

f o r d

Portraits of a Lady

Martha Graham is the Georgia O'Keefe of dance. No matter what the source material, the primary subject of her works is womanhood. "Deaths and Entrances" and "Errand Into the Maze"—both featured on the third program the Martha Graham Dance Company offered at the Joyce Theater this month—bore that out. In the former, the Brontë sisters were Graham's ostensible topic, while she drew on Theseus's battle with the Minotaur in the labyrinth in the latter. But really, Graham grounded both dances in her own understanding of female desire, ambition, artistry, and power.

SHARE

Performance

Martha Graham Dance Company: "Errand into the Maze" / "Deaths and Entrances" / "Cortege" by Baye & Asa

Place

The Joyce Theater, New York, NY, April 8, 2025

Words

Faye Arthurs



Xin Ying in "Deaths and Entrances" by Martha Graham. Photograph by Steven Pisano

You don't have to be a Freudian scholar to be bowled over by the symbolism in "Errand into the Maze." In this piece, from 1947, Graham cast a woman—originally herself—as Theseus. Or should I say Sheseus? The maze is represented by a snaking umbilical cord that terminates in a suggestive V-shaped tree (designed by Isamu Noguchi to resemble a woman's pelvic bone). The man playing the role based on the Minotaur is gagged and his arms are yoked by a bowed wood beam.

This is a man-eating dance about conquering fear and monsters, whether real or imagined. And Graham's monster is a powerful brute who poses a real, albeit titillating, threat even with his partial costuming castration. At one point, the beast stands behind his lady prey and she erupts in violent trembling before mounting him. When she is finally free at the end, she effectively cuts the cord, untying it from the vulvar tree. In her recent Graham biography, *Errand Into the Maze*, Deborah Jowitt notes how this heroine "strokes the smooth sides of the V before passing through it and opening her arms to the freedom of a new day."

So Young An was almost too pretty at times in the Graham role on April 8th, but she did a wonderful job of the quaking moment. Antonio Leone was excellent in the thankless Minotaur role. He somehow managed full split leaps from zero preparation with his bound arms and plugged face. He also made the rolling around remarkably smooth despite his delimiting gear. His taxing flex-footed jumps and doubly planked embôités in arabesque (his torso parallel to the floor while skewered by that rack—brutal!) were also brilliantly executed. Graham's creature vocabulary is pure dance torture, and when he is finally vanquished, I always feel that it is a mercy killing. "I suspect I was going through my violent period," Graham reflected on the making of this piece in her autobiography *Blood Memory*. I'll say! Every one of the Minotaur's steps must be forcefully muscled; there is no recourse to momentum or coordination or even breath. Was this Graham's idea of manhood—or at least male technique—taken to the extreme? I often think of this role as payback for all the generations of ballerinas bound by pointe shoes and stiffly boned tutu bodices.

Principals Lloyd Knight and Richard Villaverde danced very well as the Dark Beloved and the Poetic Beloved, respectively, but they were treated like the many other props scattered about the stage—which included a seashell, a goblet, a vase, and two exaggeratedly phallic chess pieces (the sets were by Arch Lauterer). These men were archetypal, while the real drama was reserved for the psychological battles between the three Brontë sisters and, especially, the internal conflict of Emily (the role originally danced by Graham).



Martha Graham Dance Company in "Deaths and Entrances" by Martha Graham. Photograph by Steven Pisano

In a pre-show speech, Artistic Director Janet Eilber described this 1943 piece (which hadn't been performed since 2012) as "the first dance to use stream of consciousness." Stream is too gentle a term for Graham's approach here; torrent is more like it. Graham employs the same highly dramatic contractions and laborious floorwork for the sisters' parlor games that she uses in her bestial showdown. Thus, "Deaths and Entrances" is borderline comical at times. In her final solo, Xi Ying—superb in the mercurial lead role—skipped up and over the chessboard like it was a stile in a country field on a summer day, then theatrically banged on it and draped herself across it. In the tense final moments of the work, the sisters moved their chess piece dildos with all the subtlety of Brutus stabbing Caesar.

