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Author

Kinghorn, Kiara

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Protesting, Stark, and American

A look at Martha Graham in a revealing documentary, The Dancer Revealed

by Kiara Kinghorn

Ask any dance scholar to name the top five most influential choreographers of the 20th century, and Martha Graham is sure to make the cut. Her vision of dance as an insight into the psychology of the human condition was both larger-than-life and light years ahead of its time. *The Dancer Revealed* summarizes the personal and professional life of Graham from her humble beginnings as a plain Pennsylvanian girl who was deemed “too short and too old” by her teachers (she was twenty-two), to the prolific dance master whose work spanned decades of artistic and political evolution in modern America. Martha Graham (1894-1991) is crucial in understanding American modern dance, especially as she relates to ideas of gender politics and nationalism.

Graham as an American

The Dancer Revealed opens with a retelling of Graham’s early years, noting that she was of Irish and Scottish descent, with ancestors that harkened back to the Mayflower. It’s not an accident that she’s also recognized to be the first dancer to perform at the White House, and to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Throughout the film, there is a sense that Martha’s contributions were not only of great artistic value, they were significant to American history. Having being born just before the turn of the century, it is remarkable to consider what vast political and cultural change Martha witnessed in her lifetime, and how she might serve as a symbol of American patriotism.

Graham’s cross-country move from Pennsylvania to California at age 14 lays an early foundation for her work to be just as nationally expansive. Her choreography explores themes of perseverance through hardship, and the unbridled desire to conquer undiscovered terrain. This is most salient in her 1935 work *Frontier*, which incorporates a set piece reminiscent of an agriculture fence, with cables that extend upward with optimistic stretch. The music, composed by her then-lover Louis Horst, features dutiful horns and driving drum beats as if to conjure the marching forward of American progress.

Later, the film introduces Graham's most well-known work *Appalachian Spring*, which depicts the domestication of a Quaker couple, set to the famous Americana score by Aaron Copland. And, while it delivers overt patriotism, Graham’s performance on film in the central role at age 65 makes it at the same time counter-cultural. In this way and many others, Graham is a paradox. She is at once a trailblazing force of revolutionary artistry, yet also weak to the seduction of men

and addiction. She is undoubtedly feminist, yet also admits onscreen her own vanity and arrogance. Even with her unparalleled choreographic insight, her ego screams if she's not center stage. The minutiae of these conflicts makes *Revealed* an essential documentary for dance education.

Graham as a Feminist

Martha Graham was a feminist, whether or not she explicitly identified it. She occupied roles that were previously male-only, like leading a dance company, providing its sole choreographic voice, and developing a master technique. And she did so without question or apology, as if being pulled by some deeper spiritual force. (It's also no accident she played Joan of Arc in her later work, *The Triumph of St. Joan*.) When considering Graham in this way, it's important to contextualize her. Not only was her choice to provide psychological depth to her female roles a win for women today, it's momentous to consider this assertion nearly 100 years ago. And, no greater psychological depth arises than in Graham's 1930 work *Lamentation*, which features her tightly bound in a purple cocoon of stretchy fabric. Within it Graham writhes, pleads, rises and falls. Her huge false eyelashes seem to droop with the weight of unshed tears. While it may be tempting to dismiss *Lamentation* as overly dramatic today, it's important to acknowledge the environment in which it was created—one of vaudeville, burlesque and music theater, where roles for women were limited to displays of physical beauty and the titillation of men.

The Dancer Revealed surveys Martha Graham's personal relationships, mostly with Eric Hawkins, her lover-turned-husband who was 15 years her junior. In the era of #metoo, which exposes the commonplace power of men over women in the workplace, it's empowering to see Martha flip the script. She is the director and he the muse. While Hawkins' studies in Greek antiquity informed Martha's work, he often played second fiddle to her overpowering genius. That is, until he became tired of that and left her. Martha was broken at first; she retreated into solitude and fell into a perilous bout of alcoholism. But, true to form, she rose. Like a phoenix from the ashes, Martha was reborn and reawakened, the ebb and flow of her life being her stylistic signature, the constant release from every contraction that life stirred within her.

The film closes with a montage of triumphant images of Martha Graham, revisiting the successes in her career from performer to choreographer, dancer to educator. It shows her in the studio in her elderly years, carefully correcting eager students that have filled her classes. The narrator mentions that Graham pulled herself out of the depth of her addiction and went on to make twenty more works.

The Dancer Revealed was directed by Catherine Tatge and produced by British Broadcasting Corporation for their series, "American Masters." It was released in 1994 and is 60 min long.

Dancer and choreographer Kiara Kinghorn is a second-year MFA candidate in Dance at University of California, Irvine. Her thesis research looks at ways the #metoo movement relates to the dance world.