

DANCE

Lucinda Childs Gets Off the Floor in Piece for the Graham Company

By **GIA KOURLAS** APRIL 7, 2018

https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/07/arts/dance/lucinda-childs-martha-graham-company-histoire.html?rref=collection%2Fsectioncollection%2Farts&action=click&contentCollection=arts®ion=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=1&pgtype=sectionfront



On April 11, Lucinda Childs will unveil “Histoire,” a revision and expansion of a dance she choreographed for Martha Graham’s company almost 20 years ago. *George Etheredge for The New York Times*

One summer during the early 1960s, [Lucinda Childs](#) signed up for a master class with Martha Graham at Connecticut College. Graham’s expressive modern dance wasn’t to Ms. Childs’s taste — she was really there to study with the avant-garde choreographer Merce Cunningham — but what dancer would turn down such an experience?

“We never got off the floor, and I thought I would die,” Ms. Childs, now a pre-eminent dancer and choreographer herself, said of the 90-minute class. “I couldn’t wait to get back to Cunningham.”

In the Graham technique, class begins with a series of coordinated, seated floor exercises. It's a progression: Eventually, dancers rise to their feet and execute dynamic, exuberant movement phrases across the studio. On that day, Graham, cruising among the students, would offer only a "No" or an "Again." But, despite being stuck on the floor, Ms. Childs didn't regret a minute.

"She came in with huge sunglasses and this kimono," she said of Graham, with fond laughter. "It was incredible to be in the same room with this woman."

[Graham, who died in 1991](#), was a force. And so is Ms. Childs — albeit in an understated, Jil Sander-wearing kind of way. This season, she will unveil a new work for the Martha Graham Dance Company as part of its run at City Center, beginning on April 11.



Ms. Childs overseeing a rehearsal for "Histoire," which has both her mathematical precision and Graham's sense of story. *George Etheredge for The New York Times*

Revered for her minimalist dances, Ms. Childs, now 77, is a postmodern choreographer who got her start as part of the experimental collective Judson Dance Theater. Throughout her vibrant career, she has forged collaborations with the director Robert Wilson and the composer Philip Glass, as well as created ballets for numerous European companies. [Her elegant dances, with their sleekly patterned steps](#) — repeated and resequenced like mathematical equations — focus on structure and form to create sophisticated mosaics of movement.

The drama of Graham, in other words, was never Ms. Childs's thing. But in 1999, she was invited to create a piece for the Graham company, and the result was "[Histoire](#)," a lively duet set to music by Krzysztof Knittel.

When Janet Eilber, the company's artistic director, discovered it in the company's archives, she had an idea: Would Ms. Childs want to extend it, or create a companion piece?

"She is one of the people who truly went in the other direction of Martha Graham, and part of what we do now is inviting vastly different perspectives on our legacy," Ms. Eilber said. "We want their own separate, unique voices. We want the contrast. It brings context to the Graham classics."

"Histoire," which begins with the original duet, now has eight dancers. In its second act, set to music by Astor Piazzolla, the atmosphere has shifted; the first couple return in the middle, but they aren't what they once were. Their relationship is frayed, and the tone shifts from light to dark.

"There's a kind of disharmony, and it unravels — whatever they had before is no longer there," Ms. Childs said. "And I want that very clear statement: We're in a different time. They're bouncing off each other in a way that is in complete opposition to how it was before. Which happens. It's like a breakup."

Virginie Mécène, who performed "Histoire" as a member of the company in 1999 and is now the director of Graham 2, its pre-professional troupe, taught the duet to two pairs of dancers before Ms. Childs arrived to start work on the second half. Ms. Mécène loved dancing it. "Before I did Graham, I was a jazz dancer, and to me all those steps are a little jazzy," she said. "It is a different way of moving, especially for a Graham dancer."

She noticed that the current dancers were pushing too hard. "I had to tell them, 'Relax here' and 'Take your time,' " she said. "They had to calm down and breathe."



Ari Mayzick and Laurel Dalley-Smith in the first duet of "Histoire," which has evolved into a group dance. George Etheredge for The New York Times

[Laurel Dalley-Smith](#), who performs opposite Ari Mayzick in the first duet, said that Ms. Childs was extremely clear about her choreographic pathways. "It's about being in space and relating to each other, to directions," Ms. Dalley-Smith said. "But I feel this is different from her work. It is more emotional. It's not just form. It is about personal relationships. And even though there's a story, it's not Greek mythology."

Graham often used mythology as inspiration for dances, including for "Night Journey" and "Clytemnestra." In "Histoire," the performers are presented as ordinary people, which was very much a tenet of Judson, known for its celebration of the pedestrian body. Of course, Ms. Childs's choreography is complicated all the same.

"You have these steps that you do on a regular basis as a dancer," the Graham dancer Lloyd Knight said, "but I find that in her work, she might take 15 steps and then rearrange them five times."

In the coming months, more of Ms. Childs's intricate choreography will be on display. This summer, the Mostly Mozart Festival will feature the revival of "[Available Light](#)," her 1983 collaboration with the composer John Adams and the architect Frank Gehry, which hasn't been seen in New York in 33 years. In the fall, the Museum of Modern Art will present "Judson Dance Theater: The Work Is Never Done," an exhibition that will include performances of Ms. Childs's works from the 1960s and '70s.

She has also started working with the ballet dancer Wendy Whelan on a solo project featuring the music of David Lang with the cellist Maya Beiser. "I'm very happy about it," Ms. Childs said. "She looks wonderful, and we've done about nine minutes so far. She's amazing."

For Graham dancers like Ms. Dalley-Smith, so is Ms. Childs. Ms. Dalley-Smith said that the experience of working on "Histoire" had been freeing. "What I love about it is that there's not a huge story, but there is a story," she said. "It's not just movement for movement's sake, and it's not just about how far can I push my body because I'm an athlete. No. It's form. It's line. It's understanding partnering, understanding what you want to portray."

But there is also something else: being in the room with Ms. Childs.

"To work with someone that has such understanding of her art?" Ms. Dalley-Smith said. "It's not even about being well respected. This woman did it: Lucinda was bold enough to develop her own form."