

“It Must Reveal the Body” A Look at Halston’s Historic Costumes for Martha Graham Dance Company

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It all began with a party dress. Martha Graham, the dancer whose movements and choreography blew a forceful gust of fresh air into 20th-century dance, was looking for something to wear to the 1975 Capezio Dance Awards. Her friend (and former *Vogue* contributor) Leo Lerman offered to ring up [Halston](#)—and the inquiry catalyzed a decades-long friendship that yielded several artistic collaborations. In her 1991 memoir, *Blood Memory*, Graham recounts the call: According to Lerman, “Halston said he never lent things like that, but for Martha Graham, he would be honored.”



Halston and Graham.

Courtesy of Martha Graham Dance Company

Halston dressed Graham for the event (in an earth-colored cashmere poncho), and almost immediately after, was called upon to costume Martha Graham Dance Company, designing pieces

that amplified her distinctive, fluid style. Excerpts from two of these collaborations, *Lucifer* (1975) and *Conversation of Lovers from Acts of Light* (1981), will be performed tonight at the [Martha Graham Dance Company Studio in Tribeca](#) as part of a one-night-only 100th-year celebration of the New York dance company and Halston's significant contributions. It's a legacy that's alive and well, not least because the Martha Graham Dance Company, which was founded in 1926, is now helmed by artistic director Janet Eilber—a muse to both Graham and Halston.



Martha Graham Dance Company, *Acts of Light* with Yuriko Kimura, 1984. Costumes by Halston.

Photograph by Martha Swope © Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

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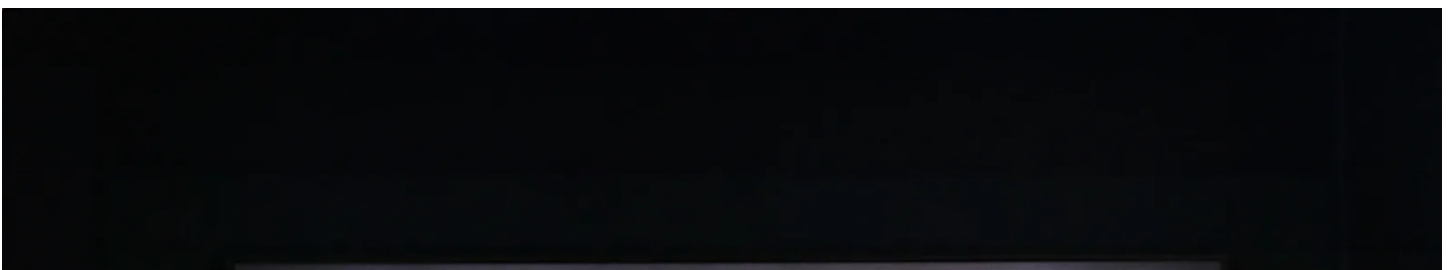
Eilber first met Halston when he was creating *Lucifer*. "That's the first work that he costumed for Martha," she says. "I was double-cast in the lead role with Margot Fonteyn. Martha would choreograph it for me, and then I would teach it to Margot." Eilber recalls a generous gift—an Elsa Peretti Diamonds by the Yard necklace—Halston gave her one year for her birthday. Eilber even served as a model for Halston one summer when the dance company was on hiatus.



From second left, choreographer and dancer Martha Graham, actor Elizabeth Taylor, fashion designer Halston, and actor Liza Minnelli attend a benefit for the Martha Graham Dance Company at Halston's Fifth Avenue Salon, New York, New York, May 5, 1983.

Sonia Moskowitz/Getty Images

It was a perfect match. Halston, known as the Ultrasuede King (though he also reigned over Manhattan society and Studio 54), had built a fashion empire with his free-flowing fashions that sheathed the increasingly liberated female bodies of the 1970s—the more uninhibited they were, the better. His pieces were pliable, billowing, and made for life on the go—whether at a disco or on stage. He did to his dresses what Graham did in her choreography: stripped away any florid or decorative elements. While Halston redefined the overly embellished landscape of haute couture, Graham deconstructed the unrelenting codes of classical ballet. In their respective mediums, the two shared the same vision, and when it collided together, the results were nothing short of magic.





