

After 70 years in operation

# Financial problems close the Martha Graham dance center in New York City

Andrea Peters  
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The board of directors for the Martha Graham Center for Contemporary Dance in New York City announced on May 25 that both the school and the company that bear the artist's name would cease operations immediately due to financial difficulties. Facing a \$500,000 deficit, the board has stated that the dance center would need \$325,000 at once in order to resume functioning. Beginning her work in the 1920s, Graham (1895-1991) was one of the founding figures of modern dance in the United States.

The closure of the school and the company comes in the midst of a dispute between the board of directors and the director of the Martha Graham Trust, Ron Protas, who owns the rights to Graham's choreography. Groomed by Graham herself to oversee the dance center after her death, Protas was recently removed from his position as artistic director by a 7-5 vote of the board. In response to the latter's decision to close the dance center, Protas revoked permission for the company to perform Graham's work.

Several commentators have pointed to the divisiveness within the board of directors as a source of the dance center's financial problems. The artistic direction of the company, a question that has continuously arisen since Graham's death, is also at issue. The *New York Times* article reporting the closure noted, "Sources in the dance company have said that some government and private donors said they would withhold promised grants until Mr. Protas quit as the company's artistic director, in effect dictating artistic policy."

The internal politics of the Graham center may be an important source of the institution's immediate financial troubles. However, the inability of the center to support itself, due to a dearth of public funding and the unwillingness of private donors to contribute sufficient funds, is symptomatic of the financial hardships faced by many of even the most prominent art institutions. While the ultimate fate of the Graham dance company and the school is still unknown—board members continue to express hope that they will be able to find funding—the closing of what is arguably one of the most important modern dance institutions is an indictment of the state of funding for the arts as a whole.

The Graham school and company have been suffering from financial difficulties for some time now. In the last two decades of Graham's life, the artist was confronted with a slowing stream of private and public funding. However, Graham's personal connections to philanthropists helped ease the situation. However, with the death of Graham in 1991, the company faced an increasingly problematic financial situation. Francis Mason, acting director of the dance center's board, stated recently, "Since 1989, we have slowly been going

broke."

In order to stay afloat, the dance center took out a \$1 million mortgage on the building on Manhattan's Upper East Side where it was housed. The death of Doris Duke, one of the company's major benefactors, and the entanglement of her estate in legal proceedings meant that the Graham center was unable to gather the financial support it needed and quickly fell behind on its \$6,000 a month payments. As the implications of the dance center's financial situation became clear, Delores Barr Weaver, a member of the Graham board and co-owner of the Jacksonville Jaguars football team, offered US Trust, the lending institution, up to \$1 million to forgive the loan. The bank refused and at the beginning of last year the board voted to sell the building. With the sale money, the dance center paid off the mortgage, a portion of the \$2.4 million in accumulated debt and had \$400,000 left over to establish an endowment.

In 1999 the Graham dance company was able to hold its first New York season since 1995. However, the recently completed American tour put the company \$300,000 in debt, on top of \$70,000 arrears in payroll expenses. In addition, the center was unable to raise the money needed to build studios and office space in the new building to which they planned to move from their temporary home. Ron Protas, who abstained from the board's vote to close the institution, stated at the time of the announcement: "They haven't raised the money to go on." In discussing the difficulties facing the dance company, Francis Mason, acting director of the board, said, "the company should earn \$3.6 million annually through performing and raise an additional \$2.4 million. We've been limping along on \$2 million or less."

The company has been forced to cancel performances scheduled at the American Dance Festival, the premiere summer dance festival in the United States, as well as shows which were to be a part of a tribute honoring the legacy of Martha Graham and Paul Taylor at the Kennedy Center in Washington DC. It is unknown whether or not the company will be able to perform this November at the Joyce Theater in New York City. The dancers in the company were informed the day of the public announcement that the company was closing, leaving all of them without work. Students at the school, where about 500 dancers from across the world train, issued an appeal to the public for emergency funding. Teachers and accompanists, none of whom have been paid for a month, offered to volunteer their time to keep classes going.

