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Bringing Back the Spirit of Early Martha Graham, Stark and Pure

Marina Harss, February 16, 2017



Martha Graham Dance performing "Primitive Mysteries" in 1935. Credit Barbara and Willard Morgan photographs and papers, Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, U.C.L.A.

"They haven't met Martha, and they don't know the history of her ballets," Denise Vale, the senior artistic associate and rehearsal director at the Martha Graham Dance Company said of the troupe's current generation of dancers. "They're not immersed in Graham like we were. We were closed in our little house of Martha." Ms. Vale spoke between rehearsals of "Primitive Mysteries" (1931), an early Graham work the company is reviving after 12 years as part of its season at the Joyce. None of the dancers have performed it before.

It is Ms. Vale's job to bring back not only the steps but also the spirit of the work. In some ways, it is an anomaly in the company's current repertory, which infrequently dips back to its earliest years, before Graham had accepted any men into the company. (That wouldn't happen until 1938.) Unlike her later, narrative works, it mostly eschews overt drama. "It's so economical and spare and slow," the company's artistic director, Janet Eilber, said recently at its studios at the Westbeth complex in the West Village. "It has the least dancing of any Graham work."

There's no set or story to rely on; the palette is restricted. "[Primitive Mysteries](#)" predates Graham's interest in Jung, in Greek myth, in the psychodrama of sex and the sensual shapes of Isamu Noguchi. It is Graham at her most stark and pure.

Martha the Modernist

At regular intervals, rows of women advance deliberately across the floor in clean, spare lines, accompanied only by the sound of their bare feet striking the ground. They are erect and taut, like figures in an ancient frieze. It is a striking example of Graham's Modernism, as bold and unforgiving as a Picasso's "Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)."

The women in "Primitive Mysteries" gather themselves into walls, wedges and tight clusters. Often, they move as one, merging into a larger organism or system. In "Martha," her book on Graham, the choreographer and dancer Agnes de Mille described them as a "collective mind, insectlike." They raise their elbows into a tight angle, a pose that makes them look like desperate supplicants.

In rehearsal, Ms. Vale stressed this aspect, saying, "There will be a day when you don't know the difference between you and the girl next to you." The effort is visibly exhausting for the dancers, who pour sweat.



PeiJu Chien-Pott in rehearsal for the Martha Graham Dance Company's revival of Graham's "Primitive Mysteries" (1931). Credit: Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Vision of the Virgin

At the center of this movable structure walks a figure in white. This was Graham's role. As de Mille described it, the work was "a study of the Virgin as a young, primitive girl, and the vision of her transfiguration through death and agony." The titles of its three sections, "Hymn to the Virgin," "Crucifixus" and "Hosannah," make clear Graham's intentions: a modern passion play.

PeiJu Chien-Pott, the Taiwan-born dancer who is the figure in white at the Joyce, is no stranger to taking roles associated with Graham. Since joining the company in 2011, she has danced the intrepid Ariadne in "Errand Into the Maze" and the murderous Medea in "Cave of the Heart." But here her movements and acting are reduced to a minimum. Instead of appearing larger than life, she must achieve a quiet, delicate purity. "I'm like a flower," Ms. Chien-Pott said, "a cherry blossom."

The Challenge of Simplicity

The work's power lies in the simplicity of its construction. The basic building block of movement is a walking step, simultaneously heavy and upward-reaching, the body as taut as a bowstring.

In the first section, the youthful figure in white skitters from one group to the next, as if seeking a blessing. In the second, she shields her eyes from a vision — the Crucifixion — as phalanxes of women fold their arms into a painful wedge, elbows pointing forward like weapons. Graham imagined the women as kachina dolls, sacred wooden figures carved by the Hopi.

The original cast members rehearsed the walk for months, until their movements became automatic, as if springing from a single brain. The music, a work for flute, oboe and piano by Louis Horst, Graham's collaborator, came later. (Both Horst and Graham said they were inspired by the religious practices and landscapes of the American Southwest, which they had visited together.) But Graham cannily kept long passages of silence, the better to build tension.

The climax may be slow in coming, but once it arrives, it erupts with monumental force. The acolytes encircle the woman in white with great loping leaps, arms stretched painfully behind their backs. They look almost like pack of wild animals. ("We call them the bison jumps," Ms. Eilber said.) The crescendoing pitch of this passage is difficult to maintain, which is why Jean Colonomos, a former company member, said that Graham called "Primitive Mysteries" her cruelest work. Cruel but potent. At its premiere, at the Craig Theater on West 54th Street, it received 33 curtain calls, de Mille reports.

Adjusting to the Present

The company now does new dances by contemporary choreographers alongside those by Graham, an inevitable accommodation to the passage of time. (This season includes four new or recent creations.) But reviving pivotal Graham works like this one is also important for maintaining a sense of identity and purpose. It requires a bit of digging on the dancers' part. They have been encouraged to watch archival video, look at old photographs and read the accounts of people who took part in its creation, as well as later revivals.

The dancers are surprised by how difficult it is to achieve the desired effect; Ms. Chien-Pott considers this her hardest role. There's very little movement or outward display to hide behind. "You have to be very quiet from the beginning," she explained. Still and quiet, but not vacant. "I'm the eye of the storm. I feel the tornado all around me."