

Martha Graham, the Ancient Greek Theater and the Rewriting of the Classical Texts through the Bodily Movement on Stage

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Abstract: The dancer, choreographer, and public figure Martha Graham (1894-1991) is considered one of the brightest personalities of the 20th Century, as well as one of the greatest innovators of dance. Often compared with Pablo Picasso, Igor Stravinsky and James Joyce for the way in which she revolutionized the arts, Graham danced until late in her long life and created hundreds of dances. A significant number of them are considered masterpieces. However, an important segment of her creation was inspired from the Greek ancient theater and mythology. Graham's deep interest and fascination with Greek culture resulted in a number of modern and original choreographies, to be found at the intersection of performing arts, including theater. Most importantly, "the Greek works" are still present in Graham's Company (established in 1926) repertoire, which continues to embody Graham's artistic vision nowadays. My presentation addresses some of Graham's "Mythographic and Mythologic Circle" works, focusing on the way in which the Greek ancient theater was re-written in Graham's creations through dance, gesture, scenography and music. A special attention will be given to the works *Cave of the Heart*, *Errand into the Maze*, *Night Journey and Clytemnestra*, which are describing Medeea, Ariadna, Jocasta, Clytemnestra, Oedipus and Agamemnon's destinies. Graham and her Greek Choir told their stories of love, jealousy, incest, hope and tragedy without words, while rewriting the texts through dance. My presentation is based on research from American and European archives and collections, interviews with former Graham dancers, and it will be accompanied by visual materials and excerpts from films and documentaries dedicated to Martha Graham and her Company. It will end my presentation with a discussion of the way in which Graham Company, based in New York City, is continuing nowadays the dialogue between the past and the present, the dance and the theater, the words and the body language.

Keywords: Graham Company, myths, greek ancient theatre, choreographic re-writing

Martha Graham was one of the most complete and complex personalities of the last century, compared and included in the category of artists like Pablo Picasso, Igor Stravinsky, and D.H. Lawrence, the great modernists who changed the meaning and course of the arts. She was a universal artist, whose creation crossed many

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boundaries of the human body and soul, and last but not least, one of the most “theatrical” dancers. She loved theater, she drew inspiration from the theater to create a new dance vocabulary, but just as importantly she lived her life as if she had always been on stage. As William Shakespeare, one of the favorite authors of the great creator said: “All the world's a stage/And all the men and women merely players”. Undoubtedly, Martha Graham was one of the most courageous “players” who did not hesitate to get inspired by the ancient Greek theater to completely innovate the dance world. She kept repeating “There are only two kinds of dances: good or bad”, she used the world not only as a stage but also its cultural traditions as an inexhaustible source of inspiration.

Martha Graham (1894-1991) lived a life almost as long as the last century and had an impressive career that lasted no less than seven decades. She was born in 1894 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and grew up in Santa Barbara, California, where her family moved when Martha was 14. One thing she mentioned in numerous interviews and was very proud of is that one of her ancestors traveled on the famous *Mayflower*, the ship that brought the first European settlers to America. In 1911, she saw the famous Ruth St. Denis performing alongside her company at the Mason Opera House in Los Angeles.¹ She was 16 years old when she became their student, the age when other dancers knew success, which should have discouraged her, but that did not happen. For Martha, it was just the beginning.

With Denishawn ballet company, she traveled for the first time to Europe, a continent she would visit again only a few decades later, in 1950. Neither the audience nor the dance critics noticed then the medium tall dancer, with a robust body and feature not necessarily beautiful but original, which later consecrated her among the unique figures of the American artist's world. At that time, the European dance scene was very complex.² The ballet was invigorated and reinvented by companies like the Russian and Swedish ballets; innovative dancers like the American Isadora Duncan³ and Loie Fuller (friend of Queen Mary of Romania)⁴ were contemplated with

¹St. Denis, along with Ted Shawn, founded a dance school that prepared the students in a different way from the classical ballet, Denishawn School of Dancing and Related Arts. St. Denis and Shawn inspired their own creation from sources outside Western culture, for example from Egyptian, Aztec and Oriental culture.

