



"Errand into the Maze" (1947). Martha Graham Dance Company at Jacob's Pillow, August 16, 2023. Illustration by Carolyn Newberger.

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

DANCE REVIEW: Devastation and Redemption through 100 years of the Martha Graham Dance Company at Jacob's Pillow

Music and story are at the core of Martha Graham's vision, and the first two dances of the evening's program, created in 1947 and 1946, respectively, address powerful themes of women facing vexatious moral challenges.

BY CAROLYN AND ELI NEWBERGER
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More than 60 years ago, I (Carolyn) saw Martha Graham dance in the Reisinger Auditorium at Sarah Lawrence college. Sarah Lawrence has a renowned dance program, then led by Bessie Schönberg, for whom the Bessie awards are named. Lucinda Child was in the class ahead of me, Meredith Monk the class after. Dance was a serious business at Sarah Lawrence College, and Martha Graham was a guest teacher from as early as the 1930s.

Then in her late 60s, Graham moved across the stage majestically, purposely, in her tube gown, cloth stretching knee to knee as she descended into her wide-legged plié. She made no apologies for her no-longer smooth body, no smiles to charm. She was serious, deliberate, dancing with a profound understanding of life's changes, contracting and expanding into each phase of her body as she—and her body—moved both in the moment and across time.

Executive and Artistic Director of Jacob's Pillow Pamela Tatge introduced Janet Elber, artistic director of the Martha Graham Dance Company, and dancer in many of their greatest roles, including ones that were choreographed and directed for her by Martha Graham herself.

Together, Tatge and Elber described, with evident pride, that Martha Graham first danced at Jacob's Pillow and indeed had been Ted Shawn's own dance partner at the commencement of her career. They spoke of her spark, originality, and courage as a dancer and visionary.

Music and story are at the core of Martha Graham's vision, and the first two dances of the evening's program, created in 1947 and 1946, respectively, address powerful themes of women facing vexatious moral challenges. Taken from her so-called "Greek" sequence, these powerful myths depict terrifying quandaries and consequences, each with a female protagonist, while also conveying contemporary meanings and lessons.



"Errand into the Maze" (1947). Martha Graham Dance Company at Jacob's Pillow, August 16, 2023. Illustration by Carolyn Newberger.

Graham sets the story of the myth of Theseus, who was sent by Zeus to descend deep into the labyrinth to destroy the Minotaur, a half-beast/half-

man, in the persona of Ariadne, a woman who was given the assignment to complete the job.

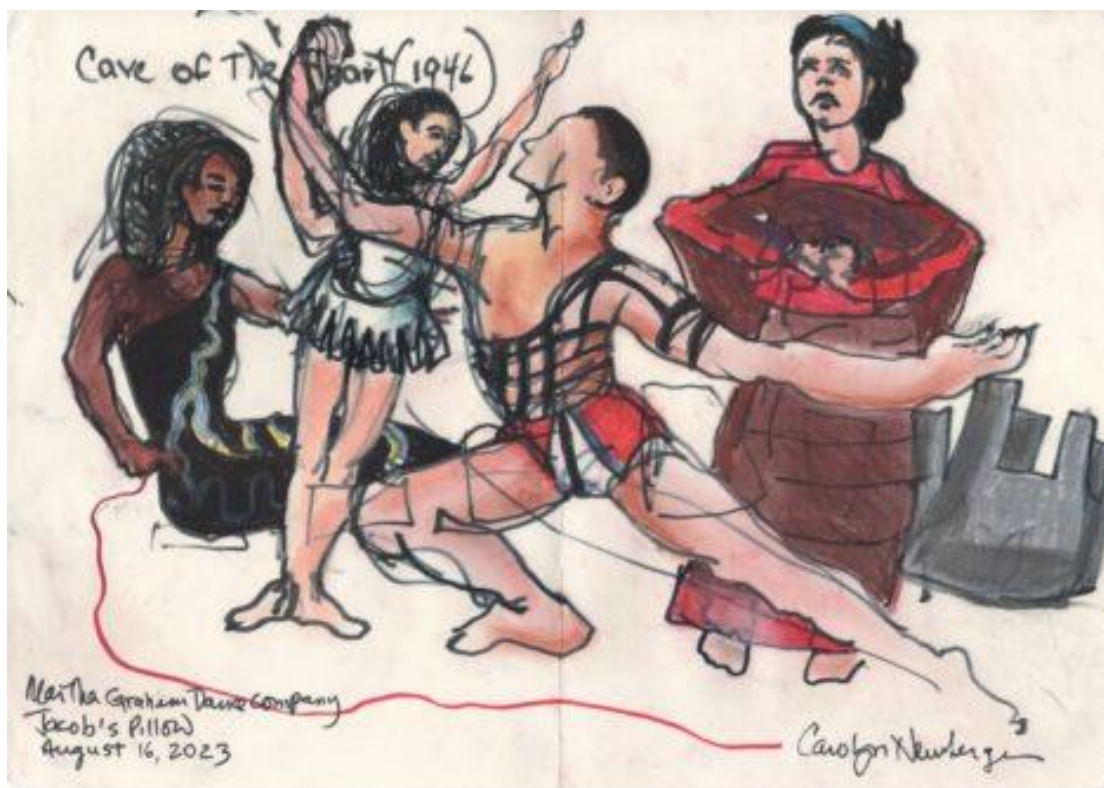
She uses every wile available to her, gathering a long length of white ribbon strung across the floor into her arms, and constructing with it a circle about 12 feet in diameter, into which she hoped to lure the beast.

