

# The moment all the particles become a work of art

Dedicated to my  
friend Giora Manor



*Holy Jungle* by Martha Graham

## Dani Karavan

I was privileged to work in the presence of Martha Graham and take part in the creation of four dances she composed. My relation with Graham began following one of her many visits to the country when I had the opportunity to see the premiere of *The Story of Ruth* (1961) to the choreography of Sarah Levi-Tanai, to the music of Ovadia Tuvia and my own set design. This was the first set design I created for dance, and there is no doubt that the work was influenced by the spirit of Graham's creations and by the way Noguchi's sets were integrated into them. The creation process together with Levy-Tanai, Tuvia and the dancers was really exciting. In those years Inbal Dance Theatre, directed by Sarah Levi-Tanai, occupied a special and respected place in the international world of dance. Many choreographers came to see the wonder of the unique Yeminite dance. One of them was the great choreographer Jerome Robbins.

The premiere was held at the Ohel Shem Hall in Tel Aviv. The performance ended, the curtain came down, the stage back-door opened and Martha Graham, accompanied by the Baroness Batsheva de Rothschild, stood in front of me and said: "You have created a great theatre, and I want to dance in your theatre". Apparently I responded to her words with skepticism and therefore she repeated her words, "I am telling you that you have created a great theatre". The next day I was invited to meet her at Rothschild's home. Graham explained to me that the Union's regulations in the United States required transferring my set to the hands of one of the union members' set designers there. In all the publication his name would appear in big letters and next to it my name in small letters. She instantly added that this situation was unacceptable to her and that she would find a way to prevent this injustice.

After about a year we received – Mordechai Seter, who was asked by Graham to compose music for her new creation and I, who was chosen to design the set – a kind of synopsis of the new dance she was about to create. The dance, a medieval story taking place in a monastery, did not touch Seter's heart. Graham did not give up and chose the story of Judith (Yehudit) of the Jewish tradition. She had no given instructions or requirements, leaving everything open. It is not easy to work this way. Only in the meeting in Rome, to which I was invited, she motioned me to the direction via small gifts she presented to me. These were objects from the Luristan Culture, findings from some two thousand years ago. The hint was slight and charming. Correspondence between us began. I sent her many dozens of sketches I had prepared for her and when the time came to build a model I sent her some photographs.

It was determined that the premiere of *The legend of Judith* (1962) would be in Tel Aviv, on Graham's dance group tour in Israel and Europe. The performance took place at the Habima Theatre, where I had experienced already in the 50s the group's first performances. Graham enjoyed hearing the stories of how we sneaked into her performances, which stunned us. Right upon landing at Lod airport she asked Baroness Rothschild to take her to the workshop, where the parts of the set I had built, at the small carpenter's workshop of the set designer Ze'ev-Shemen Halperin, were located. Graham took off her shoes, walked around in the cramped carpenter's workshop between the saws, drills and boards and began dancing and jumping on the set. We were afraid she might fall or a rusty nail might get stuck into her foot, but fortunately all went well and I understood that she loved the set.

The next day I placed the set at Inbal's rehearsal basement. The group's first

meeting with the set evoked some apprehensions in me; however, the encounter was a wonderful moment – a total integration between the shapes I had created and the dancers' movements. My set integrated into Graham and her dancers' unique style.

In the rehearsals on the Habima stage we saw – Seter and I – a great artist debating with herself, uncertain, examining and testing, changing the movement, the directions and the positions over and over again. She continued walking back and forth on the stage over and over again. We asked ourselves, what will be? How is it going to end? Is it ever going to end? The situation was really frightening. Gary Bertini, who conducted the orchestra, repeated sections of the music again and again at her request. Graham continued debating, consulted with the dancers and made countless attempts. Suddenly came the formative moment of the birth of a creation: it was a one-time moment I had never experienced before, or after. It was amazing. All the creation parts – the movement, the costumes (which Graham created herself), the music and the set – became one essence, all its parts inseparable.

