

FINANCIAL TIMES

Martha Graham Dance Company, Palais Garnier, Paris – elemental force

Excellent casts found the emotional truth in the choreographer's grand, stylised works

Laura Cappelle – September 4, 2018

<https://www.ft.com/content/654899f2-af9f-11e8-87e0-d84e0d934341>



Martha Graham Dance Company performing in Paris © Benoîte Fanton

There is a special poignancy in seeing the Martha Graham Dance Company onstage a week after [Paul Taylor's](#) death. The modern dance giant performed with Graham in the 1950s and early 1960s; after her death, in 1991, a protracted battle over the ownership of her works inspired Taylor to make plans to protect his own legacy, which will now be tested.

The dance world would be a poorer place without Graham's company, currently in Paris for a rare visit. In both 1946's *Cave of the Heart* and 1984's *The Rite of Spring*, excellent casts brought out the elemental force of the choreographer's voice. While many of Graham's works are narrative, they are not naturalistic: finding emotional truth in their grand, stylised manner can be a challenge, one that Xin Ying (as the Greek sorceress Medea) and Leslie Andrea Williams (the Chorus) rose to powerfully in *Cave of the Heart*.

Rite came much later, shortly before Graham's 90th birthday, but it connects the dots of modern dance history in compelling ways. Graham had performed the role of the Chosen One in 1930, in a revival by Léonide Massine, and her version — with

its expressionistic poses and staggered jumps — is choreographically more attuned to what we know of Nijinsky's original than most existing *Rites*. Yet it's also entirely Graham's, highlighting the personal plight of the woman selected for sacrifice.

The evening also brought a reinvention of a lost Graham dance from 1933, *Ekstasis*. Former principal Virginie Mécène used photographs and period notes to revive it, filling in the blanks herself. It's not an unproblematic exercise, but there is value in what Mécène unearthed.

Graham characterised this rippling, sensual solo as focusing on the relationship between hip and shoulder. Paris Opera Ballet director Aurélie Dupont, who programmed the tour, returned to the stage to perform it with exquisite self-possession — a reminder that she was less controversial a dancer than a manager, two years into a rocky tenure.

The Martha Graham Dance Company also added to its *Lamentation Variations*, a series of short works inspired by Graham's *Lamentation* solo. There have been 15 since 2007, including a sculptural quartet by Bulareyaung Pagarlava that was the best of the three presented at the Palais Garnier; the other two were an insubstantial piece by Larry Keigwin, and the evening's sole premiere, by Paris Opera Ballet's Nicolas Paul. His three dancers moved between light and shadow with precision and Graham-esque contractions, but the choreography was somewhat busy for its John Dowland score, especially next to Graham's clarity. The matriarch of American modern dance could still teach today's dance-makers a trick or two.