

## Graham rebounds

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At lunchtime on Friday, Wall Street workers will be treated to a spectacular sight. The Martha Graham Dance Company will take over the street in front of the New York Stock Exchange for the first of three days of performances kicking off the annual River to River Festival.

Just a year ago, it was questionable that Graham could even continue to exist.

The 80-year-old group — one of the nation's most-celebrated dance troupes — was bleeding with a \$5 million deficit. Vendors were threatening legal action, half of the trustees had quit the board, and the organization was down to a single paid staffer. Perhaps worst of all, it had to forgo a New York season.

"For anyone who knew the true depths of their financial problems, it looked like they may not make it," says Margaret Ayers, executive director of the Robert Sterling Clark Foundation, one of the longtime Graham contributors that stopped making donations. "They have really turned a corner."

A new executive director, LaRue Allen, has led the comeback. The deficit has been reduced to \$650,000. Ms. Allen has helped recruit five new trustees to build an 11-member board, and former backers like the Sterling Clark Foundation plan to return to the fold. Graham is also developing a two-week New York season honoring its 80th anniversary, scheduled to open Sept. 11 at the Joyce Theater.

"There's still a lot that needs to get done, and there's still some debt to pay," Ms. Allen says. "But considering where we were last year, it's a miracle."

Graham's troubles began with the death of its founder 16 years ago. After a bumpy decade, the company was forced to stop operating from 2001 to 2003 because of a costly legal battle with Ms. Graham's heir, Ron Protas, over the rights to her dances.

### **Costly mistakes after relaunch**

Following the troupe's relaunch in 2003, its managers made a series of costly mistakes. The biggest: a two-week run at the New York City Center that, while critically acclaimed, turned out to be a financial disaster.

Ms. Allen, working with Artistic Director Janet Eilber, began the turnaround by thinking smaller. She cut the annual operating budget 36%, to \$3.2 million, and the number of full-time dancers to 15 from 20.

Instead of performing at prime venues like City Center — a hard place for any dance company to turn a profit, as it rents for \$200,000 a week — Graham put on three downscaled performances last year at the Guggenheim Museum, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center and the 92nd Street Y. The Joyce is charging rent of just \$44,000 for the entire two weeks.

To boost earned income, a pared-down domestic touring program called Essential Graham was developed for presenters that can't afford the entire troupe and full sets. Graham charges fees starting at \$16,000 per performance and has already booked about 10 for fall.

On the flip side, the company raised rates in Europe, where it has been touring extensively. It now commands \$140,000 a week, plus hotel expenses. "We don't tour at a loss anymore," Ms. Allen says.

### **An anonymous benefactor**

But the survival plan couldn't have worked without contributions. Last year, Ms. Allen received an anonymous check for \$228,000 that she used to settle the bill with vendors.

Additionally, seven current and former board members forgave loans they had made to Graham.

Foundations and corporate donors are willing to take a chance again.

Ms. Ayers says she will look "favorably" on future grant proposals from Graham. Ted Bartwink, executive director of the Harkness Foundation for Dance, is likely to provide help as well.

"The fact that they are close to erasing the deficit is a very big plus," Mr. Bartwink says. "We're going to try to do something to help with the Joyce season."

### **COMING UP**

**June 1-3** Two excerpts from Ms. Graham's *Chronicle*, her response to fascism, will be performed outside the New York Stock Exchange.

**Sept. 11-23** Three Choreographers will create dances in response to Ms. Graham's famous solo work *Lamentation*, a portrait of a grieving woman.

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