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Living in the Real World: Martha Graham Dance Company Meets Reality TV

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Hibbard Nash Photography/Martha Graham Dance Company
Lloyd Mayor in Richard Move's "The Show (Achilles Heels)"



American modern dancer and choreographer
Martha Graham/Courtesy Library of Congress

On October 29, 2012, water rushed in from the Hudson River, spilling down the stairs into the basement of the Westbeth complex, an artist's residence in the West Village that the **Martha Graham Dance Company** currently calls home. In preparation of what we now know as Hurricane Sandy, company manager **Faye Rosenbaum** reportedly had many of the costumes and set pieces, located in the basement, placed on pallets two feet off the ground. Little did she, or anybody else, know that the water would almost reach the ceiling, approximately nine feet off the ground.

"It's a terribly difficult job, and terribly expensive, reclaiming the sets and costumes we need immediately," **Janet Eilber**, the company's artistic director, told **ARTINFO** in a recent phone conversation. "It's going to be a long-term job to reclaim them all. But on the other hand, it has given us an opportunity in a number of ways."

The upcoming season for the Martha Graham Dance Company, which runs at the Joyce Theater from February 20 to March 3, reflects these opportunities. Under the heading "Myth and Transformation," the company will present a series of commissions and reconstructions of classic Graham works in a new context, often times stripping down the original choreography to its bare essentials. Original sets and costumes, when they haven't been abandoned all together, will be scaled back considerably.

One of the featured productions is a reconstruction of "The Show (Achilles Heels)," choreographed by **Richard Move** and originally commissioned by **Mikhail Baryshnikov's** White Oak Dance Project in 2002. "The Show" draws inspiration from Homer's "The Iliad," but places its characters in a contemporary setting of voyeur celebrity culture and reality television filled with pop culture references.

"I realized that this idea of the mortal hero was very appropriate, and metaphoric, for a dancer's life," Move told **ARTINFO**. "I'm imagining, where does that happen today in contemporary culture? We see these people like Whitney Houston, we see these people melt down, we see them peak and we see them fall in real time on reality TV. I kind of

conflated this game show meets reality television show, hosted by Athena, as a way of both advancing the story line and also placing Achilles in a contemporary context. Where would this happen to this kind of figure? He would be on Bravo or something, melting down before our very eyes.”

Since its inception with Baryshnikov, “The Show” continues to evolve. Move is adamant about the nebulous nature of art, placing a great emphasis on each dancer’s ability to use the source material to customize their roles.

“It’s always about what the individual qualities are that they can bring to the piece that make it come to its most authentic, full, rich life,” Move explained. “It’s got to be individual.”

Eilber, a former dancer in the company, sees a connection between this method and Martha Graham’s. “Each new cast that went into a new reconstruction of one of her works, she would change the choreography,” she said. “She had no compunction about that. I think it’s the mark of a great director.”

Move recruited downtown New York legend **Arto Lindsay** to compose the score, which includes work by Blondie singer **Debbie Harry**. Both musicians are old friends of Move, and he was intrigued by their experimentation and constant need to push themselves in new directions.

“The very important thing about Debbie’s music in Blondie, and this production in the score, is her ballads. People know her best for ‘Maria,’ and the big hits with the beat and things, but her body of work as a chanteuse and lyricist of the ballad is extraordinary,” Move said. “So all of the songs we’re using are essentially love ballads. Romantic with a capital R.”

Another important collaborator is the painter **Nicole Eisenman**, who designed the sets for “The Show.” Move felt a kinship with her work, which uses similar forms of appropriation from popular culture to the old masters.

“Her sets sculpt the space and become the walls of the city of Troy. They become different things; the company actually transports them through the space at key moments in the drama,” Move said. “So they are very integrated into the staging and choreography.” He added that they have “totally simpatico aesthetics.”

“The Show” will share a program with Graham’s “Phaedra,” the late choreographer’s 1962 similar rendering of Greek myth into modern dance that was deemed obscene by the United States Congress.

“Graham is the Picasso of dance, she’s the Stravinsky, and that I get to show my little piece on a program with Graham masterpieces is a dream come true.”