Creating works that have revolutionised, challenged and innovated their contextual times Bob Fosse and Martha Graham’s repertoire should be included in the performances that demonstrate ‘breaking the mould’. Fosse has been classified as ‘one of the most influential men in jazz history’ by creating a ‘unique dance style’ (1) and Graham, a woman who ‘invented a revolutionary new language of dance’ (2) both challenged there societal confinements of expectation and exceeded these boundaries; both in a unique form.

Graham’s father developed her curiosity of the body; influencing her interest in movement. He was the catalyst in the inquisitiveness of Martha. Leading her future self to push the boundaries of modern dance and create her own technique. This, along with Graham watching the performances of ‘the Cobras’, ‘Rahda’ and ‘Egypta’ by Ruth St Denis and being educating in the Denishawn Academy set Graham into a life of dance that challenged societal expectations of what dance was, and should be. The company was already deviating from the dance norm by creating and teaching pieces in the styles of ‘amalgam of pseudo- oriental, American Indian, far eastern.’ (4) Importantly, Denishawn also taught Graham the restriction in the set technique and movement vocabulary; still similar to the confinement of ballet and classical technique. The explorative ideals of the Denishawn company had a lasting impact on Graham’s work, one of Graham’s dancers, Evelyn Sabin Mannes, recalls ‘I think our dances in those days may have been, quite naturally, somewhat reminiscent of Denishawn, where she had her training’ (4). This explorative nature and restrictions on movement became the stepping-stones for Graham, leading her to create a new dance vocabulary, revolutionising modern dance forever. (3)

 Denishawn also educated Martha on the Delsarte principle. Graham adapted this method creating a new breathing and impulse control principle she called ‘contraction and release’. The movements created ‘deviated from the norms […] of Duncan and Denis’ (5) and was classified as a ‘ground-breaking style’. (8) Graham began to refuse to ‘conform to the social normalities of ballet within ‘contemporary dance’, and had started to dance using this new principle and expressionism through movement. (7) This technique led Graham to ‘be the first to develop breath with contraction and release principle into an inherent basis of movement in her new dance form’, (6) and is present in her works of ‘Frontier’, ‘Appalachian spring’, ‘Seraphic Dialogue’ and ‘Lamentation’.

Feminism and women rights issues emerged in the 1920s, at the prime of Graham’s timeline, influencing her to explore social and political issues and address different themes in her repertoires. For example, ‘Chronicle’ presents war and the isolation and depression connected with it, perhaps stating an anti-war stance form Graham. (9, 7) Moreover, Graham’s interest in human emotion led her to explore ‘historic individuals and use their stories of personal struggle’ as stimuli in her work. (10) Her work of ‘Lamentation’ focuses on emotional themes. The work shows a grieving woman, the movement portray grief itself. The piece also is a ‘visual homage to contemporary architecture […] the new skyscrapers that were beginning to fill the New York skyline’ wrote the scholar Elizabeth Kendal. Grahams work brought about a new age of dance by thematising the movement, and by connecting the modernising world with her piece she exceeded societal placed boundaries of what dance could be.

In further investigation into ‘Lamentation’, Graham presents her technique and movement that broke the mould of dance. Beginning with a woman sat on a bench with her hands and feet free and the rest of her body covered in a tube-stretchy material. The dancer begins to rock from side to side unnaturally, portraying suffering. Her hands stretch and twist into the fabric as she continues to rock from side to side, the arms then shoot into angular shapes out of the fabric. In Graham’s technique ‘every movement must have a clear and perceivable meaning’ (1). Thus, I think the rocking and writhing in the fabric presents the image of sorrow and grief as well as presenting the idea of breaking out of their own skin; evoked by the use of the stretchy costume, that complements the movement. The use of costume to ‘evoke a setting, imply a character, and to complement the dance vocabulary’ was part of the Graham technique. Furthermore, the rocking and falling motion of the upper body of the dancer relates to Grahams ‘acknowledgment of the power of gravity’.(1) We also see the contraction and release principle repeated when the dancers rocks forwards curving her spine over to then curved backwards in release to the tension. The use of costume, contraction and release, emotive movement, and having a thematised piece all break the mould of what was classified as dance.

Graham was also ‘the first modern dance choreographer to fully use collaborations with other modern artists’ (11) Composer and musician Louis Horst, introduced Graham to different artists and dancers and confirmed ‘there was a revolution occurring in the arts and hat her instinct to break away (from Denishawn and the norm of dance) were right’ (4). Horst also ‘encouraged her to work with contemporary composers rather than making dances to 18th/19th century music as all her solo dance predecessors had done.’ (5, 7) Graham then collaborated with Noguchi and Copland in ‘Appalachian Spring’. Which became a ‘revolutionary piece both in style and of the choreography and music’. (7)

Graham’s ‘Primitive Mysteries’ is evident of breaking the mould as it shows ‘two major differentiation from the normal style of dance of that time’. (5) The choreographic focus is on the corps of dancers and not on the soloist. Graham was causing a fundamental shift by approaching the ‘architect of dance’ differently and ‘reshaping it’. (5) Moreover, ‘the narrative of the dance is not presented in a literal way’ but uses ‘pure abstract movement vocabulary to bring it to life’. (5)These two unique ways of dance were giant advances for Graham revolutionising modern dance.

