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Greek Myth or Graham Myth?

The Martha Graham Dance Company performed two of its Greek myth-themed works at Philadelphia's Suzanne Roberts Theatre over the weekend. The concert provided a lovely and lively conclusion for the Society for Classical Studies (SCS) / Archaeological Institute of America (AIA) 2025 Annual Meeting. University of Pennsylvania's Classical Studies Professor, James Ker, and Nina Papathanasopoulou, Ph.D., Professor of Classical Studies, College Year in Athens, organized this presentation. SHARE

Performance

Martha Graham Dance Company: "Errand into the Maze" and "Cave of the Heart"

Place

Suzanne Roberts Theatre, Philadelphia, PA, January 4, 2025

Words

Merilyn Jackson



Martha Graham Dance Company in Martha Graham's "Cave of the Heart." Photograph by Scott Serio for Eclipse Sportswire

Papathanasopoulou's academic research on Graham's engagement with Greek Myth inspired her to propose the Philadelphia event. Her separate and previously conceived project, *Martha Graham and Greek Myth*, is "a [multi-year, worldwide] project combining classical philology and live dance to explore Martha Graham's use of Ancient Greek mythology and the portrayal of Ancient Greek heroes." Professors Ker and Papathanasopoulou gave introductory curtain talks, as did Janet Eilber, artistic director, Martha Graham Dance Company. Eilber spoke about aspects of Graham's insights and explorations of Greek mythology, among them the Dionysian capacity to lose balance, the Apollonian attribute to regain balance, and the struggle between abandonment and order. The two works performed, "Errand into the Maze" and "Cave of the Heart," are two of Graham's Greek-themed dances that embody Graham's disquisition of Greek mythology.

1947's "Errand into the Maze," derived very loosely from the myth of Theseus, has a score by Gian Carlo Menotti and a set design by Isamu Noguchi. So Young An danced in this duet as a feminine hero (replacing Theseus,) seeking to find her own strength against her fears. Antonio Leone personifies her fears as the Minotaur, half-man, half bull, a faceless, nightmare beast.

The bold Noguchi sculpture, shaped in the form of a vee or a u, described sometimes as representing a vagina, is absent in this touring version. In its stead, Young An first appears in a dazzling cone of light, (by Lauren Libretti,) an elegant inversion of the entrance to the maze—far more mysterious and less symbolically obvious than the original Noguchi sculpture.



Antonio Leone and So Young An in Martha Graham's Errand into the Maze; photo by Scott Serio for Eclipse Sportswire

Asked about the missing sculpture, a company representative responded: "The current production of Errand into the Maze is stripped of the classic production elements, in order to focus on the dramatic, physical journey of the choreography itself."

Nonetheless, some of Noguchi's designs remain, such as a yards-long crinkled ribbon representing the maze. Young An wears a gown updated from Graham's original costume—the black ric-rac that gashed across it banished. This more diaphanous and virginal white gown reminds me of [Pina Bausch](#)'s body-skimming ball gowns. Graham's original costumes, though, evoke the heavier fabrics of her German contemporary, Mary Wigman, which created a Moebius strip of images for me linking Wigman, Graham, and Bausch, three viragos of twentieth-century modern dance theater and German Expressionism.

Inhabitants of Crete and other islands still perform the Theseus dance, called Crane. It consists of twisting and curving movements that suggest the shapes of the labyrinth. Young An begins with a series of slow torso contractions that soon become the convulsive contractions that are a Graham signature move and reference the Crane. She forcefully stabs her toes across the maze as she encounters the Minotaur three times and banishes him from sight each time before finally vanquishing him.



So Young An in Martha Graham's "Errand into the Maze." Photograph by Scott Serio for Eclipse Sportswire

She's a more fragile figure than Graham, and lacks Graham's authoritative attack, yet her battles become more convincing, and as the final one concludes it as if she's gained superhuman strength. Leone's three menacing entrances suggest brutal sexuality, perhaps even implied bestiality, as he towers behind Young An. He carries a spear across his shoulders, held in place by his upraised arms. It suggests both figures in a frieze or a yoke. Muscular and tall, and with his face and body masked in mesh, he conveys menace with his powerful angular movements and sudden leaps in contrast to Young An's curvilinear dancing. (Costumes here by Maria Garcia after the originals.)

