

Martha Graham Dance Company: Extraordinary

Jerry Hochman

April 14, 2025



Martha Graham Dance Company

The Joyce Theater

New York, New York

April 3, 2025: Program B

Frontier, Rodeo, Revolt and Immigrant, We the People

April 8, 2025: Program C

Deaths and Entrances, Errand Into the Maze, Cortège (world premiere)

Jerry Hochman

For its 99th Anniversary season (and the second year of its three-year Centennial Celebration) Martha Graham Dance Company presented three semi-distinct programs during its two-week season at the Joyce Theater: Program A consisted of *Clytemnestra* Act II, *Cortège*, *Letter to Nobody* (world premiere), and *Cage*; Programs

B and C are set forth in full above. I was unable to see Program A; regrettably, because *Clytemnestra* is one of the dances that introduced me to Martha Graham (I saw it on Broadway in the 70s), so even only one Act would have been better than none. So it goes. But I did attend Programs B and C.

It should come as no surprise that the finest pieces on both of the programs I attended were choreographed by Martha Graham, as originally performed or reconstructed. The world premiere dance that I saw, Baye & Asa's *Cortege*, is a highly inventive and visually stunning anti-war dance. I also saw two company pieces that premiered last year, but that somehow I missed – *We the People*, choreographed by Jamar Roberts, a standard-operating protest dance that includes some noteworthy highpoints; and Agnes de Mille's *Rodeo*, a conundrum because, as presented here, it's not Agnes de Mille's *Rodeo*, but it's *Rodeo*, not a reimagining of *Rodeo* (as in Justin Peck's *Rodeo: Four Dance Episodes*). But it is a reimagining of *Rodeo*. It made me want to scream; but on the other hand, it made me want smile on the most basic level, because, reimagined or not, it's still *Rodeo*.



Martha Graham (background) and
(foreground, l-r) Erick Hawkins, and Merce Cunningham
in “Deaths and Entrances”

Archive Photo by Barbara Morgan

Since I've already opened with that last confusing comment, I'll consider *Rodeo* first, then the world premiere and the other dance that was new to me, and, saving the best for last, conclude with the Martha Graham dances.

As I've written previously, Agnes de Mille's *Rodeo* was the final piece on the first live ballet performance I ever attended (the others were Ashton's *Les Patineurs*, Limon's *The Moor's Pavane*, and Balanchine's *Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux*), and the Cowgirl at that *Rodeo* performance was Christine Sarrey. I left the theater flying. I've attended many *Rodeo* performances since then, featuring “Cowgirls” including (but not limited to) Rebecca Wright, Erica Cornejo, Marian Butler, and Xiomara Reyes. The piece has a special place in my heart, and I react viscerally when I feel it's been treated with less respect than it is owed. I'm sure that's why I reacted

negatively to it here, even though this version isn't really bad.

I hope I'm wrong, but *Rodeo* appears no longer to be a regular component of ballet performances in this area: the last time that American Ballet Theatre included *Rodeo* on its schedule, according to my records, was in 2015, and I think it's beyond the scope of New York Theater Ballet, which includes a focus on overlooked dances within its ambit. If it has been intentionally mothballed, like *Petrushka*, the full-length *La Bayadere*, as well as de Mille's *Three Virgins and A Devil* (last revived, to my knowledge, by NYTB), among others, it's because it might offend some people, which might lead to bad publicity, and for a ballet company, bad publicity that's avoidable is best avoided.

Even though *Rodeo* was choreographed by a woman and provides significant performance opportunities for women, the story may now be considered anathema to some for a variety of reasons relating to the way women (all of them; but especially the Cowgirl) are portrayed. I won't characterize the argument more than I already have, but to me the notion that *Rodeo* is anti-feminist doctrine, and that that can control the scheduling of a ground-breaking dance makes no artistic sense.

Given the political atmosphere, I approached the Graham Company's *Rodeo* with hopeful trepidation.

