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NJDTE NEW JERSEY DANCE THEATRE ENSEMBLE

Martha Graham is considered by many to be the mother of modern dance in America. Her legacy cannot be ignored. Through her unique language, she created a new form of dance that has inspired subsequent generations of dancers and choreographers from Paul Taylor and Merce Cunningham to Alvin Ailey. At our Gala this past Spring, we were honored to have one of Graham's last protégés, Terese Capucilli, illustrate the artistic expressiveness and power that Graham's technique evokes. Today, we are equally honored to have my colleague, Virginie Mécène, teaching this most rigorous language to our students.

Nancy Turano, Artistic Director

"...creating lines in space..."

After 18 years in New York, Virginie Mécène's lilting voice still has the distinctive accent of her native France. Speak with her for a few minutes, and you immediately feel her passion and effervescence for dance - and her deep reservoirs of care and concern for her students.

Virginie is quick to turn the subject to NJDTE. "When I teach here, I'm always astonished at how well trained these

young students are. Unlike a lot of dancers their age, they already have a strong ballet technique before I arrive. And because they are exposed to so many different techniques and styles, they can assimilate new material very quickly.

"It's not an easy task to move from the pelvis - one of the innovative principles Martha brought to dance - especially while sitting on the floor, but these young ones just do it!"

Virginie started dancing when she was very young. "For me, it was always very natural...a part of who I was, and who I am today."

In France, she worked as a graphic designer for couture fashion houses, like Dior, but

soon found she didn't like sitting all day. "I decided to study dance full time. I taught there for a while, but knew that I needed something more structured and challenging. Going to New York and studying with Graham changed my life."

Virginie became a principal dancer for the Martha Graham Company. Asked what it is about the technique that so attracts her, she replies, "There's always a discovery in the study.

"You go through a very mechanical stage at first, but soon you realize the relation between movement and emotion and you learn not to imitate, but to recognize how the movement affects you physically. Then you can reproduce the movement truthfully."

Virginie goes on to say that the principles of Graham technique are all about movement that begins from a dancer's core - the center of the pelvis - then radiates to the outside of the body, "creating lines in space through the natural spirals and oppositions of the body. I believe the human body has infinite possibilities, and I would like to help guide students to channel their strength and practice with that purpose."

Young students should study Graham technique, she says, and they should never be afraid to experiment. "That's one thing I love about the dancers at NJDTE. They are always open and prepared."

What did the long hours of Graham study do for her? "While in Calcutta to perform with Battery Dance Company, we visited a hospital for terminally-ill patients run by Mother Teresa's order. The sisters asked us to perform for the patients, and we threw something together very fast. We even had to improvise the costumes."

They returned the next morning, and performed for the patients, and for the children from a nearby orphanage. "We danced between the beds and in the aisles because we had no stage. It was incredible to be so close to our audience; to see what the performance had given them. It was simply amazing

how their eyes and faces were illuminated with joy. Dance can be a wonderful gift." - *Corey Bliss*

Photo Credits:

Top Left: Virginie Mécène in *Appalachian Spring*, Courtesy of Martha Graham Center, Photo by John Deane
Center: Photo by Onno De Jong
Bottom Right: *Deep Song*, Photo by Onno De Jong
Background: Martha Graham in *Letter to the World* (1941), Photo by Barbara Morgan (1900-1992)

