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Fast on the Heels of Achilles and Martha Graham

By CLAUDIA LA ROCCO

THIS month, Richard Move is resurrecting a pair of giants: Achilles and Martha.

On April 27, "The Show (Achilles Heels)" makes its New York debut at the Kitchen. And on Tuesday, Mr. Move is to embody Martha Graham once again, this time in her company's scheduled celebration of its 80th anniversary at the Skirball Center. His variety show "Martha @" has been thrilling audiences around the world since 1996, but he has never shared the stage with the grande dame's troupe.

"I love epic," he said of the two projects with one of his big laughs. "It's in my DNA."

Rasta Thomas, most recently seen on Broadway in Twyla Tharp's "Movin' Out," will play the beautiful, doomed Achilles. The role was originally a vehicle for Mikhail Baryshnikov, who commissioned the piece for his White Oak Dance Project in 2002. It was performed only a few times before White Oak disbanded, but Mr.

Richard Move is impersonating a legend once again, but this time at the invitation of her dance troupe.

Baryshnikov is helping to present it through the Baryshnikov Dance Foundation.

In directing and choreographing "The Show," Mr. Move draws heavily on "The Iliad," but also invokes 1950's Hollywood films and game-show culture. Mixing pure dance with elements of performance art and a self-conscious theatricality, the work moves easily between high drama and playfulness. Fascinated by dichotomies in the myth, Mr. Move has emphasized both Achilles' ambivalence toward war and his desire for glory, as well as his love affair

with his childhood friend Patroclus, whose death spurs the magnificent warrior to battle.

And, of course, there are the gods.

For Athena, Mr. Move has employed a contemporary goddess: the new Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee Deborah Harry will sing and act in this production. "She is the icon," he said of Ms. Harry. "And somehow, the Athena story, it's a compression of her own."

Asked what she thought of being likened to

an ancient warrior goddess, Ms. Harry laughed and said she supposed she did feel as if she was sometimes "doing battle." "He's a funny person, Richard," she said. Mr. Move comes up with "very interesting and beautiful things," she added. "I can't imagine what made him be so insightful as to try to become Martha Graham."

Though steeped in classical literature and early modern dance, Mr. Move (real name: Richard Winberg) is a wholly contemporary

creature, one who says that "everything is available for me to use." His apartment, in a Midtown high-rise with a truly epic view of the city, illustrates this blend of sensibilities, from minimalist vases containing fish and Japanese bamboo to ornately framed mirrors and an imposing skull staff (a Graham prop).

He has given the singular Helen of Troy, who he says is underdeveloped as a character in the literature, a special movement language: the Graham technique. But no impersonations here. The role is performed by Katherine Crockett, a principal dancer with the Graham company.

Mr. Move gets his chance to be Martha on Tuesday in one of his Graham monologues and a reconstruction of the 1965 Graham duet "Part Real, Part Dream," with the former Alvin Ailey star Desmond Richardson. The entire evening seems part real and part dream to him — an unimaginable opportunity, especially given that Mr. Move's relationship with the Graham estate began on rocky footing. (When Mr. Move first started impersonating Graham, he received a letter from lawyers for her estate seeking among other things a disclaimer in his show's program, distancing the estate from his production.)

"I had heard rumblings," Mr. Move said, about being invited to perform with the company, "and I just thought, 'Oh, puh-lease, that will never happen in a million years.' And I was shocked and awed when I did get that call" from the Graham company's artistic director, Janet Eilber.

Not all Graham-watchers are thrilled, but Mr. Move, well aware that his inclusion will ruffle some feathers, seems unconcerned.

"And you know, the irony isn't lost on anyone, that my relationship with the official Graham enterprise began with cease-and-desist orders." He paused mischievously. "And now here I am, finally performing with my company again."



Photographs by Josef Astor



After a decade of playing Martha Graham in his own unauthorized show, Richard Move, above, was asked to participate in her troupe's 80th-anniversary celebration.