Rodeo's score by Aaron Copland is regarded at least as highly as de Mille's choreography, and has been since the ballet's premiere by the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo in 1942 – in which de Mille herself played the Cowgirl, the Champion Roper was danced by Frederick Franklin, and which reportedly earned 22 curtain calls. In context, the score adds a note (well, many notes) of majesty to the dance, appropriate for the way the American Southwest was regarded when the dance was created. As in *Pioneer* (see below), the early part of the ballet is filled with references to the wide-open space (captured in Oliver Smith's set), with characters' arms seemingly circling its vastness. In my opinion, the score's connection with the choreography and the dance in its entirety, and with the experience that the dance in its entirety provides to its audiences, is indivisible.

That score was altered in this production. In her opening remarks, Artistic Director Janet Eilber explained the revision made. I didn't scribble her words, but, essentially, she said the change was made to be more inclusive; more representative of what the story was really like; more realistic.





Leslie Andrea Williams
in Jamar Roberts's "We the People;"
Photo by Isabella Pagano

The change was replacing the Copland composition usually played by an orchestra, with a bluegrass style arrangement (pre-recorded) by Gabriel Witcher. I have no qualms with Witcher's transposition of Copland's iconic score; it sounds like the original in terms of melody and tempo (although there were some passages I didn't recognize as Copland's, but that's probably my deficiency). What it also does, however, is lower the dance's profile; making it sound more mini than majestic, delivering a commensurately "smaller" audience experience in the process. Just another day and night at a ranch on the prairie.

If verisimilitude was desired, why bluegrass? Bluegrass grew out of the Appalachians, not the American Southwest. Sure, a banjo and/or a fiddle could have been carried there by those who moved out of Appalachia (or elsewhere) as opposed to a full orchestra, but this ballet was created in 1942; according to sources I read (e.g., The Encyclopedia Britannica), bluegrass wasn't created until the 1940s. Of course bluegrass has roots, but roots can be found in many contexts – including in Copland's original score.

Is "bluegrass" an appropriate style of music for a story that takes place long before the 1940s, when the prairie was still the prairie (overlooking for the moment that the wide-open prairie had an existing population)? Is Witcher's adaptation what dance night on the prairie was really like? Why not dueling banjos? Or a fiddler on the roof? And is it appropriate at all to modify an original work of art without approval by its creator in order to mollify potential objectors, whatever the objection may be? [I expressed the same concern when the powers that be at NYCB recently changed the title of a dance choreographed by George Balanchine from *Tzigane* to *Errante*.]





Xin YIng in Martha Graham's "Immigrant"

Photo by Christopher Jones

The bluegrass adaptation isn't the only issue. There are the costumes (designed by Oana Botez), particularly those for the ladies, that are white and bright and chock-full of knock-out flower colors, but look like they were straight out of the 1950s and early 60s (e.g., the Donna Reed Show).

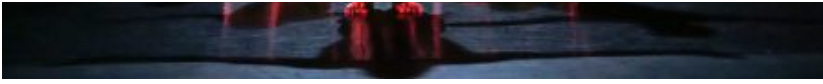
And then there's the acting. No one on stage did a poor job. On the contrary, overall they delivered fine performances (led by Laurel Dalley Smith as the Cowgirl, Lloyd Knight as the Head Wrangler, and Richard Villaverde – who does a mean tap dance – as the Champion Roper). But something was missing from the Cowgirl portrayal. In a review many years ago, I wrote that the essence of the Cowgirl character isn't that she's a tomboy, or that she wants to be like those macho men, or even that she just wants to be accepted by them and chose the wrong way to do it (though, based on what de Mille herself reportedly said, that's closer). It's a quality of vulnerability beneath the Cowgirl's façade that makes that role not just funny, but worthy of a viewer's compassion. I didn't sense that here – though again, maybe that's just a casualty of my memory of the sterling performances embedded in my mind.

BUT (there's always a "but"), judged by their reaction to the performance, the audience acted like they'd never seen *Rodeo* before. And I don't mean the musical arrangement; they laughed when it was appropriate to; when the choreography prompted it, and smiled their way through it all.

Which brings me to the second "BUT." At a minimum (and it's more than that), at least the dance is being performed live *somewhere*, which is better than never being performed again – or at least until the next sensibility change, or when some future Ratmanky discovers it buried in some archive somewhere. If it took a bluegrass adaptation to do it, having people see *Rodeo* is better than not having people see it at all. So, ultimately, the production, the performances, and the audience reaction left me, if not flying out of the theater, at least smiling.

