

The New York Times

Dance

The Ambiguous Layers of Martha Graham's 'El Penitente.'



A 1940 photograph of Martha Graham, Erick Hawkins and Merce Cunningham, dressed for "El Penitente." Credit: Via Martha Graham Dance Company

By Alastair Macaulay
March 26, 2019

When the choreographer Martha Graham added men to her company, it struck many as a contradiction in terms. Her all-female troupe, founded in 1926, had powerfully demonstrated women's independence. The only men with whom Graham regularly

collaborated were designers and composers: above all, the composer Louis Horst and the sculptor-designer Isamu Noguchi.

She introduced a male dancer, Erick Hawkins, to this troupe in 1937, causing dismay among several of her dancers, colleagues and devotees. But Graham was not to be stopped. Further complications soon arose: Hawkins, 15 years her junior, became her partner, her lover and, eventually, her husband. How is it for a woman with a younger man? What challenges are involved in marriage? How is it for an original female artist in a male-dominated society? These were now among her themes.

She added a second man to the company in 1939, Merce Cunningham. A series of her most remarkable works followed — notably “Deaths and Entrances” (1943), “Appalachian Spring” (1944) and “Cave of the Heart” (1946) — several with the Graham-Hawkins relationship at their center.



Graham, here in a 1940 photo for “El Penitente”; her role as Mary combined the Virgin Mother, the Magdalene and the Mater Dolorosa who laments her dead son. Credit: Barbara Morgan

In just one exceptional work, “El Penitente” (1940), she worked with all four: Horst, Noguchi, Hawkins, Cunningham. “Penitente,” a 20-minute masterpiece of neo-primitivist dance drama at its most ambiguously layered, returns to the Martha Graham Dance Company’s repertory this year. Newly coached by Marni Thomas Wood (who joined the

Graham troupe in 1958), it will be part of the company's season at the Joyce Theater (April 2-April 14). Horst composed its sparse, often percussive, score, his last for Graham. Noguchi, without any of the sculptural décor that he often used to define stage space, designed the props.

The three dancers are touring players, arriving with a cart to enact scenes from the Bible; those scenes are filtered through Spanish colonial traditions of the American Southwest, in which believers expiate sins by mortifying the flesh. You think you know how the Bible's central stories go? Think again.

Hawkins danced the challenging title role, the penitent who flagellates himself to attain fuller belief and enlightenment. (Mikhail Baryshnikov sometimes performed this part in the late 1980s and early '90s.) Graham's role as Mary combined the Virgin Mother, the Magdalene and the Mater Dolorosa who laments her dead son. In a dance with an apple, she also becomes Eve, tempting Adam with the fruit of the tree. Cunningham, his face mainly covered, played Christ, an often stiff figure whose gestures indicate blessing or rebuke; He was, Ms. Wood said in an email, "The avenging Angel, the forgiving Angel, the supporting Angel. (But we never called him God.)" There's much to unpack here; but "Penitente" moves fast.

"It embodies a kind of innocence not often explored in the Graham rep," Ms. Wood said of "El Penitente." That innocence lies in its seemingly naïve, antiheroic simplicity of style. Ms. Wood learned it in 1964 from Hawkins and from the Graham veteran Pearl Lang, and then received further direction from Graham herself. In January she taught it to the current company. "It requires investing a degree of naturalness that alternates with the dramatic (which can get 'over done' if you don't watch out)," she said.



From left, Ben Schultz, Anne O'Donnell and Lloyd Knight in "El Penitente," which the Martha Graham Dance Company will perform at the Joyce. Credit: Melissa Sherwood

How do other Graham-Hawkins roles compare to those in “Penitente”? “In most other dances, their relationship represents a clearly dramatic build that brings a message explored and developed throughout the entire work,” Ms. Wood said. “But ‘Penitente’ creates the spark of quickly dared transitions in and out of a different situation every few minutes. Martha did talk about telling the various stories as if you were peeling them off a chapel wall and your audience needed to know the difference between sinners and saints. She and Erick clearly enjoyed going back and forth between both those extremes.”

It’s a tough piece, expressively knotty, marked by the intense and rapid repetition of certain steps (explosive small, rapid jumps in particular, taking off from both feet and landing on one). And its Horst score heightens the tough atmosphere.

Janet Eilber, artistic director of the Graham company since 2005, told me in January that Horst was opposed to strings in modern-dance music. In a recent email, she elaborated: Horst “told Martha that she should develop her ideas for the dance first, and the music should be added later,” as opposed to what choreographers like Isadora Duncan and St. Denis were doing by choosing the score first and drawing inspiration from it. “As part of this idea,” Ms. Eilber wrote, “he felt that strings were too emotionally instructive — telling the audience what to feel.”

Yet within a few years Graham would be commissioning scores with plentiful strings: “Appalachian Spring” (1944) is the most celebrated. The advent of Hawkins changed many aspects of Martha Graham dance theater: even its very sound.