

"IT'S A CLASSIC STORY," SAYS RICHARD MOVE, KICKING BACK IN HIS SPRAWLING apartment over a sex club in the meatpacking district. "Someone comes to New York from the hinterlands—I'm from rural Virginia—and then invents a whole way of life: a name, a personality, everything." • Actually, Move created two new identities for himself: first as a go-go dancer (born Richard Winberg, he was christened "Move" by the club promoter Michael Alig, who's now behind bars for killing a drug dealer and chopping up the body), then as a keen impersonator of Martha Graham.

His drag riff on the matriarch of modern dance, which comes to Town Hall January 20, has been a cult sensation since its premiere in 1996. Long staged at Mother, a tiny nightclub near Move's home, it has lured a dazzling retinue of guest artists including Mikhail Baryshnikov and played before the likes of Francesco Clemente and Julia Roberts. The show—a cabaret act with arch monologues, clever impressions of Graham's oeuvre, and short dances by a range of luminaries—earned Move and coproducer Janet Stapleton a Bessie Award in 1997.

Move's impersonations gain further resonance because of the bitter contest over Graham's legacy. The pioneering choreographer left her estate, including the rights to her dances, to her longtime associate, Ron Protas.

errand into the maze



JOSEPH ASTOR



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Last May the board of the Martha Graham Center for Contemporary Dance voted to remove Protas as artistic director. The company shut down a few weeks later, and may never perform again. The school, which also suspended operations last summer, is set to reopen Tuesday under the direction of Stuart Hodes, who began dancing for Graham in the 1950s.

At Town Hall, Move will stage his miniature *Phaedra*, adding a chorus of women and new sets to Graham's 1962 erotic thriller. He's also preparing a solo based on the 1959 *Episodes*, "that strange, historic collaboration" by Graham and George Balanchine for the New York City Ballet. The bill also includes solo performances by Merce Cunningham, Mark Morris, and Meredith Monk. And Sharon Kinney will give a rare rendition of Paul Taylor's *Epic*, a minimalist "anti-

AS RIVAL FACTIONS FIGHT OVER MARTHA GRAHAM'S LEGACY, RICHARD MOVE RE-CREATES THE DIVA'S SINGULAR MYSTIQUE

BY CHRISTOPHER REARDON



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dance" whose 1957 premiere left critics aghast.

Move's act has come under fire, chiefly from people who've never seen it. Mostly he's accused of cheapening Graham's artistic legacy by plying the audience with misinformation and playing her creative genius for laughs.

Even before the 1996 launch of "Martha@Mother," lawyers for the Graham Center sent letters telling Move to cease and desist. He made a few concessions (like dropping a photo of Graham and adding a disclaimer to his promotional materials), but the show goes on.

"I have every right to impersonate a public figure like her," says Move, who dwarfs his five-foot-one alter ego by 16 inches. "And as far as confusing the public that they're seeing real

Graham work: You have to be very small-minded to think that's what's going on." He takes pains to ensure that his monologues are historically accurate, drawing on books, videos, and former Graham dancers who call him up with anecdotes. "I won't say, 'Lamentation premiered in 1930' onstage unless I've done my homework," he says. "I'm a scholar now on the subject. I take a lot of liberties, but it's from a point of knowledge."

He describes his dances as "Cliffs Notes versions" that use none of Graham's copyrighted material but evoke its essence. "She has an evening-length *Clytemnestra*," he explains. "I do a 10-minute version where I eliminate the minor characters and just go right for the love triangle and the murders."

The show's tone oscillates between homage and satire. "I just think those two elements are occurring simultaneously in everything I do," says Move. "How could it not be homage when you invest so much time and creative energy?"

Move grew up halfway between Fredericksburg, Virginia—"America's most historic city," he dutifully draws—and the Marine Corps base at Quantico. His father had a long career in law enforcement with the federal government, but Move won't elaborate. ("I'm not allowed to say anything else," he says.) His mother works for a federal court, but he says he's not at liberty to discuss that either.

A high school drama teacher, Frederick Franklin, turned him on to theater, chaperoning trips

to Washington, D.C., to study at the Folger Shakespeare Library and see productions by Martha Clarke, Robert Wilson, and Graham. "I remember Martha Graham taking a bow, held up by nearly naked beautiful men," Move says. "The dance was beyond my comprehension at the time, but I understood it was mythic and dramatic and so sexy and violent. Clearly it was one of her Greek pieces."

At Virginia Commonwealth University, he majored in dance under the tutelage of Kinney, who had danced for Taylor and Twyla Tharp. After graduating in 1989, he worked as a go-go dancer at Manhattan clubs like Limelight, Paladin, Red Zone, and the Roxy. By day, he danced with Mark Dendy and Karole Armitage.

"Martha@Mother" began "out of desperation," Move says. As one of the founders and producers of Jackie 60, a scathing cabaret that took on everyone from Laurie Anderson to Tonya Harding, he was in constant need of new material. One weekend in 1995 he put together a show based on dance legends. Robert LaFosse did Nijinsky. Maxine Sherman did Ruth St. Denis. And Move, for the first time, did Martha. "I thought it was going to be too artsy and obtuse even for our audience," he says.

He thought wrong. As "Martha@" enters its fifth season, he sees no shortage of interest or material. "The booking of guest slots can go on indefinitely," he says. "I'm dying to get Ann Reinking on the show. And Tommy Tune. And with all the young and emerging artists, it's almost limitless."

He also has a wealth of material for his Graham monologues and dances. "She made at least 180 ballets," he says. "I've done 20 of them, maybe 25." Still to come are adaptations of *Dark Meadow* (1946), *Judith* (1950), and *Seraphic Dialogue* (1955).

Move continues to find favor with some of the dancers who knew Martha best: Yuriko, Bertram Ross, Linda Hodes, Mary Hinkson, Matt Turney, and Stuart Hodes. "Those are people who really know Martha," he says. "And they have embraced what I do by telling me little stories or finding me videos. Stuart, who was Martha's partner in the 1950s, has actually performed with us three times. To me, that's the ultimate satisfaction, the ultimate seal of approval." □

Photos of Move as a young modern dancer may be viewed at www.villagevoice.com.