

# Graham's 'Rite' astounding, apt

## Choreography plumbs emotional power of score

By ANNA KISSELGROFF  
New York Times News Service

NEW YORK — The theme of rebirth has been a dominant one in Martha Graham's dancing and choreography. There is something symbolically apt, then, in the crowning achievement with which she has just astounded us — her own version of Stravinsky's ecstatic hymn to renewal, "The Rite of Spring."

There is perhaps no more famous piece of 20th-century music. Indeed, when its previously unheard pounding rhythms burst upon unprepared ears in Paris in 1913, it was the 20th century as a whole that was officially announced. A time that could produce music like this could no longer be the same as before. A year later, in fact, World War I broke out. But the upheaval of the century had already been heralded in other ways. In art the breaking down of forms and the affinity most modernist artists manifested with so-called primitive cultures signaled a new attitude toward so-called civilized society's perception of reality. Dancing, too, could not continue as it had before. In championing Vaslav Nijinsky, the choreographer of the first "Rite of Spring," as a founder of modern dance, Lincoln Kirstein has warned that to understand Nijinsky one also has to understand Stravinsky, Freud, Einstein and Cezanne.

The jolting of old habits in the early part of the 20th century suggested that artists were clearly ahead of their time. But in 1936, Martha Graham noted, "No artist is ahead of his time. He is his time; it is just that others are behind the time."

In this context, it is understandable why she had never approached Stravinsky's score for "The Rite of Spring" previously. Revolutions already fought have not interested her. Although the music still is startling, especially to a first-time listener, it bespeaks its own achievement and its period. Stravinsky himself acknowledged this by plunging afterward into what would be called a neo-classical period; one does not go on composing "The Rite of Spring" forever. This is a lesson badly learned by the scores of choreographers, mainly in ballet rather than modern dance, who have created their own dance versions to the music. There is no space to enumerate the numerous failures in this regard: The few positive versions have, interestingly, refused to deal with the barbaric implications at the core of the music and have imposed totally new scenarios — including trivial ones.

Finally persuaded to tackle this monumental score, Martha Graham has approached it in a manner true to her principles but comes up with surprising results. Those who have previously criticized her attitude toward music have accused her of using music merely as background, as "aural decor." Her method has been to avoid inter-

preting the music and by extension, as she has said, interpreting a period.

This line of thinking would seem the clue to the slate-clear effect her "Rite" produces with such devastating power. It would explain why it looks unlike any other dance version of the "Rite," why one has the sensation that the "Rite" has never been danced before. This is not a recreation of the "Rite" of 1913 but a whole new "Rite" that translates the larger myth of sacrifice into terms of 1984.

Consistently, Graham's choreography goes against the expectations we have of the music. Where it is frenzied and climactic, her dancers are often still. And when their rhythms do seem to coincide with the score's, both exist side by side. Consistently, one has the sensation that the dancers are not dancing to the music. After viewing the fourth performance of the "Rite," I asked Graham whether she had choreographed most of the work without the music. She confirmed that this had been the case and that she had then adapted the phrasing of the preset movement to the music.

What she has done is to get to the depths of the emotional power of the score. In effect, she has understood its attempts to create an atmosphere of primordial ritual. She has created a terror-filled environment of her own. So deeply has she reached this essence, that one forgets totally the Russian folk motifs that otherwise stand out in relief when the score is heard in concert, or even in other dance versions (An Australian aboriginal setting went particularly against the "Russian-ness" of the music).

While there are a few narrative correspondences to specific scenes of the scenario worked out by Stravinsky and the painter, Nicholas Roerich, Graham's eschewing of all folkloristic references is significant. She has kept the general scenario of a fertility rite in which a young girl is sacrificed by a tribal community to propitiate gods and help the crops grow. But she has universalized the action through movement and motor pulses that seem modern, with which the audience identifies. The Chosen One here does not dance herself to death as in the original. Rather, the life ebbs out of her in a spasmodic solo as a shaman and his acolytes throw down a long train of green and black fabric. The identification of her sacrifice with renewal and rebirth is immediate. The black of the earth turns green with vegetation because of her sacrifice for the communal good.

