

TO: LUTSF
FROM: Wayne Parsons
DATE: October 2008

This summer I visited the Graham School to attend their Summer Intensive Programme. This consisted of a six week period of technique classes and repertory sessions. These events took place between the 23rd of June and the 1st August 2008. Having never studied Graham technique in the United Kingdom, I wanted to gain some exposure to the technique from its home in New York where many of the teachers and session leaders on the programme have either worked in the Martha Graham Dance Company (MGDC), or more importantly have worked with Graham herself. I felt this would give me the most authentic experience of the technique I could hope to gain.

REPORT

Having arrived in New York the day before the programme started, I managed to successfully navigate my way to the home of the Graham School. The school consists of two modest sized studios and an archive. Archetypal of the architecture of Manhattan, the school is situated in the basement of a larger building with only a little plaque as evidence of the school's existence. This seemingly meek first impression surprised me, considering it is the training centre of a technique developed by one of the most iconic figures in modern dance. As I headed down the stairs to take my first class, the pride of its staff, commitment of the students and its archive succeeded in reversing the first impression of the facade. With the registration taken care of, into the studio I went, and therein was where my exposure to Graham technique began.

As it transpired, I had actually walked into the class that was the level above the one I was intending to go to. The pace was fast, the exercises were almost verbalized instead of demonstrated, and, I have to confess, I was slightly lost. After a brief chat with teacher I decided to move down to the lower group. Here the technique was broken down in order to elucidate the stylistic and dynamic complexity of the technique. I did spend a few weeks in this group and successfully established a strong sense of the fundamentals and idiosyncrasies of the technique before moving back up to the more advanced group. As someone who has been working with my body for a number of years, I found the pace of the lower group a little frustrating at times. The need for such an introduction (despite my previous experience) was made clear to me after discussions with both teachers and ex dancers from the MGDC. It seemed a mastery of Graham technique can only be achieved by first gaining a deep understanding of the fundamentals of the technique and coupling this with a wealth of knowledge that can only be achieved by exposure to great and influential artist, poets, writers, thinkers and the like.

A chat with Armgard von Bardeleben, a dancer who was working with Graham towards the end of her life and career, provided me with a useful first hand account of what Graham expected from one of her company dancers. Bardeleben recalled accounts of how Martha had instructed her to research for particular roles by exposing herself to artists she referenced, and this would in turn, infiltrate Bardeleben's depiction of Graham's choreography. Bardeleben herself says she can tell when a dancer is familiar with the likes of Shakespeare, Picasso, T.S Elliot, Tennyson and Freud, claiming she can see it enhancing the movement. This inevitably led our discussions on to the emotive nature of Graham's works.

Engaging in these conversations with Bardeleben seemed to expose a divide within the spectrum of Graham technique. This divide is on one side emotive, spiritual, personal and on the other, purely physical. It seemed to me that few teachers were able to combine the two elements seamlessly. The physical execution of the technique seemed to be most teachers' first point of call and the cathartic nature of the technique was expected to develop as time went on. It was sometimes hard to see the objective of the teaching, past seemingly banal things like the angle and the hands or direction of the focus. The pool of teachers that were teaching on the course were nearly all ex-members of the MGDC, so one would assume, at some point had a mastery of the technique, but that had long since left them. Their time spent in the MGDC seemed to me to be the only credential required to become a teacher on the course rather than an adequate ability as a teacher/facilitator. The few that managed to fuse the two sides of the technique were, for me, the most inspiring teachers. Two of these are current company members Blakely White-McGuire and Tadej Brdnik, both of whom had an unquestionable embodiment of the technique as well as an ability to be expressive. Both dancers were also very adept teachers and so were able to impart their knowledge. It was a joy to learn under these two dancers. They seemed most at home with a level of theatricality that seemed to me slightly excessive. I was required to remove any preconceptions of what I may look like trying this. To be truthful, it was quite nice to play in that extreme

Through my practice of the technique and getting to perform some of Graham's dances such as 'Diversion of Angels' (Martha Graham, 1948) it became apparent to me that the torso, dynamic quality and facial expression seemed to me to be the focus of the expressive nature of Graham's work. Playing in the extremes, the technique and Graham's many dances can have the dancer expressing euphoria at one point and anguish at the next. This being said, Martha Graham's movement choices are sometimes trite and obvious which helps facilitate this expression easily, especially when you compare them to some of her more modern counterparts. It was also hard to distinguish what part Graham's craft played in this expression and what role the present day American dancer has. Saying this, the technique was born, and remains at heart in America. My guess would be both are interwoven.

