

Review: *The Financial Times* **Martha Graham Company, New York**

By: Apollinaire Scherr
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Janet Eilber, artistic director of the Graham troupe since it returned from the brink a few years ago, is the kind of thoughtful contrarian that the maverick choreographer would have appreciated. According to the dance world's conventional wisdom, a historic work can speak so loudly for itself that the present will not drown it out; Eilber, on the contrary, insists on context and curation.

This season's Political Dance Project honours Graham's belief that "no artist is ahead of his time, he *is* his time", by setting the works of her early, all-female group beside their contemporaries. The effect is to illuminate the Graham pieces or modern dance between the wars, and the whole modernist project.

Isadora Duncan's 1924 solo *The Revolutionary* lends strange forms and new meanings to the iconic fists and lunges of the revolutionary worker. Tadej Brdnik plants his knuckles on the ground as if to drill into the red earth. But then his arms pliéd and a diamond of negative space appears. Whatever you thought the fists signified is suddenly – and happily – confounded.



Tenant of the Street, which one Eve Gentry choreographed in 1938 and a mesmerising Carrie Ellmore-Tallitsch performed on Wednesday, also converts archetypal forms into poetic abstractions. The concave chest, scuffling walk and furtive gaze of the down and out become a bright mechanical bird.

This alchemising process seems to be a defining element of early modern dance. A gesture acquires sculptural heft and escapes the commonplace.

In Graham's 1936 *Chronicle*, this occurs via hands and arms that wind around and jut from women's torsos like the distortions of Picasso's wartime nudes.

In *Panorama* – made in 1935 for Bennington students and now performed by students from New York schools and the Graham academy – it is the space between the constantly shifting clusters of dancers that pulses with life. Either way, we have descended into the heart of dance, where pedestrian motion acquires a dream-like charge.

On Wednesday – the second of the week's two distinct programmes – the show concluded with *Appalachian Spring*. By 1944, Graham was telling stories. The language may build on earlier discoveries, but the dances are not as radical.

The influential critic John Martin, who grew up on early Graham, used to insist that dance's future lay in modern dance, not ballet. For once, I could see what he meant.