



Martha Graham Dance Company turns a youthful 100

Established and run for many decades by a major personality who became the towering icon of American modern dance, Martha Graham Dance Company is celebrating its centenary with a US and European tour. After performances in Paris last November, which were marked by the presence of guest artist former étoile Aurélie Dupont in a solo created for her and inspired by Graham's world, the company performs this spring in numerous American cities, Italy, and Latvia.

by Sonia Schoonejans

An exception in the unstable world of 'modern dance', New York-based Martha Graham Dance Company (MGDC) is the United States' oldest and most firmly-established modern dance ensemble whose longevity can be compared to that of the major classical ballet companies which are most often part of a stable state institution such as an opera house or national theatre. The modern dance technique developed by Graham, with its vocabulary and grammar based on breathing and the dual principles of contraction and release, is governed by such coherent logic and possesses a scope such that it has rightly been set alongside that of classical ballet. George Balanchine, who knew the subject well, said of the Graham technique that it is "classical because it is serious and transmissible". These are the two core qualities which, over the years, have enabled Graham's com-

pany to overcome the many challenges and vicissitudes inherent in the life of an independent artistic group. Many of ballet's star dancers have wanted to dance in the great choreographer's works, especially when she was still at the head of her company, among whom Mikhail Baryshnikov, Margot Fonteyn, Rudolf Nureyev and Maya Plisetskaya. Similar enthusiasm was expressed in the world of acting by practitioners captivated by the expressiveness of Graham's style: Ingrid Bergman, Marlon Brando, Liza Minelli, Woody Allen, Joanne Woodward and even Madonna attended Graham technique classes and drew inspiration from the company's performances.

Today, MGDC continues to show extraordinary creativity; Janet Eilber, artistic director since 2005, has found a formula that respects Graham's choreographic heritage while finding the way to introduce new work. Among the choreographers from whom she has commissioned

*Above:
portrait of
Martha
Graham in
New York in
1961"
(ph. Arnold
Newman)*



*Xin Ying, Lloyd Knight –
Martha Graham Dance Company:
“Acts Of Light”, c. Martha Graham
(ph. N. Sternalsky)*



Mikhail Baryshnikov with the Martha Graham Dance Company in "Appalachian Spring" en 1987

new pieces are Lucinda Childs, Robert Wilson, Mats Ek, and Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, and most recently Jamar Roberts and Hofesh Shechter. She has thereby energised the ensemble and diversified its dance styles. There are around twenty permanent MGDC dancers who are able to move between the very different worlds of guest choreographers while maintaining the authenticity of their performances of the Graham repertory, of which the company remains the custodian. This also demonstrates the solid nature of the Graham technique, which remains the MGDC dancers' core training. It should also be remembered that, despite the fact today's dancers

never knew the great Martha herself, their teachers are still former dancers who worked with her, among whom Janet Eilber herself.

For a large proportion of European audiences, especially younger audience members, Graham's world and her impact on modern dance are a real discovery. What last November's French tour - the first in more than twenty years - revealed was a repertory of fundamental importance in the history of Western dance, performed with the greatest rigour and exemplary faithfulness to the choreography, sets, costumes, hairstyles and lighting intended by Graham at the time of their creation.



Donlin Foreman, Christine Dakin, Kenneth Topping in "Phaedra Dream", in 1988 (ph. Jack Mitchell)



A short history of the Graham epic

In 1926, the Martha Graham Concert Group was established in New York. Graham had just left the Greenwich Village Follies company after several years spent alongside the pioneers of modern dance Ruth St Denis and Ted Shawn. At that time her contraction/release technique was still being developed, but the young American already had her own way of using the floor and gravity, two features destined to become core elements of modern dance. Her first group was entirely female and it was not until 1938 that the first man, Erik Hawkins, joined them. Their first dance recital took place on 18th April 1926 in a small theatre on 48th Street, New York City, Graham having managed to obtain from those who believed in her the funds needed to pay to put it on. Throughout her life she was always able to find someone willing to save her company from bankruptcy, to settle the bills and maintain the quality of performance, that said, over the course of its long history, the company has risked folding on more than on occasion.

above:
Lorenzo
Pagano,
Laurel Dalley-
Smith, Leslie
Andrea
Williams, Xin
Ying – Martha
Graham
Dance
Company:
“Cave of the
heart”,
c. Martha
Graham (ph.
F. Levieux)

Graham’s earliest works, which critics of the time called ‘dances of revolt’ because of the exclusively political content they attributed to them, were above all a rejection of the exoticism of the ‘Denishawn’ performance and an expression of the need to find an authentic form of movement, stripped of any form of folklore. Despite initial reluctance on the part of her audiences, Graham made no concessions in her artistic choices.

