

DANCE

Martha Graham dance classics still relevant

By Andrew Gilbert

CONTRIBUTOR

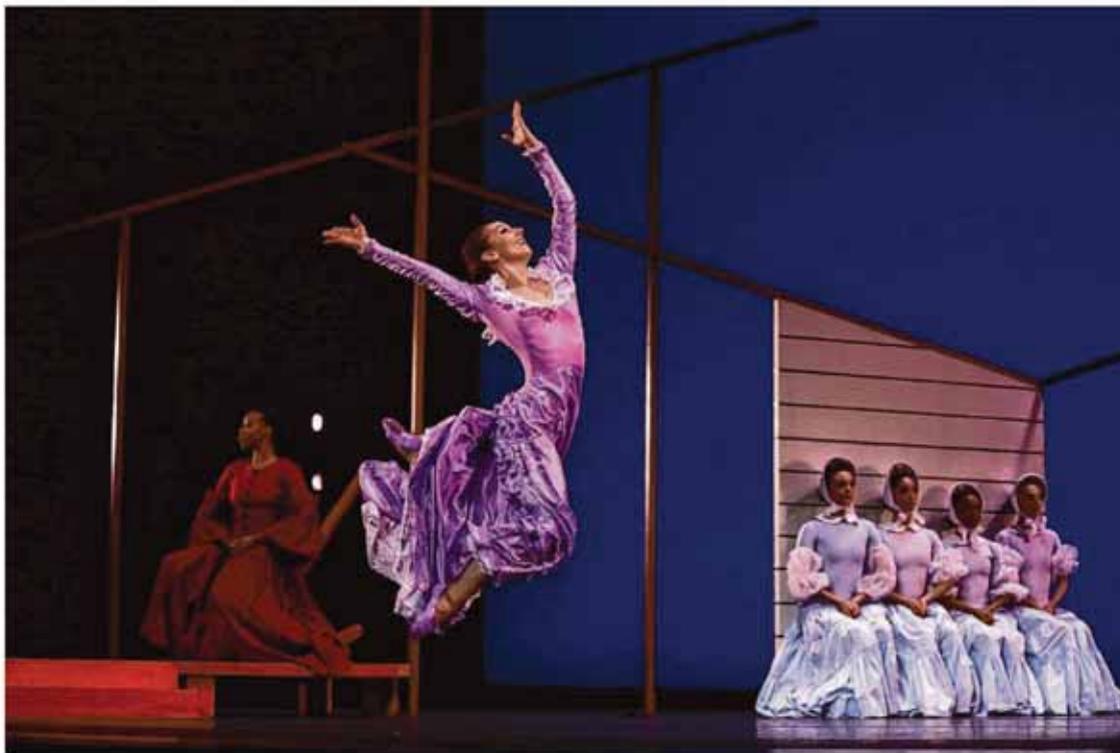
The Martha Graham Dance Company is using its long-awaited Bay Area return not only to mark its 100th anniversary but to make a bold case for why its founder's work — forged in war, upheaval and radical experimentation — still speaks urgently.

Whether drawing on the simple grace of homesteader life or the darkest Greek mythology, Martha Graham sought to embody timeless truths in her dance. While she kept her sharp modernist eye on archetypes and grand themes, she didn't shy away from addressing the 20th century's world-shaking crises, either.

That approach has guided the company since Graham's death in 1991, and its return to the Bay Area after more than a decade brings that mission into sharp focus. The two-day Cal Performances engagement at UC Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall on Saturday and Sunday, Feb. 14-15, features several of Graham's classic modern dances cannily paired with new works created in dialogue with them.

"Martha's is a legacy of innovation," MGDC Artistic Director Janet Eilber told the Chronicle. "People sometimes think of her as a frozen-in-time figure, but hers was all about movement and forward motion and her own creative drive. She was all about the future."

That forward-looking stance has also shaped the company's decision offstage. The Martha Graham Dance Company announced last month that it decided to cancel four Graham100 tour performances scheduled for April at the Kennedy Center. It didn't give a reason for dropping the Washington, D.C., venue, but



