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Martha Graham Dance Company Brings A Historic Dance Piece Into A Contemporary Lens With “Steps In The Street”



Risa Sarachan Contributor 

Arts

I cover the arts, from theater and dance to film and design.



Photo of Leslie Andrea Williams, Natasha Diamond-Walker, Alyssa Cebulski, and Anne Souder in Martha Graham's *Steps in the Street* by Melissa Sherwood. MELISSA SHERWOOD (MARTHA GRAHAM CENTER)

“The geometry of the work is so powerful and evocative, that it’s traveled well through time and

speaks to people of any era who are going through a trauma of any kind.”

The world of Contemporary Dance may seem inaccessible to the modern theatre-goer. [Janet Eilber](#), Artistic Director of the historic [Martha Graham Dance Company](#), wants to change that.

The great legacy of the Martha Graham Dance Company dates back to 1926, when Graham founded both her dance company and the Martha Graham School, the oldest professional school of dance in the United States. Graham, a prolific modern dancer and choreographer herself, was a major influence on American dance. Her innovative technique is still taught worldwide, and she is considered one of the most revolutionary choreographers in American history.

Her 1936 work, *Steps in the Street*, once considered lost, was rediscovered in 1989, captured in a black-and-white silent film by Julien Bryan. Through this discovery, Graham and famed artist [Yuriko](#) were able to bring the work back to the stage. Described by the Martha Graham Company as a “[stark, powerful dance for ten women](#),” and “a prime example of Graham’s radical modernism,” *Steps in the Street* will be performed, for two nights: September 24-25. The event will take place at [The Martha Graham Studio Theatre](#) in New York City as part of their 20 Studio Series. During the performance, artist [SoHyun Bae](#), who has been drawing the company during rehearsals for the past two years, will be creating spontaneous charcoal sketches of the dancers. Audiences will experience her work being created and projected for viewing in real-time, and excerpts of the early black-and-white film footage will also be shown. In this intimate and interactive evening, audience members will enjoy an introduction to the work, wine will be served, and there will be Q&A after the piece with Eilber and the performers.

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I spoke with Eilber about the series. We also discussed how *Steps on the Street* might resonate with a 2019 audience and what’s next for the Martha Graham Company.

'Steps in the Street' 19...



Risa Sarachan: How was the original piece lost and what was the nature of the film that you discovered that allowed for this revival?

Janet Eilber: Well, it was lost because Martha Graham was always moving on into the future. She performed it for a couple of years with her group of dancers in the 1930s. The last record of it having been performed was in 1938. She was moving into the future, continually experimenting and breaking barriers. She did not keep it in the repertory, and it had been forgotten. In the late 80s, this black and white film surfaced by Julien Bryan. It was from the late 30s, and it was silent, of course. [Yuriko](#), one of our great Graham artists who danced with Martha in the 40s and would not have danced in *Chronicle*, was a member of the company starting in 1944. She is I think she's 99 years old now. She took the black and white film and brought the dance back to life with Martha's help. This was not as easy as it sounds. I mean you don't just follow along and do exactly what those dancers did, just because audience expectations have changed and they didn't have the exact music. They had to choose a different piece of music, things like that.

