

MARTHA GRAHAM THE TRUE MOTHER OF MODERN DANCE

Legacy 1923

Pioneer of Graham Technique



Martha Graham, © Barbara Morgan, Barbara Morgan Archives

Martha Graham (May 11, 1894 – April 1, 1991) was an American modern dancer and choreographer whose influence on dance has been compared with the influence Picasso had on modern visual arts, Stravinsky had on music.

In the mid 1910s, she began her studies at the newly created Denishawn School of Dancing and Related Arts, founded by Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn, at which she would stay till 1923. In 1926, the Martha Graham Centre of Contemporary Dance was established. On April 18 of the same year, at the 48th Street Theatre, Graham debuted with her first independent concert, consisting of eighteen short solos and trios that she had choreographed. She would later say of the concert "Everything I did was influenced by Denishawn."

The Contraction

The contraction serves as the foundation of Graham technique. Graham developed the idea from observing the physical manifestation of grief in the body. It is one of the fundamental characteristics of her choreography and as such, most Graham exercises were created with the contraction in mind.

While Graham was the creator of the contraction, the move has become a staple of modern dance and has been used, altered, and redefined by many subsequent choreographers.

A Graham contraction begins from the pelvis and travels up the spine, lengthening the space between each vertebra, up to the neck and head, which remain in line with the spine. Each contraction is accompanied with an exhalation of breath. To the inexperienced eye, a contraction may look like a sucking in of the gut or a hunching over of the torso. However, any change in the rib cage, shoulders, or neck, is a result of the building of the contraction from the pelvis and occurs automatically when it has been performed correctly.

The Release

The release is the counter to the contraction. It occurs on the inhalation of breath. A release also begins from the pelvis and travels up the spine to return the torso to a neutral, straight position.

A second type of release, called the high release occurs when a dancer opens their breastbone to the sky and seems to rest their torso on an invisible shelf beneath the shoulder blades. The rib cage maintains alignment over the hips with no break in the lower back. The head remains in line with the spine.

The Spiral

A twisting of the torso around the spine, or spiral, is another fundamental part of Graham technique. Like the contraction, the spiral begins in the pelvis and travels up the spine to the neck and head, although the head always stays in line with the spine. The changes in the torso take place as a cause and effect process as the spiral moves up from the pelvis. The lower spine must move before the shoulders which move before the neck, etc.

As the dancer releases from the spiral and returns to a neutral position, the movement, again, originates from the pelvis and travels upwards.

Graham was influenced by her obsession of what happens to the body during grief. Especially the grief of the body during child birth. She also had unusually loose hips which made getting into the excruciating positions of the body easier to do.

Graham still remains today one of the hardest techniques to perfect in contemporary dance.

DORIS HUMPHREY

Legacy 1923

Pioneer of Humphrey Technique



Along with her contemporaries, Martha Graham and Katherine Dunham, Humphrey was one of the second generation modern dance pioneers, who followed their forerunners – including Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn – in exploring the use of breath and developing techniques still taught today. As a result of many of her works being annotated, Humphrey continues to be taught, studied and performed to this day.

Humphrey believed that rhythms of dance were a result of the dancer's desire to pull toward and away from equilibrium. Humphrey approached this theory of equilibrium in a very scientific and logical way. She referred to the end effect as "static death/dynamic death." By this, she meant the danger of constant equilibrium or the danger of too extreme a move away from equilibrium and

used this idea as the human struggle for survival.

In Humphrey's studies of nature, she devised her "fall and recovery" technique. Humphrey explained the importance of fall and recovery in dance when she said:

"Falling and recovering is the very stuff of movement, the constant flux which is going on in every living body, in all its tiniest parts, all the time."

She described it as the arc between two deaths. The death of when the dynamics in the body end and start again.

Humphrey often worked with her student Jose Limon and together they developed Humphrey Limon technique.

MERCE CUNNINGHAM

Legacy 1944

Pioneer of Cunningham Technique



Merce Cunningham was born in Centralia, Washington in 1919, the second of three sons. Both his brothers followed their father into the legal profession. Cunningham initially received his first formal dance and theatre training at the Cornish School (now Cornish College of the Arts) in Seattle, which he attended from 1937–9. During this time, Martha Graham saw Cunningham dance and invited him to join her company.

In the fall of 1939, Cunningham moved to New York and began a six-year stint as a soloist in the company of Martha Graham. He presented his first solo concert in New York in April 1944 with composer John Cage, who became his life partner and frequent collaborator until Cage's death in 1992.

In the summer of 1953, as a teacher in residence at Black Mountain College, Cunningham formed the Merce Cunningham Dance Company as a forum to explore his new ideas on dance and the performing arts.

From the company's beginnings, Cunningham collaborated with John Cage, its Musical Advisor and Cunningham's life partner from the 1940s until Cage's death in 1992. Cage had the greatest influence on his practice. Together, Cunningham and Cage proposed a number of radical innovations. The most famous and controversial of these concerned the relationship between dance and music, which they concluded may occur in the same time and space, but should be created independently of one another. They also made extensive use of chance procedures, abandoning not only musical forms, but narrative and other conventional elements of dance composition—such as cause and effect, and climax and anti-climax. For Cunningham the subject of his dances was always dance itself.

