two" by Lar Lubovitch. Community comes through when dancers form a big circle, hands raised and pressed together. Exuberance fills the dance, especially when dancers, with loose-jointed arms and legs, cavort like colts, and when male dancers flaunt it in flamboyant gestures, including strong-arm moves. The emotional heart of this dance occurs in the duet by two men, performed by Griff Braun and Jay Franke. Groundbreaking at the time, the duet conveys a caring, loving relationship between two men and communicates a deep sadness as they face the loss of that relationship.

Lubovitch created the dance during the height of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s in New York as his response to the courage and love that people showed as they dealt with the disease. In the duet, partners support each other and the movement becomes more pronounced as one falters and the other holds him up. But the duet transcends time and place because it captures a commitment between two people that runs deep and does not falter in the face of devastating circumstances. The duet has the power to bring tears and once again, tears came.

TODAY AT ADF

Martha Graham Dance Company performs "Diversion of Angels," "Lamentation" and "Steps in the Streets." Lar Lubovitch Dance Company performs "Concerto Six Twenty-Two." All performances at 8 p.m. in Duke University's Page Auditorium. Tickets: (919) 684-4444 or online at www.tickets.duke.edu.