End of *Rodeo* rant.





Martha Graham Dance Company in Baye & Asa's "Cortege"

Photo by Steven Pisano

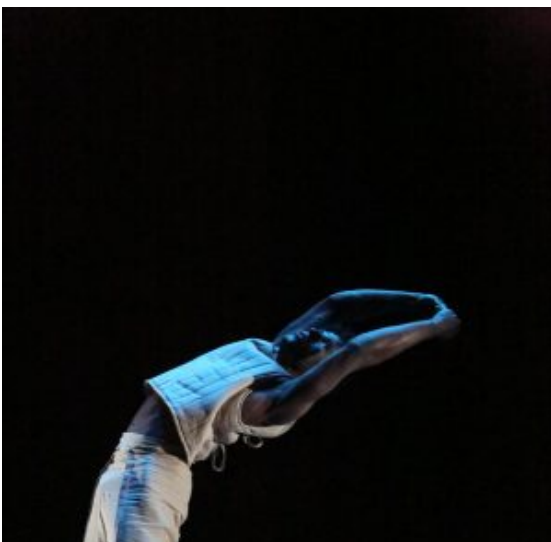
Cortege is one of those rare new pieces of choreography that's different from anything else, riveting, and a superb work of dance art. That's a difficult combo to pull off, but Baye & Asa (Sam Pratt and Amadi Washington), the dance's choreographic duo, did.

I've seen a prior Baye & Asa piece, *The One to Stay With* (presented by BodyTraffic), which earned a favorable review, but in no way did that prepare me for *Cortege*. Actually, I've seen two Baye & Asa pieces. The second one was *Cortege 2023* in MGDC's 2023 program at the Joyce. I had serious concerns with that piece then, but ultimately decided to reserve judgment until I'd seen it again.

Well, now I've seen it again, in something of a new incarnation, and I'm glad I reserved judgment. Based on the dance as I see it now, with certain changes having been made to the 2023 version, *Cortege* is a superb, and original, voyage to hell. That doesn't sound particularly inviting, but it's intended to be a metaphor – as in war is hell. War, and the calamities and death that arise from it, is *Cortege*'s subject.

Cortege is inspired by Graham's *Cortege of Eagles*, a 1967 dance, based on the Trojan War, which includes the transporting of souls to the underworld by Charon, the ferryman. I didn't see any reference to Charon in this piece – at least not in any way that's obvious (but, as I'll mention below, I did see action that can interpreted that way). Regardless, like *Cortege of Eagles*, it's an anti-war polemic. What makes it unusual is its visualization of that. *Cortege* has no central figure like Charon or Hecuba, as the Graham predecessor piece does – at least none I could discern as such. Although there are occasional solos, the cast, the suffering population, is a "central figure" of the entirety. And there are no "good" guys and "bad" guys. To the extent one can see "sides" in the piece, it's intentionally blurry – both sides participate in the carnage.

One thing that Baye & Asa did take directly from *Cortege of Eagles* are the introductory words stated by John Houseman that are piped through the theater speakers soon after the first casualties are seen on stage: "In times of extreme violence not even the most powerful or innocent may escape." In a nutshell, that's what *Cortege* is about.





Lloyd Knight in Baye & Asa's "Cortege"

Photo by Melissa Sherwood

The dance begins with eight unknown "objects" stretching diagonally upstage right to midstage, all completely covered by black tarp (or similar). When the music begins, the tarp is pulled away, revealing the dancers kneeling beneath. Later this scene is repeated. Dancers are arrayed in a line diagonally upstage right to midstage. Then the tarp is pulled *over* them, stopping mid-length, at which point the dance ends. This imagery is probably a veiled reference to Charon, but there's no such character – it's only the ferry transporting the dead, and its reference is not only to that ferry to the underworld; it's to war's continuing, repetitive cycle of violence and death.

