

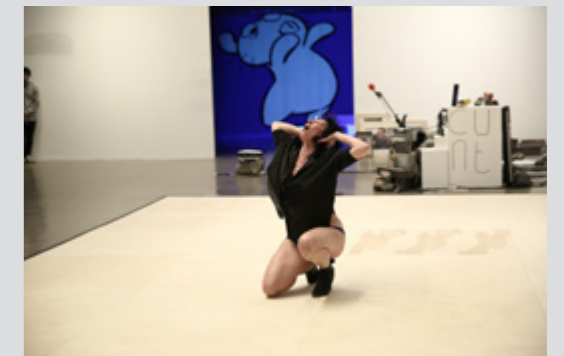
MARTHA! MARTHA! MARTHA!



By Gia Kourlas

Martha Graham was a radical. In the 1920s and '30s, she devoted herself to experimentation in order to create her own angular, raw, and ultimately groundbreaking modern-dance technique. But since then, choreographers have typically regarded Graham with more respect than reverence. That seems to be changing, as dancemakers, working tirelessly in an impoverished field, are driven to locate the essence of their own movement, their own vision. These five choreographers carry on Graham's legacy in personal ways. They're not polite or yielding, they aren't afraid of looking ugly.

That sentiment brings to mind Graham's story of a weeping woman who approached her after watching a performance of *Lamentation* (1930), a haunting expression of mourning in which the dancer writhes and twists in anguish. The woman's child had been struck and killed by a truck months before, she told Graham. Until then, she hadn't been able to cry; *Lamentation* gave her the ability to grieve. Graham recalled the experience "as a deep story in my life that made me realize that there is always one person to whom you speak in the audience. One."



SARAH MICHELSON "Being able to compose dances with beautiful dancers is not doing that much for me," says Sarah Michelson, the British choreographer who has made an indelible, influential mark on New York and beyond. "I feel like everyone can learn to do it."

For the past few years, she has been exploring choreographic practices of seminal dance artists—especially Merce Cunningham. "Not to laud the luminaries, because I don't, but the commitment to learning a technique and then producing work from this other whole language that you've made is a rigorous step that I find missing," she says.

Another one of those luminaries is Graham. Recently, Michelson returned to the stage to present works in which her body is somehow omnipotent as the very flesh of the piece. (She debuted *May 2018* at Performance Space New York and *October 2018* at the Walker Art Center, in Minneapolis.) Her frustration with the dance community's output of disposable works, however amenable they are at first view, has led her to create her own soulful expressions of grief in which she pushes her body to extremes.

Exacting contractions, with the body held rigidly in fourth position—a common sight in her earlier works—have shifted into shapes even more urgent and acute, with a primal, unending quality to them. She shouts; she's crass; she's funny. It's as if, during each performance, Michelson expels layers of artifice, layers of herself. She wants to beat the affability of dance; she knows that robs it of its power.

Throughout her career, Michelson has related deeply to the lineage of Cunningham, who danced with Graham before forming his own company in 1953. "I think that Graham was too feminine for me," she says. "And Martha Graham is theater in a way that Cunningham really is not."

Yet as her work becomes increasingly emotional and strident, it seems to have more in common with Graham's unbridled ferocity than Cunningham's austere formalism. Her recent pieces, rooted in the idea of female authorship, are the *Lamentation* of our times. Michelson is developing a technique, and, in doing so, she is taking the reverse path of Graham: Success came first, and now she is going back to basics, armed with all she has learned. "I'm not improvising," she says. "I'm basically doing a very perverted version of Cunningham. It's unrecognizable as Cunningham, but it's a female body."

Opposite page: Graham performs *Salem Shore* (1943). This page: Top: Martha Graham expresses raw emotion in *Lamentation* in 1935. Bottom: Sarah Michelson pushes her body to extremes in a performance of *October 2018* at the Walker Art Center.



NETTA YERUSHALMY To be inspired by the past one must also question it. In her *Paramodernities* project, Netta Yerushalmy has masterminded a series of dance experiments in which she deconstructs signature works in the modern canon, including Alvin Ailey's *Revelations* (1960) and Graham's *Night Journey* (1947). The performances feature not simply movement, but contributions by scholars and writers who explore the dances within the larger lens of modernism.

Yerushalmy, who studied various forms of the Graham technique in Israel and New York, attended the company's performances periodically, but never considered the choreographer a source of inspiration. "But through the new project and reading about her," she says, "I fell more and more in love with her unbelievable sense of independence and power at that time, as just a woman doing her thing. Sometimes I think, 'How did she make up those movements?'"

