

IMPRESSIONS: Martha Graham Dance Company- Dances of the Mind- at The Joyce Theater

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Published on April 18, 2025

Martha Graham's "Deaths and Entrances." Photo: Brian Pollock

Dancers: Lloyd Knight, Xin Ying, Leslie Andrea Williams, Anne Souder, Laurel Dalley-Smith, So Young An, Richard Villaverde, Devin Loh, Antonio Leone, Meagan King, Ane Arrieta, Zachary Jeppsen, Amanda Moreira, Jai Perez, Ethan Palma

Choreographers: Martha Graham and Baye and Asa

Janet Eilber, the artistic director of the [Martha Graham Dance Company](#), is a class act. Before the curtain opens at [The Joyce Theater](#), on April 2, she welcomes the audience and shares the exciting news that the country's oldest dance company (founded in 1926) and school will move to a new home, a six-studio dance center in the heart of New York's theater district.

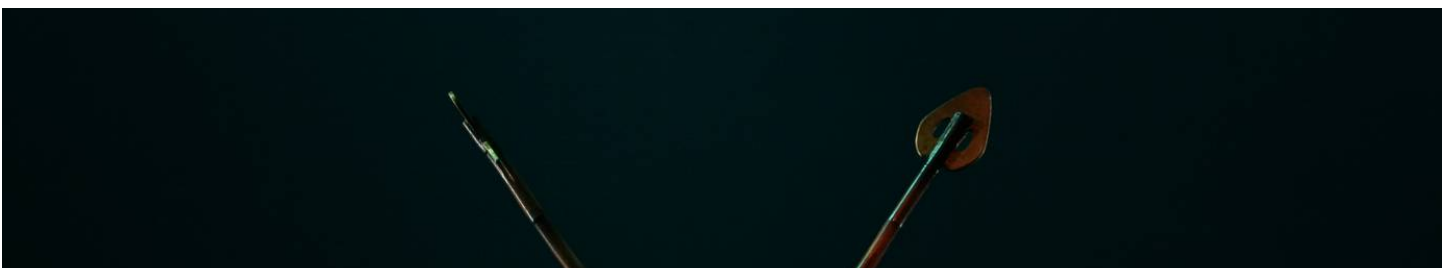
The current season, part two of a three-year-long, 100th-anniversary celebration, features a Graham work that represents one of her "dances of the mind" on each of the three different programs. It also

focuses on reflections on Graham's work by artists affiliated with the company. In addition, there are new commissions, and, on Program B, which I will review separately, [Agnes de Mille's](#) masterwork *Rodeo*.



Richard Villaverde and Jai Perez in Martha Graham's *Clytemnestra*. Photo by Isabella Pagano

As a point of departure for Program A, Eilber briefly introduces the characters for Act 2 of *Clytemnestra*, the evening's curtain-raiser. Graham's ballet recalls the bloody events described in the ancient Greek tragedies known collectively as [The Oresteia](#). Since Agamemnon, the king of Mycenae, had been at war in Troy for ten years, his wife Clytemnestra took a lover ("as one does" interjects Eilber with a smile), who helped her kill Agamemnon on his return home. In the ballet, Agamemnon appears as a ghost on elevated platform shoes, since that was the way Greek theater portrayed the dead.





