

Move's 'Martha@' odd yet moving

By Jennifer de Poyen
DANCE CRITIC

Watching Richard Move, the 6-foot-something, solidly built actor, impersonate Martha Graham, the diminutive grande dame of modern dance, in his "Martha@," it's interesting to speculate what Graham herself would make of the multimedia cabaret show.

In her bizarre yet fascinating autobiography, "Blood Memory," published the year she died, in 1991, Graham spoke approvingly of satirists like Fanny Brice, who did an early Graham takeoff for the Ziegfeld Follies, and Danny Kaye, who performed with a band of dancers he called the Graham Crackers.

"I've never really warmed



Performer-impersonator Richard Move brings the Martha Graham legacy to life in his compelling "Martha@," a multimedia cabaret show. K.C. Alfred / Union-Tribune

to the idea of female impersonators," she wrote in a typically amused, ambivalent and self-aggrandizing tone, "but then I sort of have to agree with Mae

West, who said, 'What's wrong with it? Women have been doing it for years.'"

This is one of many stories from the historical record that Move has dra-

DATEBOOK

"Martha@," starring
Richard Move

7 and 10 tonight, 3 and 7 p.m.
tomorrow

Lyceum Space Theatre, Horton
Plaza, downtown

\$27-\$35
(619) 544-1000

matized for his entertaining, richly informative and tonally weird show, which continues through the weekend at the Lyceum Space Theatre.

Move, a fervent amateur Graham historian, has culled lots of material — some juicy, some oddly affecting — from Graham's autobiography; the lines that get the biggest laughs are really

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Move manages to eerily embody the dance diva

Graham's "A Dancer's World," the 1957 documentary about her work, is both spoofed and lovingly evoked. Move also offers capsule versions of Graham's dances, at once funny and moving. And there are traces of information from Graham admirers, who have offered up stories, writings and memorabilia in the years since Move's first show.

What makes all of this interesting, and not just to dance enthusiasts, is that Graham really was both a groundbreaking artist who changed the way we look at dance and a larger-than-life personality who mingled with the rich and famous — presidents, Hollywood actors, serious artists, clothing designers. Besides which, Move is a captivating performer, much as Graham was. His show brings Graham's legacy to vivid life.

Like all great female impersonators, Move both eerily embodies his subject and uses his performance to comment on it. Graham had a distinctive way of speaking, and Move absolutely nails it; close your eyes,

and it's easy to imagine those slow, dreamy, carefully enunciated words coming from Graham's own mouth.

Graham was such a diva, especially in later years, that she almost was a drag performer herself, proving Mae West's point about female impersonation. Move's response is not to camp it up — he does not, as a rule, play Martha for laughs. His humor is quiet, appreciative, loving. Call it earnest camp, maybe. Or serious drag.

Throughout the evening, Move serves as hostess and narrator, both on the stage, in a series of fabulous diva-worthy gowns and costumes, and in video segments by the film-

maker Charles Atlas.

He is joined intermittently by Denise Vale, a former member of the Martha Graham Dance Company, who demonstrates Graham's pioneering (and deeply beautiful) technique and performs a series of dances that re-imagine, and faintly parody, some of Graham's great dance works. Vale is a terrific dancer, and she does what Move, whose technique is limited, cannot: She evokes the power and meaning of Graham's work.

In keeping with the cabaret spirit, Move also shares the stage with some local dance artists. Greg Lane and Eric Geiger performed an edgy duet adapt-

ed from Nancy McCaleb's haunting "La Rumorosa," and Sadie Weinberg (looking uncommonly Grahamesque) and Alison Dietterle-Smith presented excerpts from Weinberg's anguished "Mourner's Dance."

No doubt the show plays differently here than it did in New York, the center of the dance world, where Graham's work has been performed almost continuously for 80 years. Move's early audiences there

were full of Graham followers — acolytes and detractors alike — who became part of the show, and fed Move's performance. Still, for local audiences, "Martha@" is a rare chance to encounter the Graham legend in a theatrical setting, which is where it belongs.