Courtesy of Melissa Sherwood

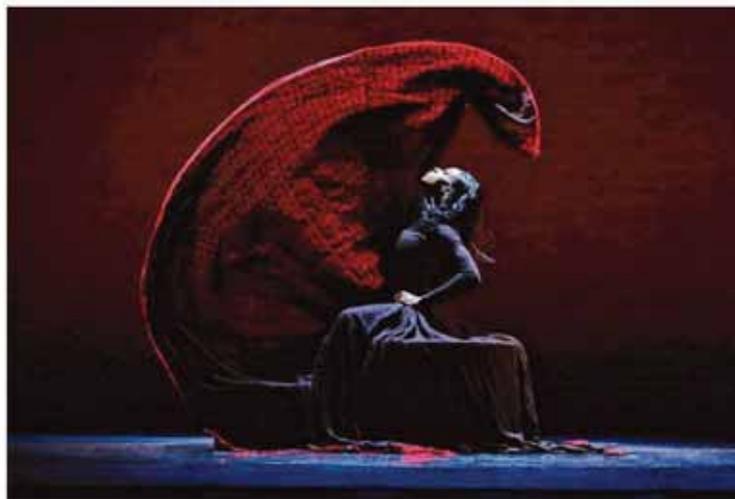
Anne Souder, center, performs with the Martha Graham Dance Company in "Appalachian Spring."



Courtesy of Cris Alexander

Martha Graham founded the Martha Graham Dance Company in 1926.

the troupe joins a growing list of artists and organizations — including composer Philip Glass, Renée Fleming and the Washington National Opera — who have withdrawn appearances there amid controversy



Courtesy of Melissa Sherwood

Leslie Andrea Williams in Graham's "Chronicle." The modern dance icon sought to embody timeless truths in her dance.

over the institution's rebranding under President Donald Trump's takeover.

The quintessential modernist, Graham was anything but the solitary genius. She collaborated with era-defining com-

posers, designers and artists in creating dances that have lost none of their power to delight and astonish.

For its Graham100 tour, the company features two distinct programs. Saturday's perfor-

Graham100: Martha Graham Dance Company. 8 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 14; 3 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 15. \$56-\$150. Zellerbach Hall, UC Berkeley. 510-642-9988. <https://calperformances.org>

mance spotlights two signature Graham works — 1947's "Night Journey," which hasn't been in the company's repertoire for 10 years, and 1936's "Chronicle," a piece she set in response to the Spanish Civil War. Then there's the hip-hop infused "Cortege," created by the choreographic team of Baye & Asa (Amadi "Baye" Washington and Sam "Asa" Pratt) in response to Graham's seminal 1967 anti-war protest "Cortege of Eagles."

Anne Soulder, a key Graham Company dancer since 2015 who performs in all three of Saturday's works, remembers dancing in the chorus of "Night Journey" during her first season with the troupe and is eager to delve into the famously harrowing account of the Oedipus Rex tragedy from the perspective of his mother, Jocasta.

"So many incredible women have stepped into this role, starting with Martha and Janet Eilber," she said. "It's an incredibly heavy psychological drama that starts at the end, and goes through the story bit by bit."

Sunday's program features Graham's most iconic work, "Appalachian Spring" with the folk-music-inspired score by Aaron Copland and original sets by Isamu Noguchi. It's paired with 2024's "We the People," a collaboration between choreographer Jamar Roberts and roots musician Rhiannon Giddens.

The program also includes Eilber's recreation of Graham's short solo "Immediate Tragedy," a 1937 work long thought to be lost "but that

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Courtesy of Luis Luque

Martha Graham Dance Company in Hope Boykin's "En Masse."

was always on our radar," Eilber said. "So much was written about it when she danced it in the late 1930s."

About eight years ago, Eilber got a call about the discovery of several film roles that a photographer had shot of a program that included "Immediate Tragedy." The newly arranged score by Christopher Rountree was inspired by pages of music handwritten by composer Henry Cowell found in the Graham archives.

"We suddenly not only had photos, but in the correct order," Eilber said. "Martha's language is in my body and looking at the images when she was in this pose, I listened to my body about what the next step would have been. It's not exactly what Martha did, but is deeply informed by the times she was living in."

Sunday's program also includes the newly commissioned dance by Hope Boykin. Much like Soulder reveling in the connections that run through her dancing the role of Jocasta, Boykin brings together a skein of creative connections with the Bay Area premiere of her "En Mass."

A former Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater star deeply familiar to Bay Area audiences, Boykin has been engaged with the score by Leonard Bernstein since she was commissioned to set a new dance for the 50th anni-

versary of the Jacqueline Kennedy-commissioned Bernstein/Ailey "MASS," which premiered at the opening of the Kennedy Center in 1971.

