Bertram Ross

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Bertram Ross, the American dancer who has died aged 82, was fated by his extreme good looks and equable temperament to spend much of his onstage life as the scantily clad victim of vivid death and torture, in his role as muse and partner to the modern dance choreographer Martha Graham.

His performances on Martha Graham's first London tour in 1954, when he was young and statuesque beside the tiny 60-year-old, inspired the establishment of modern dance in Britain. Although the sparse public found Graham's earthy, barefoot eroticism off-putting after the classical ballet they were used to, the company excited a handful of more visionary observers.

They included the ballet director Marie Rambert, the critic Richard Buckle - "Graham's first appearance in London will be as historic as Isadora Duncan's in St Petersburg at the beginning of the century," he prophesied - and a rich patron, Robin Howard, who spent his fortune on founding the London Contemporary Dance School in Euston (now The Place).

Bertram Ross was born in Brooklyn on November 13 1920. After school he studied painting, but on returning home from the Second World War, he turned to dance studies at Martha Graham's school.

In 1953 Martha Graham invited him to become her partner in the school. She was by then 59, reeling with shock at the end of her marriage to Erick Hawkins, her first partner, who had gone off to found his own company. Ross became her Hawkins substitute - her "fantasy lover", as he saw it (Ross was homosexual).

Martha Graham, out of sexual frustration, or possibly sheer mischief, devised a string of colourful and even lurid male roles for Ross, often drawn from Greek or Biblical myth.

Martha Graham's biographer, Agnes de Mille, the choreographer of *Oklahoma!* and *Rodeo*, wrote that Ross "was not interested in women, and he had made that clear. Martha had responded by inventing for him in various ballets every kind of tortured death in the calendar of horrors, and these he was forced to enact on the stage with her fervid participation.

She beheaded him, stabbed him, poisoned him, beat him, castrated him, but on

Bertram Ross the human man she dared not lay a finger".

Through Martha Graham's art and Ross's patient interpretation this complicated intimacy between the young man and older woman was translated into a theatrical and uninhibited dissection of male-female relations through a new medium, modern dance, which challenged both the apple-pie tidiness of the 1950s and the idealised predictabilities of classical ballet emotions.

Yet there was nothing crude about it, for all its fierce sexual thrills. As Richard Buckle wrote of his London performances: "Ross is great but also subtle in everything he does, soul utterly invested in body." It is arguable, however, that these hothouse creations led to the decisive reaction towards a more abstract, emotionless aesthetic by modern dance.

Few of Martha Graham's male dancers could stand the heat for long. Erick Hawkins, Merce Cunningham, Paul Taylor, Robert Cohan and Glen Tetley were in her stable of pedigree leading men, all nurtured by her into brilliant performers, but they all left to forge choreographic styles of very different character. Taylor once wrote: "Sometimes I think she views us men onstage as giant dildos."

The amiable Ross, however, stayed by Martha Graham for 25 years, squiring his ageing partner as Orestes, Oedipus and Adam, among the 35 leading roles she created for him. Becoming her co-director and leading teacher, he was seen by many as the custodian of Martha Graham's legacy.

However, in old age she switched her affections suddenly to a young photographer and fan, Ron Protas, giving him artistic control and dispensing with Ross in 1973. After Graham's death in 1991 at 97, Ross became a natural focus of the growing majority who were convinced that Protas would destroy Graham's legacy, as the company was brought to collapse.

Last year the row reached the American courts, where judges ruled that the Graham artistic legacy belonged properly with the dancers and teachers, rather than Protas, and the company reopened.

After parting from Martha Graham, Ross formed a popular lounge act with his companion of 34 years, the composer-pianist John Wallowitch, performing American salon songs and exploiting his gift for witty mimicry. They had success in London, as well as in New York and on the West Coast.

Ross, who in his later years suffered from Parkinson's Disease, died in Manhattan on April 20.