Ariadne approaches the Minotaur, played powerfully by **Alessio Cagnale-Roberts**, who carries a club with two nobs at the ends, a fearful instrument, poised ominously over his shoulders behind his neck. She pretends to romance him, and he is aroused, attempting to embrace her every which way, including attempting to spirit her away by carrying her on his back.

She, danced with marvelous subtlety by **Yin Yang**, suggests that they go together into her charmed circle. Ironies and misunderstandings abound, and resonances to contemporary strategies by controlling males to attract and keep in thrall their intended partners radiated from the stage. (The most dangerous time for a controlled female partner is when she signals her intention to leave the relationship. This is when murders of battered women most frequently occur. Not infrequently, their controlling partners threaten them with this warning, "If I can't have you, no one will.")

Ultimately, the Minotaur is not lured into the trap. But his death is foreordained. The female conquering hero is justly celebrated as the curtain closes.

In the next piece, the Medea tragedy juxtaposes three women: the wronged and enraged sorceress Medea, betrayed by her lover Jason; the princess for whom he betrays Medea; and the chorus, who sees what is coming and cannot prevent it. Jason, dressed in hypermasculine red trunks with a prominent white codpiece, black bandings around his muscular middle and biceps, struts and frets with manly arrogance and power as he woos the demure princess, in girlish white.



"Cave of the Heart" (1946). Martha Graham Dance Company at Jacob's Pillow, August 16, 2023. Illustration by Carolyn Newberger.

The simple stage set projects symbols of male authority. Phalluses protrude beneath the flat surface of both the central platform and the earthen setting for the tree in which Leslie Andrea Williams' Medea seethes and schemes. On stage right, a row of stones, surmounted by

colorful steps, provide platforms for Jason's strutting and proclaiming his masculine authority.



Leslie Andrea Williams as Medea in "Cave of the Heart" (1946). Martha Graham Dance Company at Jacob's Pillow, August 16, 2023. Illustration by Carolyn Newberger.

Medea herself, feline in a lustrous black gown embroidered with snake-like coils, sets upon a course that not only kills her rival, but also her children. A dancer of astounding fluidity and power, she portrays a Medea overwhelmed with rage and the hunger for her rival's destruction. And yet, at the end, she is a picture of numb agony as she drags her dead children in a large tan sack across the stage to the feet of Jason, who, confused, initially postures authoritatively, and then dissolves in anguish.



"Cave of the Heart" (1946). Martha Graham Dance Company at Jacob's Pillow, August 16, 2023. Illustration by Carolyn Newberger.

Ane Arrieta, adorned in a broadly striped costume of the colors of emotion, red and brown, serves affectingly as the embodiment of the Greek chorus, expressing the profundity of her anguish in facial expression and expansive gesture. All to no avail. In the face of tragedy, lamentation.

