

FKA twigs Dances Martha Graham: ‘This Is Art in Its Truest Form’

Once a young bunhead, the acclaimed musical artist is taking the stage with the Martha Graham Dance Company. For her, this is holy grail territory.



By Gia Kourlas

April 16, 2024, 11:01 a.m. ET

The rebellious spirit of Martha Graham has found a rebellious soul mate in another creative powerhouse. A classically trained dancer, she’s known in the world as an acclaimed recording artist. She moves like water. Her pole dancing is pretty astounding, too. This is FKA twigs.

On Thursday, she will make her debut as a dancer with the Graham company in the solo “Satyric Festival Song” (1932). “To me, this is, honestly, like winning a Grammy,” she said. “I feel like I’m winning a Grammy.”

At the company’s gala performance, FKA twigs will slip into her costume, a bold and graphic striped dress designed by Graham. She will pop into the air as if the floor were on fire. She will twist and bend her body into jagged edges. And she will tease the audience with tilts of the head and dancing, expressive eyes. This is a solo inspired by rituals that Graham observed in the pueblos of the American Southwest, specifically, the kachina figures that served as comic relief at religious ceremonies. Graham was also poking fun at her serious, dramatic self.



“To me, this is, honestly, like winning a Grammy,” FKA twigs said of dancing with the Graham company.
Caroline Tompkins for The New York Times

An artist of vast imagination whose music defies genre, FKA twigs is adventurous in all of her pursuits. Her shimmering, fluent physicality, displayed over the years in videos and performances, is equally fearless and lissome. “My values of success and achievement are maybe slightly different to other people’s,” FKA twigs said in an interview from London. Many of her colleagues will be at Coachella over the next two weeks, “which is obviously such an honor,” she said. “But I’ve spent the whole of my life in the dance studio. I studied Martha Graham’s technique at dance school. I took the class many times when I was a younger dancer.”

The Graham company, though, didn’t know she had studied the technique. So how did this solo happen? Through that unofficial dance network known as Instagram.

Last year, the company posted a pandemic-era video of Laurel Dalley Smith performing “Satyric Festival Song” in different locations in London. Being the Graham fan that she is, FKA twigs reposted it. The company thanked her in a DM and proposed doing a project together. “She immediately sent us the contact information for her manager,” said Janet Eilber, the group’s artistic director. And as the conversation progressed, Eilber said, the

company asked, “Would she like to dance a Graham solo?”

The solo is a good fit for FKA twigs. “The attitude in ‘Satyric Festival Song’ is so sort of flirtatious and comedic and quirky,” Eilber said. “And it’s one of the few Graham solos where the fourth wall is down, so this little character is basically speaking to the audience and having her way with them.”



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Dalley Smith taught FKA twigs the solo and a series of Graham exercises in London (and FKA twigs will continue to work on it in Oh, New York at the Graham studios). “It wasn’t just cut and paste, put it on, learn it, do it,” Dalley Smith said about the process. “It’s recognizing someone trying something new, recognizing someone wanting to not follow a certain path.”

Her artistic bravery echoes some choice words of Graham’s: More than 80 years ago, she told a despondent Agnes de Mille to “keep yourself open and aware to the urges that motivate you. Keep the channel open.”

For FKA twigs, the channel is *wide*. She is committed to being “bold and dynamic and to really make art,” she said. “And I mean *really* make art. I’m not talking about, like, really look fab on a red carpet or really slay in my music video, or really be a queen in a radio interview.”

She’s grateful for those opportunities, but artistic excellence is what matters to her. “When I die and I take my last breath, these are the things I’m going to be thinking about: What did I do with my life?” she said. “I want to say that I was kind, I worked hard, and I served my practice, and I made art. Next week I’m going to serve my practice.”

Here are edited excerpts from our conversation.



FKA twigs said the playfulness of the solo came naturally. “It’s really cute and funny. You turn your head and it’s kind of like: Are you watching me? Don’t look at me.” Caroline Tompkins for The New York Times

What have you found challenging in the solo?

