



## Praise and provocation in the return of the Martha Graham Dance Company

JIM BURKE, SPECIAL TO MONTREAL GAZETTE – FEBRUARY 14, 2018

'New works bring fresh eyes to Martha Graham masterpieces' at Danse Danse while Les Grands welcomes Eifman's Requiem

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Choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui's Mosaic is a new work being presented within the Martha Graham Dance Company's Répertoire at Danse Danse in Montreal. Brigid Pierce Photography BRIGID PIERCE / MONWP

A lot has changed since the Martha Graham Dance Company last came to Montreal, almost 30 years ago.

The founder of America's oldest and perhaps most iconic dance troupe was still alive for that 1989 visit and — well into her 90s — still, astonishingly, choreographing for the troupe, which remains America's oldest and perhaps most iconic dance troupe.

Largely credited with creating modern dance (with a couple of respectful nods to the likes of Isadora Duncan and the Denishawn school), Graham was one of the first dancers to become a household name in America, thanks in no small part to the 1958 televising of *Appalachian Spring*, her game-changing collaboration with Aaron Copland. She received the Presidential Medal of Freedom with Distinction, America's highest civilian honour, and has been compared to Picasso in terms of cultural impact.

But the troupe, which performs Feb. 22-24 at Montreal's *Danse Danse*, is more than legacy, thanks largely to artistic director Janet Eilber, who joined the company in the early '70s and took over in 2005.

Under Eilber's leadership, the company has moved beyond being simply a repository of reverence for Graham's achievements, reinventing itself as a more forward-looking creative force that both honours Graham's legacy and builds on it with new works which may or may not be recognizably Graham-esque.

Speaking to the *Montreal Gazette* from a hotel near the Haque, where the company was just about to perform, Eilber explained the delicate balance.

"I think new works bring fresh eyes to Martha Graham masterpieces. And Graham classics bring historic perspective and context to new works so people don't think they just burst out of the head of Zeus but are a reaction to something that went before."

Neatly illustrating this approach is *Répertoire*, the show that MGDC is bringing to Montreal. It's a mix of Graham classics (*Chronicle* and *Ekstasis*), independently minded responses to a Graham classic (*Lamentation Variations*), and a new work, *Mosaic*, from choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, which might be said to be moving off in the opposite direction.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lynk28xXNSA>

Eilber describes how *Mosaic*, which references different Middle Eastern cultures to comment on diversity, has "a really different vocabulary from Martha's work. The dancers are amazingly fluid, as opposed to what you'll see in, say, *Chronicle*, which has this strong sense of graphic design and uses much more structured movement rather than the sliding and flowing movement in *Mosaic*."

(*Mosaic* will also serve as an appetizer for *Sutra*, Cherkaoui's spectacular 10-year-old signature work that brings together Buddhist monks and contemporary dancers. It's the final show of the *Danse Danse* season in May.)

Fans of a more recognizable Martha Graham approach are likely to be more taken with *Chronicle*, which was created in 1936 partly as a response to the rise of fascism.



The Martha Graham Dance Company's *Répertoire*, being presented at Montreal's *Danse Danse*, will include the founder's *Chronicle*, created in 1936 partly as a response to the rise of fascism. (Photo courtesy of Brigid Pierce)

"Martha created it in the same year she rejected the Nazi invitation to dance in Berlin at the Olympic Games," says Eilber. "Because it's an abstract work about people taking action, it speaks to a great variety of challenges. It has an all-woman cast, and in this day and age is even more resonant because of the international conversation about women taking control. But it speaks to people in any era, regardless of what struggles and challenges are going on."

There's political charge, too, in the company's ongoing conversation with Lamentation, the four-minute "personification of grief" that Graham first performed in 1930. Its image of a dancer straining within encasing material is archetypal Martha Graham — it was used to start off the [animation sequence](#) Google created to celebrate what would have been her 117th birthday. The series of Lamentation Variations, four-minute responses to the piece by contemporary choreographers, was begun in 2007 to mark that year's anniversary of 9/11.

"It was so successful that we immediately started programming it around the world. We're now up to 14 variations," says Eilber.

The Variations being performed at Place des Arts will reference 9/11, the AIDS crisis and the power of women.

Finally, there's Ekstasis, Graham's "lost" 1933 solo piece that, daringly for those times, made much use of a thrusting pelvis to describe "cycles of distortion." It's been reimagined by Virgine Mécène, former principal dancer of the company.

#### AT A GLANCE

*Répertoire by the Martha Graham Dance Company plays from Thursday, Feb. 22 to Saturday, Feb. 24 at 8 p.m. at Théâtre Maisonneuve of Place des Arts. Tickets cost \$43.98 to \$74.80. Call 514-842-2112 or visit [placedesarts.com](http://placedesarts.com).*