²Lynn Garafola, *Legacies of Twentieth Century Dance*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, Connecticut, 2005

³Isadora Duncan, *My Life* (New York: Boni and Liveright:1927)

⁴Richard Nelson Current and Marcia Ewing Current, *Loie Fuller: Goddess of Light* (Northeastern University Press, 1997)

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astonishment; the experimental German dance, Ausdruckstanz, had also appeared, whose brave innovators were Rudolf Laban, Kurt Jooss and Mary Wigman.⁵

In 1923 Graham left school and moved to New York, where she later completed her work and lived for the rest of her life. Graham was a "Pioneer Woman", an image dear to American culture and mentality, who was connected with the American idea of space, of "going West" to explore further and further, constantly overcoming boundaries and obstacles. Not only temporally - literally living in the century of American expansion - but also through her creation, Martha Graham was an American artist par excellence. In 1926 she founded the Martha Graham Center of Contemporary Dance in a small studio on the Upper East Side of New York City. It followed the establishment of a school adjacent to the company where she began to teach the Graham Technique. Both the Company and the school still operate today. Graham confessed that the thought of creating a new kind of expression in dance came from her father, Graham, the physician, who was a psychiatrist and was very close to her. He was the one who advised her: "Watch how the animals move. Their bodies do not lie." Later, she spent days observing the cats in the Santa Barbara Zoo, trying to learn from the minimal movement, almost simplistic, but full of strength and elegance of the felines. On April 18th, 1926, at the 48th Street Theater, Graham made her debut with her first independent concert in which she presented 18 plays. Her first masterpieces are considered *the Heretic*, created in 1929, and *the Lamentation*, created in 1930, both are pieces of special originality and which still exist today, in the repertoire of the Martha Graham Company.

Just as in the case of the great Picasso whose creation had phases (the pink one, the blue one, pre-cubist, cubist one), Graham's creation was also distinguished by creative stages, which sometimes overlapped, intertwined but remained distinct. In total, during her extended creative period, Graham created more than two hundred dances.⁶ In the third decade of the last century, relatively soon after she created her company, Graham was at the forefront of her "Americana" creation, expressing her creative attachment to the history, rhythm, and sensitivity of her people. "A dance reveals the spirit of the country in which it takes root," she wrote in 1937 in an essay

⁵Susan Manning, *Ecstasy and the Demon: Feminism and Nationalism in the Dances of Mary Wigman* (University of California Press, 1993)

⁶Marian Horosko, *Martha Graham. The Evolution of Her Dance Theory and Training* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), 259.

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called "A Platform for the American Dance."⁷ Between 1934 and 1936, Graham created *American Provincials*, *Frontier*, and *American Lyric*. The artist's interest in theater, and her ability to combine theater, dance, and history, was fully proven in 1938, when Graham created another masterpiece: *American Document*, which had an experimental choreography for that time, using spoken texts, including the *Declaration of Independence* and the *Emancipation Proclamation*.⁸ For the *Appalachian Spring* (1944), which dealt with the theme of the connection between the American soul and the vast space of their country, she collaborated with the composer Aaron Copland - who won the Pulitzer Prize for this piece - and the sculptor Isamu Noguchi, who created for this performance one of his exceptional sets.

Graham was not only a national artist but also one with an international vibration, "an engaged and universal artist" who manifested her rejection of any kind of dictatorship and promoted human values. In 1936 Joseph Goebbels, the Propaganda Ministry, personally invited her, together with her company to join the opening of the Berlin Olympic Games, which was a great honor for any international artist at the time. Graham refused, arguing that she could not dance in a country where people were discriminated against. Goebbels threatened her that when the Nazis conquered America, she would be among the first "they will take care", to which she replied that it was the greatest compliment she had ever received.⁹

But while she refused to cooperate with Nazi Germany, Graham accepted the invitation of America's first lady, Eleanor Roosevelt - a great defender of human rights and an admirer of the artist - to dance at the White House. So Graham was the first dancer in the world to perform in this famous place. Graham danced in the East Ballroom of the White House on February 25th, 1937, and to the astonishment of the staff, she danced barefoot in front of the president, his wife, and their guests.¹⁰ The chosen program was one of the first moments of subtle American cultural diplomacy, at a time when the United States was in between neutrality and participation in European affairs, including the Spanish Civil War.¹¹ The great ladies, one of politics,

⁷Maureen Nedham, *I See America Dancing: Selected Readings, 1685-2000* (University of Illinois Press, 2002),176.