A Halston-designed cape worn by the lead man for *Lucifer* (1975).

Photograph by Hippolyte Petite

In *Lucifer*—an excerpt of which will be performed tonight—Halston’s costumes were spare and deeply evocative. He understood a dancer’s physicality should never be obscured or overpowered by a costume. With headpieces crafted by [Elsa Peretti](#) (another collaborator), the costumes for the legendary Rudolf Nureyev featured a fine mesh chainmail of platinum. Eilber’s costume, meanwhile, was a wispy, semi-sheer chiffon-esque gown in navy; she appeared a goddess who gradually revealed her body as fabric slipped away from her frame.



Martha Graham Dance Company production of *Lucifer* with Rudolf Nureyev, 1975. *Lucifer* was the first collaboration between Martha and Halston. Renowned jewelry designer Elsa Peretti helped created the head-dresses and trunks worn by Nureyev using a fine mesh chainmail of platinum and her signature belt buckles.

Photo by Martha Swope ©Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

As to whether the choreography or costumes came first, Eilber reveals their synchronicity. “Martha used the costumes,” she says, “they’re so integrated into the story and the unfolding of one of her

ballets. The costumes often came in much earlier than other choreographers. In *Lucifer*, there were several large capes, and you can't really create choreography without the cape.” Halston’s subsequent commissions were for Graham’s *The Owl and the Pussy Cat*, *Act of Life*, and *Persephone*. (The latter was featured in [Netflix’s mini-series, *Halston*](#).)



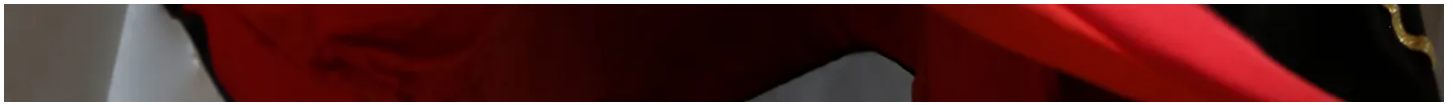
Mermaid costume from *The Owl and the Pussycat* (1978).

Photograph by Hippolyte Petite

Graham had long harnessed the power of costume; her groundbreaking *Lamentation* (1930) famously featured dancers undulating in tubed jersey fabric. “She largely designed the costumes. She really had such a strong, unique vision for what she wanted on stage. She really didn't relinquish it to other people,” says Eilber. “In the beginning of her revolution, she was showcasing women’s torsos. Graham’s skirts start below the hip so that the entire torso is revealed, and the audience can see the most intimate part of the body.” As Graham wrote in her memoir: “It must reveal the body, reveal the beautiful line of the waist, the hips, the shoulders, the turn of the head. The costume must speak to all of these things.”