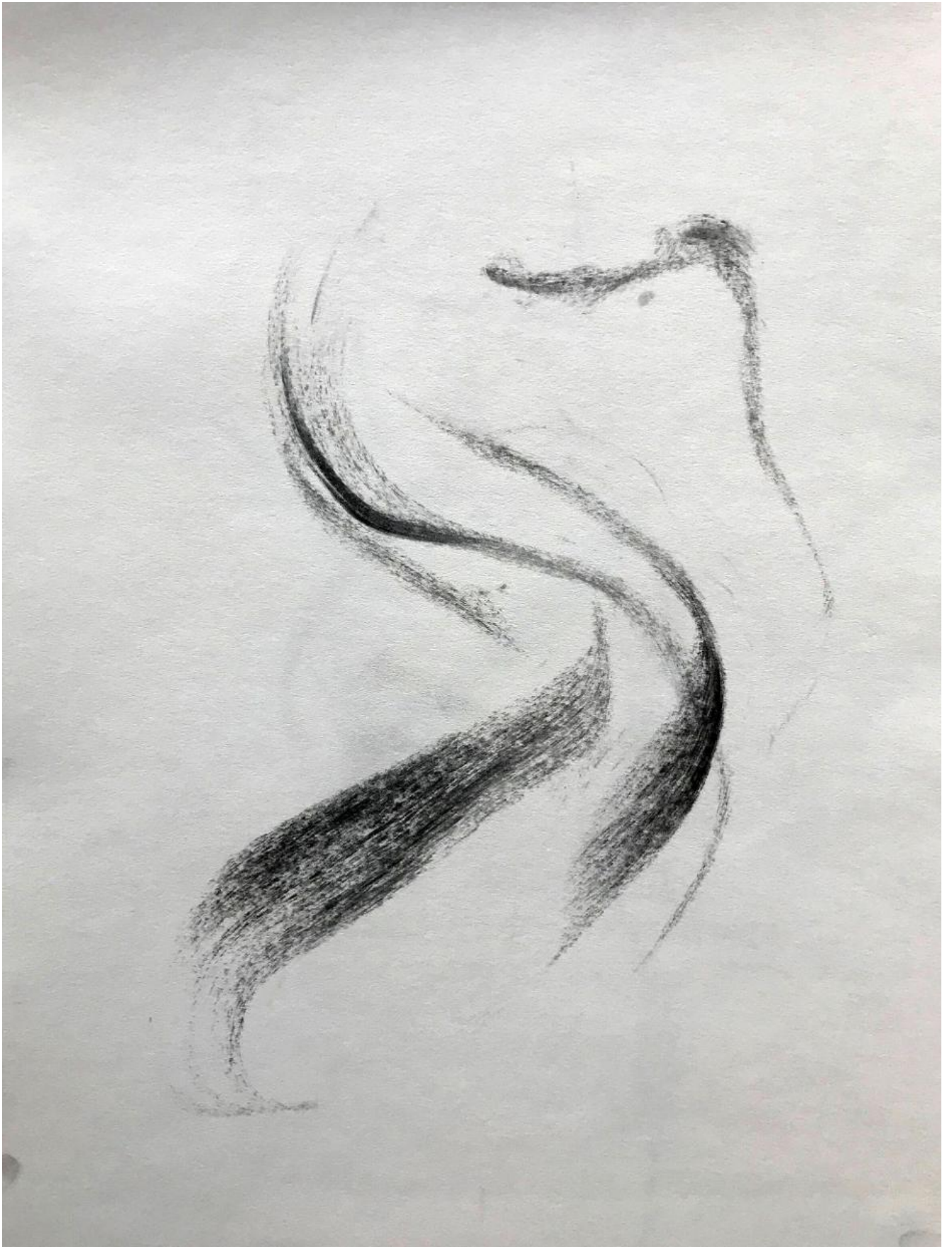
Yuriko did this reconstruction on our second company, our student company which was called The Ensemble in those days. It came out so well that Martha almost immediately transferred it over to the main company.



Photo of Anne Souder in Martha Graham's "Steps in the Street." MELISSA SHERWOOD (MARTHA GRAHAM CENTER)

Sarachan: What has been the process of working with visual artist [SoHyun Bae](#) in rehearsals? What does her work bring to the project?

Eilber: We met a couple of years ago, and she asked if she could come in and sketch the dancers. I set her up sketching our advanced class because I knew it would allow her the opportunity to experiment with capturing what she found integral to the work. She doesn't sketch a recognizable human figure. She sketches the motivation of the movement. We see a spiral geometric shape that she has imagined out of our spiral exercise. She's sketching intention and motivation of movement rather than figurative realistic human beings.

