

The Journal for Ancient Performance



*Didaskalia is an electronic journal dedicated to the study of all aspects of ancient Greek and Roman performance*

# DIDASKALIA

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## About Didaskalia

Didaskalia (διδασκαλία) is the term used since ancient times to describe the work a playwright did to teach his chorus and actors the play. The official records of the dramatic festivals in Athens were the διδασκαλῖαι. *Didaskalia* now furthers the scholarship of the ancient performance.

*Didaskalia* is an English-language, online publication about the performance of Greek and Roman drama, dance, and music. We publish double blind, peer-reviewed scholarship on performance as well as reviews of the professional activity of artists and scholars who work on ancient drama.

We welcome submissions on any aspect of the field, and we provide a uniquely friendly venue for publishing sound, image, and video evidence. If you would like your work to be reviewed, please write to [editor@didaskalia.net](mailto:editor@didaskalia.net) at least three weeks in advance of the performance date. We also seek interviews with practitioners and opinion pieces. For submission guidelines, go to [didaskalia.net](http://didaskalia.net).

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## Review of Martha Graham Dance Company – Graham’s Greeks

Boston University – October 22, 2019

by Nina Papathanasopoulou

On October 22, 2019, Janet Eilber, Artistic Director of the Martha Graham Dance Company (MGDC), along with two of the company’s finest dancers, Charlotte Landreau and Lloyd Mayor, gave a presentation on Graham’s Greek-inspired dances at the Dance Theater at Boston University. Their goal was to celebrate Graham and her relationship to the ancient Greeks by discussing and presenting excerpts from Graham’s Greek-inspired works.

The evening lasted about two hours, including a 30-minute Q&A at the end. Eilber gave a presentation on Graham’s relationship with the ancient Greeks, discussing important aspects of Graham’s life, technique, and vision, and showing multiple videos illustrating her points. At key moments in the presentation, the two dancers gave live performances. First, after Eilber discussed Graham’s reimagining of Ismene, Landreau gave a 5-minute performance of one of Ismene’s solos from Graham’s work, *Night Journey*. For the evening’s conclusion, Landreau and Mayor danced *Errand into the Maze* in its entirety, Graham’s 14-minute dance inspired by the myth of Theseus and his encounter with the Minotaur. Even though short, the live performances were the focus of the evening. The background given by Eilber made the audience more observant, enabling them to look for features of Graham’s technique, understand the symbolism of key movements, and pay attention to the dancers’ facial expressions, an integral part of Graham’s dances.

As the audience entered the theater, an excerpt from a 1960 video of Martha Graham dancing the role of Ismene played repeatedly on the stage backdrop. Stephen Scully, Chair of the Department of Classical Studies at Boston University, warmly introduced Janet Eilber and welcomed the audience, especially the students, to whom the event was primarily directed. Eilber, who has served as the MGDC artistic director since 2005, opened her talk with a short introduction to Graham’s life, highlighting Graham’s fascination with Greek myth and her interest in creating dances for what she considered archetypal figures. Graham used Greek heroes and their stories to explore human relationships, psychology, and emotions. In the mid-1940s, at the height of her powers, Graham turned her focus to Greek mythology and invented a new physicality of movement that could speak to her times and reveal the essence of humans. She manipulated the concepts of space and time onstage, and she became particularly interested in the portrayal and relationships of women. During that time she created a number of Greek-inspired works: *Cave of the Heart* (1946), based on the myth of Medea, *Night Journey* (1947), based on the myth of Oedipus, *Errand into the Maze* (1947), inspired by Theseus and his encounter with the Minotaur, and, a few years later, *Clytemnestra* (1958).



Figure 1. Martha Graham in *Night Journey*. Choreography by Martha Graham. Photograph by Angus McBean. Courtesy of Martha Graham Resources.

Eilber first discussed *Night Journey*, Graham's 30-minute work reimagining the Oedipus and Jocasta myth (Fig. 1). Graham told their story through the eyes of Jocasta, starting from the moment when Jocasta recognizes the painful truth and decides to hang herself. She holds the rope and is ready to put it over her head. The blind prophet Tiresias appears, and reminds her of the past and the dire truth she must endure. Jocasta is thus compelled to relive key moments of joy as well as pain before sealing it all in death. As Eilber's talk made evident, Graham's choreography for Jocasta captures some of the extraordinary emotions that a woman might feel on realizing that the baby she had left to die was actually alive, a grown-up man now sharing her bed, and that the husband whom she had come to love and rely on was her own flesh and blood, her lost baby from long ago.

