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A Choreographer Begins Shedding His Inner Martha



Stefanie Motta/Jacobs Pillow Dance

Kristen Joseph Irby (back) and Kevin Scarpin in his “Toward the Delights of the Exquisite Corpse.”

By JOY GOODWIN

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IN 17 years in New York, Richard Move has been a go-go dancer, a doorman at a club, a runway model, a nightclub impresario, a modern dancer and a Martha Graham impersonator. He has worked as a special-events producer, creating, say, an installation of slow-moving, bejeweled Butoh performers in glass boxes. He has directed one-man shows starring the fashion designer Isaac Mizrahi and a pro wrestler known as the Iron Sheik.

If you ask him, it’s not a bad résumé for someone now embarking on his latest career as a serious modern-dance choreographer.



Richard Move

Josef Astor

“When you look back at so many of the early moderns, in the beginning they were considered to be these maverick freaks,” Mr. Move said recently in a phone interview from Paris, where he was preparing for a performance at the Théâtre de la Ville. “You know, Ruth St. Denis had her prized peacock. Think of Ted Shawn and His Men Dancers. That was completely unheard of in the ’30s — a bunch of men dancing together? Or imagine Joseph Pilates, this genius doing exercises out in the snow in his hot pants. It all really started from this kind of wonderful madness.”

Mr. Move’s romance with dance’s old-time, outré theatricality fed into his best-known creation: his eerily lifelike turn as Martha Graham. From 1996 to 2000, the 6-foot-4, androgynously pretty Mr. Move channeled Graham in his own dance cabaret series, “Martha@Mother,” at a down-at-heel club in the meatpacking district. His clever monologues (delivered in Graham’s breathy, clipped alto) and witty, abridged stagings of classic Graham dances drew packed houses. More important for a young choreographer, they attracted dance luminaries like Mikhail Baryshnikov, Merce Cunningham and Mark Morris.

But while Mr. Move continues to perform modified versions of “Martha” at home and on the road, he has increasingly been stepping out of her shadow. When he went to the Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival in Massachusetts last summer, he left the Martha wig at home. Instead, he showed a full evening of his own choreography, employing a small, select company of professional dancers. A burnished version of that show, “MoveOpolis!” arrives at Dance Theater Workshop on Tuesday.

“MoveOpolis!” is actually Mr. Move’s second full-length show in New York this year. The first, “The Show (Achilles Heels),” garnered largely positive reviews during a run at the Kitchen in April.

But “The Show” was a dance-theater extravaganza, with Deborah Harry of Blondie belting into a stick mike while strolling among painted screens and lip-synching actor-dancers. “MoveOpolis!” is something very different: an evening of straight concert dance.

“It’s a risk,” said Cathy Edwards, the former artistic director of Dance Theater Workshop, who put “MoveOpolis!” on this year’s schedule. “He’s got a franchise with ‘Martha’ that he could be developing full time. That would be the safe path for Richard. But I think he wants to grow in this field. With this show, I think we’re going to get a more multidimensional iteration of his dance mind.”

Ms. Edwards, who saw “Martha@Mother” in its heyday, said she was impressed not only by Mr. Move’s passion for dance history but also by his ability to work a room. “He had the ability to bring out these crazy, beautiful, generous-spirited moments of hilarity,” she recalled. “It was as if Richard were a kind of den mother to all these widely divergent streams of the dance world.”

From his cabaret pulpit, Mr. Move served up a not inconsiderable modern-dance education along with the dish and the laughs. Real-life Graham associates like Murray Louis and Stuart Hodes dropped by the club to talk shop with Mr. Move’s Martha. Dozens of artists — including Mr. Morris, Mr. Cunningham, Meredith Monk, Molissa Fenley and [Yvonne Rainer](#) — showed work on the diminutive 7-by-10-foot stage.