⁸Maureen Needham Costonis, "Martha Graham's American Document: A Minstrel Show in Modern Dance Dress," in *American Music*, Vol. 9, No. 3, 1991, pp. 297-310.

⁹See Agnes DeMille, *Martha: The Life and Work of Martha Graham* (New York: Random House, 1991).

¹⁰Martha Graham, *Blood Memory: An Autobiography* (New York: Doubleday, 1991) ,153.

¹¹Camelia Lenart, "Dancing Barefoot and Politicizing Dance at the White House: Eleanor Roosevelt and Martha Graham's Collaboration during the Rise of Fascism in Europe" in *The Global Citizen*:

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the other one of dance, Eleanor Roosevelt and Martha Graham, were against neutrality and advocated for participation in the fight against dictatorship and the Spanish Civil War. Under this impression, Graham created the *Chronicle* in 1936, and immediately afterward, the *Immediate Tragedy* and *Deep Song*.¹² Dancing at the White House, an act of maximum visibility, under the patronage of the First Lady, a moment that was immediately noticed and popularized by newspapers, journals, and radio stations, Graham made a unique, personal, and public statement at the same time: the artists belong to the world and its problems, and cannot stay silent or motionless in the face of oppression.

Not by chance, the first piece danced was *Sarabande* – from a longer piece called *Transitions*, created in 1934 to music by Lehman Engel – and inspired, again not by chance, by a Spanish dance. The next song was *Frontier* – danced for the first time in 1935 on music by Louis Horst – the first piece in which Graham explored “the American space and American identity.” Graham also created the costumes, which were a stylized version of a 19th-century “Homespun Dress”, the dress woven inside the house; the original sets - two ropes arranged in the V-shape form, successfully suggesting the lack of boundary of the horizon and space - were created by the same Japanese-American sculptor Isamu Noguchi, with whom Graham had a long and fruitful collaboration.¹³ After the break, Graham danced the *Imperial Gesture*, created in 1935 (also to the music of Lehman Engel) which expressed the artist's belief in the right of each individual to freedom of speech, she criticized the arrogance of imperialism and expressed the artist's concern that history may repeat itself and people would suffer the consequences of inertia (passivity). It was this piece that established Graham as a "political choreographer."¹⁴

Humanly and creatively invested in her relationship with national and international history, and their milestones, Graham was also fascinated by ancient

Eleanor Roosevelt's Views on Diplomacy and Democracy, ed. Dario Fazzi (London: Palgrave, 2020), p. 125.

¹²Anna Kisselgoff, “Dance view: Graham's *Deep Song*: 51 and Still Protesting,” in *New York Times*, October 16, 1988; in 1937 these were only two among many solos created by other dancers and choreographers in sympathy with the suffering in Spain. Titles like Jose Limon's "Danza de la Muerte," Lily Mehlman's "Spanish Woman" and Sophia Delza's "We Weep for Spain."

¹³See Walter Terry, *Frontiers of Dance. The Life of Martha Graham* (New York: Thomas Crowell Company, 1975), 80.

¹⁴Kim Jones, “American Modernism: Reimagining Martha Graham's Lost *Imperial Gesture* (1935)”, *Dance Research Journal*, 47/3, December 2015, 54.

