

4-1-1981

Reissue of Martha Graham: Sixteen Dances in Photographs

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REISSUE OF MARTHA GRAHAM: SIXTEEN
DANCES IN PHOTOGRAPHS BY BARBARA
MORGAN (MORGAN & MORGAN, 1980)

By Curtis Carter

Last summer I saw a copy of Barbara Morgan's 1941 edition of her book, Martha Graham: Sixteen Dances in Photographs in a New York dance shop. This rare item was selling for approximately \$500. The same book reportedly has been one of the books most frequently stolen from libraries.

The reissue of this important document of American dance is a welcome contribution. The words of Martha Graham in a preface to the new edition express for all the importance of this book: "In looking at these photographs today, I feel, as I felt when I first saw them, privileged to have been a part of this collaboration. For me, Barbara Morgan through her art reveals the inner landscape that is a dancer's world." Barbara Morgan's own words affirm her mutual respect for the artistry of Martha Graham: "I am grateful through photography to have been able to convey the spiritual vitality that emanates from the dances of Martha Graham."

The book contains photographs of sixteen Graham dances: "Frontier", "Lamentation", "Ekstasis", "Celebration", "Primitive Mysteries", "American Provincials", "Harlequinade", "Imperial Gesture", "Sarabande", "Primitive Canticles", "Deep Song", "Satyric Festival Song", "El Penitente", "Every Soul is a Circus", "Letter to the World", and "American Document".

The book also contains brief essays by Martha Graham, Barbara Morgan, Louis Horst, and critic George Beiswanger. Scholars and students will find the complete chronology of dances composed by Martha Graham from 1926-1980. This chronology includes information on the performers, music, costumes, as well as dates and places of premieres. Additional information on tours and dances not pictured contribute to the usefulness of the book. But, of course, it will be valued primarily for its testimony to a collaboration of two artists of uncompromising quality.

The account of their collaboration, which has been supplied by an anonymous interviewer, provides essential insight into

the collaborative efforts that make this book so important.

TWO HERETICS:

A CREATIVE COLLABORATION

(This material is extracted from anonymous interviews with Barbara Morgan and Martha Graham.)

"We're both heretics," is the way photographer Barbara Morgan describes herself and Martha Graham, the dancer-choreographer who collaborated with Mrs. Morgan from 1935-41 to produce the now celebrated book "Martha Graham: Sixteen Dances in Photographs." The book was published in 1941 and will be reissued in a new printing late next month (Oct.).

Mrs. Morgan's description is right to the point. Miss Graham frequently describes herself as an iconoclast and early in her career created a work called "Heretic" in which she was the central figure. Mrs. Morgan in her "heretical" dance pictures made no attempt to record the stage performance but instead sought to create her own images of the dance which, nonetheless, remained true in spirit to the original.

Concern for the spiritual is, in fact, Barbara Morgan's primary concern. A recent visit to her home in Scarsdale, N.Y., provided a visitor with an insight into this concern. After bowls of fresh watermelon and blueberries served outdoors on the porch, the visitor opened Mrs. Morgan's book on Martha Graham and pointed to a specific picture. Did it, he wanted to know, reproduce the stage lighting for the dance even though the picture was not taken during a performance? (This particular picture showed Miss Graham in "Frontier" standing in shadow on one side of the photograph while the other side was balanced by a small pool of light--both Miss Graham and the pool of light being enveloped by a vast darkness).

"Hell, no!" was the 80-year-old photographer's characteristically pithy reply. "I paid no attention to the stage. I wanted to show that Martha had her own vision. That what she was conveying was deeper than ego, deeper than baloney. Dance has to go beyond theatre. Dance has to enter the spirit of the viewer from the spirit of the giver. I was trying to connect her spirit with the

viewer--to show pictures of spiritual energy."

This idea of connecting the spirits of the viewer and the dancer, Mrs. Morgan explained, was one in which the Indians of the American Southwest believed. Mrs. Morgan had visited several of the Indian tribes with her late husband Willard when they made summer trips from their home in Los Angeles from 1925-30. Her observation of the Indian rituals and tribal life affected her deeply.