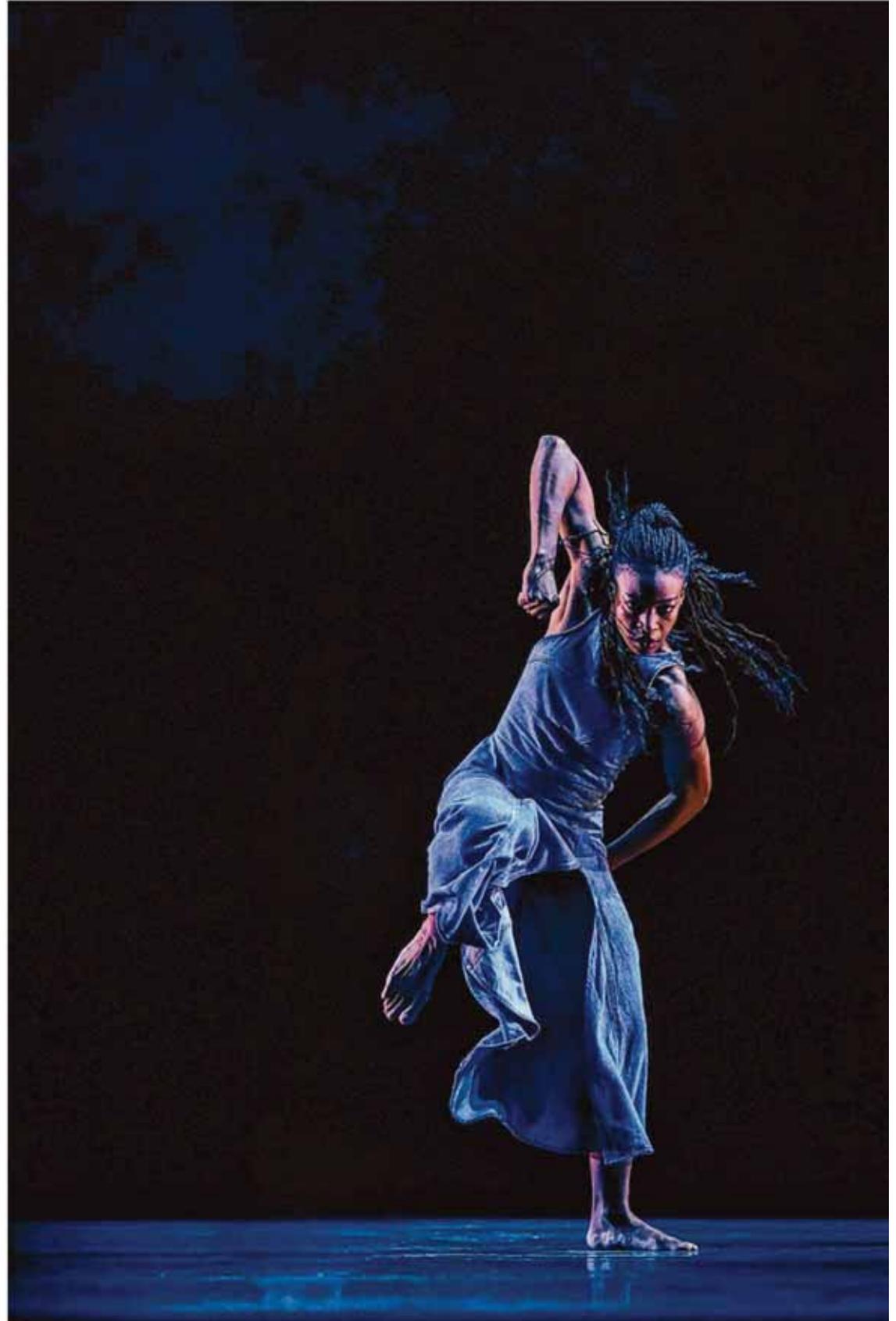
"En Mass" uses a Bernstein fragment written for an unfinished project with Graham, in essence continuing the composer's collaborations with Graham and Ailey. Rountree paired with Bernstein fragment with newly arranged excerpts from "MASS," while Boykin drew on her early training to set the new work for Graham dancers.

"My time in Ailey is not what bridged the gap. It was my time in the Ailey School, where Graham technique was one of the first classes I took, every Monday, Wednesday and Friday," Boykin noted.

The demand to study Graham's rigorous technique, with its torso contractions and releases and coiled counter movements, is greater than ever, according to Eilber. In April, the company is moving into a new state-of-the-art studio at 43rd Street and Broadway in New York City after a yearslong search for a new campus.

"There's nothing more important than space for dancers," Eilber said, "and there's so much interest in our school and the Graham technique."

Andrew Gilbert is a freelance writer.



Courtesy of Isabella Pagano

Leslie Andrea Williams in Jamar Roberts' "We the People."