

# FINANCIAL TIMES

## Theatre & Dance

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Graham's 'Phaedra' was impressive for its storytelling, but it was another choreographer's work that stole the show



Martha Graham Company in 'Phaedra'

According to Euripides, ill-fated Phaedra's helpless, forbidden passion "is what the god has chosen [her] to become" – which makes Martha Graham the perfect artist to depict her. In fact, unlike the characters in the choreographer's earlier and better Greek tragedies, *Night Journey* and *Cave of the Heart*, the players in *Phaedra* are more stiff instrument than person. They do not win our sympathy when they suffer enormously for attempting to heed the dictates of their cruel gods.

After a decade in storage, the briefly controversial ballet – at

its 1962 premiere a couple of congressmen deemed it too sexy for government funding – returns as part of the company's Myth and Transformation season, whose abundant works either riff on Graham or are by her. What does impress in *Phaedra* – besides the excellent actor-dancers, including the newcomers on which the troupe's bright future depends – is the storytelling. Typical of Graham, the drama moves as dexterously as film can do between reality and dream, dread or the past that has cursed the present.

Deft shifts in register also distinguish Richard Move's hour-long tour de force *The Show (Achilles Heels)*, crafted in 2002 for Baryshnikov and Blondie lead singer Deborah Harry and only now set on the Graham company, where it deserves a long life. With *The Iliad* as his source, Move stitches together a host of unlikely elements: a hilarious game show rigged like Achilles' fate, a chorus that lip-syncs wooden dialogue from a 1950s movie epic, and dreamlike tone-poems that feature Helen as desperate, voluptuous captive, vain Achilles and his devoted lover Patroclus dancing arm in arm, and war widows clasping mechanical doves that beat their wings. Arto Lindsay's finely textured industrial score conjures a recycled, subterranean world, with Harry's songs adding notes of elegy and romance.

*Move* may replace Graham's temporal and psychological excavations with postmodern pastiche, but the end is the same: outsized feeling. Even without Baryshnikov and Harry to prod us, *The Show* excites euphoria over bigger-than-life people like this Achilles (the Brit and Graham newbie Lloyd Mayor), who, beyond anything else, is beautiful and knows it. The dance lets us yearn for image and person to unite. It not only accepts our shallow pleasures, it discovers their dignity and their depth.