

In 'Martha@Summerdance,' he lets her spirit Move him

By **MICHAEL SMITH**
NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT
e-mail: life@newspress.com

A drag Martha Graham? It seemed like a dubious idea. The high priestess of modern dance had already become an artifact of lost idealism by the end of her long life; and since her death, her legacy has been further damaged by squabbles among her legal and artistic heirs. What could be the point of another caricature?

Richard Move, who premiered his Graham takeoff at a downtown Manhattan bar in 1996 and has ridden it to glory, neutralized these doubts with a unique mix of sincerity, wit and respect for his model. In "Martha@Summerdance," he affectionately sent up Graham's pretensions but transmitted a profound admiration for her vision and achievement.

Before the show, the audience at Center Stage Theater was greeted by a pricelessly hilarious and exhilarating video collage by Charles Atlas of dance moments mostly from movies, everything from Elvis Presley to voodoo trance dancing, from the Joffrey Ballet's "Rite of Spring" to Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis. What was amazing in these clips was the quality, humor and sheer intensity of the

dancing, the like of which is hardly seen anymore. The message was that dancing is fun. We were ready for anything when the lights went down.

Mr. Move as Ms. Graham made a stately entrance in a spotlight, statuesque in an elegant chinoiserie coat over a columnar aqua gown, made up within an inch of his life. Whipping out a microphone, he greeted the audience. The voice was soft, the diction precise and slightly drawled, the pace deliberate. The pronouncements were a little ridiculous — "There are only two kinds of dance, good and bad" and "Center Stage is where I am," for example — but there was only a hint of dry self-mockery in the delivery, a wry glint of shared amusement in the timing.

This was a homecoming of sorts, said Martha, recounting the facts of her family's move from grimy, gray Pittsburgh to sunny, liberating Santa Barbara when she was 10. She was vice president of the Student Council at Santa Barbara High School and editor of the yearbook. Then she saw Ruth St. Denis dance in Los Angeles and realized she was "doomed to be a dancer." When she bragged about her later accomplishments — George Balanchine called Graham's style "the other classical technique" — she was telling the plain truth.

Mr. Move didn't look like Graham,

though she wore just as much make-up but he uncannily caught and reflected her animating, inspiring spirit, performance more a tribute than imitation. When he kidded her, it was with love.

The evening's dancing consisted of impressionistic renditions of Martha Graham works. These too presented a disconcerting double image. Mr. Move offered a few moves from "Appalachian Spring" with a short length fence and a rope as props. Katherine Crockett, as his "company," demonstrated the Graham technique while Mr. Move described it, using what sounded like Graham's own words. Excerpts from Graham's portrayals of Medea, Jocasta and Clytemnestra followed; these figures from Greek tragedy are "every woman," she declared.

The movement fragments referred to Graham — the flexed foot, pelvic thrusts, angular extensions, facial contractions — without even trying to duplicate her dancing. Ms. Crockett was nothing like a Graham dancer but had a sharp technique of her own that looked great, especially in her first costume, which hugged and revealed her taut body like a silver film. Mr. Move's dancing was more grounded but less technical, his presence was and engaging as he channeled the woman who possesses him, sometimes looking rather Egyptian. Exaggerations and jokes abounded.

Some of the monologues between dances were on tape, smoothly making time for changes into further examples of Pilar Limosner's wonderful costumes. Here, Mr. Move was more mannered and the stories were more preposterous, but they too may well have been drawn from Graham memoirs.

He ended with "Lamentation: Graham's 1930 evocation of universal grief, visibly bare-chested in a purple tube of stretchy cloth, no longer making any point of impersonating a woman, wholly serious now, reminding us that dance can have the highest aspirations and reach to express the deepest human experience, which is well worth remembering in our post-ironic time. Summerdance is to be commended for bringing us this soulful entertainment.

(The final performance "Martha@Summerdance" is tonight 8 at Center Stage Theater, upstairs the Paseo Nuevo mall. Tickets, which are \$22-\$25, may be purchased at the box office or by calling 963-0408.)

dance review