Jai Perez in Martha Graham's *Clytemnestra*. Photo by Isabella Pagano

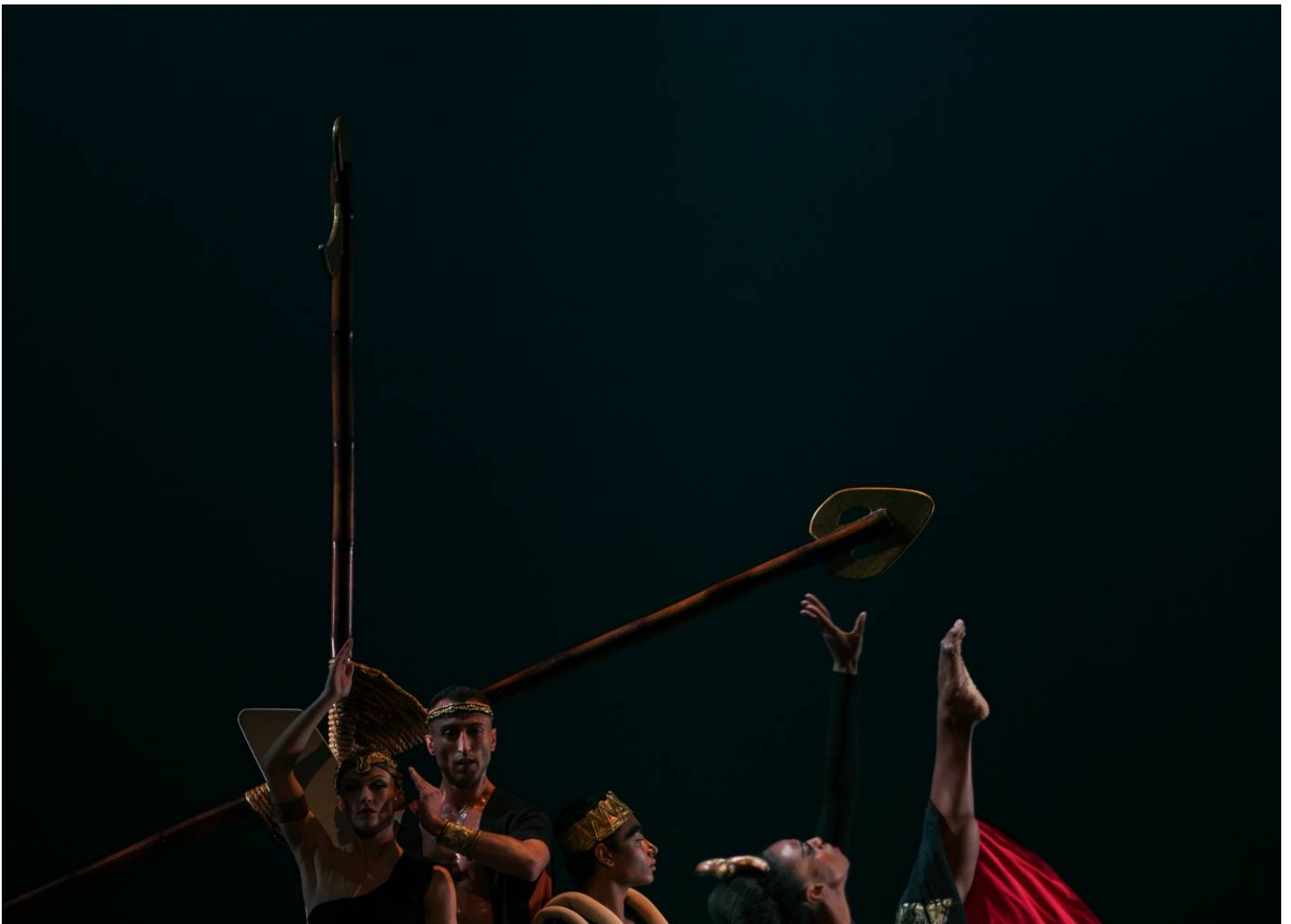
Grateful for Eilber's briefing, I can make out who is who, and I understand Clytemnestra's choice once my eye catches her lover, Aegisthus (Antonio Leone), asleep on their bed. However, the ghost is the one who gets to dance; and he (Jai Perez) does so with clear focus, while he maneuvers two spears bound in the center to form an X-shape. Good to know he is just an apparition in Clytemnestra's dream. The props and the set designed by [Isamu Noguchi](#) might clutter the smallish stage that serves as the heroine's bedroom, but they are a feast for the eyes.





Laurel Dalley Smith (foreground) with Amanda Moreira, Devin Loh, and Meagan King in Martha Graham's *Clytemnestra*. Photo by Isabella Pagano

Clytemnestra's agony comes through in Leslie Andrea Williams' sculptural, angular rendering. Her vengeful children, Orestes (Richard Villaverde) and Elektra (Laurel Dalley Smith), add their anger to the proceedings; and, as if that ancient world wasn't irate enough, a trio of [Furies](#) (Meagan King, Devin Loh, Amanda Moreira) tear ferociously through the space. Their fleet traveling patterns give the work a much-needed, space-eating counterpoint to the protagonists' mostly stationary gestural drama. Is it Agamemnon's spirit that directs Elektra's focused mission to do away with her mother? Orestes does not quite possess his sister's assurance. His inner conflict over whether to avenge the murder of his father and to commit matricide seems to leave him momentarily in a pickle, before he gets out the ax.





