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ARTS & LEISURE

He's the Shade of Martha Graham



Amy Arbus

From left, Lisa Kron as Walter Terry, the dancer Katherine Crockett and Richard Move as Martha Graham in "Martha@... The 1963 Interview," to be performed at Dance Theater Workshop.

By GIA KOURLAS

RICHARD MOVE will never get Martha Graham out of his system. Even though she died in 1991, she just won't leave him alone.

Last year the 92nd Street Y contacted Mr. Move about an interview in its archives between Graham and the dance critic Walter Terry. This was exciting new fodder for Mr. Move, who through his critically praised impersonations, has given Graham an eerie and humorous resurgence.

For his new show, "Martha@... The 1963 Interview," which will be performed at Dance Theater Workshop starting Wednesday, Mr. Move will recreate that interview and, in turn, take his Graham characterization to a deeper place. This is less a satire than a look at two important minds in a serious conversation about dance. In another gender reversal, the actress and playwright Lisa Kron portrays Terry.

When Mr. Move first performed as Graham, in the mid-1990s, it was a version of the choreographer who was at the top of her game. "She never stuttered, and she never got hung up on a word," Mr. Move said. "I always felt I was playing Martha of the late 1950s and early 1960s, around the time of 'Clytemnestra,' when she could still turn it out, but she knew the end was near. The vulnerability, the fallibility is in this show."

By 1963 her body was showing wear, and her alcoholism, as a former company member Linda Hodes, noted in an interview, “was really kicking in.”

The conversation that year brings Graham the woman to life. Along with wistful moments that touch on her elusive quest for love, it also displays her femininity and humor.



Richard Move Robert Leslie/TED

“I was always so amazed when we did press conferences on tour at how articulate she was about what she was doing,” said Ms. Hodes, who is helping Mr. Move refine his gestures in the piece. “She could charm everybody and relate everything to these great issues in life: love and jealousy and desire. She could make everybody feel like they were taking part in a poem.”

There is a similar sense of intimacy running through the Terry interview, in which Graham’s internal dialogue is gradually revealed. “I wanted to do this interview so badly because it is exposing that side, and it is offering me a different insight and a different approach,” Mr. Move said, “although she is making plenty of grand pronouncements too, as always. But there are some moments that take my breath away.”

As Graham fleshes out her roles, it’s clear that one common point is a yearning for love. In the segment on “Appalachian Spring,” a dance about a couple on their wedding day, she is particularly tender on the subject: “I know it sounds corny, but it sometimes happens in everybody’s life,” and “if it ever happens, hang onto it.”

The interview also came at an intriguing time in Graham’s life. “Martha’s about to die her first death,” Mr. Move said, referring to her looming retirement. “It is the next year or two where the feet and hands start to be crippled. Within the next year Sontag uses her as one of her examples of camp. And by 1965 or so critics were basically saying, ‘Get her off the stage.’ ”

Fewer personal details are known about Terry, who was the influential critic for The New York Herald Tribune and a friend of Graham's. But it's clear he was also something of a character; at one point during the interview he even demonstrates a movement.

"There's a fantastic Andy Warhol drawing of him, which is the thing that really makes him look like a dandy," Ms. Kron said. "But the real way you feel him is through his voice. He has a fantastically melodious effete, Southern gay way of talking, and I'm not an incredible mimic, but I'm really interested in the musicality of the way that he talks."

The naturalistic performance, which recreates cadence, inflection, intonation and pauses, isn't solely focused on dialogue. Mr. Move has enlisted the stately Katherine Crockett a current Graham company principal, and Catherine Cabeen, a former member, to illustrate Graham's words through movement.

"They embody Martha at her prime," Mr. Move said. "They both animate the text and accompany it, but never in a literal way."

In other words, the dancers take the viewer inside Graham's mind. For Ms. Kron this effect explores the limits of language. "The purpose of all of the arts, but certainly in dance, is to capture the ineffable," she said. "What you're watching is so much more than anything anyone could describe. I think there's something in that gap and in that tension that is going to be the key to the show."

While it's been more than five years since Mr. Move presented a "Martha@ ..." show in New York, his appearances as Graham have continued around the world. At the same time Mr. Move has been pursuing academics; he has completed master's in both media arts (from the City College of New York) and performance studies (from New York University, where he is working toward his Ph.D.). Mr. Move's focus is the intersection of dance studies, media studies, and gender and queer theory; his mentor is the professor and dance theorist André Lepecki, who has written about Mr. Move in the context of viewing the body as an archive.

"All of that theoretical scholarship and analysis and reading and writing has really been inspiring my, what we call, practice," Mr. Move said. "There are all these terms, like practice versus theory. I see it as all the same." He shrugged knowingly. "Who is more of a theorist and scholar than Graham?"

To hear him talk, bringing Graham back to life is both a calculated act and almost out of his hands. "I mean, I don't —" Mr. Move's voice faltered uncharacteristically as he searched for the right words.

"She keeps calling me," he said, adding later: "I have to pick up the phone. I have to answer, and I can't say no — not when it's this rich and exciting and hard."