To my contemporary ear Minotti's score sounds histrionic, and as it rachets up to a crescendo, Leone repeatedly leaps vertically behind Young An, while she portrays her inner struggle. It's only when she springs onto Leone's bent thighs that she is able to wrest the spear from him. Without a weapon, he or whatever she was battling, is defeated. (I leave Graham's Jungian influences to readers, scholars and dance historians to interpret for themselves.)

Regardless of the missing sculpture in "Errand," this second part of the performance has the full complement of Noguchi's more elaborate stage props for "Cave of the Heart," loosely based on [Euripides'](#) tragedy play, "Medea." The shimmering golden tree is stunning in its representations as tree, cage, and

finally the poisoned crown. Samuel Barber put his original ballet score, “Medea Dance of Vengeance,” through numerous iterations over the years before arriving at his 1955 version, Opus 23, which the tour is using. Its dramatic woodwind and brass heavy composition serve Graham’s choreography with several opportunities for repetitive phrases. Xin Ying portrays Medea in anguished sideways bourrées on her knees, all the while biting the long red thread she has pulled from her bodice. Is it an artery to the heart, is she biting an umbilical cord, or is she severing her connection to Jason?



*Lloyd Knight and Laurel Dalley Smith in Martha Graham’s “Cave of the Heart.”
Photograph by Scott Serio for Eclipse Sportswire*

Laurel Dalley Smith, as the Princess and Lloyd Knight also give superb performances as they struggle in a futile attempt to remove the poisoned crown Medea has placed on the Princess. Throughout, Knight’s dancing, like Leone’s in “Errand,” features strong knee bent poses as seen on friezes in ancient and modern Greek-themed architecture and spectacular stylized grand jetés.

After having murdered the Princess, Medea’s five consecutive “cave turns”—a swooping [arabesque penché](#), heads-down spins that also combine the signature torso contraction—are truly gut-wrenching.

As Chorus, Anne Souder wears a stunning red-hued poncho pinched at the wrist and a matching flared skirt that more effectively replaces the black tights in the 1947 production, creating the most mysterious dance imagery. Her emotional conflicts as she represents Nurse in Euripides’ play, veer between compassion for the betrayed Medea, fear of what will come of Medea’s violent rage, and then grief for the Princess’s death.

She first tries to prevent Medea from enacting her rage, cupping her hands over her mouth as if to stifle a scream, and repeatedly climbing the central sculpture where she bends backwards while lifting a pointed foot towards a dark vision.

The changes in the music, costumes, and stage sets over the years refresh these works so they now resonate with present-day conundrums. But these changes make me think of the [Ship of Theseus](#) paradox, where the ship's rotting wood was continually replaced to preserve it, creating a philosophical question as to whether or not it could still be considered the same ship.

These are two of 18 complete Greek-themed dances by Graham. Papathanasopoulou's project, Martha Graham and Greek Myth, explored "Jocasta" in 2022 with acclaim throughout Europe. She and her collaborators plan to continue this research with presentations over the coming years. However long these studies and performances last, I doubt all the eternal questions they raise will ever be answered. Like the Theseus' paradox, will they still be considered?

(For more on the project see <http://www.ninapapathanasopoulou.com/project-description-and-goals/>)

Merilyn Jackson

Merilyn Jackson has written on dance for the Philadelphia Inquirer since 1996 and writes on dance, theater, food, travel and Eastern European culture and Latin American fiction for publications including the *New York Times*, the *Warsaw Voice*, the *Arizona Republic*, *Phoenix New Times*, MIT's *Technology Review*, *Arizona Highways*, *Dance Magazine*, *Pointe* and *Dance Teacher*, and *Broad Street Review*. She also writes for *tanz magazin* and *Ballet Review*. She was awarded an NEA Critics Fellowship in 2005 to Duke University and a Pennsylvania Council on the Arts Fellowship for her novel-in-progress, *Solitary Host*.