

# Martha's Advanced Class, 1947

By Stuart Hodes

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*Part Real- Part Dream, Encounters With Martha Graham*, Copyright 2005

The advanced class meets at 4:30 PM. By fourfifteen, choice spots in the center of the studio floor and in front of the mirrors are taken and latecomers pick their way to places near the back or at the sides. I sit with the soles of my feet together, letting the weight of my torso gently stretch the muscles of my lower back. The beginning of every class has an almost baited-breath excitement. The maple floor, clean as a cutting board, feels good beneath my bare thighs.

Ethel Winter, Martha's demonstrator, waits facing the class. A minute before 4:30, Ralph Gilbert enters, takes his place at the piano and arranges his newspaper. Martha enters, looks the class over, glances toward Gilbert who meets her eye.

"And...!"

Gilbert's compressed chords mark each pulse as torsos drop into opening *bounces*, sixteen with soles of the feet together, sixteen with legs outspread, sixteen extended to the front. The *breathings* follow, an expansion that fills the torso and lifts the gaze.

Then begin *contractions*, Martha's signature torso modulations. From deep in my pelvis I draw my body into a concave arc from hips to head, relishing the feel of deep muscles working, the surge of energy in my bones that seems to gather and shoot out of my flexed hands and feet. *Release* straightens me like an uncoiling spring. As each *contraction* begins, my face lifts, lengthening my throat. "Open your eyes!" Martha commands. Closing them is selfindulgent and narcissistic.

"Present your gaze!" I present mine to the vaulted ceiling, then beyond, imagining sky, space, beyond space. My gaze feels weighted, almost solid. I pan it like a searchlight and chop it down like a cleaver as my body gathers in an accelerating sweep that articulates my spine and flows through my torso into my mouth where it bursts into a second *contraction* to begin the entire sequence again.

"Sit to the side, fourth position."

I study Ethel Winter, trying to fathom the comfort and ease she has in this curious body posture. My tendons seem long enough, but I am not at home in the *sittingfo-u-rth* and believe it to be a conceptual flaw, some muscle group deep inside that hasn't learned not to resist. We change sides on three counts, extend the legs, tilt onto the other side, spread the knees and pull back onto the left rump, each count accompanied by a percussive chord. Gilbert's music is familiar yet his improvisations always fresh.

My left hip lifts to insinuate a rotating wave through my stomach, chest, and head. Arms engage, left, then right, then both as head and gaze sweep through an arc. Within I feel stillness as the room spins past my eyes. Both hips rise as my torso arches up,

back, and around until my weight hangs over my right forearm where I suspend until a *contraction* catches me, sucks me in and whirls me into a ball until *release* fills me once more to end the move delicately, like silk settling. In the stillness that follows effort, I relish my quickened heartbeat and present my gaze to the mirror where thirty others present their gazes to me.

Martha moves about giving personal corrections. She stops over me. "Go to the count of five." I spiral back placing weight on my right forearm. She pokes me lightly under the ribs. "Lift, *there!*" I strive into my rib cage. "At least you're wet," she says. It's approval. The floor beneath me is wet too as sweat runs off my thighs and drips from my arms. Heavy sweating feels cleansing, a shower taken inside out. The room is hot, comforting my muscles, the humid air nourishing as broth.

"Over on your face." I stretch out face down, body parallel to the front wall. "Back on your knees. *Exerciseonsix.*" Martha's most dramatic floor sequence is named simply by the number of its counts.

I come to the starting position, body shaped like a "Z," weight on my knees and insteps, torso held out horizontal. Martha looks us over. "Lengthen your torso. Keep your back parallel to the floor, like a table." She pushes gently on the hips of the dancer next to me, lowering her torso, lifts another's shoulders, traces her finger along the spine of one who isn't in a full *release*, presses down a pair of tensely lifted heels. She takes her time. Simply holding the position demands strength and Martha keeps us at it. Not comfortable with my weight on my knees, or rather, on the tops of my tibias just below the kneecaps, I feel my jaw tighten and try to relax every muscle not engaged simply holding the position.