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Greek mythology and theater. Graham scholars¹⁵ agree that besides the “Americana” theme, the “Greek mythology” theme was the closest to the soul and mind of the creator for a very long period of time. That is all her life, continuing to create on this subject until the very end. The way Graham rewrote the great themes of this fabulous source of inspiration, also inventing a new vocabulary of dance, gave the creation a unique symbiosis between theater and dance. The two arts together generate the initial Cartesian principle, the one that emphasizes the idea of knowledge only through and with the help of our minds. As Graham's creation proves, the dance-theater symbiosis demonstrates the human body's ability to understand, to build the reality around us through bodily perception. “Cogito ergo sum” (*I know, therefore I exist*) said, Descartes. Using dance and theatre with the human body as an interpretive tool, Graham goes on to say: “*I feel, therefore I exist.*”

The inspiration in Greek mythology was an essential factor in the career and life of the artist who became an international artist thanks to it, crossing the national threshold as a source of inspiration and fitting herself solidly within the parameters of the universal artist. Through her creative connection with Greece, Graham connected with Europe, given that she had always had a complicated relationship, one might even say difficult, with Europe.¹⁶ During the interwar period, she hesitated to visit the European continent on several occasions, feeling that of all the international cultural arenas, the European one would be the most difficult to fascinate and convince regarding her creation value (worth). Which turned out to be true. In 1950, when she made her first international tour, in Paris, and then in the rest of Europe, success was expected. She only became appreciated and accepted here in the next decade.¹⁷

But how and when did mythology appear in Graham's life? Of essential importance in the "Graham Greek Creation" is the cultural and temporal context in which Graham rewrote the Greek Tragedy by dancing because Martha Graham was not the only cultural personality who turned to Greece in the act of creation. In music, the famous George Enescu created the opera in 4 acts, *Oedipus*, which is inspired by

¹⁵I use the *scholars'* term because I consider it to be a more appropriate, inclusive and complete term, vis-à-vis (facing) Martha Graham's creation and persona than that of a *researcher*.

¹⁶Camelia Lenart, “Martha Graham's Modern Dance and its Impact on Europe during the Fifties,” vol. 9 of *New Readings*, November 2008, Cardiff, England.

¹⁷Camelia Lenart, “Rehearsing and Transforming Cultural Diplomacy: Martha Graham's Tours to Europe during the 50's,” published in the *Proceedings of Dance History Scholars Conference*, October 2013.

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the tragedy of Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex (Oedipus the King)*, whose premiere took place in Paris on March 13th, 1936. Dancer Isadora Duncan was also inspired by Greek culture. Feeling unappreciated in an America she considered materialistic and uninterested in culture, Duncan moved to London in 1898, where she began performing her own creations, inspired by the Greek vessels and bas-reliefs she constantly admired in British Museum. From London she went to Paris, where she soon became a famous dancer, giving up Ballet Point Shoes, dancing barefoot, in Greek tunics, which allowed her unparalleled freedom of movement on stage before. Besides the costumes, Duncan also inspired her dance style from Greek art, moving her body and using moving forms like those from the art that inspired her.

Among the playwrights inspired by the Greek tragedy, the best known are Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams. O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* is the rewriting of Aeschylus' play, *Orestia*. *Orpheus Descending* written by Tennessee Williams, is the modern retelling of the *Orpheus Legend*, demonstrating the power of passion, art, and imagination to revitalize and resize life. Finally yet importantly, in 1949, shortly after the premiere of *The Death of a Salesman*, Arthur Miller came out in front of his readers with an essay entitled "*Tragedy and the Common Man*." Here he states that while in Greek tragedy traditionally the characters are from the high society, in fact, the Greek tragedy belongs to everyone, because it expresses the human soul beyond any social class.

Like all true artists, musicians, playwrights, and dancers, including Graham, have steadily sailed against the winds and canons of society. Appealing to the Greek cultural fund, to the Greek tragedy per se, was an act of courage. All the more so for the American creators, dance and dramaturgy were among the most advanced "fields" in the broader spectrum of American cultural life. While American ballet was created in the middle of the century, modern dance and dramaturgical creation were the most active and successful creative areas. It is interesting to note that they were in opposition and in direct confrontation with the vaudeville creation, which was and remained for a long time the most successful American artistic genre. Radio, theater, and later cinema, this genre (now represented in "soap operas", the American version of the telenovelas), relaxing and easy to follow (the good was winning most often, and virtue was rewarded) were the most popular. The Depression years started in 1929, the war years, and then the fearsome "Red Scare" initiated by McCarthy in the post-war period reinforced this preference of the audience.

