

## Biography

Janet Eilber  
Artistic Director  
Martha Graham Resources

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.

# Becoming the Pioneering Woman

It began with my inability to find the correct angle for my head. Chin lifted? Too heroic. Slightly tipped? Too romantic. Lifted and tipped? The worst possible choice in the theater of Martha Graham. Too *sentimental*. "You can't just be pretty," Martha would observe dryly.

My first season with the Martha Graham Dance Company, I was cast as the *Pioneering Woman* in *Appalachian Spring*. The role has little actual dancing and must rely on force of presence to evoke the American pioneer spirit: determination, optimism and a great generosity. With her maternal, knowing stillness, the *Pioneering Woman* blesses and comforts the other characters of the ballet and urges them into the future. I was 21. I had no qualifications for the role except that I was tall.

Finally, using an image of balancing books on my head, it was agreed that I had found an acceptable angle to my head. I was able artificially to project some maturity. As rehearsals continued, I learned from my body that this desired "level headedness" required a certain lift at the back of the neck, a power through the spine, deeply rooted in the pelvis and in the legs, charged and active even in the long sitting poses of the role. This posture also gave my torso a maternal lean, my arms and legs a solid geometric relationship to the earth and to the plains, and projected my gaze at the level of the horizon, the frontier.

Eventually, the physicality of the *Pioneering Woman* gave me her emotional center. I discovered that she was the embodiment of the American passion and reverence for space. This space – evoked by Copland's masterful score and by the infinite lines of the Noguchi set – celebrates the openness of the American frontier and the limitlessness of the American Dream. I took my place in the ballet.

For the audience, the genius of Martha's theater is that a simple physical gesture can illuminate the deepest secrets of the heart. A girl imagining she has books on her head can begin to evoke the wisdom of our collective history. But the genius, for those of us lucky enough to inhabit one of her great characters, is that the roles are infinite. They can accommodate layer upon layer of personal discovery and maturity. Each physical gesture can become more specific, vital and potent.

I have performed *Appalachian Spring* hundreds of times, with many different casts (including Rudolf Nureyev), even conducted by Aaron Copland on occasion, and for diverse audiences from Cedar Rapids to Rangoon. I've performed it through marriage, motherhood, and frontiers of a different sort. It was the last ballet I performed with the company. I was 46. Projecting maturity was no longer a concern.

Now I have undertaken a new role for Martha Graham. My challenge is to pass her legacy on to a new generation of dancers and, when coaching *Appalachian Spring* and the *Pioneering Woman*, to pass on some of my own legacy as well.

How to give today's young, facile, eager dancers the role that now contains 25 of my own years? I'll have to begin with the angle of the head.

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