

Richard Move's 'Martha': A Drag Homage That Soars

By SARAH KAUFMAN
Washington Post Staff Writer

With his wide-set eyes, round face and broad, glossy smile, Richard Move in makeup bears more of a resemblance to Jackie Kennedy than to petite, angular modern dance matron Martha Graham. But as his show "Martha@Dance Place" progresses, Move reveals the essence of Graham and her groundbreaking art in surprising and deeply touching ways.

Move launched his drag impersonation of Graham in 1996 in a tiny club in Manhattan's meatpacking district. The former go-go dancer and club rat had a soft side for Graham's disarming sentimentality about her work, and for her deeply felt frankness about the power of dance and what it could reveal about the human spirit. It was this quasi-religious belief in dance that led Graham to retool the art form into a vehicle of searing expression such as the world had never seen. This serious philosophical side of Graham is as much a part of Move's show, performed

over the weekend at Dance Place, as are the hilarious send-ups of her severe, spare movement style and her diva-esque declarations of self-importance.

"Martha" is essentially a variety show with Graham as emcee, presiding over excerpts from her works and performances by guest artists. Move presents a decidedly outspoken Graham who is acutely aware of her legendary status in the world of art, even if others aren't. The evening begins with Charles Atlas's hilarious film montage of dance snippets, from contortionists to a reconstruction of Nijinsky's "Rite of Spring." Cue the soaring strings of Aaron Copland's "Appalachian Spring," and enter Move's towering version of Graham—he stands over six feet tall—in a gold-trimmed gown and floor-length cape. "Yes, I am the mother of contemporary dance," he begins, listing various awards Graham garnered throughout her 96 years. "And I am a national treasure"—dramatic pause—"in Japan." His dramatically fringed eyeballs roll.

An excerpt from Graham's "Night Journey," the Oedipus myth from his mother's

perspective, follows. In the space of a few minutes, Move brilliantly caricatures Graham's ferocity of expression, the unrelenting tension and the illicit passion of Queen Jocasta for her own son, wittily depicted by blond hunk Reid Hutchins (a Playgirl centerfold and Move's classmate when both were at Virginia Commonwealth University) wearing only a gold cape and spiky silver thong. "As you can see," Move purrs as Hutchins struts into the wings, "we must always dress the women, and undress the men." If Graham herself didn't pen these words, she must have thought them, given her tendency for just such a division of the sexes in many of her works.

As Move points out in one of his many monologues, Graham, who died a decade ago, was a forceful personality offstage as well. She declined an invitation to dance at Constitution Hall after black singer Marian Anderson had been denied a recital there. She refused to tour in Hitler's Germany. Washington honored her many times: She was awarded the National Medal of Freedom and the Kennedy Center Honors, and she

was the first dancer to perform at the White House. But she was not always appreciated here. Move relates with pride how Graham's ballet "Phaedra" was denounced by Congress as "lewd."

Graham's recollections about performing in a Spanish bullfighting arena—where, as Move tells it, she reveled in its echoes of passion, terror and agony—segued neatly into a performance by local flamenco dancer "La Furia," Debra Belo. Other guests included local choreographer Laura Schandelmeier in a rambling solo, "Mademoiselle"; brightly costumed performers in a modern version of bhangra, a folk dance from northern India and Pakistan; and leading Washington Ballet dancer Erin Mahoney—looking taller and even more commanding on Dance Place's small stage—in a sharp-angled solo choreographed by Septime Webre.

Webre, artistic director of the ballet company, was a Graham student—for all of three days. "Your floor work is excruciating," he complained to Move in an onstage interview. Move flashed a self-satisfied grin. (Earlier, one of the three Graham-trained women

who are regular members of Move's show had performed a telling demonstration of that excruciating technique, with its whip-lash contractions of the midsection.)

But Move remained the show's solid center, and when he was onstage in his gleaming black wig and regal Halston knockoffs you could look nowhere else. His deliberative, hushed voice was uncannily like Graham's, as was clear when she was occasionally heard on tape, and his deadpan expressions and sidelong glances gave added bite to his pronouncements, most of them taken directly from Graham's writings.

His show is funny and wry, but its earnest moments are what stay with you. Unlike the spoof of "Night Journey," Move paid tender tribute to "Appalachian Spring"—first performed at the Library of Congress—and "Frontier," underscoring their evocations of new love and the expansiveness of the American spirit. In our postmodern age, it is unfashionable to be so openly romantic about one's art. Move's homage to Graham reminds us of how truly pioneering she was, and continues to be.