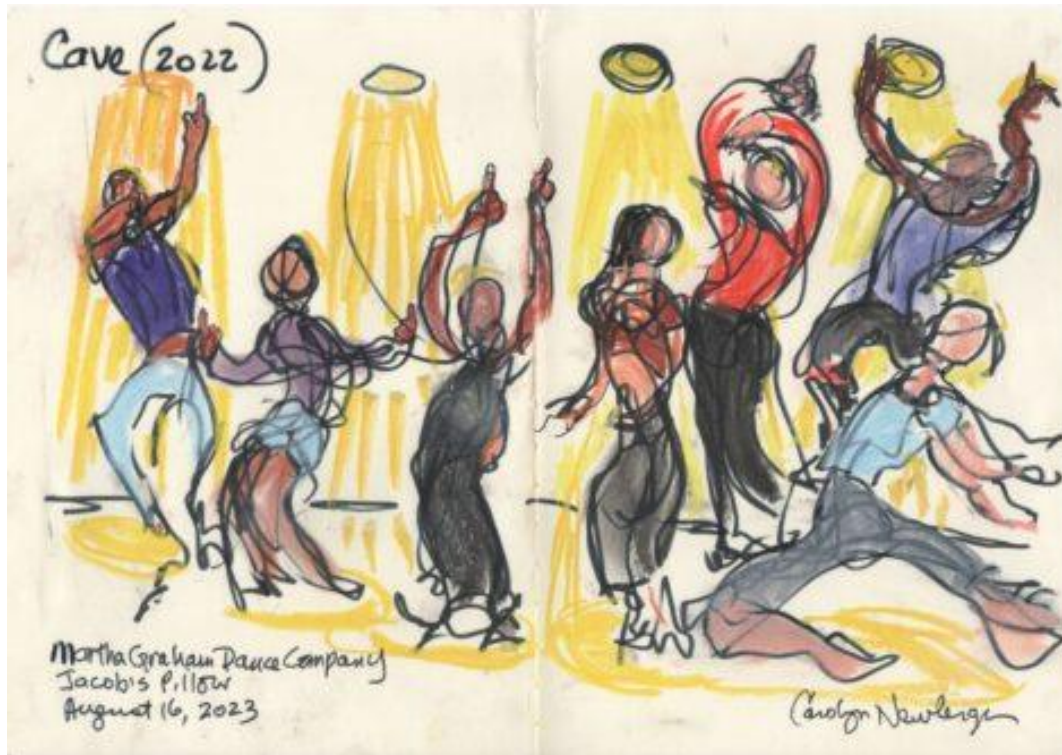
After the intermission, we were treated to "Cave", a new work choreographed by **Hofesh Shechter** and inspired by a suggestion of the international dance star, **Daniil Simkin**. The Martha Graham company was taken by the idea of pulling together into a rave-styled dance party of ordinary people in casual dress. Kind of an antidote and cleansing after the agony of the Greek tragedies.

This succeeds beautifully.



"Cave" by choreographer Hofesh Shechter. Martha Graham Dance Company at Jacob's Pillow, August 16, 2023. Illustration by Carolyn Newberger.

"Cave" focuses on several choreographic themes, such as the company in unitary movement, "think of a boat rocking with the feet," and also, the notion of struggle between the individual and the group. This notion takes quasi-humorous form at one point as two men violently push away two women, who fold back into the group of six other women who berate, scold, and tease them. One of the two men, in a splendidly absurd gesture of penance, kneels down in the front of the stage with his back to the audience. He takes in his mouth a rather fancy tweed jacket and proceeds to nibble on its buttons. The teasing women are mightily amused, and the audience cracks up as well.



"Cave" (2022). Martha Graham Dance Company at Jacob's Pillow, August 16, 2023. Illustration by Carolyn Newberger.

The music begins with a devastatingly swinging beat of multiple percussion instruments, with heavy offbeat accents, before any recognizable tonal elements emerge. The dancing is wild, delighted, and free—and, truly, a rave.

And in the end, as the entire troupe walks forward with fingers pointed to the sky and graciously beckoning the audience, it was a small wonder that none of us rushed up to the stage to join them.

In other words, we all raved!