Martha Graham Dance Company in Martha Graham's *Clytemnestra*. Photo by Isabella Pagano

Clytemnestra herself undergoes transformations experiencing different moods. When she faces terror, I seem to detect emotional fragility and grief. Perhaps she is thinking of her daughter Iphigenia, whom Agamemnon sacrificed to appease the goddess Artemis. Now I remember the reason for this whole mess. Clytemnestra had avenging of her own to carry out, which, in the end, not only sealed her fate, but also that of sweet Aegisthus, who awakens only to be killed by Orestes' golden ax.

Seeing this second act of Graham's only evening-length opus whets my appetite to take a look at the whole work on a bigger stage, and to get a better perspective on Noguchi's set. It also makes me curious to explore the music of the late, Egyptian-born composer, [Halim El-Dabh](#). After this first collaboration, he and Graham joined forces on another three works.





Amanda Moreira, Devin Loh, and Meagan King in Martha Graham's *Deaths and Entrances*. Photo by Brian Pollock

The other “dance of the mind” ensemble this season features more recent historical figures, namely [the Brontë sisters](#). In contrast to the story-telling of *Clytemnestra*, the 1943 *Deaths and Entrances* is often referred to as the first “stream of consciousness” ballet. With music by [Hunter Johnson](#) and a set by [Arch Lauterer](#), the current production features costumes by Oscar de la Renta. It also has a lighting design by Judith M. Daitsman that captures “those moments of doubt, loneliness, (and) fear” which Martha Graham described in a letter to a former company member who served in the Air Force during World War II.



