

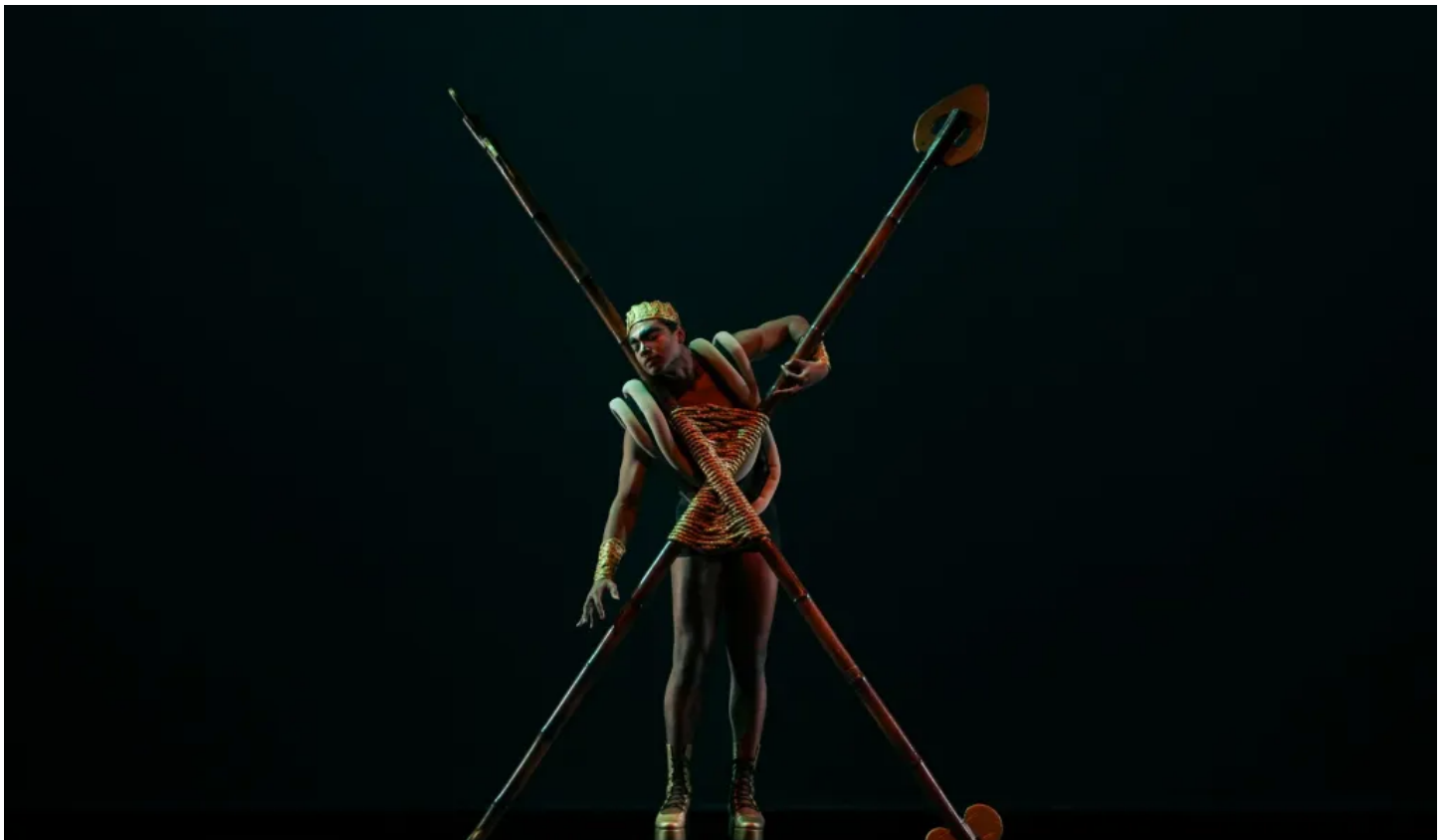
# A Hundred Years of Drama: The Graham Company Celebrates its Centennial