After this short description, Eilber called Charlotte Landreau to dance Jocasta's main solo from *Night Journey*. The dancing would do the speaking from this point on. Landreau danced the role with poise, exactness, and fervor. The solo started with Jocasta lying on the floor. To the accompaniment of William Schuman's music, she reached up and stretched her body. She extended her arm and leg in despair, perhaps calling for help, longing to find answers for the tragedy that had befallen her. She looked far away and cried for help. She raised herself up and performed the most characteristic movement of the dance, a gradual lift of her right leg, slightly bent until it reached her mouth. The movement shows despair, a woman's attempt to scream not just with words but with her whole body; it also shows vulnerability, as the lifting of her leg opens up her pelvic area and the most vulnerable part of a woman's body, her womb. The vulnerability of the position made her want to cover herself, and she wrapped her arms around her womb as if to protect it. She then ran from one side to the other, like someone trapped and eager to flee, frantically turning and trying different means of escape. Her costume, a dark dress with a green cape attached to it, marked her royalty and queenliness. Schuman's music, heavily dominated by the sometimes-shrill sound of strings, added to the discomfort, despair, and eeriness of this apocalyptic moment. Landreau portrayed Jocasta's

double role with seriousness and grace: on the one hand she was the young, fertile, and attractive wife, protecting her womb and women's capacity to procreate; on the other, she danced like a compassionate mother, striving to protect her child but becoming desperate when realizing that certain things were out of her control. At the end of the solo, the audience could hear Landreau breathing, a reminder of the stamina, strength, and emotional commitment the role requires.

As a conclusion to her discussion on *Night Journey*, Eilber showed a video excerpt from a past performance. *Night Journey* includes a chorus of seven women called "The Daughters of the Night." They show their reaction to Jocasta's and Oedipus' incest, performing what Eilber called a scratch dance, with movements of tearing their hair and scratching their bodies, horrified by what they have learnt and seen. By showing the dance of the chorus, Eilber helped the audience appreciate in yet another way Graham's reimagining of Jocasta. Jocasta's dance evoked pity for a woman who is vulnerable and desperate, while the chorus' movement evoked fear, casting Jocasta not only as pitiable, but also as disturbing and repulsive.

Eilber proceeded with a discussion of *Cave of the Heart*, Graham's work centered on the figure of Medea. In this work, Eilber pointed out, Graham revealed the complexity of Medea's thoughts and emotions by greatly differentiating her movements from those of Jason and the princess. Though the latter two are two-dimensional – Jason looks like a cardboard cut-out, flat, and with no layering of personality, while the princess resembles a paper doll, lifting her legs with ease and airiness, lightly jumping from side to side – Medea's movement shows depth, strength, determination, and intensity, with vibrations that permeate her whole body. Her dance is full of the contractions and releases that are fundamental to the Graham technique, as Eilber explained. They begin from the torso and the pelvis, they show the coiling in and expansion of energy, and they articulate the expression of emotion. To illustrate these points, Eilber showed video clips from Jason's, the princess's, and Medea's dancing.

In 1958, Graham created *Clytemnestra*, a work lasting almost three hours. The dancing begins in the Underworld, where Clytemnestra disagrees with Hades and defends herself for killing her husband, Agamemnon. In support of her actions, she recounts a series of events from the Trojan War: Paris' seduction of Helen, Iphigenia's sacrifice, and the sack of Troy, all of which are related to her story and serve as constant reminders of the importance of power in human lives. The dance continues by depicting Agamemnon's return and his murder at the hands of Clytemnestra, Clytemnestra's dreams and nightmares after the event, and the trial of Apollo and the Furies in the final act. Eilber narrated how Graham, dissatisfied with the dance's ending, changed it more than five times and left it unresolved, with the trial scene fading into darkness. She couldn't stand ending with Clytemnestra defeated, Eilber said, a comment that elicited laughter from the audience at BU. To end her presentation on *Clytemnestra*, Eilber showed a video excerpt, the so-called "knife dance," in which Clytemnestra asserts her royal power and cunning by seducing a muscular and arrogant Aegisthus and then taking his knife.

