

Deaths, Entrances and Memory at The Joyce

Caedra Scott-Flaherty



Lloyd Knight and Xin Ying. Photo by Steven Pisano

“There are so many little deaths,” [wrote](#) American modern dancer and choreographer [Martha Graham](#), “those moments of doubt, loneliness, fear... moments when one ceases to be for a short time. Then there is the entrance again into the real world of energy that is the source of life, that is the immortality.” She was writing to [David Zellmer](#), a friend and Company member serving in the Air Force during the Second World War, about her new work, *Deaths and Entrances*. The then-new ballet, a stream-of-consciousness psychodrama inspired by the lives of the three Brontë sisters, initially baffled yet moved audiences and is now regarded as a modern masterpiece.

Martha Graham Dance Company is bringing back *Deaths and Entrances* (1943) to include in its 99th anniversary season as part of the eclectic [Dances of the Mind](#) program running April 1-13 at The Joyce Theater in New York City.

Graham choreographed many masterworks during her long and illustrious career. But *Deaths and Entrances* is special for several reasons. “It’s her first psychodrama,” artistic director [Janet Eilber](#) told Observer. “It’s the first time she uses the stream of consciousness as a narrative form. Memories flow from the heart, as Graham says. They just come and go and certainly not in chronological order.” Graham returned to this idea of choreographing memory and the subconscious in later works like *Night Journey* (1947) and *Clytemnestra* (1958).

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In the 1930s, when Graham’s company was made up entirely of women, her ballets were geometric and abstract. She was “manipulating the space to bring the emotional message forward,” Eilber explained. In the late ‘30s and early ‘40s, she brought men into her company and began experimenting with narrative structures. “The ‘30s in America had been very much about social activism, the community coming together,” said Eilber. “In the ‘40s, it becomes about the individual and the psychology of the ego and the id.” It was similar to what Hitchcock was doing with film and Faulkner with literature. “It was in the air.”

Deaths and Entrances is also important because it is an insight into Graham’s psyche. Eilber, who danced in the ballet’s 1977 revival, said that now—from a distance—she can see how personal this piece was for Graham. While the work was inspired by the Brontë sisters, it’s about more than them. It’s about what it means to be a female artist, about societal and familial expectations for women—Graham was born into a strict Presbyterian family where dancing was not allowed, was unmarried when she created the work and never had children. It’s about sisters—Graham was also one of three sisters. And it’s about having to make a life-changing decision that might disappoint those you love—themes that are as relevant today as they were in Graham’s or the Brontës’ time.





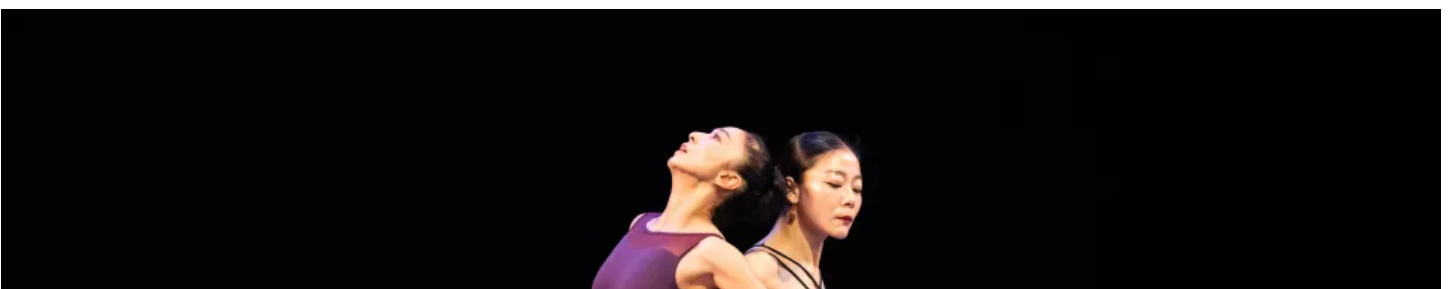
Martha Graham, Erick Hawkins and Merce Cunningham in *Deaths and Entrances*. Photo by Barbara Morgan

In the original 1943 cast, Graham, [Jane Dudley](#) and [Sophie Maslow](#) played the Three Sisters. [Ethel Butler](#), [Nina Fonaroff](#) and [Pearl Lang](#) were the Three Remembered Children, [Erick Hawkins](#) (Graham's future husband) played the Dark Beloved and [Merce Cunningham](#) played the Poetic Beloved. The 2025 cast will be entirely new, except [Lloyd Knight](#), who played one of the Cavaliers in the 2011 revival and will now take on the role of the Dark Beloved. "It's nice to see it fresh on these new bodies and new brains," said Eilber.