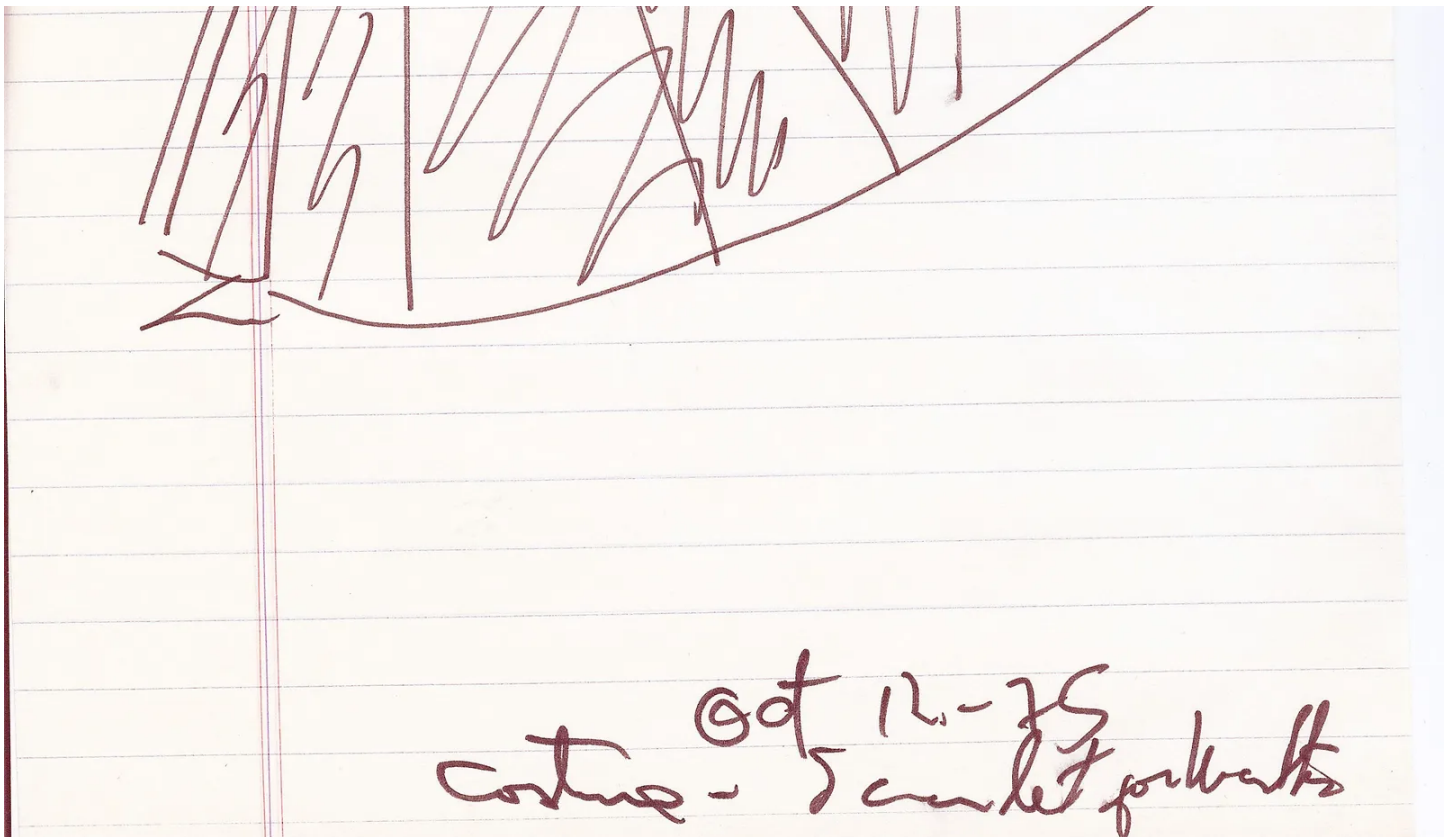


In 1978, Halston redesigned the costumes for Graham's only full-evening length work, *Clytemnestra* (1958). This dress was created for the dancer playing the queen who murdered her husband, King Agamemnon, and who was in turn murdered by her own son, Orestes.