The evening's climax was a 14-minute performance of *Errand* in its entirety, a deconstructed version of Graham's original *Errand into the Maze*. The choreography is mostly faithful to Graham's original, but *Errand* is performed without the set and the original costumes. The dance was inspired by the myth of Theseus, his encounter with the Minotaur, and Ariadne's role in helping Theseus escape the windings of the labyrinth. In his *Life of Theseus*, the ancient Greek writer Plutarch describes the youths' encounter with the Minotaur as follows:

And the most dramatic version of the story declares that these young men and women, on being brought to Crete, were destroyed by the Minotaur in the Labyrinth, or else wandered about at their own will and, being unable to find an exit, perished there; and that the Minotaur, as Euripides says, was

A mingled form and hybrid birth of  
monstrous shape, and that two different  
natures, man and bull, were joined in  
him.<sup>1</sup>

Plutarch, *Life of Theseus* 15.<sup>2</sup>

In Graham's version, however, it is not Theseus but the woman Ariadne who confronts the Minotaur and tries to escape the labyrinth. As many critics have suggested, Graham's labyrinth may represent the complexities of a woman's mind and psyche, and the dance a deep psychological exploration of her soul.<sup>3</sup>

Charlotte Landreau and Lloyd Mayor danced the roles of Ariadne and the Minotaur with virtuosic technique, remarkable strength, and fervent passion. The dance started with Ariadne lit backstage center, a rope coiled around her and leading upstage. To the eerie and ominously percussive music of Gian Carlo Menotti, she began moving her torso, attracting the audience's gaze to her center and the feelings hidden within. Her movements were small at first, her arms folded over her abdomen. Though the rope was laid on the floor in the shape of a maze, Landreau's facial expressions suggested it was tied around her. Trapped in a limited space, she tried to move, but found herself restricted. Then somehow she managed to set herself free; she opened up, looked around, and started turning with small bourrée steps executed right below her pelvis. Having gained more confidence, she began walking along the rope, "wandering at her own will," as Plutarch said of the trapped youths, trying to find the way out, stepping on one side of the rope or the other, but never touching it (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Charlotte Landreau in *Errand into the Maze*. Photo by Sahana Sreepakash.



Landreau took every step with care, precision, and certainty. And as she walked forward, her steps became bigger, displaying assertiveness and a restrained joy. But just as she reached the front, having seemingly completed the course, she was drawn backwards. With increasing fear, she returned to her first position upstage. Her movement became more expansive and more intense, including many of Graham's renowned leg kicks and split falls, and she seemed to gather strength in finding the way out.

At that moment, however, the Minotaur made his first entrance, approaching her slowly with his leg *développé* forward in a stark and aggressive manner (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. Charlotte Landreau and Lloyd Mayor in *Errand into the Maze*.  
Photo by Sahana Sreeprakash.

He moved around her in a circle and settled behind her back. Like wrestlers, the two engaged in a physical struggle, the Minotaur using his strength to push her down and overcome her. She tried to leave, but he pulled her towards him; she sat on him, but he swayed her from side to side; she tried to resist, but he carried her on his thighs, making a circle around himself (Fig. 4). Finding the right moment, she was able to push back and make him fall to the ground. Limited in his movement, he rolled on the ground and slowly exited the stage.



Figure 4. Charlotte Landreau and Lloyd Mayor in *Errand into the Maze*.  
Photo by Sahana Sreeprakash.

The struggle between Theseus and the Minotaur was a popular subject for 19th century neo-classical sculpture. Barye's bronze statue, for instance, depicts their intertwined human bodies at the moment when Theseus defeats the animality of the Minotaur (Fig. 5). The sculpture reveals the close encounter of the two, the intensity of the moment and the human need for power and control. In Graham's version, this iconography and intensity of the struggle is preserved. But the roles are reversed, with the woman mounting the Minotaur like an animal, underlining perhaps the primitive instincts of humans when faced with fear, anguish, and despair.



Figure 5. Antoine-Louis Barye, *Theseus Slaying the Minotaur*, c. 1840. Photo credit: Allen Phillips/Wadsworth Atheneum. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art. Hartford, CT.

