

# Martha graham: a life of dance biography examples

[Business](#), [Company](#)



Martha Graham was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on May 11, 1894, but she moved to Santa Barbara, California in 1908, and it was there that she spent most of her early years. Her father was a physician who specialized in using physical movements to treat mental and neurological disorders, and it was he who would prove to be one of the greatest influences, both on Martha's choice of career as a dancer and on how she used dance to portray images and emotions (A+E Network, 2012).

Perhaps the inciting moment of her professional life came when she was 17; it was then that she saw dancer Ruth St. Denis perform at the Mason Opera House in Los Angeles, and she was enthralled. She begged her parents to allow her to study dance, too, but they were both strong Presbyterians, and their religion would not permit it. Instead, Martha enrolled at the Comstock School, an arts-oriented junior college, from which she graduated after studying theater. When her father died in 1916, it freed her from his restrictions on her career. She entered the Denishawn School of Dancing and Related Arts in Los Angeles, a school founded by the aforementioned Ruth St. Denis and her husband, Ted Shawn, and spent eight years there. It was unique, being the only major dance company that did not work in the classical ballet tradition at that time (NY Times, 1991), but the works invariably had exotic pretexts, and Graham felt this method was not quite right for her.

Having seen her dance with Denishawn, director John Murray Anderson offered Graham a position with the Greenwich Village Follies, where she worked from 1923-1924. But here in commercial theater, she also felt the spirit was not quite what she wanted for herself. As a result, she left the

company to take up a position with the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, where she taught dance (NY Times, 1991). After giving her first public performance in 1926, Graham went on to establish the Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance in 1927; though first composed only of women, it took on a number of men in 1938-1939, filling its ranks with a variety of talent and allowed her to choreograph the types of dances she favored. The works from her company's initial years, including "Immigrant," "Lamentation," and "Vision of Apocalypse," and her first non-solo ballet, "Heretic," dealt with a variety of social problems (Kennedy Center, 2012). In the 1930s, she moved on to American themes, saying "We must look to America to bring forth an art as powerful as America itself" (Kennedy Center, 2012). The company displayed such works as "American Document" (which she choreographed for Eleanor Roosevelt following an invitation to perform at the White House), "American Provincials," and the monumental "Appalachian Spring," which demonstrated her ability to collaborate with artists in many other areas, such as composer Aaron Copeland and set designer Isamu Noguchi.

In 1939, dancers Merce Cunningham and Erick Hawkins (who became her husband in 1948 and was divorced from her nine years later) joined and became an integral part of her company. They toured in the United States and Cuba throughout the 1940s, displaying works that often dealt with mythological themes, such as "Cave of the Heart," the story of Medea, "Errand into the Maze," the tale of the Minotaur, and "Night Journey," the story of Oedipus and Jocasta.

Graham's company toured Paris in 1954, but it was not received well at the

time; her ballets were actually booed by audiences there. Over the next few years, though, she saw more success with her work, not just by the critics, but also by the public, and in 1956, she won the Dance Magazine Award. And even though she was identified with a new, modern art form that replaced classical ballet as inadequate to convey the artist's message, she collaborated with George Balanchine in the 1959 work, "Episodes," which her company performed alongside the New York City Ballet (NY Times, 1991).

Inspired by her father's medical work, Graham's form of expression was clearly distinct from all others, using jarring, spasmodic, and trembling movements as the keys to communicating spiritual and emotional concepts (Kennedy Center, 2012). She absorbed the principle of tension and relaxation, calling it "contraction and release;" though many early critics considered her work nothing short of "ugly," Graham's exceptional ability at choreographing and translating movement into an art form became increasingly respected over time. Many people now consider her works to be an important achievement in America's cultural history (A+E Network, 2012).

Despite failing health that forced her to stop dancing at the age of 76, she continued to choreograph for other notable dancers, such as Rudolph Nureyev and Margot Fonteyn, and she completed her 191st new dance, "Maple Leaf Rag" in 1990. She died of complications from pneumonia the following year.

Perhaps Martha Graham's life and amazing career can be best summed up by one of her own quotations, as it was heard on the Bob Edwards radio

show in 2009: “ I think the reason dance has held such an ageless magic for the world is that it has been the symbol of the performance of living. Many times, I hear the phrase, “ the dance of life.” It is close to me for a very simple and understandable reason. The instrument through which the dance speaks is also the instrument through which life is lived: the human body. It is the instrument by which all the primaries of experience are made manifest. It holds in its memory all matters of life and death and love.”

## **Works Cited**

Biography. com. “ Martha Graham Biography.” A+E Networks. 2012. Web. 26 Nov. 2012.

Graham, Martha. “ An Athlete of God.” The Bob Edwards Show. 2009. Web. 26 Nov. 2012.

Kisselgoff, A. “ Martha Graham Dies at 96; A Revolutionary in Dance.” New York Times. 1991. Web. 26 Nov. 2012.

“ Martha Graham.” The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. 2012. Web. 26 Nov. 2012.