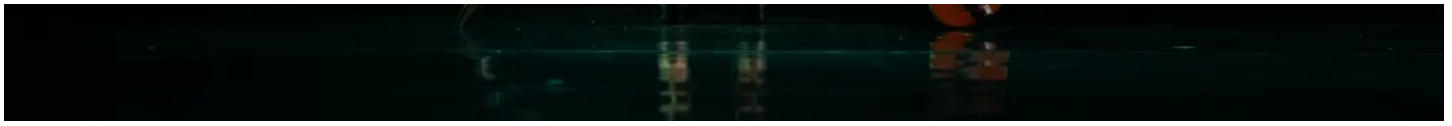
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by Karen Backstein

The Martha Graham Company is now 100 years old. So it celebrated with a season called Dances of the Mind that both looked back and explored how today's choreographers took inspiration from their creator. Program A at the Joyce presented one of Graham's landmark works followed by two world premieres that engaged with her legacy. Only the final piece, Hofesh Schechter's *Cave*, stood apart.

The evening opened with a classic: The second act of Graham's full-length *Clytemnestra*, choreographed in 1958. Based on Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, it told a bloody tale of revenge during the Trojan War: Clytemnestra slayed her husband, Agamemnon, in retaliation for sacrificing their daughter Iphigenia to the gods in exchange for victory in battle. Act 2 dramatized the aftermath of Clytemnestra's murder, as Agamemnon's ghost appeared, goading their other children, Electra and Orestes, to kill Clytemnestra and her lover, Aegisthus, as further retribution. As Janet Eilber quipped in her pre-talk, "Not one of our lighter works" – but a powerful one that set the bar high for everything to come, choreographically, dramatically, and visually.





Jai Perez in *Clytemnestra*. Photo © Isabella Pagano.

Even before the curtain rose, Halim El-Dabh's music created a sense of doom and dread, with military drumbeats that steadily counted down the minutes until *Clytemnestra*'s death. In addition to being visually striking, the sets by Graham's frequent collaborator Isamu Noguchi – which included modular stairs and chairs, strategically placed spears, and a hanging circular sculpture – felt like an integral part of the choreographic conception. The ballet opened with the cast carefully arranged in positions as sculptural as Noguchi's own designs – especially Agamemnon's Ghost, danced by Jai Perez. He stood motionless center stage between two large spears, crossed to make an X, wearing big, almost disco-style platform shoes (keep in mind that this was created in 1958, not 1978), towering over everything and radiating power even in stillness. Several groupings that revolved around the sets created almost photographic images, and when the four main characters grasped hands and turned swiftly in a circle, their pattern echoed the circular sculpture right above them.

The costumes were designed by Graham herself along with former company member Helen McGehee. *Clytemnestra* (So Young An), the role danced originally by Graham, first wore a blood-red cape that drew the eye straight to her. She wrapped it tightly around herself to reveal the Graham contraction and release that signaled her anguish, perhaps even nausea. Eventually she ripped off the cape to reveal a sleek black gown. *Clytemnestra*'s choreography matched her emotional turmoil, as she covered space more freely than the others. The Ghost, Electra (Xin Ying), and Orestes (Lloyd Knight), danced in measured, controlled, sometimes jerky movements, even making their way laboriously across the stage on their knees to accomplish their mission. Agamemnon's Ghost, particularly in the beginning, looked as if he were still adjusting to his new, non-human body; the siblings felt almost like his puppets.





Martha Graham Dance Company in *Cortege*. Photo © Isabella Pagano.

Inspired lightly by Graham's *Cortege of Eagles*, Baye & Asa's *Cortege* was the first of the program's two world premieres. Graham's original antiwar work, choreographed in 1967 at the height of the Vietnam protests, was (like *Clytemnestra*) based on a Greek myth – this time of Hecuba – and set during the Trojan War. Baye & Asa, however, have exchanged narrative for abstraction, somewhat muddying the politics of their piece. Per the company's description, the choreographers removed Graham's central figure of Charon, who ferried souls to the underworld, and instead "place[d] the burden of fate on the ensemble."

