

## Dance Icon Martha Graham's Legacy Comes to Life in Work Both Old and New

by Elizabeth Zimmer

<https://www.villagevoice.com/2017/02/22/dance-icon-martha-grahams-legacy-comes-to-life-in-work-both-old-and-new/>



PeiJu Chien-Pott, center, assumes Graham's role Photo by Brigid Pierce

Sustaining a dance troupe after its founder's death requires enormous feats of imagination. The Martha Graham Dance Company, just over ninety years old and since 2005 in the custody of former principal dancer Janet Eilber, survives by adopting trendy tools of audience engagement: projecting video before the show starts, addressing ticket holders in the theater, and, primarily, commissioning new work from younger artists. This season's repertory, flying the rubric "Sacred/Profane," includes pieces by local maverick Annie-B Parson, Belgian Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, Swedish choreographer Pontus Lidberg, and Spaniard Nacho Duato, as well as five dances by Graham herself that span the twentieth century, and for which she often designed the costumes as well as the movement.

Graham, who died in 1991, found inspiration everywhere, and frequently from the Native American rituals of America's Southwest. This season includes two early works drawing on these practices and their syncretic fusion with Christian belief.

The purest is 1931's *Primitive Mysteries*, a spare, riveting pageant in which very little happens. A chorus of a dozen women in long blue dresses flanks a young virgin (Graham's role originally, now danced by PeiJu Chien-Pott) in a translucent white gown. They walk slowly in and out, backward and forward, sending one extended, flexed foot in front of the other. Occasionally they circle or dip into deep pliés, fusing delicacy with startling strength. If Steve Jobs had made contemporary dance, perhaps it would have looked like this.

Graham's 1946 *Dark Meadow* has been transformed into *Dark Meadow Suite*, a highlight reel. To a recorded score by Carlos Chávez, six women in long, straight slit skirts and bra tops take the stage in the huge, loping movements central to the enduring Graham technique. They're joined by four men in tiny suspended briefs, moving in the heroic mode originated by Graham's then-lover Erick Hawkins. Man as warrior, woman as pliant partner: This scenario underlies much of Graham's mid-century choreography.

The new works by invited guests stand diametrically opposed to one another, Cherkaoui's *Mosaic* a swirling invocation of Middle Eastern motifs while Parson's "reimagining" of Graham's 1941 *Punch and the Judy* keeps only the original's emotional freight, replacing just about everything else. *I used to love you* messes with the story of a mom at odds with her mate; he has a roving eye, flirting with everyone onstage except her. Three maidens wearing fabulous costumes (by Oana Botez) and headlamps ride swivel chairs and coo into microphones as Tei Blow's raucous soundscape alternates between silence and wild percussion. A homosexual tryst on a folding cot subs in for 1941's allusions to Graham's husband's infidelity. Parson is one of my favorite contemporary artists, but this is several headstands short of a flash act.

*Mosaic*, on the other hand, takes a deep dive into Martha's instincts for raiding diverse cultures, its four men and five women filling the stage with crowds, solos, somersaults, and sensuous, athletic coupling drawn from Cherkaoui's Middle Eastern aesthetic. Nick Hung's dim lighting mobilizes smoke, banks of LED bulbs, and some subtle strobes to create transcendent, mysterious effects; Felix Burton's score mixes music from Arabic and Sephardic sources with chanting and percussion. More texture than incident, it's still compelling.

Two programs conclude with the 1990 *Maple Leaf Rag*, Graham's last work. A vaudevillian romp to Scott Joplin's music, costumed by Calvin Klein, performed by the full company plus a couple of apprentices, it sends up the clichés of Graham repertory and technique, modernism descending into mannerism but a great lark for all that. A little cakewalk, a little tango, a lot of flirty partnering and acrobatics and posturing, it shows us a great artist, in the twilight of a century-spanning career, parodying herself.