



Errand into the Maze

Martha Graham Dance Company



Grades 7-12

Wednesday, February 16, 2005 • 11 a.m.-12 p.m. ET

When viewing the *Martha Graham Dance Company* and participating in this guide's suggested activities, the following National Standards for Dance will be addressed: 1-7

Students Will See and Hear...

This program introduces the work of American modern dance pioneer Martha Graham. As a dancer and choreographer, Martha Graham (1894–1991) is recognized as one of America's great artistic inventors of the 20th century. Graham searched for ways to communicate human emotion (the “interior landscape”) through movement, and her artistic material was the human body.

Students meet the Martha Graham Dance Company's artistic directors and observe as members of the Company perform excerpts from Graham's notable works from the 1940s that express powerful human emotions: fear and triumph over fear (*Errand into the Maze*), love (*Diversion of Angels*), sorrow and joy (*El Penitente*), and hope (*Appalachian Spring*).

Curriculum Connections:

Martha Graham Dance Company correlates with a wide range of curricula: Dance, Music, Social Studies/History, Language Arts

Educational Objectives

- To understand the relationship between one dance form and another
- To evaluate how well music composed for dance suits that medium
- To examine how an individual is shaped by events and surroundings
- To look at how a social studies theme, such as “pioneer spirit”, can be expressed in dance or other art form
- To examine how a written text, such as a Greek myth, can be interpreted through dance or other art form

Program Notes

Creating a New American Dance Form

Martha Graham has often been referred to as the mother of modern dance. She has been described as:

...a daring innovator

When Graham was young, most dance audiences watched classical ballet. This dance form was steeped in tradition—choreographers drew on a well-defined set of steps and movements that were developed over hundreds of years.

But European ballet traditions were of no interest to Graham. She

imagined there could be a distinctly American type of dance that would reflect the American experience. For instance, America was a nation of immigrants who had risked everything for opportunities in a new land. They had pioneered an enormous expanse and soon, with the help of trains and the telegraph, traveled and communicated across great distances with unheard-of speed. America, too, had a kind of frontier athleticism, born of and necessary for survival on the frontier. Graham drew on all these characteristics—space, speed,

communication, risk, our quest for new frontiers and our pioneer spirit—for her work.

Graham bravely forged ahead, inventing a unique kind of dance expression that startled the public. In contrast to ballet dancers who work to appear graceful, fluid, and weightless, Graham dancers hold their bodies at sharp angles and move in abrupt and irregular phrases. Her choreography welcomes the powerful force of gravity and works with it, instead of against it. Performing in bare feet helps her dancers feel connected to the ground.¹

But it wasn't enough to create unique dances. To bring her vision of dance into reality, Graham had to create a system of exercises for training dancers' bodies to move in this new way. Graham developed a technique that was based on the most natural human movement: breathing—exhaling and inhaling. Graham's modern dance technique became the first enduring alternative to classical ballet.

...passionate, independent, and persistent

To Graham, dance was a sacred mission. In 1927, she created the Martha Graham Dance Company, now one of the oldest dance troupes in America. Consistent with her vision of making dance a form of expression for all people, it was the first racially integrated dance company. Graham worked tirelessly, hammering out her ideas in the studio on her own body and then transferring them to her dedicated Company members.² Working without financial resources during the early years, Graham had barely enough money to buy food. She survived out of sheer determination and ingenuity—sewing costumes, locating low-cost performance spaces, and relying on her dancers' dedication to perform without pay. But Graham persevered in honing her vision.

...a prolific, dominant force in American culture

"Martha Graham's impact on dance was staggering."³ Graham created more than 180 works during a career that spanned over 60 years. She trained

Instructional Activities

- Graham's father told her, "The body never lies." He said that Martha's body language always revealed whether she was telling the truth. Drawing on your experience, explain how body language can help someone "read" one's honesty.
- Working with a partner, divide a paper into two columns, one for classical ballet and one for Graham's modern dance. Drawing from your experience watching the program and pictures of ballet and Graham's modern dance (johndeane.com/graham/index.html), list words to describe

each. Make a master list that combines the ideas of the entire class. Discuss the similarities and differences you discovered.

- Many of Graham's students became the next generation of modern dancers, choreographers, and teachers. All have drawn from her technique, even in rebellion. Discuss this cycle of learning a tradition, challenging that tradition, and then inventing a new one. Is it the role of artists to always challenge tradition? Why? Which artists' careers provide examples of this cycle?

and inspired three generations of modern dancers and choreographers. Dance companies throughout the world now use the Graham Technique. The dance school she began in 1926 still trains hundreds of students each year, and her dance company performs her works around the world.

Graham's work was always evolving. Throughout her career, she continued to experiment with new themes. Graham revolutionized not only choreography, but also stage design and musical composition for dance.

In stage design, Graham's 30-year collaboration with Japanese-American sculptor Isamu Noguchi launched a new direction for set design. Instead of using representational sets, Graham

and Noguchi wanted the stage to be set with abstract shapes and forms that would require audience members to interpret their meaning.

In music, Graham was guided by composer Louis Horst, her accompanist and first musical director. He taught her that dance should not mimic the mood of the music. Rather, music should enhance the dance, like the frame does for a painting. Graham used contemporary scores and later created dances with music commissioned for her. Her musical collaborators included such noted composers as Aaron Copland, Samuel Barber, William Schuman, and Gian Carlo Menotti.

¹ The Martha Graham Dance Company Souvenir Journal, 1981, p. 18-19.

² Kisselgoff, Anna. "Martha Graham Dies at 96: A Revolutionary in Dance," *The New York Times*, April 2, 1991.

³ PBS web site, American Masters, pbs.org/wnet/americannmasters/database/graham_m.html.

Internet Resources

For more information, visit:
marthagrahamdance.org/company
kennedy-center.org/programs/specialevents/honors/history
 (scroll down to 1979 for Martha Graham)
noguchi.org/graham.html

Other resources related to the **Martha Graham Dance Company** can be found on page 20.

Part of *A New America: The 1940s and the Arts*, the Catherine B. Reynolds Foundation Series for Artistic Excellence.

For additional resources, visit kennedy-center.org/pwvtv



From the collection of the Martha Graham Center

Martha Graham



Photo by John Deane

Appalachian Spring