

Hidden Gem Revealed

By Michael J. Solender

College of Arts + Architecture presents
Martha Graham's lost 1935 work



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Kim Jones' smile lit up the foyer of UNC Charlotte's Robinson Hall as she spoke of her admiration for legendary dancer/choreographer Martha Graham. On this bright November day, Jones, assistant professor of dance at UNC Charlotte, was almost two years into one of the most challenging and exciting projects of her career.

With the support of a faculty research grant from the University and in partnership with the Martha Graham Center of Contemporary Dance, Jones was leading a small team of professionals in the reconstruction of a lost Graham work from 1935, "Imperial Gesture."

"The process of bringing out the beauty in her work is exciting," said Jones, who performed as a dancer with the Martha Graham Company from 2002 to 2006 and remains with the troupe as a "régisseur," a choreographer who restages productions. "Graham was such a towering figure that her work garners significant attention. This particular piece has not been performed since 1938 and was only ever performed by Graham herself. I feel an enormous responsibility to her legacy in the reanimation."

Jones and a team of designers recreated the choreography, lighting, musical score, and costume for the six-minute work, which features a lone dancer in a dramatic, flowing black and auburn gown that becomes her "partner."

The rediscovered work premiered Jan. 17 and 18 at Charlotte's Knight Theater as part of a performance by the Martha Graham Dance Company. Also, the program featured the Graham-choreographed piece, "Panorama," danced by UNC students and professionals from across the Charlotte community, whom Jones trained and led.

When Jones was preparing "Imperial Gesture," it received a great deal of enthusiasm from the dance community in New York City, where she routinely visited to conduct research and to work with Blakeley White-McGuire, the Graham Company member who danced the piece. The historic performances, part of the company's first program in Charlotte in more than 30 years, were presented by the UNC Charlotte College of Arts + Architecture, with support from Wells Fargo bank. "Danced powerfully" is how The Charlotte Observer described White-McGuire's performance.

DANCER OF THE CENTURY

Graham, who died in 1991, exerted unparalleled influence on contemporary American dance. She created more than 180 dance compositions, was the first dancer to perform at the White House and received the Local One Centennial Award for dance by her theater colleagues, awarded only once every 100 years. She also earned the United States' highest civilian honor, The

Medal of Freedom, and was named "Dancer of the Century" by TIME Magazine in 1998.

Sharp, angular and direct movements characterize Graham's groundbreaking language in choreography. Her influence is felt well beyond the arena of dance, as she collaborated with visual artists such as Isamu Noguchi, composers such as Aaron Copland and fashion designers including Halston, Donna Karen and Calvin Klein.

Jones had restaged Graham works before, including "Steps in the Street" and "Secular Games" for the Millennium Dance 2000 in London. In the four months leading up the

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January performances, she relentlessly trained the 40 dancers who performed "Panorama," a work that Graham choreographed in 1935 for the students of Bennington College. The group's excellent performances, praised for their "precision and verve" by the Observer, were a testament both to the dancers' hard work and to Jones's skills as a régisseur.

CHOREOGRAPHIC ARCHEOLOGY

With "Imperial Gesture," however, Jones had never had so little to work with. There are no known film recordings of the piece or other detailed documentation, such as choreographer's notes, that could serve as guides in recreation. The musical score, by Lehman Engel, was lost.

But Jones' dogged sleuthing and her collaboration with University colleagues and New York artists paid off handsomely. "Imperial Gesture" has been welcomed into the Graham Company repertory, receiving its New York City premiere at the Joyce Theater in February.

Janmarie Higgins, assistant professor of dramaturgy in UNC Charlotte's Department of Theater, helped Jones in her choreographic archeology. The two analyzed written reviews of Graham's performance of "Imperial Gesture." Several newspaper notices and accounts of the day, available through archival records at the Library of Congress, provided Higgins and Jones with interpretations of the movement, descriptions of the costume and specifics about the length



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of the performance. More than 30 previously unpublished photographs by noted dance photographer Barbara Morgan were also obtained, providing information about gestures and movement, as well as additional costume detail.

"One of our best sources of information came from a pair of dancers who performed with Graham," recalled Jones. Ethel Winter, who died in March 2012, and Linda Hodes both danced with Graham in the 1940s. Jones was fortunate to speak with both dancers in 2010 as she embarked upon the project, gaining valuable insight regarding Graham's approach to this particular piece.

Jones was then able to hire costume designer Karen Young and lighting designer Judith Daitsman, both Graham Company veterans. Pianist and composer Patrick Daugherty, who had also worked for years with the company, composed a new score in the spirit of Engel.

"Imperial Gesture" suggests the collapse of monarchy. The overly proud soloist, with hair aloft in a crown-like headdress, parades theatrically around the stage, whipping her voluminous skirt like a toreador's cape. In the end, she drowns underneath a wave of her own fabric.

"I learned so much more about Graham during this process than I ever knew," said Jones. "She was complex, in a good way, and used dance as a vehicle to touch upon humanity. She was curious and fierce in pushing boundaries, not simply settling."

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Michael Solender writes widely on Charlotte area arts and culture.