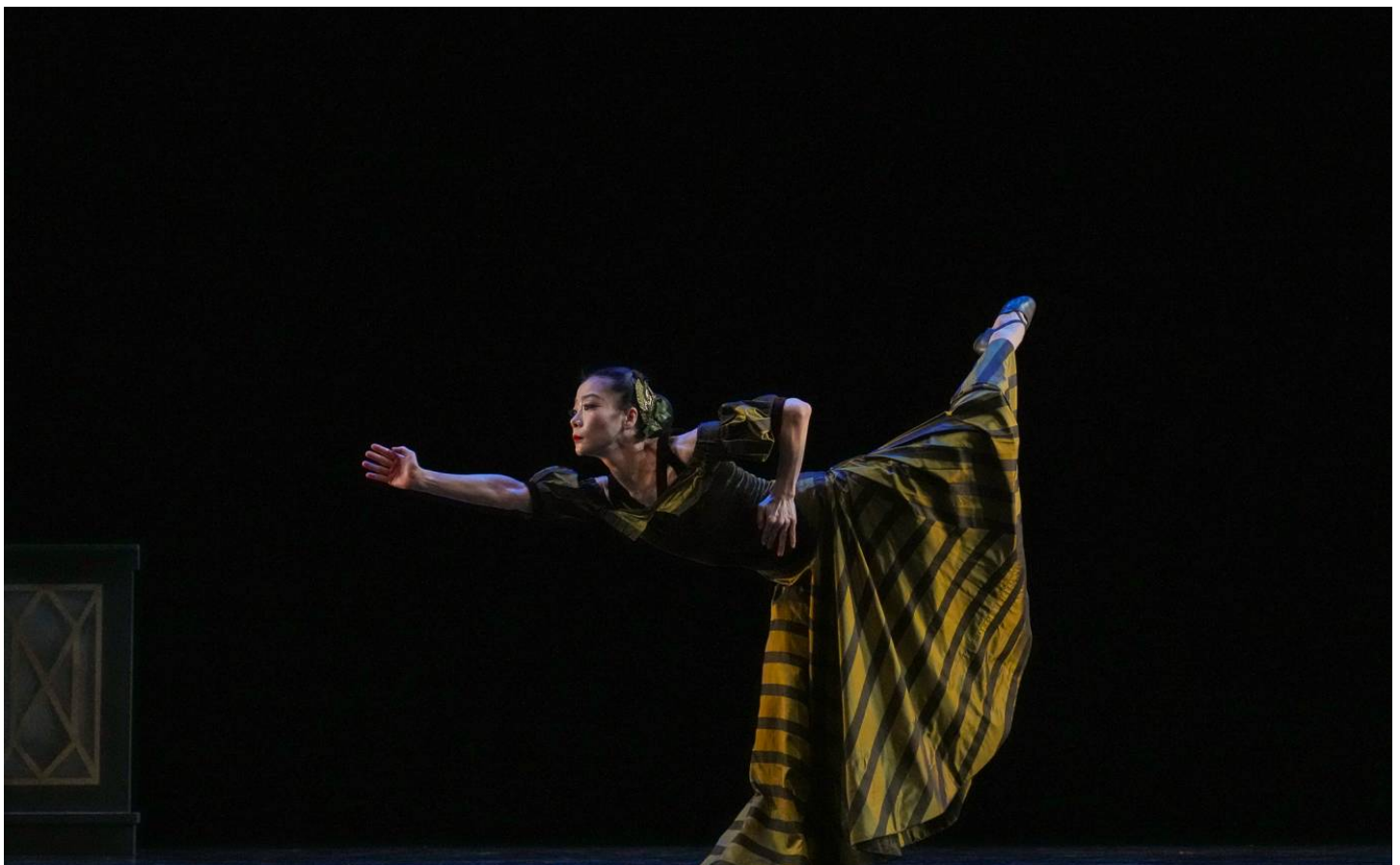


Lloyd Knight, Xin Ying, and Richard Villaverde in Martha Graham's *Deaths and Entrances*. Photo by Brian Pollock

In this work one never knows what is the mind's projection, as it shifts from childhood memories to subconscious cogency, and produces dance sequences with partners who appear to be real. In addition to the three sisters, danced by Xin Ying with So Young Ahn and Ane Arrieta, the cast features "The Three Remembered Children" — Meagan King, Devin Loh, and Amanda Moreira evoke these "Mini-Me's."

I connect to *Deaths and Entrances* on the level of basic instinct. When a series of powerful contractions moves through Ying's body, I feel her despair and longing. She wavers between unrequited love or lust, as "The Dark Beloved" (Lloyd Knight) and "The Poetic Beloved" (Richard Villaverde) provoke her.

When "The Cavaliers" (Ethan Palma and Jai Perez) dance with the other sisters, the partnering wants to distinguish each couple by its individual push, pull, and entanglement. Since all three relationships could be labeled "it's complicated," however, one does not quite care to see them resolve one way or the other. In the end, the women find themselves once again playing at the chessboard of memories. Are they in the same positions as when the dance began?





Xin Ying in Martha Graham's *Deaths and Entrances*. Photo by Brian Pollock

Yes, her two sisters are anchored as at the outset, but Ying interrupts the game by placing a symbolic goblet on the table amid the chess pieces. She has changed and presumably grown.

While these company works (on Programs A and C respectively) engage me in different ways, Graham's duet *Errand Into The Maze* (featured on Program C) firmly grips my heart and soul. Graham based the work on the Greek legend of [Theseus](#) whose mission through the labyrinth brought him face to face with the Minotaur. In her ballet, however, Graham altered the sex of the hero. She replaced him herself as the beauty battling the beast, now called the Creature of Fear. For generations of Graham dancers, dancing this Graham role has proven to be a defining career moment. Is there another part more raw and powerful in the history of the art form? Now Laurel Dalley Smith confronts her inner demons and her Creature, Zachary Jeppsen-Toy, with primal puissance.



Antonio Leone and So Young An in Martha Graham's *Errand into the Maze*. Photo by Isabella Pagano

The new works on these two programs intrigue the mind with theatrical imagery. In Xin Ying's solo *Letter To Nobody* (co-choreographed by Mimi Yin), Graham moves onscreen behind Ying in a film of her 1940 *Letter to the World*. Later, artificial intelligence transforms Graham's face to Ying's as Graham discusses the dancer's identification with a role. This altered excerpt - from the documentary *A Dancer's World* (1957) – leaves me to ponder if Graham dancers identify more with Martha Graham herself than with the roles she left behind.

The choreographic duo [Baye & Asa](#) have reworked and expanded their 2023 *Cortege*, inspired by Graham's 1967 *Cortege of Eagles* and the perils of war.



Martha Graham Dance Company in Baye & Asa's *Cortege*. Photo by Isabella Pagano

A black piece of cloth first covers and — once removed — reveals dancers kneeling in a long, diagonal line across the stage space. Quickly the dancers spring into action and resemble fighting battalions. They put on vests that make me think of bulletproof protection, and move with agile force across the space. Groupings expand and retract in a way that connotes [amoeboid movement](#) under a microscope. Even if the high-energy dancing doesn't fluctuate much in its dynamics, it shows how strong and fit the dancers of the company really are. Nothing seems too hard for them, and they emerge as the heroes of the evening. The piece ends as it started. As the fabric is

once again pulled over the warriors, we are left to contemplate if people ever emerge from a war as winners.

Note: Due to the length of this review, *CAVE*, the other group work presented in Program A and C, will be reviewed with Program B.

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