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Martha Graham in Paris

If classical ballet training—from Vaganova to Cecchetti—idealises effortlessness, silence, and a body almost freed from its own weight, modern dance insists on the opposite: the blunt truth that we are made of flesh and bone, and that this matter can itself become an instrument of power. Martha Graham 100, in which the oldest US modern dance company celebrates its centenary with a touring programme of two evenings (A and B), offers a universe where the body is heard as much as seen: breath, whispers, floor-bound stretches, stamps and jumps. The selection of Graham's keystone works, presented alongside contemporary creations, sets the tone for these two evenings: Programme A is a journey into the realm of Greek myth seen through female eyes, while Programme B turns towards the eternal categories of love and war. Each evening opens with an elegantly delivered introduction by Janet Eilber, the company's director. After drawing parallels between Graham's revolutionary spirit and that of Picasso and Stravinsky, Eilber highlights the power of Graham's "discoveries"—a meaningful choice of word, as it speaks directly to the innate, biological foundations of her technique.

Performance

Martha Graham Dance Company

Place

Théâtre du Châtelet, Paris , November 4 & 12, 2025

Words

Elsa Giovanna Simonetti

Marzia Memoli, Lloyd Knight, Anne Souder, and Xin Ying in Martha Graham's "Cave of the Heart." Photograph by Melissa Sherwood

Programme A opens with "Errand into the Maze" (1947), in which Graham reframes the myth of Theseus from the perspective of Ariadne (Xin Ying). She confronts the Minotaur (Ethan Palma), his face veiled, a packsaddle pinning his arms, a pair of horns crowning his head. He embodies not an external adversary but her own fear, the struggle with it, the internal dialogue, the movement toward self-knowledge and transformation. Jungian archetypes—shadow, animus/anima, hero, labyrinth, monster-as-terror—form the work's dramaturgical spine. Dance becomes the medium through which this psychic labour is made visible.

The journey into ancient myth as a repository of eternal symbols of the human soul continues with "Cave of the Heart" (1946). Here Medea—the sorcerer-queen, interpreted by the rightly acclaimed Leslie Andrea Williams—becomes the centre of a distilled, four-figure tragedy alongside Glauce, Jason's new bride (Laurel Dalley Smith), Jason himself (Antonio Leone), and the Chorus (One Arrieta). Jason, statuesque and self-absorbed, moves as if insulated from the drama, a figure of tragic unawareness around whom the three feminine forces take shape: Glauce, whose love is unexpectedly tender, candid, almost abandoned; Medea, consumed by passion, resentment and jealousy; and the Chorus, embodied by a single female dancer whose presence radiates a nefarious, restless clairvoyance. The work ends in Medea's fury, as she becomes ensnared within Noguchi's sculpture—at once dress, armour, and spiked cage.

Leslie Andrea Williams in Martha Graham's "Chronicle." Photograph by Melissa Sherwood

Programme B is the true highlight of the tour. "Diversion of Angels" (1948), an abstract meditation on love, revolves around three women—or perhaps the same woman—in three different phases of life. Graham makes expressive use of colour: the young, flirtatious woman in yellow (Laurel Dalley Smith); the passionate, sensual woman in red (So Young An); and the mature, spiritual one in white (Leslie Andrea Williams)—their dresses contrasted with the dark, sand-toned costumes of the rest of the ensemble (four men and four women). The pace and choreographic quality soften as we move upward through this hierarchy, and as the three women interact with their partners (Zachary Jeppsen-Toy, Ethan Palma, Richard Villaverde). The young woman in yellow is quicksilver, all brightness and life; her exchanges are joyous and playful, culminating at one point in a sudden lift onto her partner's shoulder, so swift that the audience gasps. With the woman in red, the interactions are physical and intense: she remains lively but more controlled, often pausing in a wide, grounded stance—one leg raised, arms open, one hand pointing to the floor—with expansive, elastic grands pliés. With the woman in white, steady and noble, the contact is marked by a kind of respectful distance, a moderation of touch. Around them, the other dancers form and dissolve figures, echoing or framing these three qualities of love. The composition reveals an extraordinary complexity and flow—a harmony of lines and energy that binds the work together with remarkable mastery.

