

# After Kennedy Center cancellation, Martha Graham Company shines in Berkeley

*Rachel Howard*

More than a decade after its last visit, the oldest dance company in the United States finally returned to the Bay Area. But to say the eager audience at UC Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall got a history lesson doesn't come close to capturing the occasion's import.

This is the Martha Graham Dance Company after all.

When the New York troupe landed at Cal Performances on Saturday, Feb. 14, as part of its [Graham100](#) centenary tour, it brought the essential elements of the Martha Graham iconography: passion and sexual angst and the spectacle of women whose abdominal strength alone could knock out a prize fighter. But more than that, the evening demonstrated the simple strokes of genius that make a dance timelessly fascinating.

Consider the "Steps in the Street" section of Graham's "Chronicle," the opening night finale of an all too brief two-performance run. A woman in a black dress enters the stage walking backwards, one hand on her shoulder, the other wrapping down to her hip, her head and torso turned to the exact angle of keenest pained regret. In silence, another woman steps onstage backwards in this sculpturally precise posture, then another. Soon the stage is swarmed with 10 such women as Wallingford Riegger's music, driven by militaristic drumming, begins to swell. Before long the women are thrusting their elbows to their knees, then racing in circles, then jumping straight up, backs hunched, like weird insects - and when it's over, it leaves a fierce desire to watch it all again.

"Chronicle" was choreographed in 1936, 10 years after Graham gave her company's first concert and well after she had refined her physical technique of contraction and release that initiates in the pelvic floor. That's part of the complexity beneath the surface simplicity of "Chronicle," which was lost for decades until a film of the original cast surfaced in the 1980s. Every tense jump, every clenched-fist gesture is part of a rigorous movement system trained into these dancers as deeply as language itself.

History is part of the complexity beneath the simplicity of "Chronicle," too. Shortly before making it, Graham declined an invitation to perform for the Olympic Games in Germany, citing the many artists who had been persecuted by the Nazis. (In what feels like a modern day echo, the company recently canceled its engagement at the [Kennedy Center](#).)



Blakeley White-McGuire in Martha Graham's "Night Journey." (Brigid Pierce)

In the first section, danced magisterially by Leslie Andrea Williams, a figure in a red-lined dress stands ominously tall on a hidden block, the red underside of the skirt gradually overtaking her. Later, Williams returns in black and white, symbolizing the third section's "Unity - Pledge to the Future." (Unfortunately, two of the dance's original five sections are still lost.)

Whether you work out an exact allegorical correspondence to the action doesn't matter. What stays in mind thanks to the dance's finely honed formal architecture is a vision that women - their grief and their wisdom - are powerful and should be heard.

### **More Information**

Graham100: Martha Graham Dance Company. 3 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 15. \$56-\$150. Zellerbach Hall, UC Berkeley. 510-642-9988. <https://calperformances.org>

Graham's work will always be in conversation with current times, but under the direction of Janet Eilber, the company has increasingly commissioned new works to keep from becoming a troupe of museum pieces. For emerging choreographers, it's no small task to place fresh efforts next to genius. Alas for Brooklyn-based duo Baye & Asa, their 2023 commission "Cortege" suggested the rising dancemakers would benefit from more studies of Graham's compositional lessons.

The work purports to be in an homage to Graham's 1967 dance "Cortege of Eagles" - her last solo role at the age of 73 - but other than snippets of the earlier dance's music interspersed in Jack Grabow's

new timpani-driven score, it's hard to discern connections. An ensemble of seven begin in pale pants, clustering in poses of violence and strife. Gradually, they put on stiff tops, yet nothing in how they dance with each other seems to change. "Cortege" sprawls, with no build. Perhaps, in the contemporary way of avoiding earnestness, the choreographers were going for subtlety.

By contrast, there is nothing subtle about the cycle of works Graham based on Greek myths. Some people find them "old fashioned," but more dancemakers today could stand to risk their unabashed theatricality.

Saturday's program opened with 1947's "Night Journey," the story of Oedipus retold with Queen Jocasta as the protagonist. Lloyd Knight could not have been more in control of the stage as the incestuous son who unwittingly weds his own mother (the original in the role was Graham's beefcake lover at the time, Erick Hawkins). Anne Souder, devastatingly intense, alternately bowed before Oedipus and cradled him, all the while trembling with lustful confusion.



Anne Souder (front) with Martha Graham Dance Company in Martha Graham's "Appalachian Spring." (Melissa Sherwood)

The matinee scheduled for Sunday, Feb. 15, promises newer works by former Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater members Jamar Roberts and Hope Boykin alongside Graham's celebrated

"Appalachian Spring." The Graham Company should return soon and stay longer. An annual Graham Week, akin to Cal Performances' annual Ailey Week, would benefit the Bay Area's dance community in ways that linger well beyond a single engagement. Dancemakers need this history to feed the future of their art.

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