In between, Baye & Asa demonstrate, visually, the consequences of violence. Some of the images are not unusual, but overall the dance is distinguishable by its communicated sense of hysteria and death. The death images are identical to the moving image that Alexei Ratmansky uses so masterfully in his recent *Solitude*. [Indeed, the dances are complementary – while *Solitude* is essentially (though not completely) focused on individual suffering, *Cortege* is focused (though not completely) on the besieged population as a whole.

What is different in *Cortege* from other anti-war dances that come to mind is the abundance of this death/mourning imagery scattered throughout the dance, and that moments after one of them lays dead on the stage floor accompanied by a mourner, the mourner and the deceased quickly bolt upright and join the rest of the group – only to fight and die and mourn again and again. The constant motion, the constant death representations, and the manner in which Baye & Asa and the Graham dancers communicate this, is quite extraordinary. It's not stylized – it's people trying to escape death, and fighting a losing battle. There's no collateral protest issue; it's "just" anti-war, and it's a towering ensemble effort in which each member of the 8-dancer cast (and particularly Lloyd Knight) excelled.

Not particularly memorable is last year's Graham Company premiere, Jamar Roberts's *We the People*.

There are parts of *We the People* that are well-deserving of praise. Among them are outstanding solos, as choreographed and as performed by Leslei Andrea Williams and Knight (who had a fabulous performance evening). On their own, and delivered in silence, they're pounding examples of seething anger and frustration.





(l-r) Alessio Crognale-Roberts, Marzia Memoli, and Lloyd Knight
in Jamar Roberts's "We the People"

Photo by Isabella Pagano

Beyond those exceptions, *We the People* is a garden-variety protest/ motivation dance distinctive only in its format (it has a large, 13-dancer cast that, much of the time, is gathered upstage while solo performances are highlighted downstage) and its score (by Rhiannon Giddens, adapted by Witcher; the banjo music fits well here) – although I recognize that the audience at the performance I attended was certainly enthusiastic. But it's too much preaching to a choir that doesn't mind being preached to.

We the People also suffers from a series of "false endings." There are two of them before the dance finally concludes, each prompting audience applause as if to greet the dance's end, only to resume after a brief pause. The effect was that when the dance finally did end, there was a pause on the audience's part because, by then, they weren't sure that the end was really the end.

I must emphasize that I'm not critical of Roberts's choreographic skills or his sincerity. And notwithstanding its similarity to other such dances and the false endings, *We the People* is certainly a highly competent production, and things that stick in my craw now may be tempered with additional exposure. So, as was the case with *Cortege*, I'll withhold a final judgment until I have an opportunity to see it again.

Dances choreographed by Graham, or reconstructed from images and notes, fared far more successfully.

With rare exception, one doesn't attend a Graham-choreographed dance to see a story; one goes to see the manifestation, and the evolution, of an emotion or a set of emotions relating to a general subject (told usually on an individual level) or a specific event. The "story" in most Graham pieces, at least those I've seen, is how Graham demonstrates the emotional components of, and the drama inherent in, what the audience already knows is a situation that is, has, or soon will be happening.

The Graham dances in the two programs I attended exemplify this.

Revolt and *Immigrant* are two "new/old" dances, reconstructed by Virginie Mécène, the Company's Program Director and Director of Graham 2. According to the program note, the reconstruction of these pieces was inspired by a few rediscovered photos and research into Martha Graham's early career relating to two of her "lost" pieces: *Revolt* (1927) and *Immigrant* (1928), the latter originally consisting of 2 parts ("Steerage" and "Strike:"). To the original score for *Revolt* (by Arthur Honegger) and new music for *Immigrant* by Judith Shatin, each of the two brief solos is precise, and shattering.





Leslie Andrea Williams
in Martha Graham's "Revolt"
Photo by Christopher Jones

In *Revolt*, Williams (who also had a fabulous performance evening) is as powerful as she would be later in the program in *We the People*, but with choreography that's crisp and to the point and limited in its scope. Williams's character is an archetype that Graham has frequently portrayed: anger-driven and determined to effect change. And in *Immigrant*, the choreography for Xin Ying is similarly unadorned, but the drama, the uncertainty, and the conflicting emotions are expressed in a way that can't be ignored. There are many dances that deal with the revolutionary impulse or the immigrant experience, but few, if any, are as crystalline as *Revolt* and *Immigrant*.