The warm-up first moves the back through a series of simple exercises for the spine and torso that gently bend and twist it in all possible directions. Then the legs and feet stretch from a stable core in parallel and turned-out positions to the front, side, and back, on and off the ground. Everything is done entirely to musical counts.

One principle of Cunningham's technique is, as he says, "to make it so that the class structure doesn't become rigid. Once you're warmed up," he continues, "you don't just repeat, you change the rhythm or something, so you don't just do it, you have to think about it." So, after muscles and joints are lubricated, you're ready for whatever he throws at you. And the etudes in every class, then as now, make you move very fast and very slowly, both in place, through space, and jumping. They force you to think quickly and change weight and direction efficiently.

"Do it bigger," he encourages. He wants a movement to be as big as possible without turning into something else. The mental concentration and physical exertion of doing movement simply and directly give his choreography an expressive focus that resides in the intrinsic action itself.

"Move your feet!" Merce used to say when someone was too slow. It makes sense to move what's closest to the ground, if you want to get somewhere fast, right? And at the other extreme, moving slowly with control improves stamina, balance, and overall strength. Long, intricate adagio combinations are another Cunningham hallmark.

Cunningham technique is often likened to ballet, because it is upright and linear. But two differences distinguish Cunningham's work. First, the co-ordinations are not necessarily "natural," that is, moving in opposition through the back like walking. Second, the core of stability is not the whole spine as in ballet, but only the pelvis, so that the spine can articulate as freely as another limb. This allows the dancer a broader range of movement possibilities.

Since Cunningham's vocabulary is endless, each move must be highly specific. "If you say, 'Do an arabesque,' dancers will do something familiar," Merce says, "but if you ask them to lift the leg back, they experience it in a fresh way." Mary Lisa Burns, director of the Cunningham School and long time teacher there, says, "Merce thinks of dancing as being an enlargement of everyday movement. I often think of that, especially as we start moving across the floor. And I think that leads to clarity of intention."

"If you can do it one way," Merce says, "there must be another way." So, the technique involves principles rather than just combinations. It teaches the dancer "how to do something," as he puts it, instead of teaching the dancer how to move like the teacher.

Even when he was still dancing, Merce would often explain instead of demonstrate a phrase. "Rather than show the movement, if you explain it, the students have to think it through differently." The clarity of his imagination allows him to describe the movement verbally, so that even now, sitting on a stool, he makes his intentions crystal clear.

"Rhythm is huge in this technique," says Burns. "Every part of the beat is as important as every other, unlike the predictable dum-da-da, dum-da-da of ballet. Like nobody else, Merce can make

simple combinations that feel completely unfamiliar by changing the rhythm. The dancers have to really look. They can't do it on auto-pilot."

Since Cunningham creates and rehearses his choreography in silence, rhythmic accuracy is essential. And although sound and dance are independent (we rarely heard the score until the first performance), the movement is counted rigorously. Indeed it's the dancers' inner rhythms that keep them together in often uncanny unison.

What is chance?

Chance is a technique Cunningham used as a form of improvisation. Cunningham used to choreograph dances using a chance technique in order to provide an element of surprise in his pieces. The dancers involved would develop sequences based on chance using Cunningham's set boundaries. Cunningham focused on time, space and weight, so all of his moves were developed around these principles. For example a balance would be put against a downward pull of gravity and would be performed slowly in a deep position. Therefore, using a simple action word alongside time, space and weight.

In order to develop chance, Cunningham would use techniques such as rolling a dice or using instruction manuals to determine which moves would be used with which and in what order/direction/dynamic.

A Chance Dance: (This develops numeracy and literacy through learning key words and the use of directions, dynamics, weight and forces of gravity.)

Below is an example of how this can be explored. Create a table like the one below:

Action Word, Direction, Dynamic, Weight/Flow

- 1 Skip, Backwards, Sudden, Deep
- 2 Jump, Forwards, Smooth, Light
- 3 Twist, Diagonal, Delicately, Central
- 4 Balance, Upward, Harsh, Heavy
- 5 Rise, Sideways, Fast, Awkward
- 6 Fall, Upside Down, Slow, Bound

Roll a dice, if you get a 2 the first roll, you write on a piece of paper JUMP. They roll again. If they get a 4, they write down UPWARD and so on, writing down the word they rolled from each column.

If I rolled a 1, 3, 2 and 5, my first column on my paper will be: SKIP, DIAGONAL, SMOOTH, AWKWARD

You then have the opening move for an improvised dance. You can play around with this and use it however you may wish. You may use shape as a way of developing numeracy skills further.

In a nutshell Cunningham changed the vertical torso in classical ballet to tilts curves and arches. He also invented Chance Improvisation technique. Cunningham is the gateway between Modern Dance and Post Modern Dance.

JOSE LIMON

Legacy 1930

Pioneer of Limon Technique - Known Today as Release



Limón enrolled in the Humphrey-Weidman school in 1929 and, just a year later, performed on Broadway.

During the course of his career, Limón created what is now known as the "Limón technique". According to the Limón Institute, the technique "emphasizes the natural rhythms of fall and recovery and the interplay between weight and weightlessness to provide dancers with an organic approach to movement that easily adapts to a range of choreographic styles."

Limon technique is the most popular technique studied in today's dance institutions.