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Martha Graham Dance Company Performance:

Would Martha Graham Have Approved?

The late, great Martha Graham was a pioneer who constantly pushed the limits of modern dance and became one of the field's most iconic figures. After she passed away in 1991, her company continued to give performances, including the one hosted by Carolina Performing Arts on March 24, 2017, at Memorial Hall in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. The dance group performed four works; two of them were choreographed by Graham, and the other two were choreographed by current artists Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and Annie-B Parson (Carolina). Although the performances of the dances that Graham choreographed were not exactly the same as any of the ones that she was in, they generally maintained the signature style that gained her such approbation. Likewise, the content of the dances that she did not choreograph emulated her constant desire to push the boundaries of modern dance and evoke an emotional response from the audience. However, she would have disagreed with the overall style of one work and the excessive stage elements of another. Since the performance embodied the emotional evocation and technical prowess upon which Graham prided herself, she would have mostly approved of this performance, but she would have disliked some stylistic and presentational aspects of two of the works.

Before addressing the performance, it is important to understand some key aspects of Graham's life that influenced her style. Like many artists, Graham's style was a product of her

environment. Several events throughout her life affected her both as a person and as a dancer, yet one of her most important dance lessons occurred when she was just a little girl. On one otherwise uneventful day, Graham's father caught her lying about something, not through her words but through her movements. Seeing that she was upset, he consoled her and gave her advice that she would remember her whole life: "Movement never lies" (Freedman 15). In each dance, she ensured that the movements she and the other dancers made were authentic to the emotion they represented. This core belief was evident in many of her works, including the sorrowful climax of *I used to love you* and the joyful prancing of *Maple Leaf Rag*.

Graham began her dancing career by working her way up the ranks in the dance group Denishawn School of Dancing and Related Arts, but she did not have the freedom to develop her own style that she desired, so she left to teach at the Eastman School of Music (American). The newly independent Graham could finally focus on her true passion: creating a unique style that portrayed emotion through specific movements that had never before been used. Shortly after she began teaching, her dear friend Louis Horst returned from Europe and informed her of the drastically different dances being performed in that part of the world. Horst told her that she had to break away from the traditional Denishawn dances to which she was accustomed, so she spent six months choreographing and rehearsing with three of her best dancers to introduce her new style on Broadway. Although these dances showed early glimpses of her departure from traditional ballet, she later referred to them as "childish things, dreadful" (Freedman 42). However, in the following years she began to depart even further from contemporary dance and make her own art. Her ideology was simple: "[T]hrough spastic movements, tremblings, and falls she could express emotional and spiritual themes ignored by other dance" (American). These early formative years contributed greatly to her later ambitions in modern dance.

Graham eventually stopped working at Eastman and began to work with the New York City Neighborhood Playhouse, where she taught actors how to move dramatically across the stage. She also opened her own dance studio in her new home in Greenwich Village. During this time period, she and several other revolutionary young dancers supported each other in turning away from their traditional ballet roots. They left behind the pomp and gracefulness of ballet and created their own “uniquely American dance” (Freedman 47). This new style of understated simplicity featured prominently in many of her works, such as *Maple Leaf Rag*. Her endeavors helped her grow closer to Horst, who served a variety of roles for her, including friend, advisor, and collaborator. He lent her money when she needed it, which she often did because she was poor, but happy (46); he was the only person who could cheer her up when she was sad by playing “Maple Leaf Rag” by Scott Joplin (51), and he held her to her own high standards, not tolerating mediocrity in anything (37). Graham’s close relationship with Horst inspired her to choreograph *Maple Leaf Rag*.

As she continued to develop her own personalized style, she received criticism from some people and acclaim from others. Some critics thought that her movements looked pained, going as far as to say, “[S]he [looked] as though she were about to give birth to a cube” (53), yet others appreciated the way she depicted emotion and made people think (52). Regardless, she always stayed true to herself and did not let others dictate how she performed. Consequently, her bold foray into modern dance inspired younger choreographers like Cherkaoui and Larson.

By examining the changes in choreography and various other elements of a performance, one can gain a greater understanding of the style that Graham sought to create; having this understanding makes it easier to identify aspects of this style in the four works presented at this performance. In many ways her dances directly opposed classical ballet: ballet focused on beauty

and ease in motion while Graham focused on depicting effort and pain (56). Graham also paid special attention to the relationship between dancers and the ground, saying that “[T]he floor is a direction” (58). Instead of simply bowing her head to appear upset, she would sink to the floor in an “acknowledgement of the power of gravity” (Giguere). Like every other movement that Graham employed, the fall was calculated and precise; she and her dancers primarily fell to the left because in Graham’s mind, that side represented the unknown. Another signature of her dances was the contraction. According to Giguere,

The contraction, or strong pulling back and curving of the torso, and the release of this movement by returning to a straight torso are symbolic of the dichotomies in life. It is the contrast between desire and duty, between fear and courage, between weakness and strength.

