

# Odysseys Into Martha Graham World, One Dramatic, the Other Abstract

By **Gia Kourlas**

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Female power is something that Martha Graham radiated. This revolutionary modern dance choreographer, who once said that the only sin a person could have was mediocrity, created a repertory that celebrates women in all their grief and triumph.

This season, the Martha Graham Dance Company explores female empowerment with the start of its two-year EVE Project, commemorating the 1920 ratification of the 19th Amendment that gave women the power to vote. Included are two new works: Pam Tanowitz’s “Untitled (Souvenir),” in which she merges Graham’s steps with her own; and “Deo,” a collaboration by Maxine Doyle and Bobbi Jene Smith. Inspired by the myth of Demeter and Persephone, “Deo” explores issues surrounding women and mortality with, aptly, an all-female cast.

Janet Eilber, the company’s artistic director, said it was important for the works to be different in approach. She chose her choreographers accordingly: drama on one side (Ms. Doyle and Ms. Smith) and pure movement on the other (Ms. Tanowitz).

“I was looking at Maxine Doyle because of her theatricality and her emotional content,” she said. “Martha was really trying to create theater pieces with ‘Death and Entrances’ and even ‘Appalachian Spring.’ She called them dance-dramas.”



The choreographer Pam Tanowitz rehearsing her new work, “Untitled (Souvenir),” with Graham dancers. Yana Paskova for The New York Times

Ms. Doyle, the associate director and choreographer of the British theater company Punchdrunk brought in Ms. Smith; they met when Ms. Smith performed in the immersive “Sleep No More,” one of Punchdrunk’s best-known productions. Before that, Ms. Smith was a member of Batsheva Dance Company where she trained in Gaga, the sensation-based dance language created by the choreographer Ohad Naharin.

While Ms. Smith veers toward luscious, deeply felt movement, Ms. Tanowitz loves to invent steps and to mine dance history for inspiration. She’s done both for her premiere, in which she regards Graham’s steps and set pieces — a few will decorate the stage, but subtly so — as souvenirs, or mementos, from her body of work. Specifically, she’s used movement from “The Legend of Judith” (1967), which she said she related to on a visceral level; and “Dark Meadow” (1946), one of her favorite Graham works.

“I wanted the balance of Martha’s abstraction and her modernism,” Ms. Eilber said. “Pam’s into puzzle solving, lines. It was also the fact that she was really interested in the idea of borrowing Graham material and transforming it.”

Ms. Doyle and Ms. Smith were all about delving into the dancers’ inherent theatricality. Ms. Tanowitz had a different mission: “How do we keep the physicality,” she said, “but take away the overlay of the drama?”



Only emote: The choreographer Bobbi Jene Smith. Yana Paskova for The New York Times

In the end, what the works have in common is how they expose something singular: The dancers as individuals. What follows are edited excerpts from recent interviews with the choreographers about their odysseys into the world of Graham.

## Pam Tanowitz

**GRAHAM, PAM, GRAHAM, PAM** I spliced together movement. I would take one step from Graham’s “The Legend of Judith” and one step from Pam, and sew them together. That became a whole new phrase. In rehearsals, the dancers would be like, “Graham, Pam, Graham, Pam.” I also took the male solo from “Dark Meadow” and made it a male trio. Lorenzo Pagano’s doing the legs and the torso, Lloyd Mayor is doing the arms and then I have Lloyd Knight reversing it all.

**A DANCE NERD’S DREAM COME TRUE** I watched archival videos and that’s where “The Legend of Judith” came in. I’m a dance nerd so it’s all really exciting to me.

The dancers learned all the movement before I walked in for the first rehearsal. It was like Christmas morning: I had all of these steps to choose from. But it’s scary. I have to say that. I try to forget about it and honor it, but I feel the weight of history on me.



“The drama isn’t there, but in a weird way it brings up feelings,” says Lloyd Knight, center, of Ms. Tanowitz’s dance. “You’re just coming out as yourself.”  
Yana Paskova for The New York Times

**SHE COULDN’T HELP HERSELF** I planned on using existing Graham material that wasn’t necessarily well known, but I watched a rehearsal of “Dark Meadow,” which is a very famous piece I’m obsessed with. It starts out in silence — it’s basically step-touch, step-touch and to me it’s about group will and strong women. I couldn’t stop thinking about it so I used it. I broke my own rule.

**NO DRAMA QUEENS** What I’m asking them to do — to take away the drama — is very challenging. They don’t need to look out and to be presentational. I tell them to take their focus in. It’s strong and what we realized is that it’s created a different kind of drama: It’s about being present in the physicality and dancing with people onstage.

**THE OUTCOME** This showed me that my movement isn’t so different from Graham’s. [*Laughs*] It has told me that dance is dance and steps are steps. Aside from the obvious of the Graham architecture of the hands or the highly stylized head, the actual steps are steps that we all use.

#### A DANCER’S PERSPECTIVE:

Lloyd Knight: “You come in as you, and that’s a great feeling. You are performing, but it’s in a very stripped-down way. I loved every minute of it. The drama isn’t there, but in a weird way it brings up feelings: You’re just coming out as yourself.”



The Graham dancers rehearse “Deo.” Yana Paskova for The New York Times

## Maxine Doyle and Bobbi Jean Smith

### THE FIRST STEPS

**Maxine Doyle** I did workshops with the company a couple of years ago and I really felt a connection with the women. I felt that there was a really interesting synergy between the movement language that Bobbi created on her own body as a dancer and how I could imagine that sitting or evolving or developing on the Graham women.

## GOING GAGA

**Bobbi Jene Smith** Gaga and the Graham movement are very different, but there's something impulsively animal about the connection to pleasure and strength and power and imagination, and that magical combination of content and action and physicality. They both create that.

## AND GOING GREEK

**Doyle** The myth of Demeter and Persephone really spoke to me as a woman, it spoke to me as a mother and it spoke to me as a daughter. I was thinking about how the work would sit within the rep, and how it could honor, in some way, the themes and concerns and ideas of Graham as a creator. Rather than telling the story or the narrative of Demeter, we decided to look more at the themes of the story, which are separation, rage and grief.

## PASSION ON THE SURFACE

**Doyle** I worked with a process that is about using dramatic tone and physical tensions in the body to tell stories and express emotion. There's an inherent sensuality and connection to their vulnerability and their madness, and the distance between those two things, that I'm really drawn to.

## YES, TO THE DRAMA

**Smith** I don't think you could ever ask them, "What are you thinking about in this moment?" and they'd say, "Oh nothing, I don't know yet. I'm working on it." They're coming with a whole vessel of memories and stories in their bodies.

## A DANCER'S PERSPECTIVE:

Xin Yang "Bobbi talks about how as a woman you're almost like a mountain: You have your leg muscles, and you want to feel the power of them. You don't think, oh my legs are too big. [*Laughs*] Suddenly I feel, Oh, I'm beautiful just the way I am."

Martha Graham Dance Company  
April 2-April 14 at Joyce Theater, Manhattan; [joyce.org](http://joyce.org)