In the case of *Night Journey*, Yerushalmy was drawn to its chorus of six women and the expression they achieved in executing angular movement as one. Graham was inspired by Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, specifically, "the action [that] takes place in Jocasta's heart at the instant when she recognizes the ultimate terms of her destiny." Yerushalmy's *Paramodernities* includes text by Carol Ockman, an essay titled "Female Trauma, Interdiction, and Agency in 'The House of Pelvic Truth.'"

For her experiment, Yerushalmy learned all of the movement from each of the four roles of *Night Journey*—Jocasta, Oedipus, the Blind Seer, and the Chorus—and created a chronology of that choreography. It was an undertaking, but this kind of mimicry allowed her to see the dance from all angles.

"I would do a move from Graham, a move from the Blind Seer, and a move from the Chorus, and a move from Oedipus, and then back to Graham," Yerushalmy says. "My idea was that she is dealing with narrative, and narrative is something that moves in time. So I would continue that by progressing her sequencing forward, from the first move to the last move. I would weave the parts together."

Yerushalmy's version is nothing like the original *Night Journey*, yet what compelled her to work with the Graham material in the first place remains: "The genius of the articulations of the body, her steadfastness, what she wanted to do, how she wanted to do it, how she made other people do it—that charisma, that boldness. That fucking bourrée-ing on her knees until she was 69? I feel an affinity to that kind of gung-ho-ness."

Left: The Martha Graham Dance Company in *Night Journey*. Right: Netta Yerushalmy (top) and dancer Taryn Griggs (right) illustrate a reading by Carol Ockman (seated) in *Paramodernities II*.



JACK FERVER For Jack Ferver, a writer, choreographer, actor, and director, Graham checks all of his boxes—from her movement to her sense of theater. As a teen, he studied the Graham technique with Lisa Thurrell in Madison, Wisconsin. When he was cast as the third witch in a production of *Macbeth*, Thurrell had Ferver read his lines while executing parts of Graham's floor technique. "I didn't even know about this idea of ritual, but I could feel it with the technique and pairing it to lines," he says. "I mean, I'm 13, so this is really naive, but the sense of possession felt very clear to me."

His discovery of Graham's contraction and release was revelatory. As a young person growing up in rural Wisconsin, the extreme bullying he experienced was traumatic. Graham's movement vocabulary gave Ferver, as he puts it, "access to a seat of power." It was his first experience of owning his body and having it be powerful, "not a doll that could be thrown around the room and punched."

Graham's movement originates in the pelvis, which, for Ferver, is singular. "I think there is a handshake between women and queer men around their pelvis not being right," he says. "Kids would say to me, 'You dirty faggot, you're going to die of AIDS,' or, 'I'm going to kill you, faggot.' Having all of that around me and having a technique be right was incredible. It saved my life."

Although the Graham influence is present in his work, Ferver generally doesn't make dances that directly reference hers. An exception was the solo he choreographed for Lloyd Knight as part of his evening-length work *Everything Is Imaginable* (2018). In it, Knight, a member of the Martha Graham Company, embodied not only her technique but the artist herself. "Lloyd has that ability to be the instrument of tragedy," Ferver says. "That piece certainly has its cues from different works by Graham, but also it really is more of that sense that every moment counts."

How did Graham originally discover the power of contraction and release? Ferver imagines she was sitting on a wooden floor somewhere in the West Village and crying. "When I started making my work, I felt like I was in a pitch-black room trying to do a very intricate needlepoint," he says. "That seeking, despite everything being against you. There's no money. There isn't a paradigm for what you're looking to make. And all of those things gave me courage."

Left: Graham performs *Appalachian Spring* in 1945. Right: Lloyd Knight, a member of the Martha Graham Company, embodies the artist herself in the Jack Ferver—choreographed *Everything Is Imaginable* (2018).



TRAJAL HARRELL In his long-running series related to Judson Church, postmodern dance, and voguing, Trajal Harrell asked, "What would have happened in 1963 if someone from the voguing ballroom scene in Harlem had come downtown to perform alongside the early postmoderns at Judson Church?"