Graham’s unique movements formed the cornerstone of her style that later became known as the Graham technique. Familiarity with this technique allows one to realize what set her apart from other choreographers of her time and made her works so famous and distinctive.

Not only did Graham experiment with movement, but she also explored new music, costumes, and sets. Before Graham’s time, dances were set to music that had already been written, but Graham changed the paradigm by having Horst write music for her dances after she had choreographed them. Since her dances were so unconventional, they required music that also differed greatly from traditional ballet music (59). When she first started performing her own dances, she and her dancers made the costumes themselves. The dresses were cheap, costing only a dollar each. They were also simple and plain so that they would not distract from the dancing itself. As she began to tell more concrete stories in her dances, she sought help with the costumes in order to develop the characters further. Similarly, all of her dances until *Frontier* in

1935 were performed on a bare stage because she wanted to depart from the grand decoration associated with ballet. However, in *Frontier* Graham utilized a single fence as an integral part of the story that symbolized the vast expanse of the wilderness. She subsequently began to collaborate with its designer, Isamu Noguchi, for many works, including *Clytemnestra Act 2* (75).

Graham's biography reveals key aspects of her life that show how she would have felt about this performance at Memorial Hall. The performances of *Clytemnestra Act 2*, *Mosaic*, *I used to love you*, and *Maple Leaf Rag* each offered similarities and differences with Graham's own performances. By examining each work individually, it becomes clear which exact qualities from each one would have caused Graham to appreciate or dislike various parts of it.

*Clytemnestra Act 2* was originally choreographed by Graham in 1958 (Carolina). Before the work began, Janet Eilber, the artistic director, came on stage to share some pertinent information about the plot. She explained that prior to the timeline of the performance, King Agamemnon had sacrificed his daughter in order to triumph in a war, so his wife, Clytemnestra, killed him out of rage. She also noted that the majority of the actions that would occur were set in Clytemnestra's mind.

This performance shared many similarities with the original production, including the choreography, music, set, and costumes. Graham would have appreciated the fact that more than fifty years after its premiere, her iconic movements still captivated the audience. PeiJu Chien-Pott, who played the role of Clytemnestra, mimicked Graham's style precisely (Carolina). Her first solo evoked the essence of Graham's style: the choppy, anguished movements that she made were proof that dance does not have to be fluid to be beautiful. The violent dancing of the Furies who appeared midway through the performance contributed greatly to the Hellish environment

that Graham originally intended to portray through her dance. Near the end of the performance, Clytemnestra appeared at the front of the stage and stood still. She looked up to the heavens and bent over closer to the ground each time a bell tolled and then repeated this action several times in a row. Employing the same move as a motif was one of Graham's famous traits; once again Pott mirrored Graham's technique in order to contribute to this particular performance's authenticity.

*Clytemnestra Act 2*'s music also contributed to the performance's mimicry of the original. The music, which was the same as the music originally composed by Halim El-Dabh, represented another Graham trademark: she asked people to compose music for her dances instead of choreographing her dance to pre-existing music (Carolina, Freedman 59). The shrieking violin that featured so heavily throughout built up the tension that she desired, and the pizzicato style that occurred later urged the dancers on in their frantic, lurching movements (*Clytemnestra*). The music was such an important part of the original dance that leaving it untouched maintained the work's identity in this performance.

The work's stage was originally designed by Isamu Noguchi for the original production, and the Martha Graham Dance Company chose to use it again for the performance on March 24 (Carolina). This stage represented a major part of Graham's evolution as an artist, so the fact that the one in this performance was based off of Graham's original design helped make this performance seem similar to the original. Early in her career, Graham performed on a bare stage, but once she employed Noguchi to make the set for her *Frontier*, she realized the impact that sets could have on an audience (Freedman 75). Her dances began to incorporate sets in order to add character to her performances; the throne, spears, and bed in *Clytemnestra Act 2* made the story of the Greek queen more compelling than it would have been without them. Since she worked

with Noguchi for over fifty years, his sets became a hallmark of her performances that Graham would most likely have been thrilled to see included in this performance.

