



Martha Graham Dance Company / "Spectre-1914" from Sketches from Chronicle / Fang-Yi Sheu / Photo by Nan Melville

Martha Graham: 20th Century Warrior

By Peter Sparling

(Presented in the late 1990's as a pre-performance lecture for the Martha Graham Dance Company's appearances at the Wharton Center, East Lansing, MI)

Martha Graham's powerful legacy as artistic innovator, choreographer and dancer hovers at the threshold of a new century. Her influence on the world of dance has been so profound that choreographers following in her wake have considered it both a blessing and a curse. Born in 1894 and continuing to create until her death in 1991, Graham spanned a century of enormous cultural and artistic transition. Her first performances were with the California-based Denishawn Company in the teens and early 20's; she moved to New York in the mid-twenties to appear in the Greenwich Follies, then broke away from any outside affiliation to present radically sparse, fiercely angular works on small, bare stages. Whether she was appearing on the vaudeville stage or at Carnegie Hall in a production of *The Rite of Spring* under the baton of Stokowski, Graham always made an indelible impression on her audiences. Over the next 65 years, her repertory of dance works was forged on a loyal, ever-evolving group of dancers. During that time, audiences worshipped or scorned her sharp-edged drama, her goddess-like intensity on stage and the dense psychological depths she invested in modern dance. She

could not be ignored nor thwarted in her tenacity and pioneering efforts to promote the new 20th century art form.

Graham broke with the traditions of classical ballet and more ornamental, exotic or entertainment-oriented dance to place her work at the center of early 20th century modernist esthetics and social transition. She cast womanhood in a modern urban context, and radically rejected the image of the dancing female as diaphanously clad or ephemeral object of the male gaze. Her embodiment of a new kind of woman, feminine not in her fragility or grace but rather in her strength and will, helped to turn the trend in a fledgling art movement towards dances that revealed aspects of inner character and the soul's darker interior. Over a period of decades, she moved from dances of contemporary social commentary to works that defined our American past and further back to the primal stuff of legend and mythology. Her archetypal heroines—from Clytemnestra, Medea, Jocasta, Ariadne, Judith, and Joan of Arc, and forward in time to Emily Brontë, Emily Dickinson, or the optimistic bride of *Appalachian Spring*—all radiate a feminine persona struggling against a male-dominated world, or a world of subtle forces against which she does fierce battle.

This battle is shown in the way she trained her own and her dancers' bodies to rise, contract, spiral, and implode within their own skins, but always with a calculated technique and ruthless focus. The Graham Technique is famous throughout the world as a method for training the body to be expressive, visceral and poetic. Always motivated from the center of gravity, the pelvis and hips, the movement grows upwards through the torso to cut directional planes into the space and etch curvilinear and angular shapes that remain indelibly printed in the observer's memory. Martha talked about this memory, the body's memory, and the dancer's memory. She called it "blood memory", or our ancestral memory. When we witness her dances, we are given an opportunity to free our own bodies and spirits to remember things about what it means to be human and greater than human...or what we all share in our collective memories. Our hopes, fears are often greater than life, and greater than we can handle at any moment. Yet they reside in our own bone, nerve and muscle. Martha gave her audiences the permission to recognize and share these heightened experiences in the form of carefully plotted dance/dramas and in the disciplined, expressive bodies of her company's dancers.

We can be haunted by her dances, or illuminated by the full-out, gutsy dancing and exciting imagery of the movement, costumes, sets, lighting and music. Martha revolutionized all of these aspects and championed a new order of dance/theater. Her costumes were form-fitted, draped onto the dancer and designed to reveal the origin

of the movement in the hips and pelvis up through the torso and back. The fashion designer Halston later became her disciple, admiring her inventive use of stretch fabrics and angular cuts. Martha collaborated with extraordinary visual artists and sculptors on set designs. The greatest of these was the Japanese/American artist Isamu Noguchi, whose sets for *Appalachian Spring*, *Seraphic Dialogue* and countless others brought a stripped-down purity and modernist poetry to the overall production. Jean Rosenthal worked closely with Martha to invent a means of accenting the 3-dimensionality of the body in a 3-D space, painting with the light and creating an architecture of space on an empty stage. More than any other 20th century choreographer, Martha commissioned American composers to create new musical scores for her dances. Some of these dance scores rival those of Tchaikovsky or Stravinsky and are now considered among the greatest examples of 20th century American music. Who hasn't heard Aaron Copland's *Appalachian Spring* on the car radio while driving west across I-96 into a setting sun, and not thought wistfully of a perfect time or place somewhere in the American past, present or future? Yes, and we even hear it as background for automobile commercials: Our culture has so totally absorbed its subliminal meanings and resonances, its evocation of vast spaces.