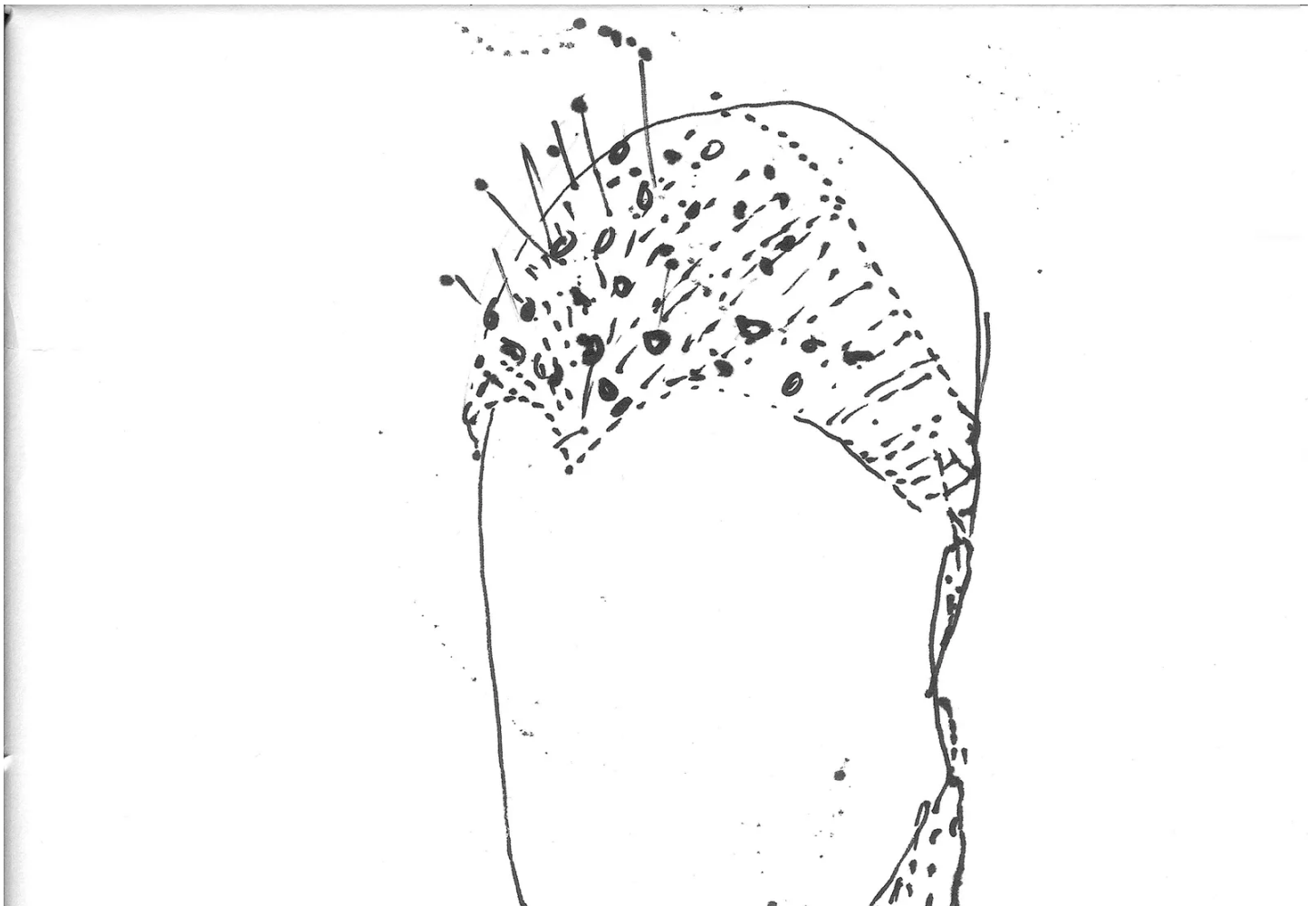
Photograph by Hippolyte Petite

Halston came into Graham's life when she needed him most. "By this time, my hands were so crippled by arthritis that I always wore gloves. I could no longer search out fabrics and, most importantly, my hands had lost the ability to craft. It was and still remains a very painful thing," Graham wrote in *Blood Memories*. "We were in his workroom looking at new fabrics, running the skeins through our hands. I could not feel the material because of the gloves. 'I cannot use my hands,' I told him, looking down at the long black gloves that covered my bent hands. 'Martha,' he said, 'let me be your hands.'"





Halston for Martha Graham's *Scarlet Letter* (1975).





Halston Sketches for the Diva in Graham's *Lucifer* (1975).

Eilber remembers Halston's generosity and dedication to Graham. "We were in the theater with a full orchestra rehearsing the premiere of *Scarlet Letter*—he did the costumes," says Eiber. "Marisol did the set, and Martha, of course, did the choreography—but we hadn't finished rehearsing and were about to run overtime. To go for another half hour, it was going to cost \$5,000. This was back in 1975, so it was an immense amount of money. Halston just turned to Martha and he said, keep going. I'll cover it. He could be a tyrant, but when he was with us, he was just in his most considerate behavior."