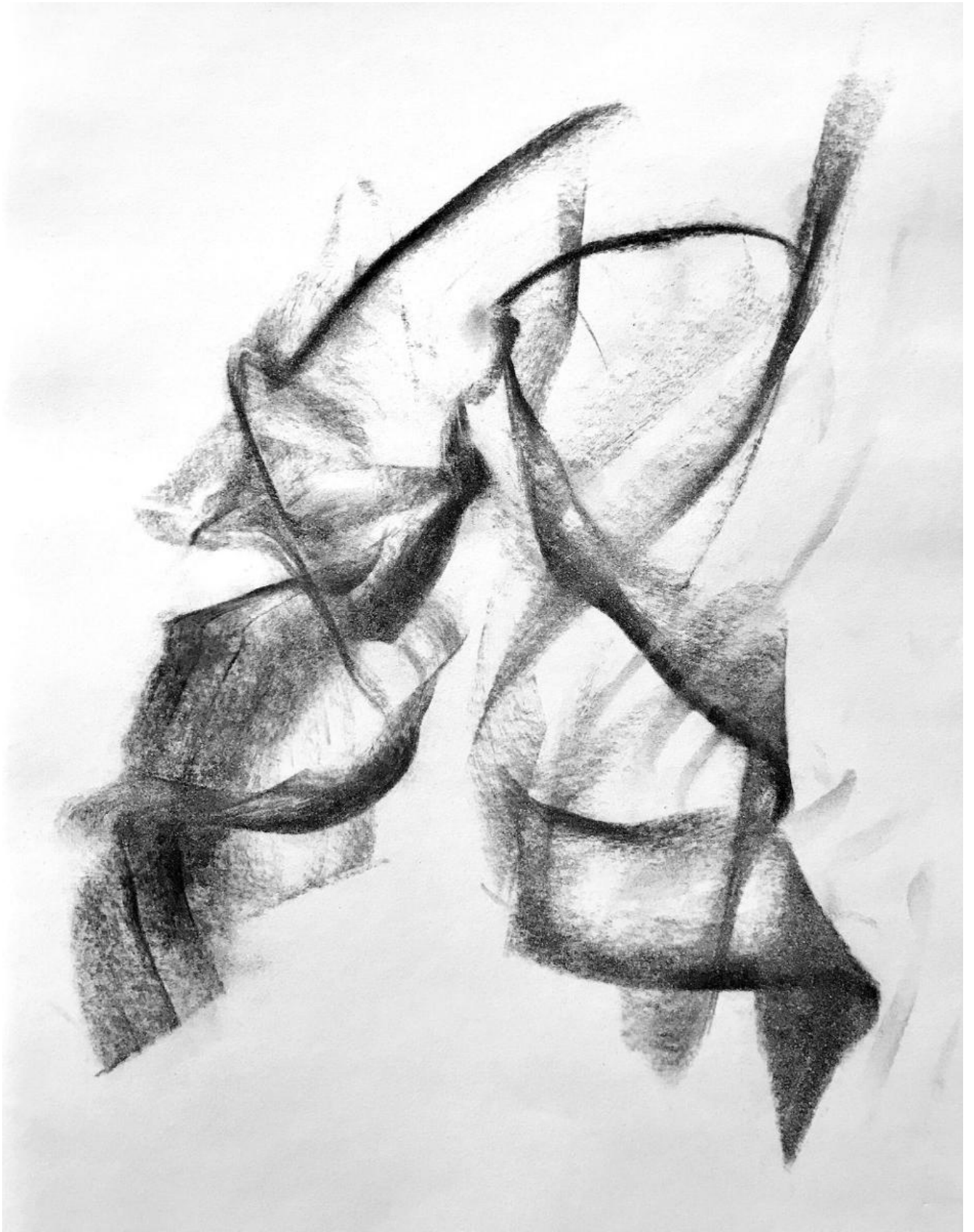


A Martha Graham Dancer image by SoHyun Bae (Anne Souder in Ekstasis), October 24, 2018, vine charcoal on paper, 11 x 11 inches SOHYUN BAE

Sarachan: How has the nature of the piece changed from the original series created in the 1930s to the 1980s when it was rediscovered to this current iteration of it today?

