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MARTHA GRAHAM'S COLD WAR

The Dance of American Diplomacy

Victoria Phillips

Oxford University Press (472 pp.)

\$45.00 hardcover, \$30.99 e-book

ISBN: 978-0-19-061036-4

January 21, 2020

BOOK REVIEW

A historian examines the political uses of modern dance in this sweeping exploration of legendary dancer and choreographer Martha Graham's government-sponsored Cold War tours.

"I am not a propagandist...My dances are not political," Graham once declared, but Phillips, a history lecturer at Columbia University, reveals in this expansive and meticulously researched debut that art and politics were deeply intertwined for the modern-dance pioneer. From 1955 to the late 1980s, Graham went on numerous U.S. government-sponsored tours of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Although the post-World War II deployment of artists and intellectuals to promote a pro-U.S. agenda abroad is no secret, "cultural histories of Cold War diplomacy have overlooked modern dance as a discrete subject," Phillips convincingly argues. Graham enthusiastically took iconic works, such as "Appalachian Spring," to Japan, Israel, and other countries, and her dances were meant to showcase American values, such as freedom, individualism, and the pioneer spirit. The choreographer, despite her disavowal of politics, was in reality a canny political operator, as Phillips shows, as well as a valuable asset on the "cocktail circuit of diplomacy." Her troupe received tour support from every presidential administration from Eisenhower's to Reagan's, and she skillfully shifted with the political winds, cozying up to various power players in order to get much-needed financial support for her company; letters that Phillips unearthed in her archival research show Graham's persistent efforts, especially in her later years, to endear herself to different first ladies.

Phillips effectively combines a survey of cultural diplomacy during the Cold War with an examination of Graham's outsize role in the history of American dance, and interviews with Graham company dancers formed part of her research. In the 1950s, the choreographer's innovations were a powerful counterpoint to the rigidity of Soviet classical ballet, and her work, while not explicitly political, could carry strong messages with their multiracial casting, challenging subject matter, and international collaborations with artists, such as sculptor Isamu Noguchi. However, as Graham aged, her style ossified, and by the 1970s, her work was increasingly seen as "old-fashioned." That fact, combined with her imperious personality and a changing political landscape, made her somewhat less useful as a diplomatic tool, the author notes. Still, as late as 1987, her company was traveling to East Berlin to perform; a trip to Moscow was in the works at the time the Soviet Union collapsed, just before Graham's death at 96. Phillips offers valuable insight into how the United States used dance as a propaganda tool. However, the book doesn't make clear what, if anything, the government gained from such efforts. Graham also remains an elusive figure throughout the work; readers hear of her alcoholism, her reluctance to retire from performing, and her relationships with figures such as first lady Betty Ford as well as her disinterest in feminism. However, she only really comes alive when Phillips discusses her dancing, as in a moving description of her performance in "Clytemnestra."

An ambitious, if uneven, book that will interest history buffs and dance aficionados.

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