"One!" A powerful *contraction* lifts the center of my back as my head and shoulders scoop toward the floor. My torso lifts and unfolds into a steep backward tilt from knees to head.

"Two!" The count catches the tilt and it holds there, thighs lengthened from within.

(Years later a student from Japan, Akiko Kanda, transforms herself in the *exercise-on-six*. She'd arrived with muscle-heavy thighs giving her slender torso a grounded look. She takes three classes a day and does the *exerciseonsix* with ferocity. "She is Samurai," Martha says approvingly. In a year, Akiko's thighs are slender as reeds. When she becomes a leading dancer in the Graham Company, no one believes she'd ever been other than the steely sylph who appears on stage. When she returns to Japan, she becomes a celebrated dancer and teacher, eventually declared a "National Treasure.")

"Three!" I spring into *release*, the bodylong *contraction* reversed in one count. "Four!" The *release* is sucked back into a second *contraction* and a steeper tilt, buttocks inches from heels, at the limit of my strength for half a count, "and, release, sit!" Buttocks drop onto heels, head flung back, gaze up, spine striving for length as the torso folds forward toward the floor into an exaggerated "hyperrelease."

"Five—" the *release* reverses, becoming *contraction*—"and, six!" returning to the cantilevered horizontal thrust of the opening, immediately to do it again. *Exerciseonsix* is always done at least twice.

"Sit to the side." I settle gratefully off my knees. Martha nods to Ethel. Ethel has done every movement with the class, but now demonstrates the *exercise-on-six* by herself, slowly, as Martha explains the impulse beneath each move. She does it effortlessly, her control almost casual in positions that make my thigh muscles shudder. Then it is our turn and we do it four more times. It yields, at last, a feeling of exultation.

"Rise from the floor." We stretch full length on stomachs then push back onto hands and knees.

"One!" The left leg reaches back.

"Two!" Step onto the left leg, straighten the right, line up, heelhiphead.

"Three!" Rise on the left leg as the body swivels toward the mirror and the right leg scissors in, coming to meet the left in first position.

Minibreak, fifteen seconds. Men tuck T-shirts into trunks and subtly adjust dancebelts. Women pull leotard bottoms over exposed buttocks.

"Brushes!"

We begin with the legs parallel, weight on one, the other beating like a bird's wing. "Make arrows!" says Martha. I'm not happy with my feet and on each brush, point as hard as I can. The brushes break free of the floor, then rise parallel to the floor at a tempo faster than its pendulum rhythm so that the body must absorb the effort, or in weakness, reveal it. Martha is standing behind me.

"You're gripping with your arms," she says in my ear.

"Let go. Let light pass through your body." I respond with a shake of my torso as I try to disconnect my arms from the force energizing my leg. I use the image she gave me, seek to feel transparent, to float serenely above the commotion of my legs. I imagine that my pumping leg is a separate entity and encourage it in a friendly, yet insistent way. We do deep pliés, done by every dancer who ever lived. My body nears the floor, kneeangle acute as the bones lose mechanical advantage, spilling the weight into thigh muscles that must support me with sheer strength. "Lift! Lift!" exhorts Martha, and I try to imagine gravity flowing upward through my body, opposite to jumps where the thrust is down; resolution sought in opposites. I believe that with enough concentration, opposition can disappear and effort with it.

"Slow sits-to-the-floor!"

We begin in a wide second position, spill weight onto the left leg, body curved like a taut sail, right foot passing behind and to the left of the left, *sickling* at the ankle. A *sickled* foot curves inward, an unmitigated sin in classic ballet. Yet it has a beauty of its own. My instep caresses the floor and accepts my weight as I drop my right buttock all the way down to settle into the *sit*.