The 1930s marked the beginning of her widening success, helped by President F D Roosevelt’s New Deal policies after the financial crisis of 1929. Thanks to commissions for new works, the their dissemination and support for her teaching methods, Graham began to acquire the status of a leading figure in American culture.

This is the period that saw the creation of the semi-

nal work *American Document*, and when, in 1932 she was offered a scholarship to continue her training with the celebrated German expressionist dancer-choreographer Mary Wigman, Graham refused, affirming a solid allegiance to American culture in her search for artistic identity. In those years, she made more committed works and, in 1936 refused an invitation from the Nazi minister Josef Goebbels to take part in the performances at the Olympic Games in Berlin.

The 1940s were period of extraordinary creativity as Graham became interested in psychoanalysis and, with an introspective focus, created works that brought to the stage tragic female figures drawn from Greek mythology and the Bible. As was her custom until the age of 76, Graham always performed the leading role. Martha

below:
Martha
Graham,
Batsheva de
Rothschild
and Ted
Shawn at
the Jacob’s
Pillow
Dance
Festival in
1956
(ph. Jack
Mitchell)





Graham Dance Company now included major dancers who, in addition to Erik Hawkins, included John Butler, Glen Tetley, Merce Cunningham and Paul Taylor, not to mention historic female dancers such as Anne Sokolow, Sophie Maslow and, a little later on, Yuriko Kikushi, the most faithful of all Graham interpreters with the company who later directed the ensemble for some ten years and was devoted to the transmission of Graham's technique and works.

Graham most often relied on contemporary artists to accompany her choreography. Among the composers were Samuel Barber, Aaron Copland and Gian Carlo Menotti while among the designers, Isamu Noguchi and Alexander Calder and, later, fashion designer Calvin Klein. Lighting design was of fundamental importance to Graham and most of her works were "lit" by Jean Rosenthal, a former student who became an innovative force in stage lighting. The celebrated "Rosenthal blue", a luminous backdrop that established itself as the standard background for many ballets, was originally created for

Graham, who recalled: "For *Appalachian Spring* I needed an American sky of a clear, clean blue, stripped down, simple, without affectation or sentimentalism, and that is what Jean brought me".

In the 1960s and until Graham's death in 1991, the company performed in the most prestigious theatres across the world; the quality of its dancers and the originality of the choreographic language were admired and acclaimed by the widest variety of audiences. In France, Martha Graham was awarded the Légion d'honneur, the highest French honour in 1984 and the following year, at the Théâtre du Châtelet, her company was applauded for almost thirty minutes at the end of their performance.

After Graham's death, her protégé Ronald Protas took over the artistic direction of the company, but he accumulated debts through imprudent management and exercised excessive control over the repertoire, coming into conflict with the dancers. Following a court ruling which established that the author's rights belonged not to him but to the Martha Graham Dance Company, a former company dancer, Janet Eilber, was appointed artistic director in 2005, beginning a period of renewal.

This centenary, whose celebration began in France last November, will continue in spring first in the United States, initially in California, then Chicago, Washington and New York where the 100th Anniversary Gala takes place on 17th April. From May onwards, MGDC begins an international tour which starts in Italy, in Venice, where the company will be hosted by Teatro La Fenice and then at the Teatro Comunale, Modena.

Martha Graham Dance Company: "Night Journey", c. Martha Graham (ph. Luque)



Madonna, Martha Graham and Calvin Klein in 1990 (ph. R. Platzer)



Paris and touring programmes

To celebrate its centenary, Martha Graham Dance Company undertook an extensive tour in France, to which London and Athens were added. In Paris, the company was resident for almost two weeks at Théâtre du Châtelet, presenting two programmes, the first including two works from Graham's 'mythological' period.

