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“Errand into the Maze; The Life and works of Martha Graham”

By Judith Brin Ingber

Books, articles and reviews abound about Martha Graham (May 11, 1894-April 1, 1991) and her colossal influence on American dance and beyond. But the best book, I think is Deborah Jowitt’s relatively new and extraordinary *Errand into the Maze; The Life and Works of Martha Graham*.

By the 1960s, Jowitt’s writing eschewed “objective” dance criticism and she refused judgement in favor of a more descriptive, personal outlook. One saw this first in Jowitt’s reviews for the Village Voice and then her books *The Dance in Mind* and *Dance Beat*. The book she wrote called *Jerome Robbins; His Life, His Theater, His Dance* encompassed biography and her dance descriptions. This sixth book of Jowitt’s about Graham might be her last as it was published just a week before Jowitt’s 90th birthday after years of research and interviewing. When the book came out, it was two years before everyone noticed it was 100 years since Graham’s first work, *A Study in Lacquer*. Now the centennial is in full swing with accolades to Jowitt and the current exhibition at the the New York Library for the Performing Arts. Personally, I found Jowitt’s book so engaging, giving us not only an overview of Graham’s well-known biography beginning almost a century ago, but also Jowitt’s ability to place Graham in her general historical eras along with the insightful, lively descriptions of Graham’s actual works.

A main historical point is that Graham took Denishawn’s valued musical accompanist Louis Horst with her when she left for New York. He likewise became Graham’s music advisor, accompanist, confidant and lover for 17 years. It was he who introduced her to American composers, and to Mary Wigman, the European Expressionist dancer, with very different goals for her dances. Jowitt weaves writings by Graham, such as her autobiography *Blood Memory*, with other authors on Graham including the *New York Times* critic John Martin, left-wing critics including Yoko Ono and Jowitt’s own thorough research.

Let us look at Jowitt’s description of a duet created by Graham in 1947 to music by Carlo Menotti with her oft-collaborator, set designer Isamu

Noguchi. The title of the dance is also Jowitt's title for her book. We see a new version of the Greek myth about the horrid creature, the Minotaur, capturing Ariadne. Jowitt's description is keenly apt whether the dance is known to the reader or not.⁵ "The maze (in the title) is represented by a length of white rope that lies in erratic curves along the floor, a path the heroine must traverse to reach her destination. Initially alone onstage, she attempts to control what can only be terror, her body contracting repeatedly as if she's both shuddering and gathering strength for her mission by breathing strenuously. Graham and the composer Gian Carlo Menotti (new to her) must have worked closely together; his struggling melody and harsh chords underline, for instance, the emphatic way she whips her head sharply around, throws it back, and wrenches it resolutely into place again several times.

"The path leads to an irregular V-shaped portal that could be interpreted as a vulva... She approaches the threshold and steps across it. Yet the entire space of the stage is her territory; it can represent either the area outside her destination or the inner place of reckoning... A Graham movement learned by every student in her classes involves standing on one leg and, over and over, circling the other slightly bent leg forward and then oppositely to the back to create a figure eight. Performed with the dramatic intent that Graham brought to it in *Errand into the Maze*, it suggests someone preparing for violence, whipping herself on. When the trumpet in the score calls a warning, she rapidly gathers the white path inside the V and lashes it hastily back and forth around the sides of the structure, committing herself to her challenge despite her dread.

"Conjured up by her imaginings, the partially masked Creature of Fear appears several times. It was a brilliant idea on Graham's part to have the dancer performing the role keep his arms hooked over a three-foot pole athwart his shoulders; rounded at the ends, it looks like a giant bone. He is both monstrous and effectively hampered by his yoke. Athletic nevertheless, he leaps in a circle around her... When she falls to the floor, he walks heavily back and forth over her, smacking each foot against the floor; you fear that he might step on her.... Grasping the pole, she stands on his thighs and... forces him to fall gradually backward to the floor and slowly release the pole, until he twists to lie sprawled, facedown, inert. Now victorious—and seeming to wonder at that—Graham unwraps the cord, steps onto the portal's threshold... opening her arms to the freedom of a new day."

The duet was revived by the Batsheva Dance Company seventeen years after its creation, originally danced in Israel by Rina Schenfeld and Moshe Efrati (also later danced by Ehud Ben-David; Galia Gat and Moshe

Efrati).⁴ I regret that Jowitt's book makes short order of Graham's work in Israel with the Baroness Bethsabée de Rothschild who had invited Graham to form the Batsheva dance company in 1963. Instead of moving to Israel, Graham gave works of her own to the Batsheva dance company, a unique gift as up until that point, no company but her own had performed her works.