Watching Graham's company perform her greatest works takes us on a turbulent, gut-wrenching inner voyage. We see the human body transformed into the ultimate expressive instrument. Gravity weighs down on her dancers from without, but something else pulls at them from within. A typical Graham heroine wages a battle to the end with her own overpowering emotions; forces greater than her are so internalized that her inner emotional response becomes the greater force. She paints an inner landscape with the whiplash brushstrokes of her body. No words, no colors, no canvas – only the human body. There is a mastery and a transcendence – from one body on stage to its many witnesses, from the specific to the universal.

Are Martha's dances intended as a feminist statement against a world of male domination? Often times, men appear in her danced scenarios as pawns or catalysts for radical conflict and change within the female protagonist. And many say that Graham's company is a woman's company, giving the male persona little opportunity to express a broad range of character development. Placed in a cultural context, Graham's dances reflect the 20th century's changing gender landscape, one in which new boundaries and roles were rapidly being transformed and re-defined. Martha always insisted upon the universal; her embodiments of fear, joy, doubt, betrayal, envy or ecstasy are without gender. Nevertheless, Graham's depictions of women and her twists on ancient myths mirror the turbulence of her own life, as well as of the century she lived and created in. They look far back to a

mythical time when women's roles in culture were reflected in the immense influence of its religion's goddesses, whom were worshipped by men and women alike. They look ahead to the militant demands by women for equal space, equal voice. The pelvic bone as temple, as rightful domain, as threshold. Radical stuff, not for the squeamish or easy to ruffle.

For me, Martha's dances are about momentum, pulse and determination – Martha the 20th century warrior. They are about compelling music, bridging passages of rhythmic propulsion with lyrical melody. The music in her dances mirrors both the obsessive emotional drive of characters, whom she liked to call "doom-eager," and the sweet relief of freedom from that relentless momentum. They are about finding the most direct and expressive gesture and body language to express the maximum meaning and power. They are about a universal movement language that can be understood and felt by audiences of any culture. Indeed, as I toured all over the world with the Graham Company in the 70's and 80's, I learned to take it for granted that our dancing would, and could instantly translate to any culture, jumping most political and social barriers with ease.

American Modern Dance was always made possible not only through the near-poverty ingenuity and devotion of its choreographers and dancers but also through the generosity of dance-lovers and those who recognized the arts and dance as a precious natural and national resource. Unlike a football team, a company of dancers cannot depend upon the sponsorship of huge soft drink empires or athletics-wear companies, nor can it fill 100,000 seat stadiums with screaming fans. The competition is not between teams but in the quest to tell the truth and create something of exquisite beauty, expressivity and bold elegance. The dance in our country sometimes get lost in the culture's hunger for an accessible and accepted outlet of mass expression and adulation, supported by the Olympian ideal for perfection and the ultimate competitive edge. Contributors to dance companies, boards of directors, and audiences recognize something of deeper value in the human body and its ability to dance out its passions, its joys, and the images of its mind and imagination. Dancers find every moment on stage, under the lights, in costume, the most precious gift imaginable. They take nothing for granted and are infinitely grateful for your support. Modern Dance is a rarified art form in danger of extinction. We thank you for your curiosity and for risking the price of your ticket tonight to come to learn about dance.

Peter Sparling is a professor and former chair of the University of Michigan Department of Dance and Artistic Director of the Ann Arbor-based Peter Sparling Dance Company. A graduate of Interlochen Arts Academy and the Juilliard School, he danced with the José Limón Dance Company from 1971–73. From 1973–87, he was a principal dancer with the Martha Graham Dance Company; since then he has returned often to perform, coach and teach. He has staged Graham's works on his own company and on companies all over the world.