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## Martha Graham Dance Company Review: Its Founder's Long, Lithe Shadow

**The highlights of the troupe's current programs at the Joyce Theater are Graham's own works, as well as those most directly inspired by her.**

*By  
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Xin Ying in 'Letter to Nobody.' PHOTO: BRIAN POLLOCK  
*New York*

"Dances of the Mind," the Martha Graham Dance Company's program at the Joyce Theater through Sunday, comprises 11 works in three different mixed bills and celebrates the troupe's 99th season. It is dominated by four landmark Graham creations that the innovative choreographer and dancemaker (1894-1991) arranged as compelling, stream-of-consciousness theatrics that unfold in nonlinear time.

Her works here, dating from 1935 to 1958, hold the Joyce stage with striking authority. This is especially true of “Errand Into the Maze” (1947), performed to a Gian Carlo Menotti score heard, as is all of the run’s music, on tape. Graham takes inspiration from the Theseus/Minotaur myth to center on a lone woman (first danced by the choreographer herself) and an unnamed male character, referred to in a program note as a “Creature of Fear.”

“Errand” at the Joyce revealed its central woman—a commanding Laurel Dalley Smith in the performance I saw—amid a spare and unforgettable set by Isamu Noguchi with bleached-bone white elements in a rich black surround, handsomely lighted by Beverly Emmons in a design based on Jean Rosenthal’s original. The dance, dominated by an intermittently fearful and fearless woman whose presence is intruded upon by an implacably persistent horned male character—an impressive Zachary Jeppson-Toy on my night—ends with the unnamed female character’s eventual triumph over her antagonist.

“Deaths and Entrances,” a 1943 work for six women and four men to a score by Hunter Johnson, takes inspiration from the lives of the three Brontë sisters. Seen here for the first time since 2012, the dance depicts the often intensely driven actions of its three central women in their insular world. This staging is company artistic director Janet Eilber’s 2011 version trimmed back to 30 minutes from Graham’s 45-minute original.



Richard Villaverde in 'Deaths and Entrances.' PHOTO: BRIAN POLLOCK

"Deaths" is intriguingly set by Arch Lauterer with three architectural elements indicating parts of rooms and is lighted glowingly by Judith Daitsman; Oscar de la Renta's costumes from 2005—especially for the men—remain overly fussy.

The female participants are identified as "Sisters" and "Remembered Children." Two men are called Beloved—one Dark, the other Poetic—with a pair of additional male dancers as Cavaliers.

All stream through, asserting their individuality, at times interacting, sometimes involving themselves with the playing of a kind of chess game. These dreamlike incidents prompt audiences to read their moods and assess their import; Xin Ying, as the central sister, moves affectingly and projects both inner turmoil and outward confidence.

As the dance's Poetic Beloved, originally danced by an acrobatic Merce Cunningham, Richard Villaverde exudes a kindly warmth and fleet athleticism. Lloyd Knight performs with steadfast aplomb as the Dark Beloved, a role first danced by Erick Hawkins, who would eventually marry Graham.

“Frontier” (1935, to Louis Horst), a delicately declamatory solo for a woman, and “Clytemnestra Act 2” (1958, to Halim El-Dabh), inspired by Aeschylus’ “Oresteia,” have notable set designs by Noguchi. “Clytemnestra” focuses on two central and three subsidiary women as well as three prominent men; its choreography exemplifies Graham’s theatrical vision for capturing tragic themes through physical gestures and haunting moods.



Laurel Dalley Smith (foreground) with Amanda Moreira, Devin Loh and Meagan King in ‘Clytemnestra Act 2.’ PHOTO: ISABELLA PAGANO.

Three recent solo presentations mine Graham’s past to give it fresh life.

“Letter to Nobody,” a world premiere by Ms. Xin and Mimi Yin, has Ms. Xin performing in an atmosphere of manipulated sound and filmed records of Graham, primarily silent footage of the troupe’s founder dancing in her 1940 Emily Dickinson-inspired “Letter to the World.” While it’s not easy taking one’s eyes off the vivid images of Graham in the background, Ms. Xin’s simple, responsive moves to Graham’s, while costumed in Karen Young’s lilac chiffon dress, lend her “Letter” a beguiling air.

Two other solos, from 2024—the work of former Graham principal dancer Virginie Mécène—aim to reclaim choreography no longer extant. One reimagines “Revolt”

(1927); the other, “Immigrant” (1928). These educated guesses of the originals are both stylishly costumed by Ms. Young.

In “Revolt,” to Arthur Honegger’s music, Leslie Andrea Williams at times makes a gestural statement of physical resistance, her arms recalling the horns of a bull, then the broken wings of a bird. For “Immigrant,” to newly composed music by Judith Shatin, Ms. Xin proceeds diagonally downstage as if into an unknown; in her glossy, long black dress, re-created from photos of Graham in this solo, she suggests the young artist forging a way for herself into 20th-century dance history.

None of the other contemporary works presented here holds the stage with more than passing impact. While Ms. Eilber continues to commission choreographers with an eye toward advancing Graham’s legacy, so far the results largely pale in the shadow of Graham’s art.

### **Martha Graham Dance Company: Dances of the Mind**

Joyce Theater, through Sunday