In this deconstructed version, the Minotaur wore not the heavy bull's horns and bit of *Errand into the Maze*, but a transparent nylon mask over his face and a bone over his shoulders. With his face hardly visible and his upper-body movement limited by the bone, he did seem monstrous and inhuman, bringing fear and anxiety to the woman in white. The Minotaur has been interpreted as the Creature of Fear, a representation of the fear that we all have inside us and struggle with. Mayor did indeed inspire fear. He danced with an aggressive passion that was perfect for the role. He loomed over Ariadne, about to attack, like the human conscience that never lets one go. Landreau's facial expressions made him seem even more dangerous and threatening (Fig 6).



Figure 6. Charlotte Landreau and Lloyd Mayor in *Errand into the Maze*.  
Photo by Sahana Sreepakash.

With the Minotaur momentarily gone, Landreau performed a solo demonstrating Ariadne's growing confidence: leg extensions, knee vibrations, stretches, and long movements dominated her dance. She then ventured to escape again, walking through the rope one more time, now picking it up and trying to gather it all in her hands by pulling it (Fig. 7).



Figure 7. Charlotte Landreau in *Errand into the Maze*. Photo by Sahana Sreepakash.

And though freedom was near, the Minotaur reappeared to send her into yet another struggle, trying to torture and manipulate her mind. Downstage left, Landreau maintained control. The Minotaur danced in the diagonal, moving away from her and then again coming towards her. But he maintained his space and moved back and forth without being urged one way or the other. One interpretation of the movement would be that his presence was not real but the product and reflection of the woman's mind. When she was afraid, hesitant, and unsure of herself, her fear appeared, in the shape of the Minotaur; but when she felt strong, confident, and protected, the Minotaur faded away. Does he live in her mind? Is it her emotions that control him?

The section that followed is probably the most powerful in the dance. The Minotaur starts jumping straight up and down, facing the audience, as Ariadne lies on the floor before him. He starts rolling her body to the side and tries to step on her, but she rolls her body over, avoiding each of his steps (Fig. 8). There is a symmetry in their movement, a perfect back and forth. He jumps from one foot to the other, leaning forward and threatening to harm her. At one point, he holds her arms, lifts her in the air and spins her around as a parent would play with a child. The moment is aggressive and suggests she has been caught forever. But Landreau also made it appear liberating, projecting joy in being part of this encounter.



Figure 8. Charlotte Landreau and Lloyd Mayor in *Errand into the Maze*.  
Photo by Sahana Sreepakash.

The Minotaur exited and Ariadne performed a brief dance of relief: light jumping, gentle turns, uplifting steps. Then she paused, and her whole body started to vibrate. Her movements were small again, with petite bourrées that she executed with detail and grace. Fear crept into her body; fear instilled anger; and anger provoked violence. She turned her fists against herself, hitting her legs, unsure of her direction and purpose. In that most intense moment, as she looked frantically right and left, the Minotaur appeared again. This time he came out jumping directly behind her. In the face of his force and violence, the woman displayed a certain calmness in this encounter, seeming less affected by his movement, standing relatively still, breathing deeply, avoiding looking him in the eye, and gaining the strength that she would need for her final encounter with him. In that final struggle, she jumped on his thighs, swaying from side to side, and managed to overpower him (Fig. 9). He fell to the ground defeated. A moment of rest followed, the woman visibly realizing that she was free; she was no longer trapped, she was safe and with strength inside her.



Figure 9. Charlotte Landreau and Lloyd Mayor in *Errand into the Maze*.  
Photo by Sahana Sreepakash.

The costumes, simplified versions of Graham's originals, reinforced the contrast between the two figures. A long white dress marked Ariadne's innocence, but also her difficulty in escaping the labyrinth and her initial ignorance of how to do so. By contrast, the Minotaur was almost naked, muscular, and monstrous. His covered face made him cold, unapproachable, and scary, enabling Graham to highlight his physical strength, violence, and the visceral desire for destruction, conquest, and control. Ariadne displayed her resourcefulness and creativity; in Graham's vision she stands for civilization and reflects the depths of the human soul and the power of the unconscious. In Greek mythology, the struggle of Theseus against the Minotaur, of human against inhuman, often stands for the contrast between civilization and destruction. Greek vase iconography underlines the contrast by making the Minotaur and his animality stand out in isolation from the humans surrounding him. On a black-figure amphora at the Louvre, the Minotaur is naked instead of dressed, and painted in a single color rather than many. He has no human mind and needs to be overcome by the civilized, refined, and well-dressed Theseus (Fig. 10).