The premiere of *The legend of Judith* was a great success. When the curtain went down the audience erupted in applause. Only one person, looking respectable, who was sitting in front of me, stood up and shouted, BOO! BOO! It turned out that there were still people who regarded her work injury to the inner sanctum of dance. Many years earlier Graham suffered a traumatic experience which she told me about more than once. On her first trip to Europe after World War II she appeared in the Spring Festival of Florence ("Maggio Musicale"). When the curtain came down, most of the crowd hooted and shouted Boo. She came out to the front of the stage, arm in arm with the group members, holding her fist out to the audience. This is the fate of those advancing their contem-

poraries. She claimed repeatedly that there were no advancers, only "those who are behind". I was not surprised that after the premiere my friends told me, "What have you actually done? It appears as if the set has been planned by the choreographer herself and you just carried out her ideas". This has been my dream ever since I began drawing sets (today it is called set designing): I always wanted to be part of a total piece of art. I was drawn to the theatre and dance out of the need to be part of a creation which contains all the arts giving all of them together a new quality. Working with Graham gave me the feeling that I was being filled. The work process was saturated with talks, notes, insights and inspiring stories. After such an experience it is very hard to work with someone else. For a long period of time I continued standing on one stage with her, unable to understand how I became so fortunate to work with one of the great and revolutionary figures of the twentieth century culture.

Graham held a premiere for *The legend of Judith* on Broadway, and shortly afterwards she ordered from Seter and me music and a set for a new creation called *Part Real, Part Dream*. The process repeated itself. Once again, the same debating and misunderstanding. "Do whatever comes to your mind" she told me. I felt as if she was asking me to "go on air, on nothing, make a dream come true". After she approved the model photographs I had sent her I began building the set in Israel, at Shemen's carpenter's shop. The set was sent to New York and I went to supervise staging it. I was worried, but I had no problems with the union of the set builders on Broadway.

I will never forget that Sunday morning, a day after arriving in New York at the house of my friends the dancer Leah Levine and the dancer and choreographer Donald Mc-Kayle. On that same morning I received from Mc-Kayle the keys to Graham's studio and I



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went out for the first time to New York. I walked alone in the empty streets, the skyscrapers mounting up until they touched the blue skies – and I with them. I reached 62<sup>nd</sup> Street, a little east of Second Avenue. I put the studio key into the lock, turned it and the door opened. On the wooden floor my set was standing, installed, my set for *Part Real, Part Dream*.

Later on, On Broadway, the Olympus of the theatre: The curtain rises on my set for *The legend of Judith* and *Part Real, Part Dream* and the audience applauds. Graham added in my honor *The Legend of Judith* to the two new dances she had created *Part Real, Part Dream* to Seter's music and my set, and the *Witch of Endor* (1965) to the music of Robert Schumann and the setting of Ming-Cho-Li, an impressive set designer.

Graham was no longer in shape and her movements were limited. It was difficult for her to watch her dancers, young people with supreme body skills, dancing next to her. She caused some provocations, continued moving on the stage and consumed their time in the intervals between one dance and the other, which was oppressively long. It turned out that her amazing seamstress had to make her a new dress and therefore the interval lasted endlessly.

After several years she addressed me again and ordered from me the set for a new dance she created: *The Holy Jungle* (1974). On my last premiere with her on Broadway I painfully saw Graham, who had to pass on her roles to other dances, younger than her, sitting wrapped in a fur coat in the corner of the dark and cold hall, watching the dancer Ethel Winter dancing beautifully

the dance *Appalachian Spring* (1944). Right after the rehearsal Graham vanished into her make-up room. Coming out she incidentally ran into Winter, who was coming down the stairs. "How was I?" asked Winter and Graham answered: "You were great! And it hurt me." I met Rudolf Nureyev behind stage, at the premiere of the *Holy Jungle*. It was after Graham decided to invite Nureyev to join her group in her new creation. Thus she reached a hand to Classical Ballet, after years of criticizing and objecting it.