First performed in 1947, *Errand into the Maze* takes its title from a poem by the writer Ben Belitt. The theme is inspired by the myth of Theseus, the hero who must, with the help of Ariadne, defeat the Minotaur in order to escape the labyrinth. But it is not the Athenian prince who is of interest to the choreographer - *Errand into the Maze* presents a heroine, Ariadne, who, in the labyrinth of her subconscious, confronts the darkness within her, embodied by the Minotaur. Graham's introspective reading of the Greek myth, transforming the accomplishment of her mission into a journey through the human psyche (Ariadne frees herself from her fears), corresponds to a period in which Graham was interested in psychoanalysis and in particular the theories of Carl Gustav Jung. When the Minotaur enters the stage, a duet of intense power is set in motion and Gian Carlo Menotti's music accompanies this confrontation between darkness and light with an emotional charge that maintains the tension until the final release. The sculptor Isamu Noguchi, Graham's collaborator throughout her career, devised a V-shaped structure that defines the stage space, within which a winds a long rope, the symbol of the path to be taken in order to emerge from an existential impasse.

Cave of the Heart, created in 1946 to music by Samuel Barber, draws inspiration from another Greek myth, that of Medea, daughter of the Sun, who avenges her lover Jason's betrayal by killing her own children. For Graham, the myth becomes a way to explore the destructive powers of wounded love. Through powerful, theatrical movement, Graham shows the sufferings of jealous love and Medea's vengeful blindness. The sets and costumes were conceived by Noguchi in to-

tal harmony with Graham, who wrote in her memoirs: "When I was reflecting on the problem posed by Medea's flight towards her father, the Sun, Isamu invented a dress made of shining, vibrating bronze threads, which surrounded me like a chariot of flames".

The beauty of these two works lies in a rigorous geometry that channels expressive force. The dancers' interpretations, thanks to their commitment to the stage action as conceived by Graham, convey with the necessary intensity, the past made present.

After such dramatic power, the programme ended with *Cave*, a driving work by contemporary choreographer Hofesh Shechte, in which all the dancers' vibrating energy was released. Invited in 2022 to create a work for MGDC, the Israeli choreographer conceived it as a kind of 'rave party' in which freedom is combined with rigour, improvisation with precision. *Cave* allows the dancers to express their individuality within structures and parameters rigidly defined by the choreographer. The resulting power is such that the audience, carried along by this immersive dance experience, ends up rising to its feet and applauding enthusiastically the dancers who shift with ease from theatrical dancing of powerful intensity to an explosion of vibrant energy.

In the second programme, Graham showed a more serene aspect of her work with *Diversion of Angels*. The ballet, created in 1948, presents three couples, each representing an aspect of love symbolised by a colour: white for harmonious and mature love, red for erotic and ardent love, yellow for seductive and adolescent love. It was again Graham's friend, the poet Ben Belitt, who suggested the title and summed up the atmosphere of this plotless piece: "the desire of those who have a single heart, of those who are not divided, the moods of innocence, of joy, of the diversion of angels". Norman dello Joio's score combines jazz rhythms with melodies of a more romantic character.

Chronicle takes us back to a more 'committed' period of Graham's career. First staged in 1936, *Chronicle* is an anti-war manifesto, rarely performed because it disappeared from the repertory as early as the following year. Thanks to film found in 1985, it has been

Martha Graham Dance Company: "Diversion of Angels", c. Martha Graham (ph. D. Bazemore)

possible to reconstruct it, and today it comprises three of the five sections originally composed. It opens with a solo by a woman whose frenetic gestures announce impending disaster and who is joined by a group of women dressed in black who jump and leap, with ‘contractions’ followed by no ‘release’. It is a work notable for its energy and austere radicalism, for which Graham turned to Wallingford Riegger, one of the first American composers to use twelve-tone musical technique.

We the People, a 2024 work by Jamar Roberts, also carries a dimension of radicalism. *We the People* - the first three words of the United States Constitution - takes the shape of both a protest and a meditation. What is striking is an emotional force that recalls the work of Alvin Ailey, of which Roberts was one of the leading interpreters.

