



**Remarks by Lar Lubovitch delivered from the stage prior to
a performance by the Martha Graham Dance Company
at the Joyce Theater on September 22, 2007**

As part of the Martha Graham Dance Company's 80th anniversary celebrations, the company is highlighting Martha's wide-ranging influence on American culture. I am honored to be asked to speak about my own experience of Martha Graham, and I would like to thank the company for the privilege of being included.

In the early 60's, when I discovered dance, it felt as inevitable as the clap of thunder that follows lightning – it was an “all at once” experience, and though technically I came into the world 18 years earlier, I was truly born at that moment. I was an art major at the University of Iowa, and though I had never seen dance before, by chance I found myself at a performance of the Jose Limon Company. The instant it began, the character I had sketched myself to be prior to that moment drifted off the drawing board like so much charcoal dust, and I became at once a dancer.

From information in the printed program, I discovered I could attend an intensive summer dance program at Connecticut College, where I would be exposed to all the top modern dancers and choreographers of the day, all of whom gathered there annually. Jose Limon would be there and though that was enough for me, local dancers, whom I had sought out, had told me of someone named Martha Graham, whose very name was recited as though it was a prayer.

Two months later, I am in a dance studio in New London, Connecticut, now enthralled by the Graham technique which courses through my body like a song. The room is vibrating with nervous expectation. In a great commotion, dancers scurry to claim a piece of the floor where, we are told we must be still, silent, and seated, with the soles of our feet together and our hands on our ankles in the primary position that begins all Graham classes before Martha herself enters the room. We do so at once.

A small old woman enters the studio. We are levitating with excitement.

Her ink black hair is fixed to the top of her head in a great ball pierced by ivory chopsticks. Black sunglasses completely hide her eyes from us, and we have only the severe set of her jaw and faintly bitter smile with which to read her face.

Her feet are shocking and bare. God only knows the abuse they have endured to comply with her demands. She walks upon these prehistoric utensils with some difficulty. In her black silk coat, with mandarin collar buttoned tightly at the throat, and black tights, she stands before us in tragic majesty and, with an incongruously sweet voice, utters the most powerful word I have ever heard. The word that begins every dancer's discipline. The single word that commands legions of acolytes and modern dance wannabes to begin to live and causes music to begin to play. She says “AND.” At

that moment, we are all transformed into her acrobats of God as we lean forward, finally expelling the breath we had held since the moment that she appeared, and perform the sixteen bounces with which every Graham class commences.

My birth was now complete, and I will be a dancer forever.

Her presence was fearful, as she walked amongst us, correcting us as one thing, not yet worthy of being individualized. She spoke in declamatory sentences, notable for their terseness and accuracy with more than a touch of cruelty, betraying her unwillingness to be there. Apparently, according to Martha, we barely even knew yet how to breathe, let alone dance. Woe be to anyone foolish enough to risk imperfection in her presence. And yet, she was astonishingly inspirational.

Looking back, knowing what I know today, I realize that she did not want to be there. She did not want to be anywhere except the one place where her soul could safely exist – on stage, dancing.

Several days later that is where I next saw her. Her company of unearthly beings performed three of her dances. In the first, *Acrobats of God*, she sat at the center of a circus coaxing her young lions to execute breath-taking maneuvers, occasionally walking a few painful steps, in her tiger-striped gown, to lift a dancers leg just a little bit higher, with great poignancy and comic precision.

In *Phaedra*, the second dance, once again she was poised center stage, this time on a divan, from which she reached longingly to the exotic sexy dancers, bidding them to enact her heroine's anguished fantasies and memories. She threw herself to her knees, executing tortured knee crawls expressing Phaedra's dilemma, but exhibiting her own struggle with her failing instrument, to the discomfort of many in the audience.

Finally, *Primitive Mysteries*, choreographed many years earlier, with Yuriko Kikuchi at the helm dancing Martha's role. And, once again, in this pure and perfect dance of exquisite simplicity and overwhelming beauty, the heroine sits center stage, barely moving but for assuming majestic sacred poses to inspire her minions.

But it is here that the heart **breaks**. Martha chose, at the height of her young physical genius "sitting still" as the most powerful action she could take, and now, decades later, "sitting still" was the only choice she had left.

There were many more encounters over the years with the great and strange Martha Graham, but it was not until many decades later, reading her autobiography "Blood Memory," where I discovered that she said her destiny was to face death twice. Her first death, she wrote was when finally she could dance no longer – for her, a far far worse death than the natural one that would follow some 30-odd years later.

I realized then, that as a fledgling dancer, I had borne witness to her catastrophic first death, ironically at the very moment of my second birth.

Martha symbolically died when she could no longer dance, because dancing itself was the very core of her creative genius. The real motivation for every amazing dance she invented was, above all else, to create an opportunity for herself to dance.

I understand that, and every dancer on stage tonight understands and embodies the gift she bequeathed – a unique and supremely fulfilling way to dance, and the privilege of doing it within Martha's great orchestrations of movement.

All of the best choreographers I have ever known have also been the best dancers that I have ever known.

Martha's good friend, the choreographer Agnes DeMille, requested later in life that her own tombstone should read "Here lies a dancer." Had Martha known that before her own final days she would surely have appreciated the epitaph.

On behalf of the Martha Graham Dance Company, thank you for being with us tonight.