

Journeying with Martha Graham's masterly 'Night Journey' at The Soraya ²

SEP 25 2025 | Dance divas isamu noguchi jocasta martha graham martha graham dance company night journey oedipus sophocles the soraya wildup william schuman woman artists younes and soraya nazarian center for the performing arts



Ed. note: This story by **Debra Levine** was commissioned the [Younes & Soraya Nazarian Center for the Arts](#).

Somewhere around 429 B.C., Sophocles, a titan of Greek drama, produced a knotted tale of human fate, *Oedipus Rex*, as a theatrical text. A saga of self-discovery, its dramatic arc hinges on two mortal taboos: murder and incest. The mythical king Oedipus, peeling the onion, comes to realize he has unknowingly killed his father and, separately, married his mother.

Fast-forward to May 3, 1947, for the unveiling of *Night Journey*, Martha Graham's startlingly personal retelling of the Oedipus myth through choreography at once elemental and abstruse. Staged amidst an iconic sculptural set by the great visual artist Isamu Noguchi to a wrenching commissioned score by mid-Century composer William Schuman, this Graham masterwork will have a rare viewing opportunity at **The Soraya** on Saturday October 4, 2025. **Martha Graham Dance Company** will perform it to live accompaniment by WildUp as part the company's extended centennial celebration, **Graham100**.

In dancing the tortured role of Jocasta, Graham pulled no punches. Mining from her astonishingly visceral dance technique (which by 1947 was highly honed, as Graham, its instigator, was dancing in peak form), she embodied a woman unhinged by facing the truth: she has succumbed to the dueling drives of maternal and carnal love. Mired in guilt and shame, Jocasta, when we first encounter her, is seeking an "easy" way out: suicide.



Decades before feminism took hold in American society, Martha Graham danced in the guise of powerful female protagonists like Jocasta: Medea, Clytemnestra, among others. Her creative world was that of women: founded in 1926, the troupe fielded an all-female ensemble, only including men in 1938. But Graham's most radical feminist act happened before she choreographed a step. She reoriented the dramaturgy of classic texts from the male perspective to that of the female. In this regard, *Night Journey* provides a textbook example, for, in the Sophocles play, Jocasta's story is glossed over. With stunning simplicity and characteristic poetry, Graham indicated in a *Night Journey* program note: "The action takes place in Jocasta's heart."

Night Journey's curtain rises on the disparate objects of Noguchi's set; upstage looms his sculptural rendering of the low-slung birth/conjugal bed to be visited by Jocasta and Oedipus—the nexus of their relationship. With stolid legs and crudely cut cross bars, it is no cozy cushion. It resembles a weapon, a slingshot. This bed is perhaps the most fetching of Noguchi's [ten modernist set designs for Graham](#), starting from *Frontier* (1935) and famously including *Appalachian Spring* (1944).

At stage center, Jocasta, in turmoil, is on the path to self-annihilation. Her action is waylaid by a heavily cloaked seer, Tiresias, who intervenes with the pounding of his walking stick. (Paul Taylor once played this role.) Jocasta's deadened soul reawakened, she is doomed to revisit—in a night journey, a memory play, a dream sequence—her terrible trajectory with her son. And thus the ballet shifts to flashback mode.

Scrambling onto the stage (the ballet is not yet two minutes long) is a Greek chorus of female dancers, Graham's so-called, "Daughters of the Night." This close-knit pack in tight black dresses and branchy headpieces (some see the squiggles as snakes) will bear witness (or not, by cupping hands over eyes) to a heinous tale in reenactment. Equally witnesses, wranglers, and warriors, they dance in unison to the point of bravado; their silent screams given form in jagged shapes, steps, leaps and falls. Creating a mini-ballet comprised of supremely difficult choreography within a larger work, Graham has her chorines frequently return, which keeps Jocasta pinned to her hateful task. Rather than position them at side or rear like a traditional Greek chorus, they dance front and center. Notably, during an erotic encounter between Jocasta and Oedipus, the chorus thunders in the foreground in a frenetic but controlled spew of percussive movements, obscuring the two principals.

Often a role for a beefy male dancer, Oedipus was originated by Erick Hawkins, Graham's then-lover and soon husband. That is more than a fun fact; it is essential for interpreting Graham's deep engagement with this mythology. Hawkins, a Harvard graduate in Classics, was blonde, handsome, and a good dancer. He was also fifteen years Graham's junior. Her vulnerability about this age gap may rightly be read into *Night Journey's* searing pas de deux.

The first is a lengthy seduction rite, rigid and formal, in which Jocasta invites the younger man "into the privacy of her body," to use Graham's own explanatory words. Their limbs intertwine (Oedipus's legged wrapped around Jocasta's shoulder, dominating her, is a singularly powerful move). Spurred by Schuman's insistent strings, the action heats up to erotic; Jocasta is prone as Oedipus, mounting her, seems to devour her. Next thing you know, he's swaddled in her arms as she strokes his head on her breast. The duo binds itself with the same rope of Jocasta's suicide attempt—thus a simple prop finds multiple applications: birth (umbilical cord), sex (conjugal bonding), and death (suicide). The seer reappears and, the adult in the room, takes charge. He wrests mother from son. Realizing his wrongdoing, Oedipus gives a primal scream with his body. He then blinds himself. She takes robotic steps toward the audience, stripping herself of her queenly robes. Finding the rope, she returns it to its previous purpose. The ballet has come full circle.

In the hands of a lesser choreographer this would be horrifyingly creepy, and *Night Journey* surely left audiences of 1947 rattled if not aghast. But Graham's pronounced, inventive integration of her rich movements with music and amazing sets and props elevates the proceedings.

The Martha Graham Dance Company centennial at the Soraya also includes a world premiere, *En Masse*, that extends The Soraya's commitment to Graham's collaborations with composers. This new commission, choreographed by Hope Boykin, is a first-ever pairing of Graham and Leonard Bernstein. Pertinently, it was at Bernstein's invitation that *Night Journey* first came to Los Angeles in 1955. The maestro was then directing the "Festival of the Americas" at the Hollywood Bowl. Wild Up will perform Christopher Rountree's new arrangement of Bernstein, as well as William Schuman's score for *Night Journey*.

We the People, choreographed by Jamar Roberts to a folk score by Rhiannon Giddens — a 2024 creation inspired by Graham's longstanding sociopolitical critique — rounds out this stellar program.