The costumes used in this performance were based on the ones originally designed by Graham. Just like her views on sets, her opinions regarding costumes changed throughout her career. From her early performances, in which the costumes were plain and simple, to her later performances, such as *Clytemnestra Act 2*, Graham came to appreciate the value of a bold costume that helped develop a character in a dance. Clytemnestra's vibrant red dress depicted her as a murderous and powerful figure, and Agamemnon's platform boots followed the Greek tradition of identifying the dead with these shoes. Considering that Graham designed the costumes herself with the aid of Helen McGehee, she would have been pleased to see that her dance company continued to use them long after her death (Carolina).

*Mosaic* showcased an entirely different form of dance from *Clytemnestra Act 2*, and the only real similarity between them was the Middle Eastern music (*Mosaic*). Choreographed by Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and premiered in February 2017, this modern work boasted far more fluid dancing, and its storyline was primarily abstract. However, Eilber informed the audience that the underlying theme was that individual, diverse objects can come together to create something beautiful, like a mosaic, hence the title (Carolina). The dull red and yellow lights, along with the flowing, earthen-colored costumes that all the dancers wore gave *Mosaic* a warm and mellow feel. The style of dancing in this piece was elegant at almost all times, and the lack of any props on stage added to the fluid, open feel of the work as a whole.

Although Graham would have liked much of the underlying intent behind *Mosaic*, she would not have liked the overarching style of the choreography. The fluid dancing that Cherkaoui choreographed for much of the work embodied the same style from which she fought

so hard to break free. *Mosaic*'s elegant, graceful moves were nothing like the "spare, stark, angular movements, blunt gestures, and stern facial expressions" on which Graham built her repertoire (50).

Regardless of the technique used in *Mosaic*, she would have appreciated Cherkaoui's creative spirit, which was quite similar to her own. The following evaluations of Graham and Cherkaoui reveal their shared desire to explore the field of dance. Critic John Martin's opinion of Graham was that "No other dancer has yet touched the borders to which she has extended the compass of movement" (68); similarly, the artistic director of Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet claimed, "I had honestly never seen anything like it before" when asked about Cherkaoui's choreography ("Ethereal").

Although *Mosaic*'s style contrasted with that of most of Graham's work, its choreography shared commonalities with Graham's choreography. She frequently repeated movements in her performances, such as the woman repeatedly twirling across the stage in *Maple Leaf Rag*, and the dancers in *Mosaic* repeated the same movement of forming into a collective tree several times in a row (*Mosaic, Maple Leaf Rag*). Another conspicuous parallel between these two choreographers' styles was the prevalence of dancing on the floor. Much of the dancing in *Mosaic* took place on the ground, across which the dancers spun and rolled to appear close to Earth. Graham also clearly had a propensity for dancing on the floor: the first section of the Syllabus of Graham Movements was devoted entirely to floor work (Horosko 231).

The second half of *Mosaic* also mimicked Graham's 1927 work *Revolt* (Freedman 44). As Freedman describes it, "*Revolt* was Martha's first dance of social protest a stark, forceful comment on injustice and the outraged human spirit" (44). The animal-like rage that the dancers

in *Mosaic* displayed with their violent leaping and spinning represented this same sort of social protest against conformity, and Graham would certainly have noticed the underlying theme.

Perhaps the greatest acknowledgement of Graham's influence on Cherkaoui came in *Mosaic*'s final moments. The only dancer left on stage convulsed and flailed rapidly as the lights slowly faded out (*Mosaic*); Graham was one of the first people to introduce this sort of disturbing yet powerful movement into dance.

Finally, Graham would probably have reminisced about many of her old practices when observing the set and costumes used in *Mosaic*. For the first ten years of her career, she danced without any set; the bare stage in *Mosaic* similarly placed all of the focus on the dancers instead of their surroundings. The simplistic, earthen colored costumes in *Mosaic* were also similar to the loose, flowing dresses that she made by hand, partially because she was tired of ballet's excessive presentation (Freedman 59). Although her style evolved over the years and came to employ more complex attire, *Mosaic* would have brought her back these memories.

Graham probably would have been most intrigued by *I used to love you* because it was not meant to be an exact replica of one of her works, yet it was also not a completely original work. *I used to love you* used Martha Graham's *Punch and The Judy* as the framework for a modern interpretation of a classic story (*I used*). As such, it paid homage to the comedy's choreographer, yet it took great liberty with the plot and style. The choreographer, Annie-B Parson, chose to use a three-person chorus to narrate the making of the ballet. This work incorporated many props in order to achieve post-modernism, including a small TV screen to display scenes from the original performance, microphones with which the chorus made commentary, and chairs from which the chorus observed the other dancers. A large projected screen dominated the background as it dynamically displayed new scenery and emotionally

charged images. Lastly, the bed that was rolled on stage shortly after the performance began provided the setting around which much of the performance's plot was based.

