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## Dance Review

### The Staying Inside Guide: Martha Graham's Magic at Home

The legendary dance company is opening up its archives through a series of online programs.



Leslie Andrea Williams and Marzia Memoji (foreground) in a 2019 performance of 'Chronicle'  
PHOTO: MARTHA GRAHAM DANCE COMPANY

By Robert Greskovic  
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**In April** the Martha Graham Dance Company began presenting “Martha Matinees”—individually themed, twice-a-week programs on its [YouTube channel](#). These presentations are shown there at 2:30 p.m. EDT on Wednesdays and Saturdays, when viewers can participate in a live-chat stream with MGDC director Janet Eilber and others watching. After the hourlong matinees are

concluded the channel keeps the programs posted and available for further access. Among the highlights of the programming so far are some especially rare and newly discovered items.

The company has recently been making concerted efforts to inventory, catalog and digitize the films in its holdings. As Oliver Tobin, a former Graham dancer and the current director of Martha Graham Resources, put it during a recent matinee's live chat: "Our archives are soooooo vast."

Until these current offerings, the archive's vintage and sometime scratchy films from the 1930s and '40s, many documenting Graham herself in performance, have been available only to researchers. Despite their hardly high-definition resolution, these records of Graham's choreographic career as a pioneer in modern dance—which spanned from 1926, the year she founded her own dance group, to her death in 1991 at age 96—remain invaluable to understanding her art. As recently announced, the Graham archives will be transferred to the New York Public Library, where researchers and public alike will be able to access them on the premises once the items are cataloged and the library reopens.