Thirty dancers hold it there, curving coils of muscle from shoulder to knee. Ralph holds the pedal down letting the chord ring as he turns the page of his newspaper and Martha counts, "...six, seven, eight," then slams his thick fingers down hitting more than ten keys. Thirty backs snap straight flinging weight through thighs and in-curved feet into skinpolished floor. Thirty torsos cut upward, suspend, then settle carefully, like mountain birds landing. The music drains away.

Martha has Ethel demonstrate *prances* and then challenges us with a look that asks why don't we dance like she. The first time I see Ethel dance, it's in a *Letter To The World* rehearsal where she is chaste as Diana. Next she's doing jazz improvisations at a company party, and after that steamy routines in Broadway's *Ankles Aweigh!*

Daydreaming, I miss an explanation, feel woozy and bend from the waist to drain blood into my brain, then straighten up as we start *prances*, doing them as a rest step by letting the spring in my calves and feet carry me through the first set. We repeat, knees rising high, then with jumps in the middle ending on a double upbeat. Martha works them into a turning jump combination with tricky syncopation, and I attack with gusto no longer feeling tired.

A second minibreak while the class shuffles to the corner and lines up in pairs for the diagonal *across-the-floor*. Men dance last. There are only three other men, Mark Ryder, (Sasha) and Robert Cohan, both in the Graham Company, and a smallish wiry newcomer in a white leotard whose hornrimmed glasses are tied on with elastic. Cohan and the newcomer hang back wanting to go last so I pair up with Sasha.

We begin with *low walks*, slow at first, then faster, keeping the body's weight centered between footfalls. After several crosses Martha gives a ludicrous illustration, chest caved in, belly thrust out, chin poked forward. "This is how little babies walk. Selfish little babies." Her quick smile fools nobody. She hates what we are doing. We start again.

"No!" She stops us. "Watch Ethel!"

Ethel moves in a seamless flow, knees flexing smoothly, toes seeming to touch the floor with the sensitivity of fingers, inviting the heel which follows soundlessly to take the body's weight. Around she glides as if on tracks. "Do it!" We do it again, and again, then faster, and faster still, developing into *low runs* that swallow the studio's diagonal in three seconds.

Triplets. One low step, two high. Martha adds a wide turn, a traveling *skip*, and works it into a dancy combination that reverses and cuts back in a semicircle to end with leaps the length of the studio. Ralph hammers out the triplets on low notes, then switches to a fourbeat for the leaps buoying each with a slashing chord accented on "two" instead of the downbeat to give us a musical lift at the crest.

"Stop!" Martha claps her hands together, halting music and dancers. "You're missing it," she says angrily. "Push off on one, stay in the *air* on two. Listen to Ralph. He's trying his best to help you. Sasha and Stuart, will you please demonstrate?"

A bouquet! We leap across trying to out jump each other, followed by the eyes of the Intermediates who crowd the doorway waiting for the class to end. Then everyone does leaps continuously, a sustained crescendo until the clock says three minutes after six.

"We've run over. That's all. Thank you."

The class applauds as students dash in to grab choice spots in front of the mirror.

**STUART HODES** was Martha Graham's partner in the 1950s, has performed in a dozen Broadway musicals, in concerts, on television, in nightclubs, and in some seventy dances of his own. He has choreographed for musicals, television, film, and for major modern dance and classical ballet companies. He's taught at the Martha Graham School, NYC's High School of the Performing Arts. He and his wife, Elizabeth have completed six national tours of their two-character musical shows, "Dancing on Air with Astaire," "Our Marlene," and "Two Americans in Paris," and recently premiered "The Sound of Wings," which they wrote and for which Stuart wrote four songs. He dances with younger choreographers, including Stephan Koplowitz, D.J. MacDonald, and most recently, Victoria Marks. His articles on dance have appeared in *Ballet Review* and *Arts Education Policy Review*, and his book on choreography, "A Map of Making Dances," will soon be published by Ardsley House Press. He is a licensed commercial pilot and grandfather of five-year-old Matthew.