Figure 10. Black-figure amphora depicting *Theseus fighting Minotaur*.  
Attributed to the Painter of the Birth of Athena, ca. 540 BCE. Louvre  
Museum, Paris. Photo © RMN-Grand Palais (musée du Louvre) / Tony  
Querrec.

In an Attic stamnos from the British Museum, the painter has emphasized the contrast between the human and the inhuman by depicting Theseus killing the Minotaur while holding his muzzle, the animalistic feature that prevents him from speaking and thus most differentiates him from humans (Fig. 11).

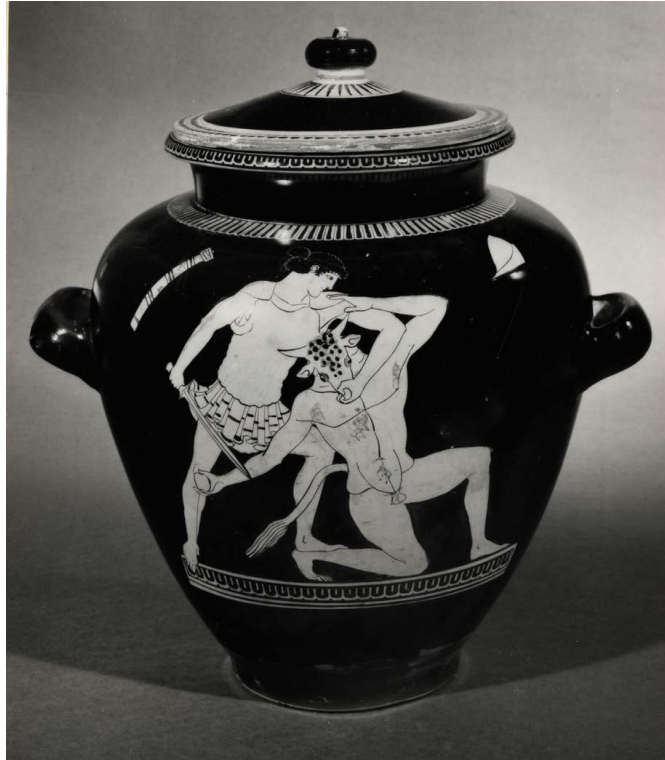


Figure 11. *Theseus Killing the Minotaur*. Attic stamnos. 490–480 BCE Kleophrades Painter. British Museum, London

Like the Greek myth, Martha Graham's *Errand* brings out the clash between civilization and destruction, as well as the human struggle for control, power, and survival. Humans must face external dangers – hostile animals, destructive individuals, and belligerent communities – but also internal threats, the human tendency to succumb to fears, anguish, and uncontrolled passions. The youths' aimless wanderings in the labyrinth brought about their death, as Plutarch describes. But here Graham made those "wanderings" an "errand," showcasing the strength of a woman who overcomes her darkest fears, finds satisfaction, and emerges victorious.

In the Q&A that followed, an audience member asked Eilber to share a personal moment from working with Martha Graham. With emotion, Eilber responded that Graham encouraged her always to talk to herself during her dancing – an ongoing inner monologue, Graham thought, ensures that her dancers motivate and justify every action and movement they execute. Indeed, when watching Landreau and Mayor, I found it easy to imagine such inner monologue as a source of power for their dancing: as Landreau fluctuated between confidence and fear, she seemed constantly to be thinking about her next move; Mayor was driven by lust and power; and though his face was covered and he appeared to move by instinct rather than careful thought, his whole body displayed an intensity and determination that seemed to emerge from the constant goading of an inner self.

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**NOTES:**

<sup>1</sup>Nauck, *Trag. Graec. Frag.* 2, p. 680.

<sup>2</sup>Plutarch. *Plutarch's Lives*. Translated by Bernadotte Perrin. Cambridge, MA. Harvard University Press. London. William Heinemann Ltd. 1914

<sup>3</sup>For an interpretation of the dance see, for example, Agnes De Mille, *Martha: The Life and Work of Martha Graham*, New York, 1956 (reprinted in 1991), p. 280-1; Ernestine Stodelle, *Deep Song: The Dance Story of Martha Graham*, New York, 1984; and Mark Franko, *Martha Graham in Love and War*, Oxford, 2012, p. 87-95.