Martha Graham's contributions to dance and modern art as a whole are unrivaled. While perhaps less well known to the general public because of her chosen field, Graham's choreography places her among

the most important artistic figures of the twentieth century. Founded by Graham in 1926 and 1929 respectively, the school and the company played an essential role in the development of modern dance as an art form distinct from ballet, one equipped with its own technique and physical language. Graham's movement theories, rooted in an exploration of the dynamics created by the opposing forces of contraction and release, opened up entirely new ways of moving the body, of understanding the source of movement within the human form and of capturing human experience and emotions as motion.

The intense emotionality and physical poignancy that define her movement style served as the basis for her groundbreaking works, including, to name a few, her cycle of Greek dances, her exploration of ceremonial ritual in *Primitive Mysteries* and her tribute to the American frontier in *Appalachian Spring*. The Martha Graham Dance Company was the training ground for many of the most important dancers and choreographers of this period, including such figures as Paul Taylor, Merce Cunningham, Erick Hawkins, Anna Sokolow and Pearl Lang.

The highly sophisticated and revolutionary dance idiom developed by Graham informed the evolution of many of the different styles current in modern dance today. While Graham's methods of movement structures are taught at many schools and institutions, the Martha Graham Center for Contemporary Dance is the official repository of the legacy of training, skill and talent represented in the dance company and captured in the teaching at the school. This institution imparts an artistic heritage and a unique set of physical skills onto a new generation of dancers, and in so doing, allows for Graham's contributions as an artist to continue after her death.

The media coverage on the closing of the Graham center was quick to note the importance of such a loss. But there has been little commentary on how or why an institution of such stature was allowed to fail as a result of financial difficulties. The past several years have witnessed a gutting of public funding for the arts, with the largest source of federal support, the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities, having had their already inadequate levels of funding frozen for several years now. The inadequacy of public funding and the difficulties faced by artists in trying to attain such support have produced an increasing dependence on the benevolence of private institutions.

The subtext of much of the commentary on the closure of the Graham school and company is that the institution itself, as a result largely of the wreckage created by its internal politics, is to blame for not being able to garner enough private support. While there is no doubt that problems within the center may have contributed to its inability to attract donors, there are some larger issues at work.

After Graham's death in 1991, donors may have questioned the institution's continued creative viability. This factor, combined with the universal funding problem faced by arts institutions, may also be further compounded by the very nature of Graham's work. A revolutionary in dance, Graham's aesthetic is complex and demanding. In a climate in which an increasing number of arts organizations are scrambling for a stagnating or shrinking number of dollars, it may have been all too easy for donors to see the challenges posed by Graham's work as one more reason not to contribute to the center.

While highly technical training is an essential component of Graham technique, the style of movement has little of the flashiness and subservience to mere displays of technical prowess that has come to dominate in segments of dance today. Graham's movement—visceral, filled with edges and explosive drama—might, to a viewer with little

exposure to dance, feel like an assault on the senses. The gentleness and formal elegance of ballet and certain styles of modern dance, which often makes these styles so immediately accessible and comfortable to an audience, is largely absent in Graham's work.

The artist's choreography, covering a wide range of themes, deals with some of the most universal, but at the same time complex, dark and socially critical issues. Graham did not believe that dance should represent, but that the motion itself should embody the subject of exploration. Her work forces the viewer to think, and above all to feel, with great intensity. One could even say that the act of watching a piece of Graham's choreography could be physically exhausting for the onlooker. These qualities of the Graham aesthetic set her apart as an artist, and make her work unpalatable to many.

There has been little of a public outcry at the closing of the school and the company. Artists and art institutions have failed to make any concerted effort to save the Graham center. Other than a few passing comments, the issue of the utter inadequacy of public funding for the arts has not even been raised.

At the same time that the pockets of the wealthiest layers in society, in particular a segment of the well-to-do in New York City, are being lined with the wealth accrued from the stock market boom, money for art institutions is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain. The slashing of public arts funding, as well as the virtual elimination of art and music from many public schools, speaks volumes about present-day American society, and the political forces—Republican and Democratic—who have presided over the process.

While both major political parties trumpet the virtues of private charity, the reliance of art institutions on the checkbooks of corporations and wealthy donors for their survival has meant that we risk permanently losing one of the most important art institutions of our time. There is both a sad irony and an important lesson in the fact that only a few months before Martha Graham's artistic contributions were to be honored in Washington DC, the company and school dedicated to carrying forward Graham's work are forced to close their doors.



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