My last cooperation with her was in *Jacob's Dream*, a choreography she created especially for the Batsheva Dance Company. This is the only creation she composed for a dance group that was not her own. The choreography was ordered by Leah Porat, director of the Council of Art and Culture, after the Baroness Rothschild abandoned the group carrying her name.

Graham accepted the invitation thus expressing her sharp criticism of her great friend, who transferred her support to the dancer and choreographer Jeannette Ordman and the Bat-Dor dance group.

Towards the end I am returning to the beginning, to the establishment of the Batsheva Dance Company. On the dress rehearsal, at a poor and cold cinema hall in Herzliya, Graham was watching. Also then she found it difficult to watch other dancers perform her dances and her role. She walked back and forth and sipped from the "chicken soup" cup smelling of alcohol. Often she used to wash down her pains and doubts with alcohol. Later on she was pleased about the accomplishment of the group's work and accompanied the group she had established for years. The successful performance proved that Graham's works of art could be performed by another group, full of youthful strength and power. Graham disappeared and Baroness Rothschild approached me and said: "Everything is just wonderful, but before whom shall we perform? After

all, there are no dance fans in the country". Nevertheless, the group became the star of the famous Holland Dance Festival of the 60s and conquered its place in Israel and worldwide.

The dress-rehearsal in Herzliya was probably the beginning of the road towards turning Israel into an international dance world-power. Seeing today the large audiences filling out the halls, the abundance of dance groups, the Israeli dancers and choreographers, it is worth remembering that it all began in a small cinema hall in Herzliya, where the Batsheva Dance

Company was established. The step the Baroness had taken undermined the trust Graham had in her: how was it possible to support at the same time Graham and her group as well as Ordman and Bat-Dor? She did everything she could to stop the move that seemed a hard blow to the group she had established for her friend De Rothschild, and which she regarded as her own group.

Much more can be written about this affair, with documents enclosed (letters Graham sent me and others so we may help her prevent what seemed to her as a disaster). Graham experienced the Baroness' desertion as victory for mediocrity on genius. Therefore



*Part Real, Part Dream* by Martha Graham

she accepted the invitation of Linda Hodes, who danced in her group and was Batsheva's art director, to create the dance *Jacob's Dream* (1974) for Batsheva. The initiative received the approval of Leah Porat, CEO of the Art and Culture Council, who agreed to finance the dance. The work was very interesting (Seter wrote the music and I designed the set). In the course of her work on the new creation Graham realized how much her work was injuring her friend, who had saved her and her group, and returned to New York with a very heavy feeling. In *Jacob's Dream* the connection between Graham and

Ohad Naharin was established. Ohad, who performed in an outstanding way the role she had given him requested to join Graham's group in New York and she gladly accepted him.

The circle closed when Naharin took upon himself the role of artistic director of Batsheva and became the group's choreographer (in 2014 the group will celebrate its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary). He created for Batsheva numerous exciting dances and placed it back where it was at the beginning of its road – an important Israeli and international dance group.

**Dani Karavan** In the years 1960-1975 designed sets for the Cameri theatre, Inbal and Batsheva dance groups, for Martha Graham in New York, for the Opera of Jan Carlo Minuti in Festivals in Israel, Florence and Spolto. In 1976 he represented Israel at the Biennale di Venezia (The Venice Biennale) and created in the Israeli pavilion the Environment for Peace. A year later he was invited to participate in Documente 6 in Kassel. Since then Karavan created numerous site-specific artworks throughout

the world among the Negev Memorial Monument, Kikar Levana, Morro in Japan, Cergy in France and Port-Bou in Spain. He was awarded many prestigious international prizes among them: Israel Prize for Sculpture (1977), Peace Artist for UNESCO (1996), The Kaiser Ring Award for Visual Arts in Germany (1996), Japan Emperor's Award – the Nobel Prize for arts (1998), Berlin Award for Sculpture (2004). Karavan has been active for the promotion of peace since the early 50s and was among the initiators of the Bauhaus conservation in Tel Aviv.