Fosse’s was the son of a vaudevillian performer, exposing him to sexually mature content at an early age. ‘The bumps and the grinds would be the prepositions of his dance vocabulary’. (13) The influence of the sexual nature normalised around him is represented in his movements. Exampled in ‘Percussion Four’, a section from ‘Fosse the Musical’, the dancers does pelvic thrusts and isolations. (13) Another example of Fosse’s sexualised style is in the choreography of the ‘Pyjama Game’. The choreography he produced revolutionised the ideals of sexual freedom and sensual dance expression involved in performances outside the vaudeville and burlesque scenes. It also opened his mind to explore taboo themes of sex, gender identity, and other uncommon themes in his repertoire.

Fosse had the ability to utilise fragments of the styles vaudeville, burlesque, jazz and tap he exposed to him and recreate them into a new movement vocabulary. This ‘new’ style broke the mould of what jazz was known to be. Known performers such as Fred Astaire, Jack Cole, and Paul Draper also influenced his movements. From these dancers he adopted the use of shoulder movements, slides and the general ‘showbiz’ feel. An example of this is in the section ‘Percussion Four’ the dancer’s holds a final kneeling gesture at the end of the choreography and throws his arm saying ‘that is all folks’. Fosse states ‘Paul Draper affected everyone’s style […] I had never seen such showmanship or dancing’ (15). I also think that Drapers philosophy of going against the notion that dancing is purely a form of self-expression resonated with Fosse, leading him to produce pieces that explored political and social issues (such as cabarets presentation of character defying traditional heteronormative roles in society) and pieces derived just to entertain. The themes and style of movement deviated from the norm of the contemporary dance pieces.

Fosse also worked in the burlesques. This was ‘typical of many depression era households’ as ‘employment was not easy to come by’ hence, Fosse committed himself to dancing in shows for money. ‘when the girls (strippers) found out he wasn’t eighteen years old[…], they started messing with him [..] before he was about to go on, they came from behind him kneading his pants’. (13) The experiences that he had were unique, and manifested his fascination with the female body and sexualised movement vocabulary. Furthermore, WW2 led him to perform in the nightclubs that initially had age restrictions. ‘When the war came along and so many men got drafted, I became the youngest M.C in Chicago’. (13) Fosse broke the mould as his repertoire drew from the extremes of the societal change in burlesques and his childhood experiences in them challenged the status quo in the rebellious style of what he presented. Fosse quotes ‘I’ve been accused of vulgarity […] but what some think is vulgar, I think is Rabelaisian […] sure, there’s some rough stuff, but I was raised in burlesque so rough is part of me.’ (13)

Fosse’s scoliosis led him to exaggerate shoulder drops. His poor turnout, linked with his limited ballet training, caused him to work in parallel or with exaggerated turnout. In Fosse’s movement style, he uses his ‘flaws’ to his create his movement vocabulary and his overall style, hence its originality. For example, in ‘Percussion Four’, the dancer is in parallel; then changes his left leg to a turned in position accentuate the parallel. This use of turned in feet and legs can also be seen in Fosse’s ‘Steam heat’ and ‘Pyjama game’. Fosse’s obsession with his image as a dancer led him adapt his style to him. Costumes were mainly back, essentially slimming the dancer, Bowler hats were common, covering his balding, and gloves were worn to emphasis gestures with his small hands. All the adaptions became common of the ‘Fosse style’ of jazz.

‘Cabaret’ shows Fosse breaking the mould by his new approach to characters, themes and the relationship the audience has with the performance. Using the character of Sally, he explores gender identity and sexual orientation in the film with her personality and sense of expectation of men. Fosse also explores many different themes and pushes the limit with his audience where he ‘simultaneously attracts his audience and repels them’. (16) By showing them a great piece of art but with deeper themes such as ‘the carnal cabaret lifestyle as a paradoxical statement on the political terror enacted outside the streets of berlin’ (16) Fosse revolutionised the way audiences responded and interacted to performances. (19)

Fosse dominated the filming industry with innovative cinematic approaches with the camera, such as close ups and pan outs. In ‘All That Jazz’ Fosse captures the ‘air-otica’ sequence by placing the camera on the floor giving a ‘you are there’ feel. Fosse also experimented with the idea of choreography for the camera, so that in dance numbers the camera participates in the action as well. (17) for example in the first part of the section ‘Take Off With Us’ the camera hops freely from one positions to another, which immerses the audience in the dance. He uses close shots in ‘Cabaret’ to show the ugliness and realism of the dancer’s situation, Fosse wanted the audience to have an immersive experience in the truth. ‘None of this is pretty […] drawing on Fosse’s own experiences as a young dancer in burlesque houses’. (16). this style of filming transformed how the camera interacted with the performance using new shots he broke the mould in dance filming, acting, and even modern day music videos. (18)

Fosse and Graham both created a new movement style, vocabulary and technique that broke the mould of their original confinements. With Fosse in jazz and Graham in modern dance they redefined the definition of dance by breaking free of societal limitations and expectations. Graham created a ‘new language of movement’. (21) Fosse became the ‘brand of Americana’. (20) Their techniques and styles are still recognisable today. The choreography of Michael Jackson and Beyoncé reflect Fosse’s immense influence and Graham’s technique prompted the works of Merce Cunningham, Lester Horton and Paul Taylor to name a few. Both of these practitioners broke the mould uniquely and should be included in the performance week.

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