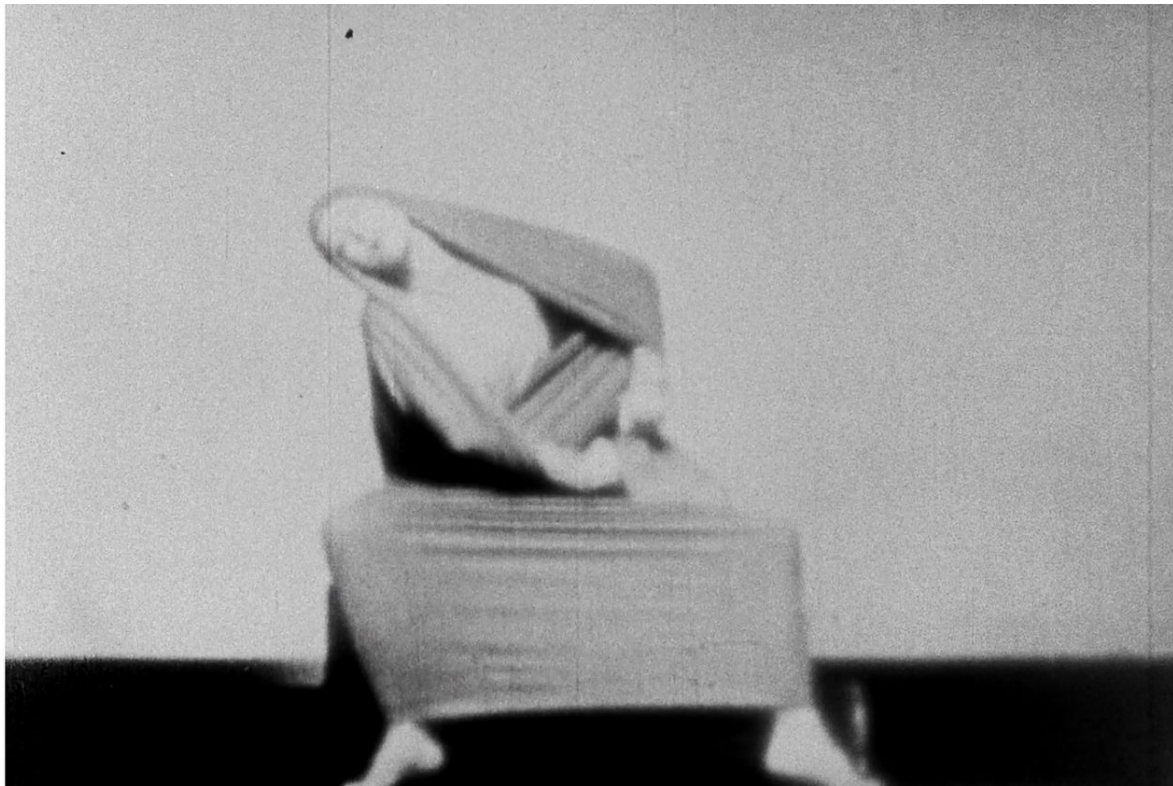


Martha Graham (center) in a circa 1944 performance of 'Appalachian Spring'  
PHOTO: MARTHA GRAHAM DANCE COMPANY

Mr. Tobin's remark about the vastness of the archive came during an on-screen matinee chat about the rarest of Graham finds so far: a complete film with the original cast of "Appalachian Spring," her 1944 ballet depicting a rural gathering of what its program names as "The Bride," "The Husbandman," "The Pioneering Woman," "The Revivalist" and "The Followers," to the music of Aaron Copland. Unfortunately, the "Appalachian Spring" program now posted on the site does not include a charming clip that was part of the mid-April matinee presentations showing Copland chatting with artist Paul Jenkins about his score. In that clip, we learned that this now-famous dance was eventually titled "Appalachian Spring" by the choreographer herself. Copland simply called his Graham commission "Ballet for Martha."

Copland's score and some apt ambient sound have now been added to the silent, circa 1944 black-and-white film featuring Isamu Noguchi's spare but evocative interior/exterior setting. Vivid

take-away images in this full-stage view of the 30-minute dance include Graham's often intense Bride—consistently clear of gaze and remarkably plastic of gesture—here kicking up her heels and the hem of her long dress, there twisting and dropping dramatically to the floor for darker effects. Likewise, the alternately ramrod-straight posture of Merce Cunningham's Revivalist and the almost demonic fervor of his hauntingly driven solos beam forth. As the Pioneering Woman, May O'Donnell is statuesque and stalwart, giving credence to a live-chat observation that for this role Graham incorporated the mode of a solo O'Donnell once created for herself as a statue. For its online "Lamentation" matinee, the company compiled a series of films recording the Graham solo of the same name and some works related to that 1930 dance. The four-minute "Lamentation" is set to Zoltán Kodály's Piano piece, op. 3, no. 2; Graham choreographed the concentrated dance for herself encased in a tube of purple jersey while seated on a cube that supports her as she twists and gesticulates as if embodying grief.



Martha Graham in 'Lamentation,' circa 1935  
PHOTO: MARTHA GRAHAM DANCE COMPANY

One of the several films offered here is a 1943 camera study of Graham in color, with close-ups and variously cropped frames showing her performing to the accompanying Kodály music. Other films show more recent works related to "Lamentation." But it's a black-and-white silent movie, circa 1935, that best gets to the heart of the work. The recently discovered footage, for all its graininess and lack of music, reveals more nuanced and intriguingly timed movement. In 1943, posturing artfully through her dance for the camera, she articulates her choreography with calculation; in the earlier example, her gestures feel more spontaneous and affecting, with some of the sudden changes for her arms seeming to block a body blow.

Last week's matinee, "Chronicle": Dancing Resistance," concentrated on a 1936 work that originally had five sections and is offered here in footage of three of those parts. It came accompanied by a 1935 statement that Graham made about refusing an invitation to participate

in ceremonies surrounding the 1936 Olympics due to Hitler's persecution of artists and anti-Jewish policies.

In a 2019 color video, "Chronicle" is danced impressively by the current Graham company, but there is also much to intrigue the viewer fascinated by Graham's 1930s art in the old footage that is also included. Even in the sometimes ghostly halations of crude silent filming, the athletic thrust and thrilling impact of Graham's early, dedicated dancers burn powerfully from the screen.

—*Mr. Greskovic writes about dance for the Journal.*