



Errand Into the Maze Set design by Isamu Noguchi Photo by Rudolf Burckhardt ©

A Dancer Speaks Out: The Untold Story of the Noguchi Sets

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By Janet Eilber

The sets Isamu Noguchi designed for Martha Graham during their decades-long collaboration have been widely celebrated and commented upon. There remains, however, an element essential to the power of the sets that has received little attention.

We dancers who have worked onstage with these sculptural masterworks are reluctant to reveal this aspect to our audiences. In fact, as part of our intimate and complicated relationship with the sets, we have systematically kept it hidden.

The world is aware of the success of the Noguchi constructs onstage – their stunning beauty and profundity – but has rarely thought of them as the obstacles that they literally are. Implacable, resistant, inflexible and, at times, infuriating, the sets present a great challenge to Martha Graham dancers. We spend hours of rehearsal time “taming” them and protecting their reputation. These reknowned works of architectural art, though heart-stoppingly spare and breathtakingly evocative, are also – let’s face it – teeth-grindingly, bone-achingly uncomfortable.

It is worth considering those of us who have a tactile relationship with Noguchi’s theatrical marvels. We have to fling ourselves across them, perch, scramble, or writhe on them – or even worse – serenely balance in stillness on them for long, painful minutes as others dance. It is our job to convince the audience that the sets are not only the tangible structures of our world – mere beds, thrones, mirrors or chairs – but that they symbolize our very selves, from our bones to our dreams to our deepest human urges. And we are required to do this without a tremor as we glide up, down or around various obstacles; without a groan or grimace as we appear to “sit” on narrow ledges or brass rods for several minutes; without hesitation as we throw our full weight on irregular fiberglass protuberances. All the ingenious techniques Noguchi used to create the incredibly effective illusions – the raked angles, the organic curves and exaggerated corners – are exactly what provide the greatest challenge for those of us who must enhance and extend those illusions.

Let me let you in on some of the dancers’ secrets. Working within Noguchi’s space and with the objects it contains, we not only struggle to disguise the difficulties presented but to use them to the greatest theatrical effect. The set for *Appalachian Spring*, for example, is remarkable for the narrowness of the seat of the rocking chair, and of the tiny bench that also slants uncomfortably downward. Dancers take seated poses for long minutes on these impossible

perches. The clenched thighs and levitating posture the dancers use to maintain their position must come across the footlights as the fervor of the frontier.

Then there is the set for *Phaedra*, which features a raked, tilted and sharp-edged bed Noguchi placed center stage. The dancer in the title role opens the ballet tossing and turning on that torturous bed. I know from experience that her projection of the agonies of semi-incestuous lust is driven in part by her desperation to keep from rolling into the orchestra pit.

Imagine the difficulties of donning the shimmering dress of brass thorns, created for *Cave of the Heart*, or of reclining on the hulking “elephant” from the same dance. Curl your toes around the narrow brass rods of *Seraphic Dialogue* or try to march sure-footedly across the impossibly irregular bed from *Night Journey*. Add to this empathetic fantasy that you are executing these feats in front of two thousand people, and of course, that they must be profoundly moved by your performance.

One final mock-complaint: As performers, we are not only working with the materials of the set itself – the bruise-inducing brass, wood or fiberglass. Far more daunting, we must interact with all that those materials suggest and evoke. It takes considerable energy and artistry to share the stage with, and match the power of, a Noguchi masterpiece. Inspired by his genius, each dancer strives to create a presence that is equally evocative and potent.

Of course, though dancers like to grouse about the difficulties of Noguchi’s sets, we know great art is not about ease or comfort.

As we rehearse, we work to fulfill every facet of our roles. Our task is to embody the music, to possess the movement and to sculpt ourselves into Noguchi’s designs. As our interpretations evolve, they are deepened and elevated by the effort. Our need to incorporate the sets into our performance – by clinging, balancing, twisting, grasping and pushing – eventually aligns with the intention of Graham’s famed physical vocabulary to reveal the emotional heart of the dance. The resistance, support and spirit of the immobile partners designed by Noguchi help inform who we will be on stage each night.

As the Pioneering Woman in *Appalachian Spring*, I knew that, more than any of the other characters, mine was a living component of both the design and the spirit of Noguchi’s set. The length and reach of the role’s choreography, the imposing tangents of the arms and legs, the squared-off shoulders, level chin and palpable horizontal gaze, all resonate with the angles of the set and the distances it creates. Together character and set evoke the space of the American frontier, its limitless opportunities, its far-reaching dreams, its manifest destiny – all through the significance of design.

Much has been said about the synergy generated by Martha Graham and Isamu Noguchi as they worked together in different art forms but with the common aesthetic goal – revealing what Martha called “the thing itself.” But I believe that the genius of their collaboration was that they found a way to make it perpetual. Their artistic partnership did not end with the completion of the set and the premiere of the choreography. The interaction between these two artists continues to this day. It exists wherever a Graham dancer and a Noguchi set rehearse together, challenging and inspiring each other to have a greater impact on their next audience.

You, the viewer, can become part of this artistic interaction. Attend a performance of one of these dual masterpieces. Even though you now know the secrets of the dancers – and are prepared to catch them in any groan, grimace or hesitation – you won’t. They will have successfully disguised the set’s challenges once again. Noguchi’s obstacles will have become opportunities – just as their creator intended.

In her years as principal dancer with the Martha Graham Dance Company (spanning 16 non-consecutive years between 1972-1998), Janet Eilber soloed at the White House, was partnered by Rudolf Nureyev, and starred in three segments of *Dance in America*. She danced many of Graham’s greatest roles and had roles created for her by Graham. Eilber has also taught, lectured and directed Graham works internationally. She is co-founder of the American Repertory Dance Company and has received four Lester Horton Awards for her performances and work in reconstruction of seminal American modern dance. Eilber has also worked closely with the Library of Congress Martha Graham Collection and is Principal Arts Consultant to The Dana Foundation.

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