

Transformative magic at Martha Graham Dance

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Once upon a time [Martha Graham's](#) feminist retelling of the myth of the vengeful warrior-queen Clytemnestra was shipped to Cold War flashpoints and Soviet bloc nations as part of the US government's projection of 'soft power.' The idea was to present high art that expressed universal human emotions to persuade skeptics of the supremacy of the American model of democracy, grounded in individual freedoms.



Jai Perez in Martha Graham's *Clytemnestra*

© Isabella Pagano

Once upon another time, aka last Wednesday, Martha Graham's company offered *Clytemnestra* to an American audience rattled by the freedom-stripping spree of their own bumbling, fledgling government. In a mixed bill that included a somber reflection on war by choreographic duo Baye and Asa and an interpretation of a rave by Israeli choreographer [Hofesh Shechter](#), dancers schooled in a technique that produces the stamina and physique of warriors armed with *battements* of lethal power

expressed a wordless “in your face” to would-be tyrants.

Clytemnestra Act 2 was a hoot. Artistic Director Janet Eilber breezily summed up *Act 1* – which is no longer in the rotation – at one point reminding us that, since King Agamemnon has been off at war for 10 years, “his wife Clytemnestra has taken a lover, as one does.”

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

© Isabella Pagano

Some dramatic power was lost in this abbreviated rendering. Nevertheless, Leslie Andrea Williams was haunting in Graham's signature stretchy blood red shroud, guilt-wracked yet righteous. Laurel Dalley Smith was riveting as the implacable Electra, provoking her brother Orestes (Richard Villaverde) to matricide, supported by the magnificent Furies (Meagan King, Devin Loh and Amanda Moreira.) The tension ratcheted up every time Williams thrust a leg diagonally across her body as if slashing a broadsword.

[Baye and Asa's](#) *Cortege* was relentless (like war) and fetching (not like war.) The ensemble of eight crushed every whirling lift, every explosive jump and stop-on-a-dime exertion, and made gripping tableaux, handsomely lit, that recalled the Pietà or other scenes of devastation. But too much was made of a few theatrical devices, such as the ritual donning of quilted vests – presumably a nod to an ancient form of armour. The vests were placed reverently on the ground one by one before a dancer would pick them up. They each fiddled with a bit of ribbon at the shoulder and I was reminded of a line of poetry oft heard when one is flying through the air: “put on your own life jacket before attempting to help others.”

Martha Graham Dance Company in Hofesh Shechter's *Cave*

© Chris Jones

What stuck with me by the end was the virtuosic beauty of the dance more than the troubling subject matter. In the most fearsome episode the ensemble advanced in a tight formation like the caterpillar tracks on a tank while one dancer was carried aloft like the gunner. But the piece dragged on, as wars are apt to do.

In contrast, Hofesh Shechter's *Cave* harnessed dancer energy for no purpose other than release. Tethered to a thrilling house score that started and ended with a muted pulse like a heartbeat, *Cave* premiered back when the company and the world were emerging from pandemic. Today it still feels liberating, exhilarating, a snapshot of a company that has come together after a brutal isolation. Momentary flashbacks of terror are quickly subsumed in waves of tightly coiled energy or released through the fingertips of lithe, expressive hands. The choreography is taut and witty even if it has little to say – this small company of distinctive personalities and physiques brings to it an intoxicating

range of emotional textures.

Xin Ying in *Letter to Nobody* in collaboration with Mimi Yin

© Brian Pollock

The world premiere of *Letter to Nobody* – a tech-enhanced solo created and danced by [Xin Ying](#) against a backdrop of vintage footage of Martha Graham, edited to startling effect – proved the most unsettling and moving work of the evening. The captivating Xin literally pursued the image of Graham as captured on film in the 1940 *Letter to the World*, a dance meditation on the private life of poet Emily Dickinson. In a gossamer update of Graham's dress, Xin echoed and re-interpreted Graham's movement, and voiced the opening verse of Dickinson's poem "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" – a poem that celebrates the "Nobodies" and spurns the "Somebodies," like influencers and TikTok junkies.

Xin also revisited an interview with Graham which took place in her dressing room as she did her hair and makeup for the role of Jocasta in *Night Journey*. Graham majestically invoked the "ritual – the means by which you transform yourself." I won't spoil the transformative magic spun by technology and choreography.

Amid the celebration of the company's centenary, Eilber continues to throw old and new into the mix with a compelling sense of how to engage with the present. One day, the US government will rekindle the Cold War strategy of shipping its trailblazing dance companies overseas to rebuild fractured relations. When it does, Martha Graham Dance should be in the vanguard.

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