By coincidence Martha Graham had her initial encounter with these ceremonies in 1930, although she and Mrs. Morgan did not meet until 1935 in New York. The encounter was significant for Miss Graham. As the New York Times dance critic Anna Kisselgoff observed in a 1975 article for Playbill, "Martha fell in love with a culture that was banished from schoolbooks across the nation, and she paid it the tribute of making this culture play a crucial role in her artistic development." As examples, Miss Kisselgoff cited Miss Graham's ballets "Primitive Mysteries" from 1931 and "El Penitente" from 1940.

Sometime in the early thirties Barbara Morgan saw "Primitive Mysteries" in New York and says she sensed a similar feeling to the Indian ritual she had seen in the Southwest. By chance a friend of Mrs. Morgan's, film maker Julian Brian, also knew Miss Graham and, in fact was making a film of Miss Graham at that time. Mr. Brian invited Mrs. Morgan to a rehearsal of the film, and the two women met for the first time. That was 1935.

"We talked together during the filming," Mrs. Morgan remembers. "I told her I saw the connection to the Indian rituals of the Southwest. She told me that they had had a deep effect on her whole vision. So I just said that I'd like to do a book on her, and she said, 'Fine, let's do it.' We shook hands, and that's really how it started."

From 1935-41, Mrs. Morgan made her pictures. They were never taken until she had seen the dance repeatedly, both in performance and rehearsal. "After I'd seen the dance and discussed it with Martha, I'd let it percolate around in my brain. Perhaps the dance was twenty minutes long, but after

two or three weeks I might remember only ten gestures that epitomized for me the entire concept," Mrs. Morgan once explained. Only after this process did she then begin to photograph the dance and then only in a studio situation where she controlled the light.

Both women remember the process of taking the photographs somewhat differently. Mrs. Morgan and Miss Graham met in Miss Graham's East Side Manhattan apartment recently to discuss the new version of the book. They talked about the famous "Letter to the World" photograph in which Miss Graham strikes a strong horizontal pose while her long white dress whips into the air above her body. Mrs. Morgan spoke of the picture in compositional terms pointing out the confluence of Miss Graham's body line and the horizontal line in the background formed by the meeting of the floor and the backdrop. Miss Graham remembered the hard work that went into getting that exact lineup.

"She was a terror, a perfectionist," the 86-year-old Miss Graham said of Mrs.

Morgan with a roll of her eyes upward. "I'd do it, and then she'd say, 'Well, the dress wasn't quite right,' and then we'd have to do it again. First she would make me lie down on the floor and rest. So off came the dress (it mustn't get dirty, you know), and then we would start all over again." Difficult as the picture-taking was, the results have endured. In 1975, the "kick" from "letter," as the photograph is known, was selected by Miss Graham and Mrs. Morgan as a gift for the then First Lady Betty Ford, who was chairwoman of that year's fiftieth anniversary celebration of the Graham company. It is also this picture that Mrs. Morgan chose for the book jacket of the 1980 reissue of her book.

In 1937, two years after the two women had been working on the book of photographs, Merle Armitage published his own book on Martha Graham. Filled with "articles" about Martha Graham written by John Martin, Lincoln Dirstein, Stark Young, Wallingford Reigger and others, it included comments by Martha herself.

She wrote, "The reality of dance can be brought into focus

--that is into the realm of human values--by simple, direct objective means. We are a visually stimulated world today. The eye is not to be denied. Dance need not change--it has only to stand revealed."

Thirty-five years later Barbara Morgan told a interviewer, "For me the greatness of Mar-

tha's dance came from the fact that she tried to express her vision of the human condition, of human awareness." In her pictures of Martha Graham, Barbara Morgan gave substance to that vision, and through her marvelous book that vision of Martha Graham's dance, indeed, stands permanently revealed.