There are two shocking emotional moments. The setting by Ron Protas and the lighting by Thomas Skelton is a bleak clime recalling the American Southwest. It is a place where water rarely flows. When the shaman suddenly plucks the victim off her partner's back as two other couples have passed by in plowing rhythms, it is as if an

animal suddenly snapped out and swallowed an insect. In its suddenness and randomness, the choice appears unjust. And yet it also seems inevitable.

The second shocking image concerns the inhuman response to the sacrifice. The men sit in a lotus position, passive and removed as the shaman calmly winds a rope around the girl as the music builds.

The decor is a steplike rock formation, topped by a tree (Graham says it is like a "Devil's Claw," found in the Southwest). But just as this is not a specific place, so Graham's movement vocabulary now transmits no specific gesture but a signature for emotional energy. Only after repeated viewings does it become apparent that the same jumps she used for the chorus in "Night Journey" are now used for the twisted women here, who play a different role.

Never has Graham created such an assemblage of overlapping body parts. The tense forms of the female body press against each other as in a Picasso painting, a front and side simultaneously visible.

The entire mood is negative. When the men enter, heads held back, the breath seems barely in them. Later the women's heads seem to roll in their neck sockets. George White Jr., superbly knowing as the shaman, wears a black, white and green cape that he manipulates to "magic" effect. After the women's frieze marches in, there is a wonderful moment. Each stands on a bent leg and beats a flexed foot against her ankle. The elbows are pressed to the side, the forearms shoot out.

When the shaman literally scoops up the Chosen One, Steve Rooks, as her mate, bursts into a frenzied solo of grief. From then on the shaman and the girl become the focus of attention. Terese Capucilli, who opened in the work, was a fighter, racked with defiance and terror until the end. Christine Dakin was dazed, more quivering. Both interpretations, conveyed through movement quality rather than acting, were excellent. After a symbolic mating duet with the shaman, the girl has a spasmodic solo. In an extraordinary image, her tight twisted body falls on its side and springs up repeatedly.

If the women had seemed finally to advance upon the girl in an attacking line, now the men stand arrogantly, one foot placed on the shoulder of a woman sitting on the ground. Acknowledging the end, the girl climbs to the rock pile, as the green and black serpentine cloth cascades down from her body. The snake is an ancient sexual symbol. Graham reports that she was thinking here of a mound she saw in Ohio that was shaped like a snake with an egg in its mouth — an Indian ritual site.

Such footnotes illuminate Graham's creative process. Her "Rite of Spring," however, speaks for itself — proving its capacity to disturb as all great art should.

# Theaters offer movie cassettes in lobby

By DESMOND RYAN  
Knight-Ridder News Service

In a bizarre affirmation of the adage "If you can't beat them, join them," patrons leaving a chain of theaters in Oregon can now rent or buy videocassettes of their favorite movies.

Since the beginning of the revolution in home entertainment, theater owners have felt threatened — and quite rightly — by an alternative and often preferable means of watching a film. At a recent convention of exhibitors in Las Vegas, William Christiansen, an executive of Oregon's Moyer Theaters, defended the fact that his chain is the first in the country to sell tapes in its lobby. His reasoning is that theater owners' business is movies and they should aggressively pursue every means of marketing the product.

If this play catches on, it will represent a remarkable turnaround in the continuing story of theaters vs.

home video. In the past, exhibitors have been urged frequently to do everything to make a visit to the theater a sonic and visual experience that a filmgoer can't find at home. Certainly, "Star Wars" or even "Flashdance" are not the same when seen in the average living room. On the other hand, the theater owners have to deal with customers' resistance to paying the ancillary costs of a movie outing — expenditures such as parking, transportation and baby-sitting.

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