

NEXTBOOK.ORG

Dancing with the Dead

When I moved to New York City I found an unlikely mentor: the grandmother I'd never known.

BY ABIGAIL RASMINSKY

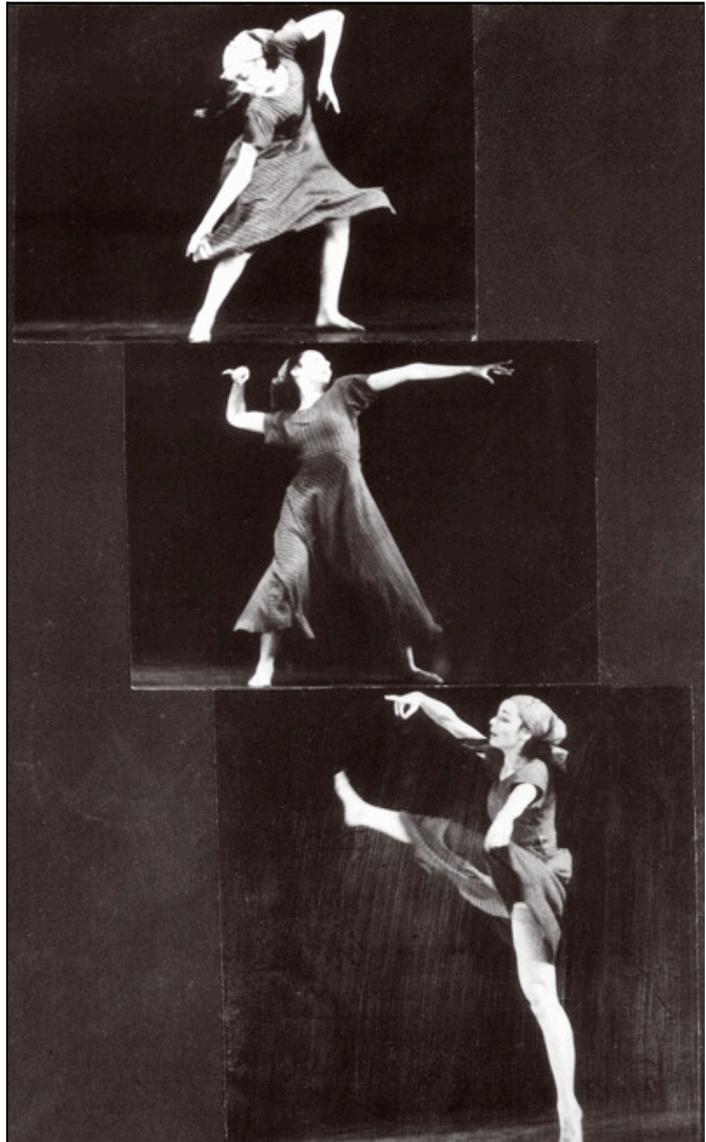
Having recently graduated from Hunter College, my maternal grandmother spent the summer of 1935 at Bennington, dancing with Martha Graham. Modern dance was still in its infancy—Graham, whose company was then nine years old, had only just begun choreographing group works after the success of her iconic solo, *Lamentation*—but growing rapidly, largely because of the pioneering efforts of ambitious young women like Graham, Sophie Maslow, Jane Dudley, Anna Sokolow—and Miriam Blecher, my grandmother. That summer, Graham asked Miriam to join her company, which was only beginning to gain a national reputation. But Miriam—whether she suspected what Graham would become or not—turned her down: she didn't want to be told what to do. She wanted to choreograph her own work.

Two decades later, she took her daughter to see Graham's company perform at the Hollywood Bowl, in Los Angeles, where they lived. Afterward, she found Graham backstage and introduced her to my mother. Graham peered down at the awkward 11-year-old and said, "Your mother was such a beautiful dancer." Then she barked, "And you're the reason she stopped dancing."

Nasty, but not entirely untrue: When my grandfather, George Sklar, a playwright and screenwriter, left New York to write for the movies in 1940, she went with him, to a town essentially devoid of modern dance. After my mother was born, Miriam—who'd had a thriving career in New York—never performed professionally again, nor did she become especially active in the Los Angeles dance community. When my grandfather was blacklisted during the McCarthy era, she became the family's main breadwinner, teaching dance to school children, middle-aged housewives, and the elderly.

