

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Julian Zentner

Martha Graham Lives!

by Gregory King

Traditional modern dance techniques like Horton, Limon, and Graham continue to provide foundational training for young dancers at certain institutions. At others, instructors align their pedagogical offerings to what has been popularized as “contemporary dance.”

Recently, while teaching a group of dancers primarily trained in ballet, I asked their level of experience with other genres. When most confirmed it to be “contemporary,” I wrestled with my curiosity, wondering if dance instructors teach the historical connections between the vocabulary and aesthetic of early modern dance and the style now dubbed “contemporary.”

Young dancers should be trained in a range of genres and styles so as to keep up with growing dance trends, keeping them marketable. But the importance of continuing to teach traditional techniques was at the forefront of my mind during an interview with Janet Eilber, former principal dancer of the Martha Graham Dance Company, who has served as artistic director of that company since 2005. In our interview, she reflected on her time with the company, lending insight on dance history, Graham as a traditional technique, dance and popular culture, and, of course, Martha Graham herself.

Gregory King: *What is your role as artistic director?*

Janet Eilber: My principal role is to curate the Graham legacy and decide how it will move into the future. I oversee and coordinate the three departments of the Graham Center—the Company, the school, and the archives—to make sure there is synergy, and that we are all working towards the same artistic goal. We have these incredible assets that Martha created, and my job is to find creative ways to connect to today’s audiences, making sure the works are as relevant and profound as when they were made.

GK: *What attracted you to the Graham technique?*

JE: I was never trained in the Graham technique until I went to The Juilliard School. I was more of a ballet and a Limon dancer, but Graham was required . . . and I hated it. I skipped my Graham classes the entire first year, and then I was cast in Martha's *Diversion of Angels*. A lightbulb went off and I connected to the exercises we did in class, understanding that the essence of the Graham technique is a physicality integrated into the emotional content of the work.

GK: *From my practice of the technique, I have not-so-pleasant memories of my hips hurting during the floor exercises. As a result, I have made claims that the Graham technique does not suit the male body. You have practiced, performed, and taught the technique all over the world. Would you say that it is more accessible to the female body?*

JE: I don't think the technique was specifically created for the female body, but it was created on the female body. Martha didn't hire a bunch of dancers and decide to create a technique. She wanted something different than what was being shown on stage at the time and started experimenting as a solo artist in her bedroom, which was her studio. She started theatricalizing body language and years later developed this new style of dancing. Young women flocked to her, becoming members of her company. The first ten years of her Company were all women. As she created works for the stage, she had to have a way to train her dancers to perform them, and her classroom technique emerged. Sure, for the first ten years the work was developed on female bodies, but then men joined the company in 1938, and at that point, she was ready to expand and include them in her classroom exercises. For some men it's just not as easy as for others. To that end, we make accommodations by allowing men to make adjustments by bringing blocks like they do in yoga, to make the exercises more efficient for the bodies that don't naturally take well to some of the seated positions.

GK: *With reality television shows like Dance Moms, So You Think You Can Dance, and Dancing with the Stars, dance has become a more popular source of entertainment. Would you say these shows are accurate representations of what's happening in the field of dance? And do you think what is shown on mainstream media affects how some institutions choose to train their dancers?*

JE: I actually think the television shows about dance are a force for good. They have many positive aspects, because they reveal process and standards. They show there is a high bar set for dancers who want to communicate emotionally, and they show that there are expectations in dance. They also show the rehearsal process and how hard dancers work. There's a panel of experts who tell them what they have or have not achieved. So I think the path to excellence in dance is revealed through some of these shows.

It would behoove some of us from the classical concert world to reach out to some of those audiences, saying we also have beautiful and passionate dancers working with similar standards and principles. These shows have expanded the audience that is enthusiastic about dance. When [Sonya Tayeh](#), a choreographer from *So You Think You Can Dance*, announced she would be working with us, our website crashed because people wanted to find out about the company she was going to be working with. Martha used to say "there are only two types of dance: good dance and bad dance." And from what I see on the television shows, they're shooting for good dance, so I'm a supporter.

GK: *Some teachers with strong aversions to traditional modern techniques like Graham claim that they are archaic, and that dance is moving away from these techniques to more somatic-based training (Bartenieff Fundamentals). What are some of the benefits of studying the Graham technique?*

JE: The Graham technique is foundational. Hashtag grahamcorepower . . . we're expanding our offerings at the school. Our company dancers not only dance Graham works, but they have to be able to work with different choreographers--like [Lar Lubovitch](#) and [Nacho Duato](#), who have a relationship with Graham's technique, as well as [Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui](#) or [Annie-B Parson](#), who come from very different aesthetic. The Graham technique is not an exclusive club. It is a strength-building technique that is extremely powerful, allowing dancers to go in any direction within the field.

GK: *What is being done to ensure the longevity of the technique and the company?*

JE: Over a year ago we started “Grahamworks,” a class taught by former Graham dancer Marni Thomas, that included researching ways in which the technique has evolved. A perfect example would be the “bounces” at the beginning of a Graham class; she studied and discovered the different versions of the bounces, and over the years, her research answered questions pertaining to the original intentions of each exercise—how the ways in which they are taught have evolved. She did this with all the classic Graham exercises, including the Graham barre work and the fall. Some of these essential exercises are not taught because of time constraints. Some of them have started to disappear from the classroom structure. So “Grahamworks” was developed to not only research and capture the information, but to supplement the regular Graham classes with a deeper knowledge of the technique.

GK: *If Martha were still alive, what do you think she would say about the current state of dance?*

JE: Martha more than anyone was about change--the future. She would have been so curious and eager to try the internet, 3D projections, and virtual reality. She truly had an appetite for creativity. She wouldn't fold her arms and say, “Well that's not the way we used to do it.” She was really about moving forward. She was positive and optimistic. Martha would never say, “That's interesting what they're doing today!” She would be the one to say, “What can we do tomorrow?”

By Gregory King

January 2, 2017