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But what were the personal factors that sent Graham to the text of the Greek Tragedy? Martha Graham loved reading. As those who knew her remembered, dancers, collaborators, and other choreographers, Graham read non-stop, she was an avid reader, but she also analyzed what she was reading, and turned her reading into inspiration. She deeply admired William Shakespeare and the American poet Emily Dickinson. In general, she believed that her interest in Greek mythology was aroused by her partner and then her husband Erik Hawkins, who, before dancing in her company had studied classical languages at Harvard. In reality, and before their meeting, Graham performed in plays inspired by Greek theater. In 1930 she created one of the most famous pieces with Graham's signature, which is the *Lament*. In 1931, the *Electra* of Sophocles followed, and in 1932, *Dionisiaques*. In 1933 she created *Tragic Patterns: Chorus for Supplicants, Chorus for Maenads, Chorus for Furies*.

In the forties, Graham began to choreograph her imagination, in her repertoire constantly emerging plays inspired by dramaturgy, opening the "dramaturgical, mythographic and psycho-dramatic" phase of her career.¹⁸ Particularly interesting is the fact that this mythological cycle appeared at an antipodal time of her life, characterized by a cross-intersection at a professional and personal level, which impacted the trajectory of her career. "Imagination choreography" was helped by the deep relationship of modern dance in general and Graham the artist in particular, with the unconscious. This inclination towards unconsciousness and surrealism in her creation, which ultimately synchronized Graham with the international Avant-Garde, was also helped by a subjective factor. Surrealism, which had as its central focus on the creation, the myth, and the unconscious, was at that time en vogue and a reference point in New York's artistic life. Leading European surrealist artists preferred New York to a Europe devastated by war, and soon "the global city" of New York had become the new capital of the arts.¹⁹

Besides, Graham had a deep personal interest in the unconscious and the rituals inherited from the family. On the one hand, as I mentioned before, her father, whom she was very fond of, was a psychiatrist. On the other hand, Lizzie - the nanny-governance who raised her was Irish and introduced her to the world of her childhood legends. Last but not least, the purpose of mythical choreography and its

¹⁸ Mark Franko, *Martha Graham in Love and War: The Life in the Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 6 .

¹⁹ See Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985)

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“psychodrama experiments” was for Graham the way to seek herself, “to dramatize her search for the individual, both personally and artistically”. Like the characters of classical Greek theater, Graham was in a deep personal crisis. In the forties, when Graham's creation inspired by the Greek tragedy was heading towards its peak, and her professional life continued to expand, reaching new creative heights, on a personal level her life was in the process of diminishing and narrowing, physically and emotionally. The artist's body, literally, and her heart, figuratively, were the first affected by the age-related deterioration process (as well as the world's medical specialists confirm, those who are first affected in this process are the muscle fibers and then the heart). The artist who pushed physical and emotional boundaries into and through her art, could not control either her aging or the end of love in her personal life. Symbolically, when Graham left the national scene and entered the international scene, her relationship with Erick Hawkins ended and her body began to show serious signs of deterioration.

For a dancer, who depends on the first class (superlative) physical condition to perform, aging means a loss of capital. Graham had built up to that point a reputation for being a performer, not so much a choreographer. She had built her company around her and it was her center (universe). Though she was still dancing at a high level, her dancing days with a full technical command would soon be over. Much has been written about her complex and complicated relationship of "love and war" with Erick Hawkins, as well as his contribution, or lack thereof, to Graham's life and creation. Due to the couple's problems, her relationship with psychotherapy became more complex, she continued to explore the work of Freud and Jung and immersed herself into a state of emotional distress that would eventually lead to her alcoholism. The years 1940-1950 of the artist's life were a period of "creative disease", when she used her creativity as a formal equivalent of introspection, resulting in the most fruitful period of her mythological creation.