Meagan King wearing the Halston costume for the lead woman in *Tangled Night* (1986).

Photograph by Hippolyte Petite

In addition to the two performances, more of Halston's costumes will be on showcase at the Martha Graham Dance Company's Bethune Street Studios in Tribeca. The serpentine bodysuits of *Tangled Night* and mythologically-inspired costumes for *Judith* will both be on display—a treat given that the two works are no longer in the company repertoire.

While these pieces are worthy of a fashion museum (and have at times been on view as such), the Martha Graham Dance Company is not strictly housing their works for the sake of posterity. “We wear them out!” says Eilber, “We really wear out our costumes and we remake them for the next cast. It's just a constant renewal,” she says. In addition to general wear and tear, the entire archive was exposed to floods from 2012's Hurricane Sandy.

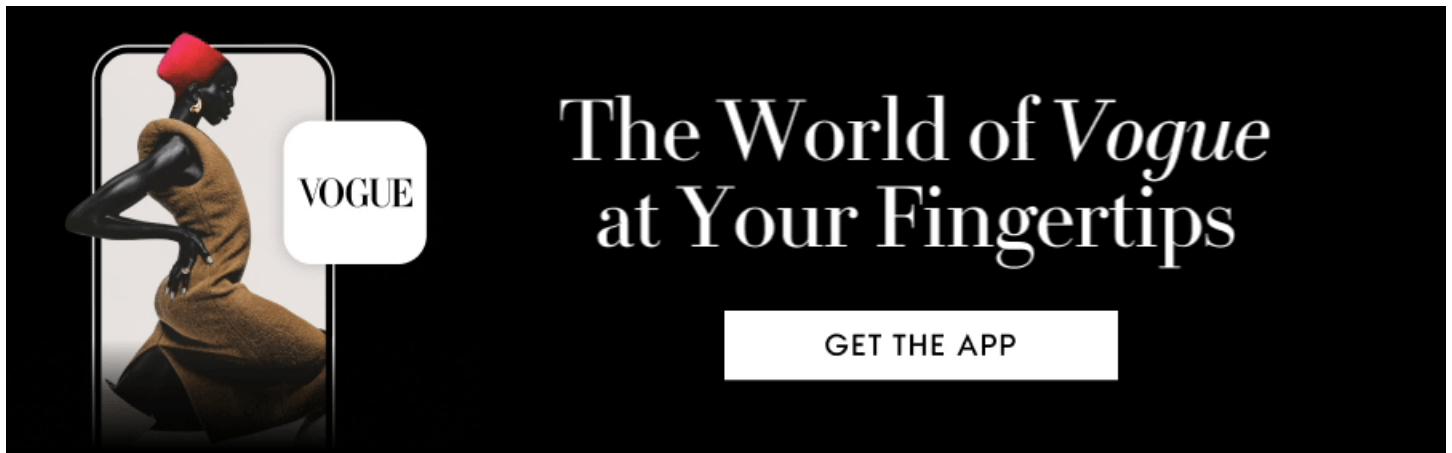


The tailored jackets created for the Turkey and the Owl, from *The Owl and the Pussycat* (1978). Martha and Halston created a whimsical world inspired by the classic poem by Edward Lear. The Owl jacket features Davy Crockett-like fringe, while The Turkey has an indication of tail feathers in the upturn of the jacket's tail.

Photograph by Hippolyte Petite

Tonight's celebration, which will include a conversation with Ralph Rucci, who once worked as an assistant designer in the Halston atelier, is one of many moments that the company will celebrate its

centennial. There is a forthcoming New York Public Library exhibition as well as an upcoming PBS documentary. In the meantime, there are these photographs of rarely-seen costumes *Vogue* captured ahead of the big night.



“As dancers, we loved wearing Halston's costumes because they not only were so thematically attuned to the dance we were doing, but were so beautifully made. He made me a costume for *Frontier* with a circle skirt out of a wool jersey. I can remember how it felt. It just moved so beautifully,” says Eilber, “it’s as though it took my cues.”