

FINANCIAL TIMES

Dance

Martha Graham Dance Company at the Joyce Theater, New York — determination and despair

The choreographer's *Herodiade* joins a season that also includes new commissions



PeiJu Chien-Pott in Martha Graham's 'Herodiade' © Melissa Sherwood

By Apollinaire Scherr

The Martha Graham season organises itself around a new theme each year: surrealist Martha or political Martha or, this year, in time for the 19th Amendment's centenary, Martha the emancipator of women. The women part is certainly true.

Graham liked to instruct her students to move from their vaginas. Her early, all-female work emanated witchy strength and sisterhood — power iconic and voluminous, pelvic and mystic. The galvanising anti-war *Chronicle* from 1936 (on Programme B) exemplifies this Amazonian turn.

But by the 1940s, the studly young Erick Hawkins had entered the company and the cave of the choreographer's heart (to nod to one of her titles). Increasingly her heroines came

to ruin. If her message was gloomy, though, her method proved so precise and nuanced that it dignified the women's suffering. The story warned and lamented; the choreography elevated.

The message in "Martha's menopausal dance", as troupers at its 1945 birth called the duet *Herodiade*, is straightforward. Drawn to a mirror that sculptor Isamu Noguchi seems to have assembled from a jumble of bleached bones, this woman whose husband has succumbed to her own daughter is feeling all dried up. On the roster for the first time in 15 years and the only reason to show up for Programme A, *Herodiade* alternates between spiky linearity and spiralling volume — between the kind of tunnel vision that has Anna Karenina throwing herself on to the tracks and a voluptuous hurricane of motion that pulls space into its orbit and thus defers an ending.

The tremendous PeiJu Chien-Pott revealed every facet of Herodias's determination and despair. Natasha Diamond-Walker was less her "attendant" than her shadow (as Graham the Jungian might have it) — grounded calm to Chien-Pott's flagrant agitation. Yet Diamond-Walker brought out resemblances too: her arms curving earthward like hillocks alerting us to Chien-Pott's whorling.

Most of the new and recent commissions in a season overstuffed with them skip Graham's means for her ends. The premiere *Deo*, for example, by Sleep No More director Maxine Doyle and Batsheva alum Bobbi Jene Smith, deploys a typically unleashed contemporary idiom to suggest a woman's sexual ripeness — about as specific to Graham as apples are to Cézanne.

Pam Tanowitz's riveting *Untitled (Souvenir)*, by contrast, takes on specific Graham steps from particular dances. Much in demand this year, with upcoming commissions from New York City Ballet and Paul Taylor, the New York choreographer understands that the effect the sculptural steps have on the surrounding space is drama enough. Like the onetime Graham trouper Merce Cunningham, Tanowitz keeps emptying and filling the stage, asymmetrically and surprisingly. And she attends to what Graham too often neglected: the score. In its deconstructive tendencies, Caroline Shaw's fractured string quartet perfectly suits *Untitled (Souvenir)*.

Paul Hindemith's intimate, mercurial music for *Herodiade* represents one of the few times Graham chose a composer at her level of genius. Perhaps for its next project, the company could commission a few alternative scores.

★★★☆☆ To April 14, joyce.org TNW