“Richard made you feel a sense of community that invoked other times,” said Ella Baff, the executive director of Jacob’s Pillow, one of the insiders who squeezed into the sold-out shows. “Times you’d read about, like Greenwich Village in the ’20s, when in someone’s living room or the back of a bookstore the true spirit of uninhibited creativity was allowed to flow. Times when there was kind of a pride about being an artiste with an ‘e.’ ”

Ms. Baff noticed that Mr. Move’s gifts extended far beyond performing. He could attract extraordinary talent to his projects. He could direct, and he knew how to make a performance feel like an event. So in 2001 she invited him to be one of the choreographers of a special Jacob’s Pillow program entitled “The Seven Deadly Sins.”

Working with Helene Alexopoulos, the former New York City Ballet principal, Mr. Move created the solo “Lust.” His striking synthesis of high and low dance culture refracted ballet shapes through the prism of a dark nightclub sexuality. To many, “Lust” was a piece of bravura experimentation; Jennifer Dunning, in *The New York Times*, called it “stunning.” But to Mr. Move, blending modern dance with nightclub theatrics was completely natural.

“I can remember one night coming offstage at the Joyce, and then putting on a much more fabulous outfit and getting into a go-go cage and being lifted three floors above a crowd of 3,000 people at the Palladium,” he said.

“The so-called legit stuff and the club work were always feeding each other,” he added. “I didn’t see one as more important than the other.”

Mr. Move's unusual background made him an exciting artistic prospect to many, including Mr. Baryshnikov, whose White Oak Dance Project commissioned the first version of "The Show (Achilles Heels)" in 2002. In a show of faith, Mr. Baryshnikov himself first danced the role of the sensual, haughty Achilles.

"Richard's a very New York artist," Mr. Baryshnikov said recently from his Midtown dance studio. "It's like that line from Anna Akhmatova, 'poetry born from garbage.' He emerged from the debris of downtown: from the disco life, the artists, from that dark underside of the city. And he very much gives you the impression of New York in the '80s: the nightclub world, with its kind of simple but open, tender sexuality."

Mr. Move's background tells not only in his dance-making but also in the singular mix of collaborators he assembles for each project. In "Toward the Delights of the Exquisite Corpse," one of four works on the program at Dance Theater Workshop, the slinky second-skin bodysuits are by the "Sex and the City" costume designer Patricia Field. The piece's provocative sound score — a collage of music and spoken text by Julius Eastman and the Crystals' chilling 1962 girl-group recording of "He Hit Me (and It Felt Like a Kiss)" — was assembled by the New Yorker writer Hilton Als. The video clips that flicker on a giant rear screen are mixed live by Charles Atlas, who met Mr. Move at a club in the early '90s, when Mr. Atlas was working the door and Mr. Move was go-go dancing.



Josef Astor
Richard Move performing as Martha Graham.

Though text and video add texture to "Exquisite Corpse," the focus remains squarely on the dancing. And intent on making his first "pure dance evening," Mr. Move has revised "Lust," stripping away the original's theatrical conceits (text, mirrors, paparazzi figures). What remains is pared-down, high-intensity dancing for the new soloist, Catherine Cabeen. Similarly, the other two works on the program — the solo "Dilemma" (for Miguel Anaya) and the trio "Verdi Divertimento" — have shed their earlier distractions for sleeker forms.

Though Mr. Move doesn't perform in "MoveOpolis," there are echoes of his dancing in grand, archetypal gestures that — one imagines — would look even grander on his towering frame. You can sense his thirst for communication in a long gestural sequence of baby sign language. And you can almost see his intellect clicking through the floor-work experiment that opens "Exquisite Corpse."

But anyone who expects Mr. Move to have Graham on his mind will be surprised. Apart from a few women with long, loose hair and a mood of overall theatricality, there are few references to her. There is little of her beloved narrative, and the eclectic movement vocabulary — much of it developed in collaboration with the seasoned dancers — suggests no specific school.

Still, in other respects, Mr. Move acknowledged, Graham's fingerprints are all over his pure-dance debut. "When I'm working, I hear these inspiring phrases of hers in my head all the time," he said. "Things like 'We are all of us unique, and if we do not fulfill this unique creative pattern within ourselves, it is lost forever.'"