



Martha Graham in Death and Entrances by Cris Alexander



Group picture of the company from NYCC 2026 in Steps in the Street by M. Sherwood

# EDITORIAL

## CELEBRATING A CENTURY:

### 100 years of the Martha Graham Dance Company (1926-2026).

Much has been said about the genius of Martha Graham, who's own centenary was celebrated in 1994, but it's impossible to consider Martha's artistry, her social impact, her revolutionary influence without recognizing the innumerable contributions of her most essential collaborators -- the dancers of her Company. She called them "Athletes of God."

Imagine the first dancers to stand onstage beside Martha one hundred years ago, Thelma Biracree, Betty Macdonald, and Evelyn Sabin. Three acolytes willingly to step into the unknown of an experimental new style of dance that was so radical that Martha's own mother asked her when she was going to stop.

Ten years later, the fifteen courageous young women of the "Graham Group" embarked on our first transcontinental tour, crisscrossing the country by train to bring the little-known, misunderstood, and often dismissed new art form to cities from Tallahassee to Vancouver. Many of them were first generation Americans -- young Jewish women for whom Martha refused the Nazi's invitation to dance at the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin.

In 1938 and '39, the first men drawn to the possibilities of Martha's modernism, Erick Hawkins and Merce Cunningham, joined us. When Martha hired a young dancer just released from a Japanese internment camp in 1944, Yuriko Kikuchi, and not long after, our first Black dancers, Mary Hinkson and Matt Turney, we became one of the earliest if not *the* earliest dance company to be integrated, as we have been continuously since.

Through the decades, the messages embedded in Martha's dances -- her belief in humanity and the empowerment of the individual -- have been given full voice by our dancers

on stages around the world. These messages have been delivered through upheaval in our own country -- from segregation to censorship -- and through extraordinary circumstances around the world -- from Saigon in 1974 to East Berlin in 1987 and many more.

Our dancers, while inextricably part of the social-political atmosphere of each era, were also indispensable to Martha's artistry. They were both the inspiration and the execution of all she was creating -- a collection of dances that are ranked among the greatest works of art created in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

The generations since Martha's death in 1991 have not only shouldered the historic significance and relevance of Martha's mid-century modern masterworks, but they have danced a vast range of works by today's top choreographers -- expanding the Company's reputation and impact as it continues to innovate.

In the course of its 100 years, the Martha Graham Dance Company has been an internationally recognized artistic force -- a force that has always been irrevocably part of the bodies, minds and hearts of our Company dancers. This visceral legacy has been bequeathed to each new generation of dancers with an almost religious dedication by the one that has gone before.

As today's dancers don the costumes that were designed for dancers many years earlier, as they learn the now-classic moves and the motivation behind each role, they literally follow the footsteps of their predecessors and are alive with the legacy. And as they interpret and enliven the Graham dances with their own sensibilities, artistry, and place in time, they become part of the continuum. They are the current -- but temporary -- custodians of an ephemeral body of work that has reached its 100<sup>th</sup> year by the grace of Martha's "Athletes of God."

Janet Eilber

Artistic Director