

# If I Was Martha, What Would I Do?’ For One, Stay Upright

The Martha Graham Dance Company has reimagined a lost 1937 solo, inspired by the Spanish Civil War, for the digital world.

By **Gia Kourlas**

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The choreographer Martha Graham “had been in a valley of despair.”

It was 1937 when Graham, worried about the Spanish Civil War and the rise of fascism in Europe, confessed her state of mind in a letter to the composer Henry Cowell. “Whether the desperation lies in Spain,” she wrote, “or in a memory in our own hearts, it is the same.”

The result was her solo “Immediate Tragedy,” a companion piece to another dance inspired by the war, “Deep Song.” Both featured music by Cowell; both were explorations of harrowing events. In “Immediate Tragedy,” Graham told him, “I was dedicating myself anew to space, that in spite of violation I was upright and that I was going to stay upright at all costs.”

“Immediate Tragedy” is a lost work, yet its of-the-moment title, along with Graham’s determination to remain upright no matter what, feels right for the current moment. Now the solo is coming back — reimagined for the digital world and for multiple dancers.



Leslie Andrea Williams of the Graham company: “I got to mix my movement style with Martha. I had to picture if I was Martha, what would I do?” Ricki Quinn

Before the coronavirus struck, the Martha Graham Dance Company had worked on creating a new version of the solo for the stage using archival materials as a guide: among them letters, a lively description of Graham performing the work by the choreographer José Limón and 35 photographs, by Robert Fraser, Barbara Morgan and George Platt Lynes. The composer and conductor Christopher Rountree, who leads the Los Angeles ensemble Wild Up, was working on a new score. (The Cowell music was lost, too.)

But with the dancers in quarantine, Janet Eilber, the company’s artistic director, had an idea to keep them working while sheltering at home. “Why don’t we use all the ephemera that we collected for ‘Immediate Tragedy’ for a completely different project?” she said. “Let’s see what we can build out of it for the digital world referencing today’s immediate tragedy.”

On Friday, the Graham company, in collaboration with Wild Up and the Younes and Soraya Nazarian Center for the Performing Arts in Los Angeles, will present the premiere of the new “Immediate Tragedy.” (The video will be available starting at 7 p.m. Eastern on the Facebook pages of the Soraya and the Graham company; the Graham company’s YouTube Channel will feature it on its Saturday Martha Matinee presentation. “Immediate Tragedy” will remain up indefinitely on Graham’s YouTube site.)



Clockwise from upper left, the Graham dancers Xin Ying, Lloyd Knight, Lorenzo Pagano and Leslie Andrea Williams in the reimagined “Immediate Tragedy.” Ricki Quinn

“We started out liking the idea of space as an underlying theme because in Martha’s quote, she says she’s dedicating herself ‘anew to space;” Ms. Eilber said. “Because all of our space was so limited, we were considering space in a completely different way.”

But after the protests ignited by the killing of George Floyd in police custody in Minneapolis, the theme — or the feeling of the dance — expanded. “The great thing about Martha’s abstraction is it can contain so many different issues and tragedies,” Ms. Eilber said. “Her best works absorb the context of just about any era.”

For the dancer Leslie Andrea Williams, the events of the last few weeks changed the tone of her performance. At first, she said, she was full of angst brought on by feeling isolated and “wanting to escape this reality.”

But when she reshot her section — she had to fix the lighting — she felt “acute grief,” she said. “It’s that idea of blood memory: You feel this weight and you also feel confused.”

The dancers were tasked with creating phrases of choreography; each was given four photographs from which to draw inspiration. “One of the directions the dancers got was to try to get inside Martha’s head, and part of their direction was really to stay in the Graham world,” Ms. Eilber said. “They could be creative about it, but to stay in Martha’s brain. Graham is in their bodies.”



Robert Fraser's contact sheets showed the order of Graham's poses in "Immediate Tragedy." Robert Fraser, via Martha Graham Center of Contemporary Dance, Inc.



Robert Fraser, via Martha Graham Center of Contemporary Dance, Inc.

And their archival resources, many discovered by Neil Baldwin, the author of the forthcoming “Martha Graham: When Dance Became Modern,” were extensive. Of the photographs, most valuable were those by Fraser, who had great access to the company at the time: He was dating the Graham dancer Nelle Fisher. His pictures ended up with the Graham organization a few years ago after Fraser’s son discovered them.

Those images, captured at a 1937 concert — “Robert was in the front row, snapping away,” Ms. Eilber said — were part of the reason she thought the solo could be reimagined: His contact sheets show the order of Graham’s poses.

Judging by photographs, which feature Graham in a torso-hugging white top and a long black skirt — “I wore my hair in a new way, like a bull-fighter’s cue [queue], tied with a narrow red ribbon,” she wrote to Cowell — the dance was passionate, daring and full of power. Limón wrote of Graham’s “consummately sinuous torso, the supple, beautiful arms, the hands flashing like rays of lightning,” and her head “thrust forward in defiance, or flung back, far back, as in a despairing cry.”

In the photos, Graham’s positions show her holding her arms high overhead. There is a punch with an arabesque and poses on the knee, which resonate today.

Ms. Eilber also provided dancers with photographs from the Spanish Civil War; several feature a fist salute with the thumb not in front, but to the side of closed fingers. “It’s the fist that Martha’s using in the punch arabesque, and it’s the fist that protesters are using right now,” Ms. Eilber said.





Alessio Crognale. Ricki Quinn



Anne O'Donnell. Ricki Quinn



Xin Ying. Ricki Quinn



Laurel Dalley Smith. Ricki Quinn

As the videos dance along the screen there are at times multiple dancers, and in other moments only a soloist; it's hypnotic, as is the score. Mr. Rountree said he was inspired by Graham's oath to remain upright, and created space for contemplation as well as action. "In terms of the melodic content, I really wanted something to feel like this thing kept trying to get energy, and the energy keeps getting sucked out of it," he said. "And then there's this other music, which is kind of spacious and just chords."

Along with the music and dance, there is a third creative element at play: the choreography of the film itself. For that, Ms. Eilber worked closely with Ricki Quinn of the Soraya who is in charge of digital design and editing the videos, which were shot indoors. “This dance is about space and the restraint is something you can use,” Ms. Eilber said. “Part of this exercise is that we are restrained: That works for Covid, and now it works for the racial injustice theme as well.”

And the experiment also showed Ms. Eilber something about her dancers, like who has an affinity for choreography. Ms. Williams, for one.





Robert Fraser, via Martha Graham Center of Contemporary Dance, Inc.