I never knew my grandmother—when I was two she died of a brain tumor—but her genes have always been at work in my body: I spent my childhood as a national level rhythmic gymnast, competing all around North America, and my college years barefoot in dance studios, discovering how to leap boldly—heart, eyes, chest open—and land softly, protecting my bones and joints.

On a hot August day in 2000, I packed up my sweatpants and kneepads and moved to a dingy apartment in Park Slope, Brooklyn, to jump-start the career that she had begun at my age, 70 years earlier. I lived across the street from an insane asylum and below a family of drug addicts who partied nightly until 4 a.m. Within a few weeks, I had three or four jobs, my favorite of which was teaching chess to five-year-olds, even though I had never played a day in my life. I ran to classes and auditions all over the city, but my dancing, for the most part, went unnoticed.



Miriam Blecher dancing her solo composition *East Side Sketches*

In the midst of our endless unpacking, my new roommate, Liz, came into my tiny bedroom and spotted the photos hanging near the window. She leaned over my bed to get a closer look. "Is that you?" she asked. Over the months that followed, I would hear this question again and again, and it thrilled me.

But what had always pleased (and alarmed) me more was my family's insistence that the resemblance was not just physical. Miriam—or Mickey, as her friends called her—regularly frightened friends, teachers, and salespeople with her impetuous honesty even as she delighted them with her ability to make them laugh. Like her, I have never been able to hold my tongue, regularly insulting friend's choices in clothing or boyfriends; and I, too, have the knack for keeping others in stitches. But under a tough exterior, she was tender—just as I am. In those early, erratic days in New York, it was less our physical resemblance and more our psychological kinship that bolstered me and proffered a fleeting sense of steadiness to offset my unruly existence. Miriam's image, her silent body, wild and vulnerable, seemed to whisper: *I made it. So can you.*

Sometime that September, my mother's brother Daniel—a veteran New Yorker—invited me for dinner. "I have something important to show you." Propped up on display above the fireplace in his tiny West Village living room were two oversized scrapbooks. He pulled one off the ledge and opened it gingerly. On the first page was a program: *New Dance Group—First Annual Recital. The Dance is a Weapon. 10c.* "She was exactly your age when she started making these," Uncle Daniel told me.

The books contained every program and newspaper article that ever mentioned my grandmother's name (which, throughout, was underlined hastily in black or blue ink). "Oh my God," I whispered, caressing the fading covers. Each time I turned the page, the fragile edges of a yellowing newspaper clipping crackled and floated to the floor. "Take your time," my uncle advised.

I spent the rest of the evening leafing through the books, and for the first time realized that Miriam Blecher, "one of the most beautiful solo dancers in the concert field," according to *The New York Times*, had performed all over town many nights a week for years. She choreographed dances about Nazi Germany, the movie star Robert Taylor, and Jewish life on the Lower East Side. I discovered that she was not just a dancer, but also a revolutionary who, in 1932, helped found the New Dance Group, a left-wing collective that included Sophie Maslow and Jane Dudley. The product of an era when artists believed that art and politics were powerfully, inextricably linked, the group created dances that portrayed issues of racism, anti-Semitism, and class struggle, and aimed to inspire exploited workers to rise up against the evils of capitalism. It offered daily, affordable classes to anyone who walked through the door of its (perpetually moving) studios.

Closing the pages of the second scrapbook, which petered off in 1940, I turned to my uncle. "Did she miss New York when she moved to the West Coast?" I asked. "Wasn't it hard for her to give up her career and become a wife and mother?"

Uncle Daniel shrugged. "She didn't believe in regret," he said simply. "Once she made up her mind, she never looked back. She was ready to move on."

Learning the details of her career made my new life seem possible. She had done what I wanted to do. Despite my natural cynicism, the scrapbooks fortified what I had always secretly suspected: that she and I had a special, unspoken bond. We understood each other. Perhaps I had been born into the world to take up where she had left off—a premature reincarnation of sorts. When I performed I often imagined that she was watching me—*feeling* my bones shifting under my skin, my heart unlocking—and I found myself sweating and straining through performances not for the people in front of me, but for her. I felt that perhaps, *perhaps*, her scrapbooks were not made for her at all, but for me. They were her way of leading me along this unsteady, thorny path.

