

30<sup>th</sup> October 2010

Dear Secretary of the LUTSF

Thank you very much for the support you gave me in awarding me the scholarship. I have enclosed my report as requested. My project was to go to The Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance in New York City. I participated for 3 weeks between June 28<sup>th</sup> and July 18<sup>th</sup> 2010 and was also able to take classes again in September before I returned to the U.K. The aims of my visit as a professional development activity were completely achieved. I had an incredibly active, stimulating and rigorous experience and I feel like my confidence and passion for the subject has grown rapidly enabling me to return to practice in the U.K with a greater competence and energy.

The highlight of my trip was to meet Denise Vale who at times taught me both technique and repertory. I found her to be one of the most inspiring figures I have met in dance and her feedback and support for my training was of great value to me. I found in her not only a role model for a teaching but also a personification for the bridge between repertory and technique, performing and teaching, and more than that dance and life. It was a very positive experience from start to finish and I met some amazing dancers from around the world

I was able to share my experiences on my return to teaching Graham based technique and in a role that has grown since my visit. I also hope to teach at professional class as soon as the date can be negotiated. After my scholarship project I had the opportunity to teach a Laban based residency on a MFA programme for Jacksonville and White Oak and Graham technique provided me with a common ground with the students to look at notions of form, expression and personal journeys.

I have no suggestions to future awardees other than to keep a journal everyday which I found incredibly useful and to enjoy every minute of your adventure!

Many thanks again. I would not have been able to go without the scholarship and it was such a pleasure to feel my explorations were supported and my passions could be realized.

Yours sincerely

Laura Greenhalgh

## Project Report -Laura Greenhalgh

### The Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance Summer Intensive 2010

#### Introduction

My project was to participate in the Martha Graham Summer Intensive in New York. As a teacher of Graham based technique at Laban Conservatoire of Dance and Roehampton University, my practical aim was to deepen my understanding of the codified exercises. This entailed learning the details of the most advanced floor and standing exercises and as many of the extended versions and variations of core exercises as possible. Furthermore, in acknowledgment that the Graham technique is a means to support and develop the repertory rather than an end in itself, I sought to improve my knowledge of Graham's repertory work and its relationship to technique.

The Intensives at the Graham School take place twice a year during both winter and summer holidays and presented the opportunity to experience three weeks of advanced technique classes and a repertory project in school and companies historical and spiritual home, New York City.

The repertory project for this period was *Diversion of Angels* which was led by Denise Vale and my teachers for technique during this time were David Hochoy, Denise Vale and Janet Eilber (Artistic Director of the Graham Company). I also returned briefly to the school in the fall and during that time met Marni Thomas and Penny Frank. This variation of teachers gave an insight into the evolution of the technique as each teacher had worked with Martha during different decades. It was an incredibly intense experience which was everything I had hoped for, generating a renewed appreciation for the elegance and the logic of the technique and for the passion of those involved with keeping Martha Graham's work alive.

#### Before the Intensive

Firstly I must say; I never expected to become a Graham Teacher! I had the opportunity to teach the technique intermittently before being properly trained at Laban in 2008. Before then it was not a technique that I felt deeply confident in nor did I feel I had a great body for it, and not one I felt I understood or could remember. The whole notion of 'Graham' was intimidating. This all seems an irrelevancy now however I note it as it's important to recognize my journey and that the issues encountered will not be unique to me alone. I can still recall undergraduate encounters with Susan Sentler at Laban and the many other intensely passionate and eccentric guest teachers we were lucky to have. I recall moments of amazement at the feats that were expected to learn that seemed more challenging (cups up in deep stretches), virtuosic (bisons) and improbable (lower back fall?!) than the other demands of my training. This athleticism and love for physical intensity coupled with the stories teacher would tell, or images they would give that came from soul, is what made me feel that 'Graham' was an inspirational endeavor not to be ignored.



Me outside the school at 316 East 63rd Street NYC.

I had been curious as to how Graham technique is distinguished from Graham based technique and specifically I sought to understand in which instances a variation to the standard exercises is a worthy exploration and evolution versus when introducing this variation causes a dilution of technique. My concern for authenticity had become an issue for me in making choices in how to structure material within classes. The notion of authenticity can also create intimidation and I felt that the technique has such formidable potential for creating individual transformation that it is a shame when students are afraid of it and become inhibited. In relation to this I was keen to reflect on the individual styles of both the teachers and the students. I was also looking forward to taking rather than giving the classes and especially training in the fearless atmosphere of New York again. More generally my engagement with Graham technique helps me explore my own questions about myself as a person and as dancer and I find Graham an icon for her passion, her impact on those around her and also because her story is famous as much for her struggles as her successes. I felt I had many things to look forward too.

## **During the Intensive**

### Technique



Class on stage at Julia Richmond  
Education Complex 68<sup>th</sup> Street.

*'Roads form where people travel with new purpose in places that previously were unmarked'*  
(from the book Eat , Sleep, Sit by Kaoru Nonomura)

I began to see the Graham Technique in these terms; as a pathway through the landscape of the body that already existed within human nature but one that Graham signposted through her particular and deliberate repetition of routes into movement.