Out of the four works performed, Graham would have liked *I used to love you* the least. In her original work *Punch and The Judy*, she mocked the stereotypical housewife's inability to escape from her mundane existence. However, Judy was victimized much more in *I used to love you* than in *Judy and the Punch*. In Graham's work, Judy became disillusioned with the minor infidelities of her husband, Punch, so she tried to find happiness with three other men, yet none of them satisfied her. In the end, she unknowingly found comfort in her husband's arms and decided to stay with him (Terry). Despite the futility of her existence, Graham still characterized Judy as a woman who took control over her own life to try to make it better for herself. In contrast, Judy in *I used to love you* sat by helplessly as her husband had an affair with another man and eventually passed out from anger (*I used*). Since Graham placed such an emphasis on the "struggles and triumphs of ... women," she would not have been impressed by how her female lead was weakened even further to an incapable bystander in *I used to love you* (American).

Another reason why Graham would have disliked this work was how excessive the special effects were. Even though she prided herself on trying new things and pushing the boundaries of what was socially acceptable in dances, she would have found the massive background screen distracting from the dance itself. Even after she began to use sets to tell her stories, she liked them to be understated and subtle. For example, in her 1947 work *Errand into the Maze*, she represented a maze with twisting white tape alone. Anything more would have been unnecessary to her, so she would not have appreciated the overwhelming stage effects in *I used to love you* (Freedman 113).

Despite her probable complaints about the presentation, there were many signature Graham qualities in *I used to love you* that she would have admired. The tormented face displayed on the giant screen in the rear portrayed the anguish and raw human emotion that she strived so ardently to capture (*I used*). This image was troubling, which is exactly what Graham would have wanted; according to Freedman, “[Her] dances were meant to be challenging and disturbing” (50). The other obvious Graham signature was the Judy’s fall at the climax of the work. After she could take the torturous behavior of her husband no longer, she sank down to the floor in an unconscious heap. Graham desired to create a feeling of utter despair, and in this moment, the movement did not lie. The fall perfectly matched Graham’s description, which was that falls “were not so much a crashing down as a dissolving, a melting and sliding, a communion with the ground and then a recovery” (58). She would have been proud that the signature element in many of her dances played such a central role in this work as well.

In short, Graham would have approved of the vast majority of the choreography and most of the content. In her own words, “Either a performance is honest or it is not,” and she would have recognized this work’s authenticity (Horosko 1). However, for an artist of her caliber, each minute detail was incredibly important, and the overpowering production factors would have caused her to feel warier about the delivery as a whole.

Watching this performance of *Maple Leaf Rag* would have brought a smile to Graham’s face. *Maple Leaf Rag* was the last work that Martha Graham choreographed before her death, and she chose to base it on Scott Joplin’s famous tune because it was the one song that Horst could play to cheer up his “Mirthless Martha” (Freedman 146). Consequently, this work had a cheery mood that she established with the spring-colored costumes, repetitious dance sequences, and light music. She would have appreciated the recording of her voice that said, “Oh, Louis,

play me the *Maple Leaf Rag*” because it would have reminded her of how much Horst meant to her throughout the years (Carolina); in her own words “I was deeply fond of him and I believed in his word” (66). Since the work was “A self-mocking commentary on human foibles and on her own legend,” she would have been pleased that nobody altered the ways in which she made light of her previous work (146).

Most important of all to Graham would have been the attention to detail in the movements. As an abstract work with no plot, the entirety of the work’s artistry relied on the dancing alone. Playing off of the juggling board in the center, the dancers playfully quoted sequences from some of Graham’s most famous work: for example, in the original performance, the “twitching women who hiccup onstage [were] a satire on the various Furies who inhabit Miss Graham's Greek cycle” (Kisselgoff). Similarly, the section “when some dancers are lying upside down, sole to sole with those squatting on the board above” was a reference to *Acrobats of God* (Kisselgoff). The precise replication of these movements conveyed the same humorous intent in reusing her own dance moves.

Graham did not always have a happy life. In her final years, she struggled with depression because her body began to betray her, and she could no longer do the one thing she loved most—dance. In fact, she even claimed that “Without dancing, I wished to die” (Freedman 137). However, she found a way to find joy in choreographing works for other people, and to see *Maple Leaf Rag* performed so joyously on March 24, 2017, would have reminded her of the joys in her life and how much other people admired her.

Overall, Graham would have approved of this performance because it adhered to her core principles. Parts of this performance mimicked her work that she strived so hard to create in a new, unique fashion. Other parts pushed today’s boundaries in the same way that she expanded

dance when she was a young, modern dancer. She might have disagreed with some of the ways in which the content was presented, but as a whole, this performance captured the essence of Martha Graham.

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