[Anne Souder](#) and [Xin Ying](#) will both dance Graham's role at The Joyce. Observer spoke with them in the weeks leading up to the premiere about their experiences stepping into the shoes—they actually do wear shoes—of the iconic character.

Souder said her preparatory research has included reading *Wuthering Heights* as well as the "beautiful poetry" of the Brontë sisters and watching old films of the work ("black and whites of Martha performing, up-close rehearsal footage of Phyllis [Gutelius], then Terese [Capucilli], Blakeley [White-McGuire], Miki [Orihara], watching the lineage.") She also reached out to the women who had danced the role before for guidance. "There was a lot of discussion about what it means to be a female artist," she told Observer. "So that's where I started to dive in, looking at the role from that angle."

One of the most helpful tips she received was to pay attention to the other dancers when watching the archival footage, not just her own role. A common interpretation of the piece is that most of what happens on the stage is in the lead woman's mind—it's all just memory triggered by objects and thoughts. "So knowing where everyone is, even if behind me, knowing their choreography and emotional journeys was really important."





So Young An, Xin Ying and Ane Arrieta. Photo by Steven Pisano

Souder has also been listening to [Hunter Johnson](#)'s musical score, which she describes as "hard, with a lot of quickness to it and deep suspension" repeatedly. "That's my subway background."

Ying has been reading Graham's autobiography *Blood Memory* and [Neil Baldwin](#)'s biography *Martha Graham: When Dance Became Modern* as part of her research, taking inspiration from Graham's real-life complicated relationships with Hawkins and her own sisters.

When asked Ying if she believed that what was happening on stage was real or just a memory, she said, "When you remember, it is real." She shared a quote from *Blood Memory* that had stuck with her: "We are living through the present to discover the past in us."

She was able to watch the piece live in 2011 right after joining the Company. "I remember the feeling of *Woah!* It's so theatrical, and the air is different. Once the curtain opens, you feel the tension between all the characters." She is thrilled to be able to dance the role now. "You don't often get the opportunity to be on stage for 30 minutes and tell someone's interior story. A role can sometimes be two-dimensional, but not this one."

Souder is also grateful to take on the challenge. "It's a deeply psychological piece where you have to drop in and then make sure, after you run it, that you drop out because it's quite intense." She has enjoyed rehearsing with her two "sisters" ([Leslie Andrea Williams](#) and [Laurel Dalley Smith](#)), who joined the Company with her 10 years ago. "We've grown up together," she said. "We don't fight like that, but the dynamic of sisterhood and being 125 percent committed to each other was immediately present."





(l. to r.) Richard Villaverde, Ethan Palma, Jai Perez and Lloyd Knight. Photo by Steven Pisano

Besides the new cast, most of the work's revival will be the same as it's always been. Though the 2011 costumes and set were drowned in Hurricane Sandy, [Oscar de la Renta](#)'s exquisite Victorian-esque gowns (reimagined but very similar to the 1943 originals) have been restored, and [Arch Lauterer](#)'s original sparse set design (supposed to imply an "ancient house") impeccably replicated.

When asked Eilber what she loves about *Deaths and Entrances*, she said that despite Graham being 49 when the ballet first premiered, the choreography is "so deeply physical and visceral, especially for that lead character. The character's 'mad scene' is pull-out-all-the-stops physical." She also mentioned that now, as a viewer and not a performer, she enjoys being able to go on the journey with that character who reminds her so much of Graham. "It's such a satisfying conclusion."

As to what it was like to learn this work from Graham herself, if she'd given any insight into its many mysteries, Eilber said, "She rarely talked about subtext or dramatic intent. Her direction was always about the physicality—stronger spine, deeper focus, a more animalistic walk across the stage... Martha's philosophy is that the movement will give you the emotion. Everything you need is in the choreography."

***Deaths and Entrances* will be performed as part of [Dances of the Mind's Program C at The Joyce Theater](#) on Saturday, April 5 at 7:30 p.m., Sunday, April 6 at 7:30 p.m., Tuesday, April 8 at 7:30 p.m., Friday, April 11 at 7:30 p.m. and Sunday, April 13 at 2:00.**