During a lecture, Pearl Lang, who had worked under Graham for many years, expressed her distress at both how the technique was taught and how the company currently performs Graham's work. This intrigued me as it seemed to hint that the practice of the technique had changed over the years, despite valiant efforts of preserving its authenticity. I had found that there were many nuances in the teaching of the technique depending on what period the individual teaching had worked with Graham. These nuances were disputed endlessly and there seemed to be some animosity between the ex-dancers over their varying approaches. I think Pearl Lang was touching on this subject. Lang made it clear that Graham would be constantly changing and making additions to the choreography, the technique developed simultaneously to include these additions. It seems Graham's practice was always in a state of flux. Can this still happen now Graham is no longer around? Or does the development freeze? When I asked Lang how she sees the technique moving forward she retorted 'its not up to me, its up to the future dancers and teachers' highlighting that no matter what has been before, Martha Graham's work is still at the peril of the present. One thing was on my mind the whole time, and that was: how can Graham's influential practice develop with the times to become a technique that is useful and relevant today? I didn't find 'the' answer

but it does seem to me that those closest to the technique are adamant to preserve its purity and authenticity, which is commendable, but does it have a time limit before people have seen and heard it all? It seems to me that Graham technique is an ideal teaching practice for students desiring to be in the Martha Graham Dance Company (and for many of the students on the course this was their aim) but not so good a generic training practice that can be adopted by varying institutions and practitioners.

I did see a few US-based dance companies perform whilst I was in New York. I visited theatres including The Joyce, Ailey Citigroup Theatre, the Metropolitan Opera House and the Dance Theatre Workshop. I saw companies including Carolyn Dorfman Dance Company, American Ballet Theatre, Thomas Ortiz Dance and Hubbard Street Dance. Seeing these shows provided me with diversity and a modern counterpoint to Graham's work. At their worst these shows were far from special. Falling back on large stimuli like the holocaust, which in my opinion is too harrowing a subject for dance, to disguise the far from intuitive movement material and underdeveloped use of set and props. At their best it was a joy to watch the talented American Ballet Theatre dancers charm the audience with their "Giselle" and to watch Hubbard Street Dance deliver with a programme that felt very European with three works including 'Passomezzo' by Ohad Naharin.

Unfortunately my trip did not include a visit to The Kitchen or to the Movement Research Studio. At the time of my application I was unaware of their summer programmes as they had not yet been published. As it turns out both places had a sparse and very non-dance summer. The discussion talks I was hoping to attend at the Movement Research Studios did not happen during the period I was in New York. I managed to get myself into company class with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company which was a fabulous experience. It was tremendously difficult, despite my efforts, to get in to do class with any other dance company based in New York. I visited The Metropolitan Museum, The Guggenheim Museum and saw many free performances in many parks across New York. These include a site specific dance performance with a JCB, another involving the Chinese Pole, and another in which the performer was frolicking with the cement dolphins set in the park. I also saw The New York Philharmonic Orchestra, Gospel Music and Latino rock and pop in Central Park. Another favorite of mine was to see Shakespeare realized, firstly with broad American accents, and secondly in a park at the edge of Manhattan looking over the water. Lastly, how could anyone go to New York and not see stand-up comedy? I visited the Upright Citizens Theatre to see an evening of improvised comedy. All these varied experiences really did complete the trip for me. As stated in my application, I was at a point in my career when I needed inspiration from a source yet unknown to me, and I can say I left New York feeling as though I had seen and experienced a lot of things that were just unachievable had I stayed in England this summer.

In conclusion, my time in New York was enriching and invaluable to me as an artist. As a dancer, I was exposed to the breadth of Graham technique through my experiences at the Summer Intensive Programme. Although this exposure raised as many questions as it did answer, I still think it was really important to be engaged in discussions about Graham's work and gain a deeper understanding about her approach to movement. It was also useful to see how the integrity of the technique is being preserved and get close to an answer as to why the technique is not practiced much in the United Kingdom. As a choreographer, I was lucky enough to be engaged in conversations about work currently being made and performed in America from Martha Graham's ballets through to site-specific dance and everything in between. As a teacher, I was exposed to an approach to instructing that would not be my first port of call. The catharsis involved in the technique is something that I feel is vastly lacking in British dance today and certainly something that is not a focus in the classes I teach. I am not sure I will be able to teach the technique as six weeks was only long enough to gain exposure rather than master the technique. I am sure of one thing, the lessons I learnt there will enrich every aspect of my career.

Lastly, thank you.

Wayne Parsons