

DANCE

By WILLIAM HARRIS

DESPITE forensic evidence, the modern-dance pioneer Martha Graham did not die in 1991. She can be found performing, name dropping and introducing guest choreographers the first Wednesday and Thursday of most months at a club in Manhattan's meatpacking district. Oh, she also grew 16 inches and is often mistaken for a soft-spoken, witty man named Richard Move.

Martha@Mother is the event, a satiric character study of Graham as artist, diva and publicity hound — all portrayed by the 6-foot-4-inch Mr. Move in Graham drag — as well as a loving tribute to modern dance and its practitioners. The combination of serious dance and high camp was devised by Mr. Move, 30, in collaboration with Janet Stapleton, 38, the co-managing director at Dance Theater Workshop, New York's premier showcase for young choreographers. Mr. Move and Ms. Stapleton wanted to create an event that fused their shared love for both contemporary choreography and the sweaty energy of the club scene.

"I have lived in both the dance world and the late-night experimental cabaret world," says Mr. Move, who came to New York in 1989 after graduating from Virginia Commonwealth University with a degree in dance. (Back then, his last name was Winberg.) He has danced with Karole Armitage, Mark Dendy and Pooh Kaye, among others, and created "Jackie 60," a drag revue also presented at the club Mother. "I have an equal respect for the work that can be done at 1 A.M. in a nightclub and something performed at the Joyce Theater, and I don't see one as superior esthetically or more important than the other."

With no advertising but lots of word of mouth, and very limited seating, Martha@Mother, now in its third season, has become a hot ticket downtown. The club, at 875

**In Manhattan's
meatpacking district,
a tribute to the priestess
of modern dance mixes
high seriousness
and high camp.**

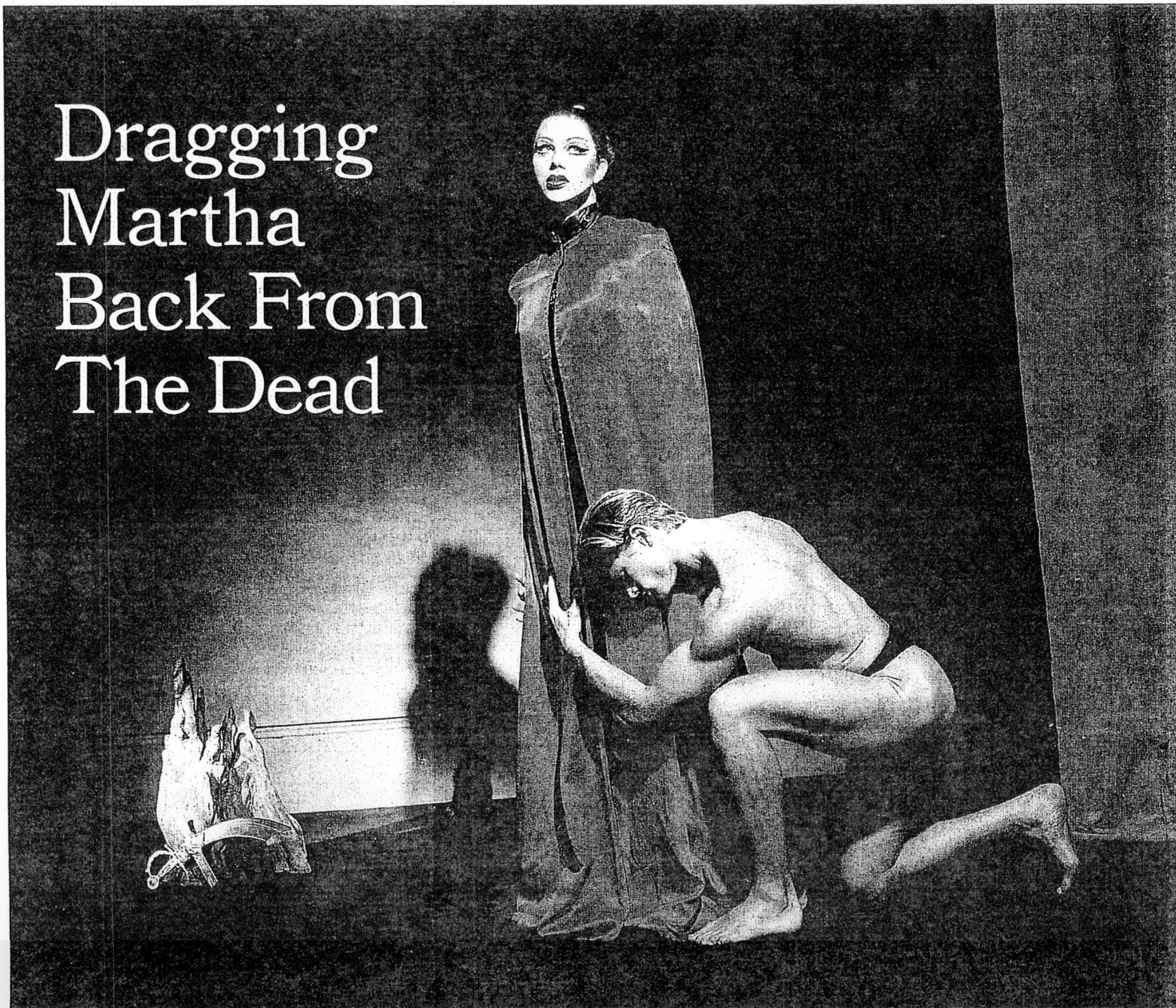
Washington Street at West 14th Street, seats only 60, with room for 25 standees. A second show has been added on Wednesdays in response to ticket demand. Mikhail Baryshnikov has attended, and so have the painters Brice Marden and Francesco Clemente and legendary members of the Graham troupe from the halcyon 1950's — Yuriko, Bertram Ross, Matt Turney, Mary Hinkson and Linda Hodes. Two other Graham company alumni, Stuart Hodes and Gus Solomons Jr., have performed on the 8-by-14-foot stage. "One thing everyone learns once they've performed at Martha," says Mr. Move, "is how much space they've wasted their whole careers."