The stamina. It starts with really big jumps. I have not jumped since I was probably 22. [Laughs] Even in the dancing I do now, whether it’s pole or even with contemporary, if I was onstage, I wouldn’t choose to do, like, nine jetés in a row.

So to start a performance with nine really energetic jumps and just then carry on as normal in a very sort of controlled Martha Graham, heavily contracted way? You know that’s something that I’ll have to work on.

What has come most naturally?

The playfulness of the solo and the expression. It’s really cute and funny. You turn your head and it’s kind of like: Are you watching me? Don’t look at me. I’m going to demand your attention. OK, now look away.

What is your dance training?

I'm trained as a ballet dancer. I was, like, a complete bunhead as a kid. I used to do my homework in the car on the way to dance practice, and I trained for four hours after school, Monday to Saturday. I did that from when I was 8 to when I was 16. I then gave up for a couple of years and moved to London to go to dance college. My journey as a music artist was actually moving to London to go to dance college.

If I'm honest with you, I have like a really strange dance history.



FKA twigs: "I'm trained as a ballet dancer. I was, like, a complete bunhead as a kid." Caroline Tompkins for The New York Times

How so?

I basically started dancing professionally when I was 12 or 13, I was in a dance company called ZooNation, which was a street dance or hip-hop-based dance company — although it was contemporary as well. I did that and then I was training in dance.

And then I moved to London to come to dance school, and I just kept on dropping out. By the time I got to about 19, 20 — do you know what the problem was? I just peaked a little

bit too soon at dance.

You dance when you sing. How is this different?

For the last couple years, I've really been trying to hone in on the type of artist that I am. Within my industry, there's a big push to seek certain accolades, whether that's streaming a certain amount or winning certain awards. With the Martha Graham company — performing a routine — you can't rig that.

This is pure craft. It's pure practice and it's expression. This is art in its truest form, which in this day and age is so rare. Honestly, this is one of the greatest things I've done in my career.

Why?

You can't fake an extended leg, you can't fake a turn, you can't fake performance or holding an audience. And that to me is so exciting. This is just purely in my hands. Whatever happens, it will be the truth.

How do you see the Graham repertoire in terms of what you usually dance?

I've always engaged in classical and contemporary dance. This is different, I guess, because it's a work that is very well known and is revered. And it's very sacred. It's something that's really important to remember and to be passed on. It's like a secret or a folk song. I'm a half-Jamaican girl from Gloucestershire, and I'm going to New York to learn a Martha Graham piece. Like, if anything, that's not testament to me. That's a testament to *her*.



“It’s very sacred,” FKA twigs said of the Graham repertoire. “It’s something that’s really important to remember and to be passed on. It’s like a secret or a folk song.” Caroline Tompkins for The New York Times

And this is an example of art in its truest form?

Exactly. We have such extremes in society when it comes to dance, when it comes to music, when it comes to expression — as we should. But there *is* a holy grail. And that is Martha Graham, it’s [Lester] Horton, it’s Alvin Ailey. This is the purest form of dance, of expression, a practice. It’s not just Martha Graham, it’s Martha Graham *technique*. It’s not Horton. It’s Horton technique.

It’s something in your toolbox that once you’ve studied that form, it’s going to stay with you across everything you ever do. I could apply Martha Graham to pole dance. I could apply Horton to pole dance. It’s a way of thinking.

What is so critical about this performance?

This is really important for my spirit. There's a 12-year-old inside me that didn't go and play with her friends at the park. She went to the dance studio instead. My friends were going out, playing in the park, drinking cider behind the bike sheds — I wanted to do all of those things but I was in the studio. That young girl! I feel like in performing with Martha Graham company, in some ways, I'm giving her a hug. I'm letting her know that it was worth it.

Gia Kourlas is the dance critic for The Times. She writes reviews, essays and feature articles and works on a range of stories. [More about Gia Kourlas](#)