Aurélie Dupont’s *Désir*

On certain evenings, *Désir*, a solo of great soberness was added into the programme and danced by guest artist Aurélie Dupont (former étoile and, for a short period, director of Paris Opéra Ballet. It is a five-minute gem, inspired by photographs of Martha Graham from the 1920s and found in the archives of the Dance Collection at New York’s Lincoln Center. The solo was conceived for Dupont by Virginie Mécène, who danced with MGDC until 2006 and later became director of its school and who is now a choreographer. The music by Kenji Bunch, is minimalist, comprising a few notes and silence. The dancer, dressed in a long, close-fitting, elastic red gown inspired by the one worn in the iconic Graham solo *Lamentation*, moves almost imperceptibly, delicately, distilling the aura of a still-young Graham in her movements. Its essence is faithful to the spirit of the great Martha. We spoke to the French ballerina.

S.S. – What drew you towards the Graham technique, so far removed from the classical ballet movement you so brilliantly performed throughout your career at the Paris Opéra?

A.D. – *It is linked to a childhood memory. At the Opéra’s dance school, I liked the classes in the Martha Graham technique among the limited modern dance training we had. I loved its approach to dance based on breathing and the double movement of contraction and release. When in 2015, and having been an étoile for 17 years, I reached the age at which the Paris Opéra dancers must retire, I asked myself “what next?” Of course I still wanted to dance, but I did not think of continuing a career in ballet. That was when I thought about Graham technique and I felt the desire to deepen my understanding of it; it was something of a return to my roots.*

S.S. – You were in Paris, so it can’t have been easy to find a high-level class in the technique.
A.D. – *That’s true, but I knew that the Graham company gives classes at its New York studios. Director Janet Eilber welcomed my suggestion, so I left for New York.*

S.S. – The classes took place at Westbeth in studios that had been Merce Cunningham’s for a long time. Were you at all disappointed by the classes or was your intuition right?

A.D. – *Not only was I not disappointed, but I truly*

fell in love with the Graham company whose expressive power and artistic commitment had a profound impact on me. It was a wonderful period. I rediscovered my dancer’s body and the Graham technique suited me perfectly. I stayed for several weeks.

S.S. – Did that stay among the dancers of Martha Graham Dance Company with whom you had formed a deep bond have consequences and lead you to return to New York later on?

A.D. – *Yes. Later, Janet asked me to take part in a Graham Company performance. Even though it was a challenge for me to go back on stage, I gladly accepted and returned to New York. The programme included Appalachian Spring and the solo Ekstasis, which I danced.*

S.S. – The adventure sparked by your childhood memory continued when, in 2018 Martha Graham Dance Company was invited to the Paris Opéra at your suggestion.

A.D. – *When I became director of dance at the Paris Opéra, after Benjamin Millepied’s departure, I wanted to invite the Martha Graham Dance Company. It had not been to the Opéra since 1992. It seemed natural and crucial to invite the company which had inspired me so much. I had the joy not only of welcoming them to the Opéra but also of being invited to dance Ekstasis again. Those moments remain among the most precious of my life as an artist.*

S.S. – And the odyssey is not over yet, since you have just danced again with Martha Graham Dance Company during its recent French tour in a new work to mark the centenary.

A.D. – *Yes, an adventure that continued when I was free again, since four years ago I quit Opéra’s directorship, a long-considered decision. But I missed the stage, and then came the invitation from the Graham company to create a solo made for me and with me, as part of this tour.*

S.S. – Did you accept immediately?

A.D. – *Almost. I was both happy and uneasy. I had to get back into shape. The choreography would be created by Virginie Mécène, which reassured me because we knew each other well, having already worked together. The solo would be built up from photographs found by Virginie, showing a young Martha Graham herself performing on stage.*

S.S. – How did the creative process unfold?
A.D. – *It lasted about ten days, working for five hours a day. Virginie and I were inspired by her poses, gestures, even the costumes. The works shown were no longer in the repertory and were long lost, but those photographs preserved traces of them. The result is very severe. The solo is called Désir and lasts five minutes.*



Aurélie Dupont
(ph. J. Saget)

□