After the attempts, successes, and achievements inspired by the Greek tragedy of the thirties, a series of "masterpieces" of the great creator followed, all of which are still in the repertoire of the Martha Graham Company. *Cave of the Heart* is a "one-act" dance to music from Samuel Barber's *Medea Suite*. Staged at the Columbia University Theater on May 10th, 1946, under the title *Serpent Heart*, it was commissioned by the Alice M. Ditson Fund. It was followed by *Night Journey* to the music of the famous William Schuman, with costumes by Graham and sets by Isamu Noguchi. Commissioned by the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation at

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the Library of Congress is the tragic story of impossible love and was based on Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. It premiered on May 3rd, 1947, at Cambridge High School in Boston, Massachusetts. In *Errand into the Maze*, Martha Graham was inspired by a poem by Ben Belitt, she danced to the music of Gian Carlo Menotti, and, using the dance vocabulary, the story is told from Ariadne's perspective, which descends into the Labyrinth to defeat the Minotaur; the premiere took place at the Ziegfeld Theatre in New York, on February 28th, 1947.

The climax of the Greek cycle ("Martha Graham's Greek Cycle") was *Clytemnestra*, staged in 1958. *Clytemnestra* was inspired by *Oresteia*, the Eschile's Trilogy, commissioned by Bethsabée de Rothschild, and danced to the music of Halim El-Dabh. It was named a "giant stature" creation by the critic John Martin, one of the first and most significant dance critics in the world. The former dancer Graham, currently artistic director of the Graham Company, Janet Eilber, considers her the most representative sample of the way Graham "choreographed the mind", meaning "choreographed the human mind".²⁰ *Alcestis* (1960), *Phaedra* (1962), *Circe* (1963), *Cortege of Eagles* (1967), *Flute of Pan* (1978), *Andromache's Lament* (1982), *Phaedra's Dream* (1983), and *Persephone* (1987) followed.

In a bridge over time, geographical and cultural spaces, Graham was inspired and borrowed elements of the Greek tragedy recreated them, giving them new valences, in an artistic mélange full of courage and innovation, dance-theater /the "dancing-drama".²¹ "We are all thieves" ("We all steal"), she used to say, referring to the act of appropriation of inspirational sources within the artistic creation. In her performances, Graham created in a way that combined the space of ideas, moving bodies, of words, in a dialogue that acted on the viewer systemically. Having the Greek tragedy as a source of inspiration, she revitalized the modern performance and transformed the human body into an interpretive "tool", restoring and re-conceptualizing the modern dance, American and not only.

One of the first elements that are taken over by Graham was intensity. What strikes from the very beginning in contact with her creation, whether you are a "Graham scholar or spectator" is the intensity of each dance, of each artistic moment,

²⁰*Every Soul is a Circus* was premiered on December 27th, 1939; Janet Eilber believes it was the first time Graham choreographed imagination. Patreon Meeting, December 16th, 2020.

²¹The term was used Marianne McDonald, "Dancing Drama. Ancient Greek Theater in Modern Shoes and Shows," in *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Theater* (New York: Oxford University press, 2015), 277.

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performed. Graham "spoke" through dance in "works" structured and elaborated according to the principles of the Greek tragedy. The narratives imagined and danced by Graham are simple, but this "simple" is only apparent, with ramifications that are to be found and lived beyond the surface. The greatest actors "speak" without words. In a simple gesture, a glance, hundreds of words are hidden. The same for Graham, the choreographic gesture is complex in simplicity and devoid of fireworks, because there is no need for them. Therefore, to set in time an image danced in the evanescent matter of human illusion, Graham gave the movement an unprecedented dramatic power and intensity. The Graham dancers I interviewed confessed that Graham had an almost magical power, to bring the depths of the soul out through the dance vocabulary, and to trigger through dance the inner mechanisms, unpredictable and mysterious that took both the dancers and the audience members inside their beings, in an impromptu moment of psychoanalysis.²²

The translation of the ancient Greek tragedy into a new dance vocabulary is also found in Graham's creation through the importance given to the "choir". Graham adapted the Greek choir, turning it into the "dancing choir". In ancient theater, the choir sang and danced, narrating and performing, honoring and following an extremely well-nuanced vocal rhythm, in a sung form. The choir offered a variety of information that helped the audience understand the performance, commented on the themes of the play and showed how the audience should react to the dramas on stage, and often presented the perspectives of the other characters. Between the Greek choir and the dance, there was a correlation, by the mentioned rhythm, but also by the fact that the members of the choir were performing in the "Orchestra", which was actually a "dance floor" of the Greek amphitheater.