Subconscious though it may have been, over the next five years, I tried to follow Miriam's lead as I performed and toured around the country and the world. Irrational as it may have seemed, I trusted that this life—one that in so many ways resembled hers—would bring me closer to her.

But along the way, something odd happened: My faith in our connection began to erode. Even when I found myself rehearsing at University Settlement on the Lower East Side, where she taught dance in the 1930s, or amassing my own collection of programs and newspaper clippings to share with my own future granddaughter, I began to feel alienated from her. My career had grown out of its nascent, dreamy beginnings into a full-tilt reality nothing like the reality she had lived. Now I was facing issues—injury, financial stability, career advancement—that necessitated an actual mentor. I didn't want her scrapbooks. I wanted *her*—her praise and encouragement, her wisdom and support. I finally realized it: She was dead, and the world I was dancing in looked nothing like hers.

Two years ago, my dance career ground to a halt. Years of rehearsing and performing with chronic back pain had culminated in two herniated discs and I was forced into early retirement. Dancing, which had always brought me unparalleled joy and freedom, became an exercise in frustration and discomfort. Locked away from what I loved most, I felt more removed than ever from my grandmother. Without dance as our mutual ground, Miriam and I were no more than strangers with remarkably similar genetic codes.

Then, last summer, I thought I had found my opportunity to welcome her back into my life. The New Dance Group was being inducted into the Dance Hall of Fame at the National Museum of Dance in Saratoga Springs, New York, and I went to the celebration with my uncles.

I was eager to see my grandmother's name in lights. But the event was oddly uninspiring. None of the founding members were alive to offer up firsthand accounts, and, lacking their presence, the induction ceremony turned the group's fiery history into an oddball collection of unrelated—and glaringly apolitical—memories. There was no hint of how these young artists had managed to connect their art and their political passion, a link that seems all the more important now that there is again plenty to rise up against.

Or perhaps my disappointment was entirely personal: Though Miriam was the group's first president, she and her work were virtually absent from the event. (To be fair, a photo of her most famous piece, *Van der Lubbe's Head*, which won several awards, is on the giant panel that is now up in the Hall of Fame.) No one seemed to know who she was; no one had *known her*. No one could tell me of her smell, her touch, what a great teacher or choreographer she had been, how she had inspired them. Upon seeing my curved eyebrows, big, dark eyes, and wide smile, no one said, *You are the spitting image of Mickey Blecher*.



Van der Lubbe's Head, choreographed by Miriam Blecher

On our drive back to my family's house near Woodstock, my uncles unearthed stories about my grandparents. As I rested my head on the window and watched the highway unravel itself before us, I felt like a sham. I had made up this relationship with my dead grandmother in order to serve my own needs; now that I was no longer dancing, I had not even that.

I went to bed deflated, lonely. My whole life I had held onto the belief that resembling Miriam could live up to—indeed, could *surpass*—the experience of having known her. Because of our uncanny resemblance, I had felt oddly protected by her ghostly presence; I had lived my life on her imaginary shoulders. That suddenly seemed gloriously stupid. I was, as we all are, totally alone.

And yet some things are simply and ridiculously inexplicable. That night, in my uncle's blue guest bedroom, I dreamt for the first time in my life of meeting Miriam. We both looked like the young woman dancing *East Side Sketches* in the photo over my bed: the shoulder-length brown hair; the big, dark eyes;

the black, flowing dress; a natural ease in our steps. Despite all evidence to the contrary, I knew—in the way you *know* things in dreams—that she was actually in her late 60s, her age at the time her death.

Outside, on a beach at dusk, we danced together. She held my waist, played with my hair, and it all felt improbably familiar, comforting—and reciprocal. All I could think, my bare feet soaked in sand, my cheeks sore from smiling, was: *She knows who I am. She knows who I am.* 🗣️

Copyright 2003-2007, Nextbook, Inc.