Eilber: I think it's meaningful in the same way. What I mean is, I think it has as powerful an impact because at the time Martha Graham was really a modernist. Things were stark and stripped down. It was all based on geometric content and not emotional narrative. The geometry of the work is so powerful and evocative that it's traveled well through time and speaks to people of any era who are going through a trauma of any time. We danced it, I know, during Hurricane Katrina, and it spoke to that era, and we danced it in the [#MeToo](#) context, and it speaks in that context. Because it's so pure and stripped down it connects to the audience of every era. From our point of view, SoHyun is bringing out what's going on in the interior of the dancer rather than where their arm and legs are going in her sketches.

SoHyun was part of our [Google residency](#) back a year or so ago, where we were experimenting with technology and how it might enhance our work. She came in and used the 3D paintbrush called the Tilt Brush in creating 3D environments that our dancers improvised within and reacted to. It was really cool. We also had our dancers dancing and SoHyun painting around them and creating an atmosphere out of their movement in a 3D space. She's been intensely connected to our more experimental work over the past couple of years. She and I have always dreamt of people being able to experience her emerging sketches while they see the movement that's inspiring her. So that's what we are going for in the events on the 24th and 25th.



Two Martha Graham Dancers (Peiju Chien-Pott and Ben Schultz in *Errand Into the Maze*), March 27th, 2019, vine charcoal on paper, 14 x 11 inches SOHYUN BAE

Sarachan: In what ways do you feel Martha Graham was ahead of her time in portraying women in power?

Eilber: She absolutely was and she still is. I mean not just the power of this army of women that you see in *Steps in the Streets*, but if you think of the army of characters, the complex, flawed anti-heroine characters Martha put on stage at a time when women in dance were either goddesses, princesses, swans, and flowers. She was revolutionary in that aspect.

Sarachan: It seems in Martha Graham's choreography there was a very deeply considered symbolism in everything. How has that continued or evolved in this modern iteration of the company?

Eilber: In a new biography coming up, there is a quote I was just reading from one of the early dancers, saying that Martha would create the movement, but they were required to fill it with their own emotional content. And that continues through today. Our dancers are not just mimicking the movement of earlier generations. The movement is like a blueprint. It's like a Shakespearean text that our dancers have to fulfill and bring their own life and interpretation to. That is something Martha expected.

You had to bring this personal intimacy, vulnerability to the work as well as being part of the memory of Martha. Our work contains generations of ritual, of experience, of consideration, of social and political climate that now is distilled in these movements.



Photo of Laurel Dalley Smith, So Young An, and Cara McManus in Martha Graham's "Steps in the Street." MELISSA SHERWOOD (MARTHA GRAHAM DANCE CENTER)

Sarachan: What are your next steps with this piece?

Eilber: The next time people can see *Steps in the Street*, which is part of this larger dance called *Chronicle*, is at the [Fall for Dance Festival](#) on October 12th and 13th. We will be touring with *Chronicle* all over the states. *Steps in the Street* is the first event of our season-long studio series, which is comprised of six or seven of these two evening events throughout the year. We want people to know that we are user-friendly, that modern dance is not like a secret club where there is a signal to get in. All of these evenings we offer wine and you get to meet the dancers. It's really trying to throw the doors open and let people have that feeling of friends and family. Our whole thing is finding new ways to give the audience access to our work. It's been immensely popular.

Tickets for *GrahamDeconstructed: Steps in the Street with SoHyun Bae* can be purchased [here](#).

This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.

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Risa Sarachan

I have a BFA from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, where I discovered my love of writing in a roundabout way while creating my own work as an acting student. My original... **Read More**