"Chronicle" (1936) is another gem, a masterpiece of choreographic composition. Created when Graham refused to perform at the Olympic Games organised by the Nazi regime, it

becomes an enduring, timeless message against war. Set to the music of Wallingford Riegger—one of the pioneers of the American avant-garde—the ballet was originally divided into five sections, though it is performed today in three: "Spectre–1914," "Steps in the Street," and "Prelude to Action." "Spectre–1914" is the presentiment of something terrible about to descend. A single woman (the brilliant, intense Xin Ying) dominates the stage, wearing a monumental black dress with a red underskirt that she lifts to form a pair of ominous, death-like wings. The backward falls, so typical of Graham's style, punctuate the piece, giving it a sense of ineluctable tragedy. "Steps in the Street" recalls the horrors of the First World War, as a group of women dressed in black enters with sharp, mechanical steps, their movement stiff and syncopated before breaking into jumps and rigid échappés. The splendid Anne Souder leads the group as soloist. "Prelude to Action" is an invitation to resistance, led here by Ying and Souder. The black-dressed women traverse the stage like arrows, moving in extremely rapid sequences of steps and grands jetés with bent legs, driven by a sustained, martial rhythm. It seems that Graham created one of her most beautiful works precisely by refusing to show it to the Nazi regime—a testament to her belief that dance, beauty, and art could stand against injustice, violence, and horror, through their concrete political and diplomatic power.

Marzia Memoli and Martha Graham Dance Company in Martha Graham's "Diversion of Angels." Photograph by Melissa Sherwood

Programmes A and B were each enriched by an original contemporary creation, a direction the company has increasingly explored over the past decade through collaborations with figures such as Ek, Foniadakis and Duato. For Programme A, Hofesh Shechter contributed a decidedly "Shechterian" piece: "The Cave," conceived in collaboration with Danil Simkin.

The dancers move to a pounding techno rhythm in a kind of underground, club-like atmosphere. Although the audience was encouraged to dance and take part in the performance, the gloomy, dark sonorities and disarticulated steps hardly invited participation. The company, however, excelled—demonstrating formidable modernity and adaptability.

"We the People," a recent creation by Jamar Roberts (2024)—a former Alvin Ailey dancer and resident choreographer—infuses Programme B with contemporary urgency. The music by Rhiannon Giddens, rearranged by Gabe Witcher without vocals, carries a haunting, folk-inflected rhythm that draws the spectator into its pulse. Featuring fourteen dancers, all dressed in denim, the work's central theme is the power of people: protest, lament, and the force that emerges when individuals cohere into a community. Divided into four sections, each begins with a soloist or a small group dancing in silence, creating a sense of poetry and suspension: it is the dancers' bodies, breath, and stomping that dictate rhythm and emotion. When the music enters and the ensemble reunites, the effect becomes electrifying, and a striking contrast emerges between the sprightly, almost carefree nature of the score and the serious, rebellious, confrontational expressions of the dancers. The sound of feet hitting the floor and hands clapping against thighs becomes part of the score. Marzia Memoli delivers a remarkable solo—fast, virtuosic, razor-sharp. Lloyd Knight is equally compelling as he enters alone, beginning almost like a street-dance battle before spiralling into a desperate rebellion against an unseen enemy who traps and ultimately defeats him, despite his cry for mercy.

Rightly featured on both evenings, the brand-new creation "Désir" (2025)—conceived by Virginie Mécène, extraordinary dancer and ballet master of the Graham technique—is a true gem. Mécène created it for Aurélie Dupont, former étoile of the Paris Opéra Ballet, who here expresses her passion and lifelong fascination for Martha Graham's universe and technique. Inspired by a 1926 photograph of Graham performing a solo of the same name, now lost, Mécène has recreated the piece with passion and refinement, set to a hammering, minimalist piano score. Dupont brings it to life with her natural elegance and glamour. The piece begins and ends with Dupont raising her interlaced wrists toward the sky in an act of prayer—and indeed Mécène describes it as a hymn to femininity and desire. While the red stretch costume and the music recall Lamentation, the choreography speaks with its own voice: mature, inventive, faithful to Graham's spirit yet full of freshness. In her red elastic dress, Dupont sculpts the air with horizontal arm movements—a kind of fractured, edgy third arabesque, forearms and hands directed backwards, elbows bent. A single top light isolates her, tightening the space around her. It is a beautiful cameo, one that the French public greets with particular warmth, as Dupont is widely regarded as a living monument of French dance.

Aurélie Dupont in "Désir" by Virginie Mécène. Photograph by Benoit Dochy

Graham's works remain modern in their very structure and speak to us today in the way only masterpieces can: timeless and uncannily present. She gave birth to modern dance, and one hundred years later she is already a classic. This legacy is carried forward by the outstanding company she founded, keeping this precious tradition alive and reliving, each time they step onstage, the radical novelty it represented at the time. Both the choreographic choices and the casting give everyone the chance to shine, revealing their talent and personality. In this balance, the innermost core of Graham's art emerges—its nuclear force: the power of the body, its beauty when it pushes beyond its limits, its harmony when it resists. We are left with the realisation that the simple movement of breath, in its contraction and release, is the place where all creation, all revolution, all resistance begins—and from there, in the relations and interactions we weave with others.

Elsa Giovanna Simonetti

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