I anticipated that I would be asking a lot of questions but these questions seemed irrelevant. There was a sense that you couldn't just go in and grab a load of information and go home 'knowledgeable'. It was a guided experience and my task was to participate as fully, openly and energetically as possible. Nothing contradicted the knowledge I came with nor did I expect it to. However, one of my favourite dialogues linking to authenticity was a student asking Denise Vale about turns around the back; 'Is this right or wrong?' To which Denise replied, 'Don't ask if its right or wrong, ask is it life?!'. This encouraged me to not be fixated on a black and white sense of technical correctness but to find precision and accuracy through a full and lively exploration. In this way I made discoveries that I could then share to make the pathway of understanding a little clearer for my students. There were also concrete answers and explanations that I really valued, for example; during a common pathway in openings when you contract and shift the weight backwards with the legs extended and interlocked hands, the fists touch the legs. This is because it's the fastest way to achieve uniformity when a whole company is performing it simultaneously in Acts of Light. Contrastingly other explanations were less 'meaningful' for example the final head position in back leg extension was described as 'you turn the head for no reason at all'!

Classes were also full of anecdote and I enjoyed the moments when teachers would pause to recall a seminal piece of information (I did this and do you know what Martha said to me?.....). This is a class full of stories of experience that arose from dialogues not just with Graham but with the body and the work. I felt strongly that the teachers were there with a desire to share as much as to instruct.

## Repertory

*'Martha is dead in the shapes, the tilt is not a balance, it's a growth and when you treat it as a growth you get the beautiful tilt you have always had but you were thinking it was something else'*

*'if you just try to get the leg up without going through the sequence, if you go against the organic, the leg will say no and fall, you have to allow the passage of time to lift the leg'*

Denise Vale on the tilt.

We had 9 sessions to learn and rehearse sections from *Diversion of Angels* and I learnt parts of the role of 'White' which is one of three female roles and symbolizes mature love (the other roles being Red symbolizing passion and Yellow symbolizing youth).

It was a challenging role and a challenging work in particular and I was reminded how you can improve any of your physical capabilities if you are deliberate and purposeful. If you know you are going to have to show a room of people it hurries you to move away from I can't and into I can as soon as possible. This urgency underpins the technique in class, you are never sitting waiting for the count you move on the 'and' and in this way you are active rather than passive. Furthermore the feeling that life is short that goes hand in hand with this urgency encourages you to commit fully to each manifestation of the contraction, release and spiral which in turn makes 'sense' of the choreography making it work for you.

The directing and feedback for the project also gave me new approaches to teaching technique. When working in an ensemble context rather than a class context there is less sense of 'my space' and 'your space' and more sense of 'our space' or 'the performative space'. Similarly the focus on traveling goes beyond rhetoric and into necessity when you need to get out a wing and into a position within a limited amount of time or steps. In this way not only was a sense of relationship heightened within a repertory context but the attention to cueing both musically and spatially necessitated attention to choreographic details of space and dynamic. I have found in teaching technique that these elements that they can often become secondary to body action but it would be a mistake to let that be the case.



Denise Vale coaching a dance ensemble from *Diversion of Angels*.



Two Graham School students in a tilt.

*'if you don't do it now you will just have to come back and try again tomorrow and that just seems like a huge waste of time'.*

Denise Vale on my procrastination in fully taking on the demands of the choreography and getting my balance.

## After the Summer Intensive

*'Start where you are and use what you know'*

Since the Intensive I feel I have a lot that I can use, a deeper embodiment, new explanations, and a few new stories. I have a little more experience and with that more confidence. Everyone who enters into dialogue with Graham technique does so at a different stage acknowledging the reality of that stage and not wishing it to be other is much better place to enter class that to be intimidated by the culture, lineage or challenge of Graham. This approach allows you to be available to connect and share with the other people in the room, to be inspired and motivated by another's excellence and to be supportive to other's difficulties. It creates a sense of a strong core not just physically but within oneself but as a member of a class or company. Ultimately this benefits everyone, including within the work and the art form.

From watching the school students moving I have a greater sense of intuition for spotting the difference between a someone dancing beautifully versus someone dancing beautifully whilst using the technique. I have a greater sense of the parameters of what the technique could look like and a growing alertness to avoid the dead shapes in favour of the living!.

I also notice that I have a greater attention to the counting of an exercise where previously I focused on the pathways through an exercise, the initiations and actions. The experience of the exercise shifts depending on how the movement is phrased for instance when you have less time to achieve something the use of the initiation must be stronger and clearer. When you vary how the exercise is structured through time you utilize the technique differently, phrasing necessitates a greater dynamism in action. I am recognizing more and more how the entire series of exercises from floor to traveling are a densely ordered and researched program that bring greater and greater subtlety, strength, simplicity, economy and expression, the more accurately they are used and understood.

## Conclusion

*"I believe that we learn by practice.....it is the performance of a dedicated precise set of acts, physical or intellectual, from which comes shape of achievement, a sense of one's being, a satisfaction of spirit. One becomes in some area an athlete of God"* Martha Graham

I had an incredibly active and positive experience, I met some amazing dancers of all ages from around the world and I feel like my confidence and passion for the subject has grown rapidly enabling me to return to practice in the U.K with a greater competence and energy. My understanding of the set exercises of the technique has grown and I now see that they have evolved from decades of practice, questioning and curiosity. To get creative whilst teaching the exercises without recognizing the hard work that has already been done in honing the exercises is unwise. However that doesn't mean that I cannot use my imagination to structure the class in a way that makes the relatedness of the exercises more apparent enabling the student to connect their understanding of how each exercise informs the next and of how they ultimately they lead to the stage. Every encounter with the technique was deliberate, passionate and rigorous and now those are the terms I associate with my work in future. The project fully supported my belief that Graham training is very relevant, exciting and of this moment.



A Graham school student in an iconic 'White' moment.

Laura Greenhalgh