The format is that of a variety show, with Mr. Move serving as M.C. for works by contemporary choreographers. The evening opens with Mr. Move and his troupe of three women and one man — Reid Hutchins, a friend since college and Playgirl magazine's 25th-anniversary centerfold — doing a takeoff of a Graham dance, often to the music from the film "Psycho." The movement is based on Graham technique and is performed with deadpan seriousness, which, along with some lip quivering and glaring by Mr. Move, gives the parody bite.

"I use Reid to exemplify and personify the Graham hunk," Mr. Move explains. "The men in the troupe were painfully gor-

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Dragging Martha Back From The Dead



Richard Move portrays Martha Graham and Reid Hutchins a "Graham hunk" in the deadpan parody that opens the evening of modern dance called Martha@Mother.

geous and for the most part did very little onstage and had no clothes on. They became props for these fierce women who were doing this incredible movement and were the stars of the show."

What follows is a cornucopia of Martha Graham anecdotes and pontifications, delivered by Mr. Move with deliciously exaggerated diction, that introduce and link the subsequent dance performances. Mr. Move has culled his material from Graham's autobiography as well as the biographies written by Agnes DeMille and Robert Tracy.

"I think people are very moved by Martha's words, because it's very unfashionable to be so sentimental about your art," Mr. Move says. "She equated art with religion. For a lot of dance people who come to the shows, hearing Graham's words rekindles their early years and memories of why they started dancing."

Mr. Tracy actually appeared at the November edition of Martha@Mother, giving a slide lecture about Graham's collaborations with the sculptor Isamu Noguchi. The hipster audience was rapt. Later the same

evening, it howled at the performance artist John Kelly's sly impersonation of Pina Bausch, the moody German choreographer. By the evening's finale, it was gasping audibly at the delicate beauty of a stick figure manipulated by the puppeteer Basil Twist.

"I love Richard's integrity," says Mr. Kelly, who was also featured on the very first Martha@Mother program. "I'm really able to appreciate the Graham choreography by seeing it through this lens of pathos and irony, which is what travestie does. The energy of the choreography on that tiny stage adds to the pleasure. It's time for us to look at Graham anew, both the beauty and the tackiness."

Mr. Move and Ms. Stapleton initially asked their friends in the dance world to participate. Now, choreographers are calling them for a slot. Ultimately, they invite artists whose work they admire. The only restriction they have imposed is that no dance can be longer than 10 minutes. (The rule applies to Mr. Move's group as well.) Choreographers are free to do as they please — show old work or devise something new. Tere O'Connor packed 16 of his dance

students from New York University onto the stage. John Jasperse showed a duet from a dance that will have its premiere in the spring. Every artist is paid a modest fee.

ACTUALLY, the show starts at the door. The ticket taker is a drag king named Willy Ryder, slender and handsome with a tough-guy stance. Once inside, there is a bar and a preshow video collage, compiled by Charles Atlas, featuring historical dance footage, numbers from movie musicals and any film clips in which the name Martha is mentioned, or screamed, as it is in "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" "We wanted to bring a whole environment to the event and not just create a dance showcase," Ms. Stapleton says.

There was one rocky moment. Back in November 1996, five days before the first Martha@Mother, Ms. Stapleton and Mr. Move received hand-delivered letters from lawyers representing the Graham estate, basically asking them to cease and desist. The two had used a photograph of Graham on their flyer, an image given to them by the

photographer. Now Mr. Move and his dancers appear on the flyers. "We took the letter very seriously," Ms. Stapleton says, "and also answered it immediately, assuring them that nobody was performing copyrighted works of Martha Graham. They asked for a few other things, which we were willing to do, including a disclaimer." The disclaimer, visible on the program and flyer, reads: "This event is in no way connected to or sponsored by 'The Martha Graham Entities.'" There has been no correspondence from the estate since.

The next Martha@Mother is Jan. 6 and 7. Appearing on the program will be the mid-career choreographers Molissa Fenley and Lance Gries, as well as José Navas (who is flying in from Montreal), Hope Clark (best known as a dancer in Elizabeth Streb's company), Sandra Kaufman (a newcomer) and Murray Louis, now 72 and the artistic director of the Murray Louis and Nikolais Dance Company. "Martha and Murray will sit on the stage and reminisce," Mr. Move says, smiling. He pauses, then adds, "I love dance, but I'm also happy to trash it." □