In none of the companies founded in the years since the beginning of the modern or post-modern dance, the "dance choir" had a clearer, total, integrated importance, but at the same time with a more special life and entity (identity), as in the Graham Company. Following again the basic structure of the Greek tragedy, Graham "told the story" with the help of the group of dancers that evolved around the main characters. Like the ancient Greeks, the dancers' choir functioned as an echo, but in this case with ramifications in the gesture, not in the word.

A perfect embodiment of the choir's role in Graham's creation is found in *Night Journey*. The key moments of forbidden love between Oedipus and Jocasta and the

²²Over the years I had the pleasure to interview Pearl Lang, Stuard Hodes, and Mary Hinkson, who danced with Martha Graham.

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tragedy that followed are emphasized by the group members, led in the original version of this dance by the excellent dancer Helen McGehee.²³ Thus, the "dancing choir" sometimes stands completely still, sometimes dances around the main characters, highlighting their actions, withdrawing, returning, covering, and discovering with their bodies, those of Jocasta and Oedipus; actively participates in key moments of the action and completes by movement the danced dialogues between the main heroes (characters). The famous "Graham Technique" is mastered to perfection: sudden contractions followed by an equally sudden release, the torso spiraling around the axis of the spine, falls on the floor, elements executed with the help of the knees, diagonal walks along the stage in the "Graham step" and with bent elbows, all contribute to increasing tension and drama. The costumes, created and executed by Graham herself with the help of the group members, complemented by the hair ornaments, increase the spectator's feeling that it is not a dance of our times, but a journey in time, in ancient Greece.

The sets that complemented the dance performances created by Graham, including those of mythological inspiration (but not only), were themselves influenced by Greek art. The sculptor Isamu Noguchi, Marta Graham's collaborator and friend for decades, was the author of many sets for her dance performances. They were made in a surreal way that transformed and encapsulated the scene into a magical world, a perfect environment where Graham's dance characters could evolve unhindered. It is essential to note that Noguchi, who was Constantin Brancusi's pupil, was also in a special relationship with Greek art. It fascinated him from childhood when his mother read him the legend of Olympus, and on his first trips to Greece he fell in love with the white marble and created a connection that lasted for the rest of his life with the country he came to consider "[his]intellectual home."²⁴ "Archaic figures, columns, marble roads [...] feelings arising at the sight of places for the first time, myths and history. These are the notions, elements, experiences, and ideas that created the image of Greece, and which will be continually infused and translated into Noguchi's creation."²⁵

²³*Night Journey*, Video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b_63g5TICeY

²⁴Isamu Noguchi, interview by Catherine Frantzeskakis, "The American-Japanese Sculptor Isamu Noguchi Talks about Greece," *Zygos (Libra)* 17 (March 1957): 9. Translated by Daphne Kapsali. Courtesy of Aikaterini and Ion Frantzeskakis, quoted by Dakin Hart, "Noguchi within Greece, Greece within Noguchi." <https://www.noguchi.org/isamu-noguchi/digital-features/noguchi-in-greece/>, accessed April 15th, 2022.

²⁵<https://www.noguchi.org/isamu-noguchi/digital-features/noguchi-in-greece/>

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Last but not least, Graham created, inspired by the Greek tragedy, some of the most powerful female characters of universal culture. Graham was undoubtedly the most feminist non-feminist. She declares that she does not understand the role of feminism, because “If I want something from men I do not have to go to demonstrations”. She loved dressing, attending galas and dinners, and posing; for example, in the spring of 1977, when the Martha Graham Dance Company started its season on Broadway, Martha posed in expensive furs with Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev.²⁶

However, during her first international tours in Europe, in the early fifties, she and her art were brutally treated by audiences and the press in a way that can be characterized as highly misogynistic. “She's crazy, she has to look for a therapist”, “It is scary to see them”, and “If she gave birth, she would give birth to a cube”, were just some of the ironic and negative reactions recorded by Graham and her company.²⁷ But we cannot wonder, how many of these comments came from the real inability to understand Graham's avant-garde creation, and how many were from an unconfessed sense of fear of the critics and the European audience vis-à-vis the American cultural wave, which threatens the traditional European superiority in this field? Especially since it was represented by a company led by a woman, who presented powerful heroines on the stage, created artistically by the same woman.

