

A New Memory

INTERVIEWS | Rachael Moloney

She went on to become a principal dancer with the company and is now the program director of the school and the director of Graham 2. Along with this busy day job and her choreographic work, she will also publish a book later in the year aimed at helping pre-professional students transition into professional life.

“I see that every year, when students are about to graduate, there is an anxiety because they are not sure what they're going to do. You're not going to be accepted in all the auditions you go to, and those rejections are not in your control. This book might help them to realize what the profession is about,” said Mécène, “and that there are different paths to take. You can create your path.”

I caught up with Mécène on an early spring day at the Graham School where we discussed her path, choreographic process, and how the seeds of Graham's work remain as relevant as ever.

This conversation has been condensed and edited for clarity.

This isn't the first time you've reimaged a lost Graham work. I wonder if you might talk a bit about “Ekstatis,”—which Graham made in 1933 and you created anew in 2017—and how that prepared you to work on “Immigrant,” and “Revolt.”

When I was a student at the Martha Graham School, I remember seeing a picture of “Ekstatis.” It was not even the whole figure—just the trunk of Martha. We couldn't see her head. We couldn't see her arms. We could just see a very subtle curve in her body in a dress that seemed to be breathing. I remember thinking at the time: one day I want to do this dance. I want to know what that was. I want to make something out of it. And it stayed in the back of my mind. Years later, a student here was also curious about “Ekstatis,” and she talked to me, revived my idea. I thought: this is a sign and I should do it now. She hadn't found much about it so I decided to do my own research. I looked online. I read books about it. There were not many clues at all about the dance, only a couple of photos. I found one where Martha was lower into the ground. I thought: great, there is a change of level, I can use that.

But I also read about Barbara Morgan and the way she was taking her photos. It was not necessarily in context with the dance. It was more in context of what Morgan wanted to create with her photographic moment.

Morgan wasn't shooting a run-through of the dance....

Exactly, yeah. Who knows exactly what choreography was on the picture, if they [the poses] were

really part of the dance to start with. In a way, it gave me some freedom to look into myself to create the dance. Because instead of recreating a dance, it was more using the idea of how Martha created a dance, for myself, from within myself. I'm very visual, so when I see a picture or something that attracts me, it makes me wonder what's behind the picture.

Do you think that attraction to images, or fragments of images, comes from your background in graphic design?

I worked with Christian Dior, and some other companies, designing the layout of the page or the bottle of perfume and then the title. The proportions of the bottle with the title had to do something with a visual, and where you place that into a page is very important. And further than that. I worked at companies where we were doing the layout of a magazine. When you turn the page, what you see first is the strongest place. I realized it is not much different than choreography, right? It's where you place your subject on stage, where you enter, where you exit, the timing...how you sculpt the stage is very similar.

What inspired you to begin working on “Immigrant,” and “Revolt”?

For “Immigrant,” it was this image with an arm up in front the other arm extended to the back. I wanted to try to research more, and this time, I went to the Library of the Performing Arts [where she had a Dance Fellowship in 2024] to see what was available there. I found a couple of reviews, but they didn't describe the dance. They just gave an overall idea.

I discovered that “Immigrant,” had two sections. One section was called “Steerage,” and the other one was “Strike.” That's where my research became very interesting; since I couldn't find anything about the movement itself, I researched what was happening in New York City, around Martha. She came to New York City in 1923. Immigrants came way before that, but they kept arriving on boats where people were packed in a place called the steerage, where it was not designed for passengers.

But I ended up focusing on the “Strike,” section, which is the photo we see where she is in the black dress that looks like leather (but it is not leather). Immigrants were living downtown, not in great conditions at all, nor were they working in great conditions. In my research I found out about the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Strike and some others. Louis Horst was also very influential for Martha. He traveled to Germany and places like that, so he could see what was going on in Europe. I put all the pieces together to find out what she was trying to express about the life of an immigrant.

I think I took it to the extreme, to the time of now. My experience of the Graham technique, being around it, dancing it, teaching it—it became my way of moving, but it is not necessarily through that vocabulary that you can recognize it, it's a little deeper than that.