Pioneer (1935), which opened Program B, is equally straightforward, although it includes a small set by Isamu Noguchi and music by Louis Horst (each a frequent Graham collaborator). Danced by Anne Souder, the piece is epic, but on an "individual" scale. *Frontier* captures not just some frontier spirit, but the fear, the optimism, and the confidence that comes with having left somewhere to find some other "where" that, for all its challenges, might be better. Souder's performance was brilliant; one could see what her character sees, feel what her character feels, and dream what her character dreams: a living memorial to the lure of the frontier in American history.





Martha Graham Dance Company
in “Deaths and Entrances”
Archive Photo by Barbara Morgan

The most remarkable among the remarkable Graham pieces this season were those in Program C: *Deaths and Entrances* (1943), and *Errand Into the Maze* (1947). Each is masterful (the former being a certifiable masterpiece), and each illustrates how woman-centered Graham’s pieces largely are, even when not solos.

As *Deaths and Entrances* (1943) began to evolve, I immediately thought of Sir Antony Tudor’s *Jardin Aux Lilas* (1936). Although he and Graham (and de Mille) were co-existent in the same extraordinarily fertile choreographic period, and even though there’s a surface stylistic similarity between the two dances, Tudor’s focus is on the internal psychology of the situation, Graham’s on its more dramatic manifestations. Both dances are extraordinary works (and *Jardin Aux Lilas* – and other Tudor dances – should be returned to the ABT repertory with all deliberate speed).

I’d not previously seen *Deaths and Entrances*, and its performance here was a revelation. The encapsulation of drama among the Bronte sisters (Emily, Charlotte, and Anne), their collective acquaintances, romantic or otherwise, and children, and the dramatic revelation of inner thoughts in the context of repressed passions and a continuing stream of consciousness, is extraordinary. [I’ve used that word far too frequently in this review, but it’s the only one that really fits.] And it featured an extraordinary performance by Xin Ying as the tormented central sister (the role – probably of Emily, according to most commentators – originally performed by Graham), together with powerful and intriguing performances by So Young An and Ane Arrieta as her other tormenting sisters, and by Knight and Villaverde as, respectively, the “Dark Beloved” and the “Poetic Beloved.”



Martha Graham and Erick Hawkins
in “Deaths and Entrances”
Archive Photo by Barbara Morgan

The psychological progression from one development to another does tell a story, but the story is in Xin Ying’s character’s head; remembrances of things past, or things that happened only in the mind. Here, in contrast to the other Graham pieces, nothing is clear, because nothing is clear in Ying’s character’s mind. It’s all quite mysterious, haunting, and...extraordinary. And those statuette surrogates for the romantic objects of her living memory and are continually moved and repositioned, like chess pieces – those aren’t clear either; based on their size and shape, they may be surrogates for something else more Freudian.

Lastly, *Errand Into the Maze* (1947) is Graham’s encapsulation of “Fear,” and the character’s ultimate success overcoming it. As usual, however, it’s far more than that. To another Noguchi set (stranger looking than others) and a score by Gian Carlo Menotti (it seems contradictory that the composer of *Amahl and the Night Visitors* also composed *Errand Into the Maze*), the piece visualizes the inner struggle between the woman, originally played by Graham, and the character that represents “Fear,” related in the context of the myth of Theseus in which a heroine enters the labyrinth and battles a Minotaur. As choreographed, and as performed (by So Young An and Antonio Leone), it’s a titanic struggle against impossible physical odds, and includes another in a seemingly endless series of unforgettable images: An climbing up Leone’s thighs in order to, finally, vanquish him.

Like New York City Ballet, Martha Graham Dance Company must continue to inject new dances into its repertory in order to grow beyond being a performance museum. But as it approaches its 100th performance year, and like NYCB (which recently celebrated its 75th), MGDC must also continue to present the ...extraordinary... legacy of dances created by its founder. These classic dances are, in my opinion, what sells tickets, rather than dances that are “relevant” but of lesser quality. Based on this season’s repertory, at least as of now the Company is doing just that.