Whether willingly or unwillingly, before others - Simone de Beauvoir, who wrote *Le Deuxième Sexe*, and the American Betty Friedan, with her own *The Feminine Mystique* - Graham opened a new path in relating the woman to her own identity and the surrounding society. In her creation, women are the center of the action on stage, their lives and feelings are the main characters, who were discussing the problems of the women of the twentieth century, readjusting to the present time, the traumas and dramas, the questions, many unanswered of the tragic Greek heroines. Graham heroines, do not accept the domestic limiting sphere. Often ridiculed by critics and dance lovers on the grounds that they are not "really" women, lovers, wives, mothers,

²⁶Cover photo of invitation to the Graham company 1977 gala performance featuring Martha Graham, Rudolf Nureyev, and Margot Fonteyn. <https://blogs.loc.gov/music/2019/04/announcing-the-maxine-glorsky-collection-saving-the-light/> , Accessed April 16, 2022.

²⁷Camelia Lenart, “Dancing Art and Politics beyond the Iron Curtain: Martha Graham's 1962 Tour to Yugoslavia and Poland,” *Dance Chronicle*, vol. 39, no. 2 (2016): 197-217.

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the Greek-inspired Graham characters refuse to be what is expected of them, loving, hating, suffering, dying “in their own terms”.

They refuse to be objectified, they are active and completely capable to enter the fight with destiny or lose the battle with it. In *Cave of the Heart* Medea is a witch who, in love with Jason, uses her powers to help him find the Golden Fleece. In *Errand into the Maze* Ariadne fearlessly descends into the Maze (Labyrinth) to face the Minotaur. *Clytemnestra*, queen of Mycenae is also a forceful, vengeful, and powerful character. Even more so in *Night Journey* where the action does not focus on Oedipus but on Jocasta and her manner of feeling the magnitude of the tragedy. Jocasta uses symbolic language to express her feelings, so the rope that Jocasta keeps in her hand is the symbol of the umbilical cord, then of the marriage vows that keep together mother and son, Jocasta-Oedipus, and finally the end that mother-wife-lover Jocasta chooses. Putting his impressions on paper after the dance premiere, critic Walter Terry remarked that Graham masterfully managed to transfer the action to Jocasta's mind and heart. And from there to that of the public.

Throughout her life, Graham traveled the world, being the cultural ambassador of her country, and received the most important possible award for an American citizen, "the Presidential Medal of Freedom with Distinction". “Graham technique”, which recreated the dance, is taught all around the world. But most importantly, the spirit of Graham's creations is carried on by her company, which has continued to exist for nearly 100 years. The pandemic didn't stop them from carrying out Graham's legacy. On the contrary, during these difficult and emotionally marked years, with pandemics and new international conflicts, the Company and its members continued to exist and create. First, through virtual meetings, in which any dance lover could attend shows (also virtual), meet dancers, dialogue with former dancers, but also with the international audience that participates in these unique "Graham moments". This spring, the company had a full concert hall season at City Center in New York City. The repertoire included a play presented for the first time in 1936, and whose original hall program said: "The Chronicle does not try to show the actualities of war; rather, evoking the images of war, it presents its fateful prelude, depicts the devastation of the spirit it leaves behind and suggests an answer."²⁸ And these days the Company has arrived in Europe, on a tour that started, symbolically, in Athens. The city that

²⁸ Marina Kennedy, “Martha Graham Dance Company at City Center Thrills with Iconic and New Works, Apr. 8, 2022 , <https://www.broadwayworld.com/bwwdance/article/BWW-Review-MARTHA-GRAHAM-DANCE-COMPANY-at-City-Center-Thrills-with-Iconic-and-New-Works-20220408>, accessed April 27th, 2022.

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gave mankind the Greek tragedy, the one that helped Graham rewrite the language of dance. Beyond the word.

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