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- Main
- What “56 Up” Reveals »

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Graham After Graham

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When you walk out of the elevator on the eleventh floor of Westbeth, the artists' housing complex on West Street, you see a painter converting the lobby walls from a chaste white to a hot orange. Open the door on the left and you see dancers on the floor, stretching their legs. No surprise here. This space is what people have known, for forty-two years, as the Merce Cunningham Studio. That's not what it is now, though. The Cunningham company folded a year ago. When the bosses of the Martha Graham Dance Company, long stuck in cramped quarters, heard that this space was being vacated, they got on the phone. As soon as the Cunningham company moved out, the Graham company moved in.

This is ironical. Cunningham's first real job was with Martha Graham. He danced in her company from 1939 to 1945, and his gifts—above all, his fabulous jump—became part of her vocabulary. But Cunningham soon tired of performing the way he was told to by someone else, particularly Graham. She was a romantic artist; she valued stories, emotions, thunder and lightning, with herself at the center. Cunningham, under the influence of the emphatically anti-romantic John Cage (who was by then his partner), favored dryness, wit, un-centeredness, even anarchy. “I wanted Dada, not Mama,” he said. So he left Graham—“a body blow to the company,” as one dancer put it. The two artists had little communication afterwards, but their two styles became the two fixed poles, the sun and the moon, of classic American modern dance.

At the turn of the century, both troupes faced the disaster that eventually comes to any modern-dance company. The founder, the maker of the repertory, the creator of the technique, dies. What is the Merce Cunningham company when there is no Cunningham? Not a legitimate enterprise, he decided, and so he directed that his company should fold after his death. Graham wanted hers to go forward. But how were the dancers to manage this, when they had no choreographer?

That's not all they lacked. Graham lived long enough (ninety-six) to feel that there were certain things she didn't have to bother about. After her death, consequently, there was a years-long legal struggle between her primary personal heir—Ron Protas, the companion of her late years—and the Martha Graham Center. Another problem was that the troupe had no money. “We were in a near-death experience,” says Janet Eilber, who is now the troupe's artistic director. “We had to suspend the company, we had to suspend the school.” But then, with the arrival of LaRue Allen, a firm-handed administrator, as the troupe's executive director, the deficit was dissolved. Most of the company's creditors took ten cents on the dollar.

Meantime, Eilber was, and is, remaking the company's profile. “It's a hundred and eighty degrees from when I was



dancing with Martha,” she says. “Before, we had this genius on a mountain, and everyone came to the mountain.” If they didn’t, the heck with them. In Graham’s opinion, Eilber says, “if there was only one person in the audience who understood the work, that was enough.” That is not Eilber’s opinion, nor can it be. She feels she has to change Graham’s “musty image” and also the package that the company offers presenters. “We’ll do shows with five dancers, or twenty dancers,” she says. “We’ll come with sets or no sets.” She’s also allowing the company to work in non-Graham productions. Last year, the dancers performed in the chorus of two Greek tragedies, “Bacchae” and “Prometheus Unbound,” in an ancient amphitheater in Sicily. “They were given huge dreadlocks,” Eilber says, “and their bodies were painted white, and they wore these big skirts. They had a ball.” In other words, they contributed to somebody else’s show. As Eilber is sending things out, she is taking things in. The Graham school now teaches ballet. Indeed, last summer, they began giving classes in the Cunningham technique!

Eilber sits and gazes at her company’s large, sun-lit studio. Before, she says, “we had to rent studios to rehearse in. You couldn’t jump high. You’d hit the ceiling. And we never had the props”—props are crucial in Graham—“until the day before the show. They were in a warehouse in New Jersey.” Nothing is perfect. No sooner were the sets and costumes moved to Westbeth’s basement than they were submerged in six feet of water by Hurricane Sandy. But Eilber says that her new headquarters is everything she ever wanted: “This space—it’s about space.” It’s also about time. “We see ourselves now as having a relationship to the trajectory of modern dance,” she says. This is an anti-heroic position, a survivalist position.

You can decide how that’s going, at least for the time being, in February and March, when the company will have a two-week season at the Joyce. They will perform some sterling Graham pieces: “Errand into the Maze” (without sets and costumes, carried away by Sandy), “Cave of the Heart,” “Night Journey,” etc. The season’s repertory isn’t all blue-chip. For example, it will include Graham’s 1962 “Phaedra,” which, in my experience, is her most dated and dirty dance. It was probably her bid to join the sexual revolution. It was denounced by members of Congress, which I would guess thrilled her to her bones.

More interesting, though, are the season’s offerings in after-Graham department: the adaptations of her style, her subject matter, whatever, that may or may not demonstrate that a company that has lost its sole choreographer can still have a tradition strong enough to carry it into the future without him/her. The best offering, I think, will be “The Show (Achilles Heels),” by Richard Move. Move was the most acclaimed of the Graham impersonators, but after (actually, while) that act exhausted its appeal— as, in my experience, do most female impersonator acts, rather fast—he turned out to be an interesting man of the theatre: writer, director, choreographer. I saw this piece when it was première. It’s a lot of fun.

Photograph courtesy the Library of Congress.

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