His question—a proposition born from his expansive imagination—merges those traditions, one informed by glamour, the other by pedestrian movement, in order to examine their parallels. He also reexamines the legacy of Graham and her dances about Greek tragedies in relation to early postmodernism. In *Judson Church Is Ringing in Harlem*, he referred to *El Penitente*, a 1940 work by Graham that looked at the Penitente traditions of the American Southwest. He transferred its ritual forms to the Southern Baptist church, debuting the performance at St. Mark's Church in New York. In the dance, one of his main actions is to weep. After years of the art being dominated by conceptual dance, Harrell put emotion back onstage.

"When I was in this period of conceptual dance, I didn't buy into it fully," he admits. "I think I always had one eye closed."

Harrell spends much of his time working in Europe, where Graham is not as appreciated as Cunningham; in experimental circles there, the fashion has long been abstraction over narrative. But Harrell brought emotionalism back to dance by giving it a new frame. In trying to find a way into emotion, he turned, partly, to Graham. "I think people were ready for it," he says, "because there had been this dry spell."

Getting there took time. "I always felt that was an important part of what I wanted to bring to my work somehow, but I didn't know how," Harrell says. "I knew at some point I wanted to play on that whole anti-Graham, anti-emotion, anti-Greek myth thing. I always felt connected to her work, especially in terms of emotion."

And he has continued into the present. In his recent *Juliet and Romeo*, which takes place after Romeo and Juliet die, he plays the Nurse. "The whole piece is seen through the Nurse's eyes," he says. "I think it's a very silly play actually. When they figure out that Juliet and Romeo have killed themselves, after, like, two pages, everyone is friends again. So I decided to extend this period to after the death and into the Nurse through her guilt, through her feelings."

Harrell began working with tears in *Antigone Jr.*, part of the *Judson* series. In *Juliet and Romeo*, he weeps more than he ever has onstage. "I had said at the beginning that I was not going to cry onstage, and then I decided I was going to cry the whole piece," he says. "I was doing it last night, and it's a big thing. Graham really gave me the courage"—there's that word again—"to do that. And her formidability in terms of just making her own style."

Left: Debuted in 1940, *El Penitente* allowed Graham to explore the religious traditions of penance in the American Southwest. Right: Trajal Harrell in a scene from his *Judson Church* series, which looked at ritual forms in the Southern Baptist church.



MINA NISHIMURA While there is no direct relationship between Mina Nishimura and Graham, there is an elusive link: Both illuminate internal emotional experiences using rigorous movement forms. Specializing in *butoh*, which developed after World War II in Japan, Nishimura is something of a shape-shifter in her finely wrought performances. Slim as a feather with a surprising sense of groundedness, her dancing takes the shape—not in any intelligible way, but palpable all the same—of something found in nature.

"I've noticed that Martha was interested in a very grounded body, like a kind of sinking body," she says. "I'm also interested in a sinking body, a body that can keep sinking into the floor. But the difference is that I'm also interested in weightlessness: A floaty, ghostly, empty body that is free from I-ness—like a subject—and free from purpose. It's a kind of wandering body."

What they do share is an ability to explore the human condition using the body as a vessel through which sensations pass, and the need to push against established notions of beauty. For Nishimura, Graham's "effort to almost de-territorialize what the Western ballet had established was very radical and extreme. I am a big fan of stripping down unnecessary things."

Unlike Graham, who codified her movement into a technique, Nishimura, despite her interest in rigorous forms, prefers not to lock them down. "Rather than fixing movements, I want to compose an internal landscape first and see what kinds of form emerge out of it," she says. "It's an inside-out process."

The afterimage of a Graham dance leaves behind traces of movement, like etchings. Nishimura is more interested in letting these shapes disappear as something more translucent. But if the effect and approach is different, the intensity is similar—it's not a projection of a feeling, but the real thing. Graham's technique led her there; in Nishimura's case, she turns to different movement practices. One involves an empty body: How can you liberate yourself from your body? Or how can you liberate your face from your feeling? "People try to read what you're feeling from your face," she says, "so my practices are often engaging in that."

The breath is integral to Nishimura, who sees it as an important connector of internal and external space, and it is integral to Graham's works, too. But while she studied the Cunningham technique, she never tried Graham. "I don't think Martha and Merce are standing at complete opposite sides, but I feel like I'm somewhere in between them," she says, with a laugh. "And that's a strange feeling."

Left: Seen here in *Strike* (1928), Graham used her body to ground her movements. Right: Mina Nishimura mimics Graham's "sinking body" in her performance of *I'm either a Psychopath in a Sheep Clothing, an Intern Priest At The St. Marks Temple, a Temporary Assistant to the Visual Artist, or You*.