To fill out the Graham influence in Israel, I reread founding Batsheva Dance Company star Rena Gluck's *My Story; Batsheva Dance Company, 1964-1980*; Ruth Eshel's *Dance Spreads its Wings*; interviewed two who'd appeared in Batsheva; and Batsheva rehearsal director Linda Rabin. Rabin reminded me that only as long as Linda Hodes would oversee rehearsals and productions of Graham's works, did Graham allow the Batsheva company to perform them. These were *Diversion of Angles*; *Embattled Garden*; *The Learning Process*; *Herodiade*, and *Errand into the Maze*. Graham did a new version of her 1958 full company work *Clytemnestra* for Batsheva. Lastly, in 1974, Graham created an entirely new work *Dream*, about the Biblical Jacob. She picked the new company member Ohad Naharin for a key role, so taken with him, that she invited Naharin to join her New York company, starting him on a trajectory that culminated in international fame and his return to Batsheva first as its director and now its house choreographer.

Rabin told me that as the Batsheva rehearsal director (1968-1973) for all the repertory except Graham's, she saw the Graham repertoire countless times. She could attest that "the Batsheva dancers were simply fire on stage. It wasn't so much about the technique, they were dancing from their inner fire. They really communicated across the stage to audiences; even I could compare them to Graham's own company (Rabin often had seen the Graham company in New York during her student days at Juilliard).

I also interviewed dancer Laurie Freedman who worked in Batsheva from 1968-1980. "The Graham work was important to me on many levels because I'd been in the Graham studio since I was a teenager. It was home for me. I never would have imagined I would perform in the Graham works for Batsheva. I just loved being in her work. The Batsheva company did them so incredibly, and compared to her own company, our performances were very much more dramatic emotionally and expressively, but not as technical. I did dance very many years in Batsheva's *Diversion of Angels* in the choir until I grew enough so Linda Hodes said I could dance the solo role known as "White." It was so exciting and I think, Graham allowed our power to come through because we were part of Bethsabée's world, too, like Graham herself was..."

Pamela Sharni danced in the Graham works and others, too, from 1970-1980. For a recent New York tribute to Linda Hodes, (z'l), Sharni sent in a rare photo to the organizers showing *Embattled Garden* with the four featured dancers from the tale of Eve eating the apple offered by the snake: Linda Hodes was Lilith with Ehud Ben-**David was the snake and William Louthier was Adam.** (Louthier at that time was the director of Batsheva).

Sharni reminisced on the phone, "Whenever Linda would come into the room, whether for a class she would teach or a rehearsal, she made The Difference. She brought so much authority, and you just knew she was there wholeheartedly. The way she moved was magical--she made Graham's movements look the most natural way to move in the world. Who but Linda? She had had roles made for her by Martha in New York, and mainly in Israel, she watched over Martha's four pieces. Also, she directed Batsheva ('64-'68). After her (second husband) Ehud died things changed. Her daughters had been kidnapped by Palestinians on a plane back to the US, and then Linda moved back to New York as Paul Taylor's head of school and then company director. She was just a quality person!" Sharni said.

Personally, I loved reading Jowitt's accounts of Graham's psychological truths, including her own Jungian therapy and how it influenced her thinking about roles of women on stage. How Graham stripped down Greek tragedies to find the women's perspective was fabulous. For example, we always have known Oedipus and the ancient Greek drama when he blinds himself, realizing his lover is his mother, fulfilling a prophesy made at Oedipus's birth. But Graham gives the story from Jocasta's view as Oedipus's mother/lover in her full length work *Night Journey*. She made the woman's character foundational to other myths, too. This included Biblical women such as Eve, Judith or Herodiade, the mother of Salome, (who in the Biblical story danced with John the Baptist's head) and Graham took a different heroine in Christian history to make her dance, Joan of Arc. It also fascinated me that Graham incorporated her vast curiosity and readings with her own perceptions from her Jungian therapy which all went into the portrayals of her heroines.

A new idea of Graham's work was also her unique use of time as described by Jowitt. In classic ballets, dancers moving from stage right to stage left might indicate sequential actions in the story had gone by chronologically, such as in *Giselle*, her meeting with a mysterious figure and falling in love, followed by Giselle's death and then the final scene at Giselle's grave. However, in Graham's work *Appalachian Spring*, Graham gave us a young bride, showing us her dreams of becoming a new mother, quaking before the sermonizing of a visiting minister damning the new

couple for dreaming of sexual relations, even as the new farmer admires the home he was building, all totally understandable but in no sequential order.

Deborah Jowitt's extraordinary book, *Errand into the Maze; The Life and Works of Martha Graham* is one I highly recommend you read. Do not be daunted by its 464 pages. If the price is too high to add to your own book shelf of dance, go to your nearest library to borrow a copy as soon as possible.