

# The New York Times

Dance Review

## After the Flood, Drying Off the Classics and Letting Them Fly

Martha Graham Dance Company at Joyce Theater

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Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Hurricane Sandy was hard on the Martha Graham Dance Company. In the West Village basement where most of its sets and costumes were stored, floodwaters nearly reached the ceiling. But this is a troupe driven by its mission to preserve masterpieces, and so sets were refurbished and costumes remade, and in the company's current season at the Joyce Theater most of the important things look as good as they did before the deluge.

**Martha Graham Dance Company** Abdiel Jacobsen leaping over PeiJu Chien-Pott in "Errand," a slightly revised version of Graham's Minotaur-based "Errand Into the Maze," at the Joyce Theater.

Under the artistic directorship of Janet Eilber, this is also a troupe never at a loss for schemes to make those masterpieces seem more relevant. Thus, in the second of the season's three programs, Graham's 1947 retelling of Ariadne's facing the Minotaur, "Errand Into the Maze," comes without its severely damaged set and costumes, but this shortfall is offered, opportunistically, as an experiment in stripped-down Graham.

In truth, there was not so much to strip, mainly Isamu Noguchi's entranceway, shaped like a pelvic bone. Beverly Emmons's lighting intelligently substitutes for that threshold and the thread the heroine follows. The Minotaur hangs onto his yoke, though he's traded his horns for a stocking over his face. This version of the dance gets a shortened title, "Errand" — a punctilio that the deviations from the original seem too minor to justify.

And yet the main difference may matter. For the uninitiated, Noguchi's sets can be one of the most off-putting elements of Graham's theater. For some, they're intimidating symbols; for others, they call to mind "The Flintstones." Replacing them, especially with light, opens up the works' psychology for contemporary minds while focusing more attention on the steps, where the deepest drama and meaning live. No sets (or — sacrilege — new sets) is an idea worth

trying. Recruiting fine young dancers like PeiJu Chien-Pott and Abdiel Jacobsen is the best strategy of all.

“Cave of the Heart,” Graham’s retelling of the Medea myth, retains Noguchi’s volcanic mound and spiky cage of a dress. Blakeley White-McGuire’s Medea twists herself tighter and tighter in jealousy — she lets Graham’s choreography work its dark magic — but she’s too pathetic at the start and insufficiently evil at the end. Xiaochuan Xie, as Jason’s new and younger wife, projects a smugness that diminishes the tragedy. Watching an innocent ride one of Jason’s biceps and pay for it with her life would be crueler torture for Medea and for us.

The one-woman role of the Chorus in “Cave” is crucial: she channels our compassion for the murderous queen. Natasha Diamond-Walker’s modesty and strength allow this to happen.

In “Night Journey,” the story of Oedipus’ incest told from the perspective of his mother, the Chorus is a seven-women pack of furies, armed with some of Graham’s most piercing choreography. Yet they, too, mourn, beating the ground softly. Light could never replace this dance’s ropes — the Queen strangles herself — but if Noguchi’s plank bed were lost, the essential discomfort would remain.

The three works on this program were made in a single 12-month span in 1946-47, one of the great runs in dance. Well before Hurricane Sandy, well before Graham’s death in 1991, people who love these works were lamenting their inevitable erosion. At the Joyce, there’s still enough in them to strike with uncommon force.

Martha Graham Dance Company performs through Sunday at the Joyce Theater, 175 Eighth Avenue, at 19th Street, Chelsea; (212) 242-0800, joyce.org.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

**Correction: February 28, 2013**

A dance review on Wednesday about the Martha Graham Dance Company, at the Joyce Theater in Manhattan, misstated the year Graham died. It was 1991, not 1981.

**A version of this review appeared in print on February 27, 2013, on page C5 of the New York edition with the headline: After the Flood, Drying Off the Classics and Letting Them Fly.**