

Divine turbulence

Richard Move's 'Martha @'

BY MARCIA B. SIEGEL NEW YORK — Martha Graham wasn't always treated as reverentially as she is now. Surrogate matriarchs appeared in other people's dances as early as the 1930s, and comedians

have parodied her gaudy aestheticism. But the Graham interpretations of Richard Move go beyond send-up. Move, a dancer and performance artist, has been hosting — or hostessing — the "Martha @" series since 1996. Wearing a wardrobe of exquisite knockoffs, Move as Martha stages his own reductions of Graham choreography, and he introduces stellar guests associated with Graham and young artists born too late to have seen her perform. Last Saturday the nonrepeatable show, which is usually installed in a tiny downtown club, played to a packed audience at the 1500-seat Town Hall.

The main attraction was Move's version of *Phædra*, a 1962 epic based on the story of the queen of Athens, who fell in love with her stepson. By the time the original dance was made, Graham was deep into her Greek period, too deep perhaps. *The Legend of Phædra* boasts all the decadent signs and impedimenta that had

become trademarks of Graham's dance theater: the horny characters, the implacable choruses and harbingers of doom, the symbolic props and sets, and, at the center of it all, Martha in gorgeous costumes and eyelashes, writhing with forbidden desire.

Maybe token Grahamism will be our legacy, at least until the decade-long feud over her creative inheritance is concluded. But Move and the cast, including Jennifer Binford as Aphrodite and Amy Piantaggini as Artemis (the two bitch goddesses sparring for Phædra's soul), Rob Besserer as King Theseus, and Reid Hutchins as the toy-boy Hippolytus, gave a believable account of a dance I haven't seen in decades. Some less respectful imitators might be content to mime and mug Graham's iconography, but Move has gathered real dancers who do real Graham movement, and this gives the whole enterprise a historical dimension.

Graham's 1959 semi-collaboration with George Balanchine provided Move with another regal character. Using only one New York City Ballet dancer, Sallie Wilson (Balanchine in turn made a solo for Paul Taylor), Graham devised a climactic tennis game as prologue for the execution of Mary Queen of Scots. Move/Martha introduced *Mary's Episode* in a monologue, one of a series of expositions layered to showcase Graham's choreographic intentions and her flowery epigrams at the same time that they delineate a chronic scene stealer. Throughout the evening, a retinue of costumed dancers attend her, handing her the microphone or taking away a prop with obsequious bows as she waves them away. Even the big stars who've come to perform with her get acknowledged only as they reflect her.

She asks Merce Cunning-

ham, "a distinguished former member of my company," to reminisce a bit, and he tells charming stories, none of them adulatory enough to satisfy Martha. She wonders what he's been doing since leaving her company in 1944. He counters that she reminds him of someone he used to know whose name he can't quite remember.

Cunningham, now 81, did his *Chair Solo*, a series of moves he can put together according to the shape he's in on a given evening. As always, he was riveting. He sat perfectly still, looking intently at the audience. With a sudden impulse, he'd change his whole body, including his face. He'd recede into stillness, then begin another move and recovery. Some things were drastic; some were whispers

— a sketchy port de bras, a series of leg brushes, a stirring of the hips. Each new reorientation was filled with a tremendous presence and a depthless calm.

Former Paul Taylor dancer Sharon Kinney performed one of Taylor's first dances, *Epic* (1957), which has attained almost mythic status. In Martha's words, "a series of so-called everyday movements and postures . . . misconstrued as dance," it "ushered in the dreaded postmodern movement."

The audience, for all its millennial sophistication, got restless as Kinney imperturbably stood on one leg and then the other and a telephone operator announced the time in 10-second intervals for five full minutes. *Epic* bore a strange resemblance to Cunningham's *Chair Solo*, a startling reminder that Taylor owed more to Cunningham at that point than he did to Graham. Meredith Monk ("Her teacher was Bessie Schonberg, a former member of my company") sang three of her wordless, evocative songs. Not least of the thrills on this amazing concert was a world premiere by Mark Morris in which he and Lauren Grant danced a sevillana with castanets and Morris developed a sultry attraction to the waiter who kept pouring them glasses of wine.

In adopting a drag-queen persona, Richard Move is playing to the audience for kitsch references, insider dance recognition, and gender-based innuendo. But "Martha @" has an inclusiveness that broadens the show's appeal and its resonance, a generosity of spirit that wasn't often practiced by Move's mentorees.



BEYOND SEND-UP: dancer and performance artist Move has been hostessing the "Martha @" series since 1996