

# *Broad Street Review*

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**Annenberg Center Live and NextMove Dance present Martha Graham Dance Company's 'The EVE Project'**

## **American Eve**

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Martha Graham reportedly once proclaimed that "all great dancing stems from the lonely place." When a student asked where that place is, Graham replied, "Between your thighs. Next question?" This exchange was on my mind when her namesake company performed *The EVE Project*, a collection of works old and new which celebrates the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment by examining aspects of womanhood.



*More than a red hem in Martha Graham's 'Chronicle.' (Photo by Brigid Pierce/Hibbard Nash Photography.)*

A dance trailblazer, Graham created her own style of movement and approach to choreography, often collaborating with artists in other mediums. Founded in 1926, Martha Graham Dance Company now performs both works by Graham and newly commissioned pieces. At the Annenberg in January, these included three dances by Graham and a preview of a new work by Maxine Doyle and Bobbi Jene Smith called *Deo*, which will get its premiere in New York in April.

### **Continuing influences**

*The EVE Project* proves Graham's continued influence on dance today. Everything that emerged after Graham seems shaped by her work somehow, much like modern dance was shaped by classical ballet even as it rejected formalism, rigidity, and elitism. Rejection also is a response, and it was apparent that Graham's dance vocabulary drew from ballet. The results were visually stunning and expertly danced, leaving me in awe of the choreographer's legacy.

### **Frenzy, passion, and balance**

The first piece, *Diversion of Angels*, premiered in 1948. A plotless dance, it examines aspects of womanhood through different types of love. Graham's costumes suggest this through color: Charlotte Landreau's yellow, So Young An's red, and Natasha M. Diamond-Walker's white reflected youthful frenzy, erotic passion, and mature balance. The lower half of the female dancers' costumes conveyed another form of balance. What looked like a full skirt was revealed to be wide-legged pants, creating an image both masculine and feminine.

There was rapture in An's sky-high kicks and febrile energy in Landreau's grand jetés, capturing the force of a woman's love. Lloyd Mayor literally caught that force just for a moment when Landreau launched her body into the air and landed sitting on his shoulder. Meanwhile, Diamond-Walker imbued balanced love with regal dignity. Her deep, architectural backbends evoked sculpture and Graham's creative collaborations with Isamu Noguchi. *Diversion of Angels* underscored the majesty of her role in its final image, when Diamond-Walker was crowned by the outspread fingers of her male partner.

### **A living sculpture**

*Ekstasis* followed, a slower-paced solo that might have suffered on a different program with another company. But Graham's repertory includes many solos, such as her signature *Lamentation* (1930). Like *Lamentation*, which the dancer performs inside a tube of material, *Ekstasis* connects movement and confinement with fabric. Anne Souder gave my favorite performance of the evening, creating elegant yet unthinkable moving shapes. Though her feet remained planted in the opening sequence, the movements of her head and hips, breathtakingly spotlit by Nick Hung, riveted my attention.



*'Chronicle' boasts choreography and costumes by Martha Graham. (Photo by Brigid Pierce.)*

Souder became an animated sculpture with slow, sinuous movements, raising her arms overhead. *Ekstasis* repeated and juxtaposed this image toward the end, when Souder resembled a twisted *Winged Victory of Samothrace*, with upraised limbs and a contorted lower half. In the striking final scene, Souder formed a deep parabola with her body, her torso its axis of symmetry.

### **A female response to war**

The program concluded with *Chronicle*, a dance Graham created in 1936 in response to the rise of fascism. *Chronicle* originally contained five sections; today, the company performs a reconstructed version with three parts. It captures images of and a response to war that struck me as distinctly female. For instance, Xin Ying wore a black dress with a full skirt that initially appeared to have a red hem. This turned out to be a red underskirt, which Ying pulled over her head into a mantle. As drums sounded the call to war, Ying became an embodiment of the bloodshed, inhumanity, and mourning in their aftermath.

The second section introduced a group of dancers in black cap-sleeved dresses who walked backward across the stage in identical poses, with one hand on the shoulder and the other wrapped around the waist. They moved with purpose but without direction, first deliberately and then with haste, like asylum seekers displaced by battle. These figures returned in the last section, their costumes (designed by Graham) contrasting with the white dress of a dancer on a platform. She seemed to draw energy from the others as they leapt in a circle around her, reaching her arms toward them and then pulling her hands to her chest.

### **The dance revolution**

Though I did not enjoy *Chronicle* as much as the other pieces, I blame this on its music rather than its choreography. Wallingford Riegger's *New Dance* sounded outdated, its horns and drums as bombastic as the wooden acting in some old

movies. Graham's choreographic style is more like Lee Strasberg's Method technique, which revolutionized acting the way that Graham revolutionized dance.

Graham is an Eve-like figure in the world of dance: nearly a century ago, she plucked an apple of creative knowledge that continues to reverberate in 2019. Just as modern dance responded to ballet, today's new dances respond to Graham's innovations. *The EVE Project* (with an April run coming up in New York) is a must-see, keeping the legacy of one of the most important choreographers of all time in conversation with emerging dance.