In general, I think Graham's dramatic style lends itself better to the many epic Greek myths she adapted. But despite—or maybe because of—its soap opera tendencies, "Deaths and Entrances" is a curiously compelling piece. At least Graham picked the Brontës of the literary windswept moors and brooding un-gentlemen instead of, say, the discreet repression of Henry James. And yet, like James's *Portrait of a Lady*, Graham's "Deaths and Entrances" insists that the somewhat circumscribed lives of clever Victorian women are worthy subject matter—as worthy as the beasts of ancient verse. Her equally extravagant physical treatment of both Emily Brontë and Theseus equates them, and thereby elevates a poor, wordy governess to the level of a mythic hero.

Graham likely also selected the Brontës because she felt a kinship with them, as they too fought for artistic control in a sexist society. They wrote under male pseudonyms so that they would be taken more seriously. And, just as Graham bound her Minotaur, the Brontë sisters were not afraid to cut their leading men down to size, afflicting them with poverty, blindness, and self-sabotaging rage. More pertinent still, the Brontës examined the complexities of female lust and the various power imbalances in heterosexual relationships. One of the peaks of "Deaths and Entrances" is the pas de trois between Emily and her two Beloveds. Though Xi clearly felt a kinship with Villaverde, tenderly holding his hand, she couldn't help but lean away from him and into Knight's body at the same time. Though Xi raged and fought with Knight in their pas de deux, this melting into his embrace was one of the few instances, in any Graham dance, of a woman with a soft and yielding spine.

Also unusual in “Deaths and Entrances” is Graham’s use of children. Well, not real ones. The dancers who portray the childhood versions of the Brontë sisters are full grown company members. Graham was not adding tiny, adorable technicians to her works like George Balanchine. The Three Remembered Children of “Deaths and Entrances” dance sprightly sautés, but they can be just as calculating as their future selves. We see them jockeying for power with each other even as they frolic and listen to seashells. They are little women, already dealing with Graham’s adult themes. And, like the men in the cast, they are also rather prop-like. They represent the grown sisters’ reveries, and their materialization is often triggered by the room’s various strewn objects—much like Proust’s madeleine daydream.



Martha Graham Dance Company in “Cortege” by Baye & Asa. Photograph by Steven Pisano

The season’s premiere, “Cortege,” by the choreographic duo Baye & Asa, closed the program. It did not share Graham’s feminine preoccupations, but it did tap into her mythic and activist traditions. Baye & Asa took Charon, ferryman to the underworld, as their subject, loosely riffing on Graham’s 1967 Trojan War piece “Cortege of Eagles.” Except they removed him and any specific war from their schematic. “In times of extreme violence, not even the most powerful or innocent may escape” was their broad tagline. They were also broad in how they hit all the tropes that contemporary choreography can’t get away from these days: the amoebas, the tweaky unison wedges, the spotlight snapshots, the hugs and the pieta poses.

What it had going for it was the Graham dancers’ sheer force. These are people who move chess pieces like they are gutting a deer; when they move in unison it is powerful stuff. The committed cast of eight was terrific, with standout passages for Anne Souder, Jai Perez, and Laurel Dalley Smith. I liked a creepy beheaded walking motif, in which one dancer slowly guided another whose head was tipped so far back that they resembled the Headless Horseman. It was fresh and unsettling, but nothing was as unnerving as Graham’s Minotaur vocabulary, which got me thinking about the problems of portraying violence through dance. So many anti-war contemporary pieces involve mock punching and pseudo-assaults. But even dancers as hard-hitting as the Graham ones aren’t stuntmen. I think the reason that Graham’s Minotaur figure is so distressing is that his

choreography is cruel to a dance-trained body. Graham assigns him agonizing steps rather than employing a dancerly gloss on fight moves.

“Cortege” was not truly a premiere, but a reworking of a piece from 2023, so I’ll give it a partial pass on how unoriginal it seemed, and also on how tired the can lights, smoke, droning music (by Jack Grabow), obscure lighting (by Yi-Chung Chen) and drab beige separates (by Caleb Krieg) looked. I will say, however, that whether Graham is exploring her femininity through legendary battles to the death or sisterly snubs, her dances are unmistakably hers and no one else’s.

Faye Arthurs

Faye Arthurs is a former ballet dancer with New York City Ballet. She chronicled her time as a professional dancer in her blog *Thoughts from the Paint*. She graduated summa cum laude with a B.A. in English from Fordham University. She lives in Brooklyn with her partner and their sons.