***Appalachian Spring***

**Summary**

*Appalachian Spring* was choreographer Martha Graham’s final piece of Americana in the cycle of her choreography that started with the solo *Frontier* in 1935 (music by Louis Horst) and continued on with *American Document* in 1938 (music by Ray Green). Aaron Coplandcomposed the original score for *Appalachian Spring*, Isamu Noguchi designed the set and properties, and Edythe Gilfond designed the costumes. The Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation sponsored Copland’s score and the premiere of *Appalachian Spring* on October 30, 1944 at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.[[1]](#endnote-1) The original cast included Graham as the Bride, Erick Hawkins as the Husbandman, Merce Cunningham as the Revivalist, and May O’Donnell as the Pioneer Woman. The title was taken from Hart Crane’s poem *The Bridge* (Shea-Murphy 158). *Appalachian Spring* was acclaimed in 1944 at the height of the Second World War as a patriotic affirmation of traditional American values in opposition to Nazi fascism. The regional Americanism theme of the 1930s, as Martin Graebner has pointed out of visual art in the 1940s, ‘was easily transmuted into the theme of rural patriotism’ (Graebner 7). *Appalachian Spring* has survived in the repertoire of the Martha Graham Dance Company from 1944 to the present day. Shorn of the Second World War context in which it premiered, *Appalachian Spring* is now considered a lyrical and psychological study.

**Exposition**

*Appalachian Spring* is set in what at first appears to be the Civil War period with recognizable character types and the suggestions of a plot. A program note reads: ‘Spring was celebrated by a man and a woman building a house with joy and love and prayer; by a revivalist and his followers in their shouts of exaltation; by a pioneering woman with her dreams of the promised land’.[[2]](#endnote-2) The two scenarios Graham wrote for Copland in 1943 tell us a great deal about the work’s genesis and influences, yet neither scenario represents the final version.[[3]](#endnote-3) Graham introduced three characters in the scenarios that never made it to the stage in the finished version: the Indian Girl, the Fugitive (an escaped slave), and the John Brown figure or abolitionist (called The Citizen). Each of these characters was controversial for a patriotic wartime ballet because they suggested a style of reference to US history and a social consciousness characteristic of the popular front between 1934 and 1941. In submerging the popular front characters Graham opted for a more politically centrist position as a choreographer. By sharing the stage with Hawkins and Cunningham in leading roles, Graham likewise curtailed the power of her own forceful feminine persona to play a less assertive and less independent woman than in her earlier work (Siegel 140-152). Her interpretation of the Bride did, however, allow her to convey her own personal misgivings about marriage (Kowal 65).

Graham called *Appalachian Spring* ‘a legend of American living’.[[4]](#endnote-4) She tempered the conventional theatricality of the plot and lyrical line of the score with contradiction, doubt, and uncertainty. The absent characters are still suggested as if encrypted within those still present. The Indian Girl, a character originally conceived to be a ghostly presence for the other characters, was perceptible in the nostalgic and distant quality of the Pioneer Woman; the panic of the Fugitive was perceptible in the movements of the Revivalist’s sermon; and the fanaticism of the Citizen was suggested in Hawkins’s stern interpretation of the Husbandman. These hybrid identities resulted from Graham switching the order of musical sequence while adapting both music and choreography to different personae. Although Copland’s score quotes a Shaker hymn (‘Tis the Gift to Be Simple’), the music also creates ‘a delicate yet substantial dissonance’ (Crist 172). Although Noguchi’s set outlines the skeletal structure of a house and fence, the design evokes the sparseness of Shaker furniture. And although Graham’s choreography occasionally suggests folk dance, the movement displays modernist tensions and angularities. Temporal and spatial coordinates in the choreography are ultimately allusive, and the mimetic gesture supporting narrative is nonetheless inflected by abstraction and symbolism.

In addition to Graham, Pearl Lang, Ethel Winter, Yuriko Kimura, and Christine Dakin have performed the role of the Bride with distinction, demonstrating a range of interpretations. This performance history along with Copland’s score, which won a Pulitzer Prize, has made *Appalachian Spring* a uniquely sustainable classic in the repertory of North American modern dance. *Appalachian Spring* has been danced by the Joffrey Ballet, the Boston Ballet, and the Paris Opera as well as by students in a number of college dance departments.

**Mark Franko**

**References and Further Reading**

Crist, E. B. (2005) *Music for the Common Man. Aaron Copland During the Depression and War*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Franko, M. (2012) *Martha Graham in Love and War: the Life in the Work*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Graebner, W. (1991) *The Age of Doubt. American Thought and Culture in the 1940s*, Boston: Twayne Publishers.

Kowal, R.J. (2012) *How to do Things with Words. Performing Change in Postwar America*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.

Shea-Murphy, J. (2007) “Her Point of View: Martha Graham and Absent Indians” in *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing. Native American Modern Dance Histories*, Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 148-168.

Robertson, M. E. (1999) “‘A Gift to be Simple’: The collaboration of Aaron Copland and Martha Graham in the genesis of *Appalachian Spring*”. Dissertation: University of Michigan, 1999.

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Siegel, M. (1979) “*Frontier* to *Appalachian Spring* (Martha Graham)” in *The Shapes of Change. Images of American Dance*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 140-152.

Thomas, H. (1995) ‘*Appalachian Spring’*, in *Dance, Modernity and Culture: Explorations in the Sociology of Dance,* London: Routledge, 149-163.

**Documentaries**

*Martha Graham – An American Original in Performance* (Kultur Video)

*Martha Graham: Dance on Film,* Criterion Collection (Nathan Kroll)

[In 1958 Peter Glushanok shot a film of *Appalachian Spring* with Graham, Stuart Hodes, Bertram Ross, and Matt Turney in the lead roles. The film was produced by Nathan Kroll and is available on *Martha Graham: Dance on Film.*]

**Paratexts**

*Martha Graham – An American Original in Performance* (Kultur Video)

<http://www.amazon.com/Martha-Graham-American-Original-Performance/dp/B00006G8HJ/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1385135420&sr=8-2&keywords=martha+graham+appalachian+spring>

*Martha Graham: Dance on Film,* Criterion Collection (Nathan Kroll)

<http://www.criterion.com/films/835-martha-graham-dance-on-film>

*Martha Graham in Appalachian Spring* (photographer unknown), Library of Congress

<http://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200153814>

**Endnotes**

1. On the genesis of the commission of the score see W. D. Shirley, *Ballet for Martha. The Commissioning of* Appalachian Spring *and Ballets for Martha. The Creation of* Appalachian Spring*,* Jeux de Printemps*, and* Hérodiade (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1997). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Program, June 23-24, 1945, Bennington College. Martha Graham archive, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See Martha Graham, ‘House of Victory’ (May 16, 1943), and ‘NAME?’ (July 10, 1943). Both scenarios are held at the Aaron Copland Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress. On Graham’s use of character compression, see M. Franko, ‘Politics under Erasure: Regionalism as Cryptology’, in *Martha Graham in Love and War: The Life in the Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 57-62. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Martha Graham, ‘NAME?’, second scenario for Aaron Copland, letter of Martha Graham to Aaron Copland, Aaron Copland Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)