As the piece opened, the dancers stood in a line across the stage, hidden under a huge black cloth. By the end, when the line reformed and the sheet again covered them, it became a shroud; no Charon to guide the cast yet the underworld still beckoned. It was yanked off, and after pausing for a beat, the group fragmented, with dancers across the stage engaging in hand-to-hand combat. As the lights dimmed and rose again like a slide show revealing new images, different arrangements of dancers tussled briefly or stood motionless in positions that suggested the dramatic end of a fight. One pose suggested strangling. In another, a body was lifted high like a corpse ready to be carried off. Even in synchronous choreography, a few dancers nervously shifted direction as if expecting an attack. Certain movements suggested martial arts, perhaps even capoeira, and dancers skulked across the floor as if tracking an enemy. Aggression reigned throughout, in stomps and flinging, with a stream of constant exits and entrances.

Caleb Krieg, who designed the simple costumes, dressed everyone wore beigey-white pants, with the men shirtless and the women in skin-tone bralettes. But throughout, individual dancers would lay a shirt on the ground for another to pick up and wear. The meaning of this gesture remained obscure: was it a uniform? Was everyone joining a group or even a battalion? Like the score for *Clytemnestra*, Jack Grabow's music kept up a strong and military-sounding drumbeat. As dark as *Cortege* was, at the end, the shroud only covered only half of the dancers. Maybe the rest were survivors and there was even a glimmer of hope.

Company member Xin Ying, along with co-choreographer Mimi Yin, engaged with the towering legend that is Martha in a different and more intimate way. The haunting *Letter to Nobody* – its title inspired by Graham's *Letter to the World*, about the poet Emily Dickinson – explored Ying's

connection with Graham not only through movement but film and other technology. Just as Graham had contemplated Dickinson's life, Ying immersed herself in Graham's work and image. "I'm nobody. Who are you?" asked Dickinson's well-known poem. What do these words, recited during the dance, still mean to someone who never knew Graham except through her art, or to a company dominated by the work and the myth of its creator? Who are you as a dancer when you perform works Graham tailored to her own body? How have Graham dancers changed through time?

On a large screen in back of the stage, an excerpt from the film *A Dancer's World* played; Ying entered and moved along with Graham's image, mirroring her steps. But the picture would stop and start again, sometimes continuing from the same place and sometimes cutting to a different scene. (Among the dancers who appeared was Merce Cunningham). But then, the technology shifted and Ying, initially dwarfed by Graham's screen image, became part of the film's world. The effect was immersive and magical, superimposing the two dancers – a success that suggested a more positive interaction between humans and AI. Credit for the creative technology goes to Yuguang Zhang with NUUM Collective. Mimi Yin, Chris Celiz and Gene Shinazaki as SPIDERHORSE created the soundscape; and Karen Young designed the very Graham-like costume Ying wore for most of the piece – until she stepped out of the dress in just a leotard, becoming herself again and not Martha's reflection.

The audience seemed to enjoy the final piece, Hofesh Shechter's *Cave*. With its hip-swiveling, hopping, swaying, bobbing movement to an insistent and hypnotic drumbeat, the dance at points suggested a club party or a rave. Dancers kept entering and exiting in different costumes (again by Caleb Kreig), including some carnivalesque designs that could have come from Mardi Gras. Both Âme and Hofesh Schechter's music and the choreographic style kept shifting throughout: here there's a fleeting Riverdance step, there another short phrase felt vaguely Indian. Still more felt African – especially when each dancer took a turn doing an improvisatory solo for the others. And the way everyone would sometimes come together and then break apart to create new formations looked like the freestyle partner-switching that happens socially. At the end, when one woman was left alone dancing in her own, still feeling the spirit, she finally stopped and simply walked off.

Much credit for creating the dance's atmosphere should go to the lighting by Yi-Chung Chen and the simple set (uncredited) here: house-shapes with light bleeding in – through edges and spaces around the doors.

Given that once upon a time, it seemed as if the Martha Graham Dance Company might not even survive – it took a controversial court case for it to regain control of her work – reaching this 100th birthday was truly something to celebrate.

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*Clytemnestra, Cortège, Letter to Nobody, Cave* – Martha Graham Dance Company  
The Joyce Theater, New York, NY

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Cover: Xin Ying in *Letter to Nobody*. Photo © Brian Pollock.

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