

Saturday, Aug 23, 2014

THE STRAITS TIMES

The *Big* Story

Dance review: Larger-than-life Martha Graham personified in layered performance



By Germaine Cheng

Martha@... The 1963 Interview reveals volumes about the late modern dance doyenne Martha Graham. This re-enactment of a 1963 conversation between Graham and dance critic and historian Walter Terry is based on an audio recording discovered in New York in 2010.

Graham's larger-than-life diva persona, the exaggerated makeup, impeccable high bun and long velvet robe. But performing artist Richard Move plays her with the careful calibration of a long-time devotee, giving life to Graham's pregnant pauses and meanderings in the interview. Through the imitation of the solipsistic lilt of her speaking voice, Move captures a hint of the late pioneer's essence - visionary at times, seemingly ludicrous at others.

Move himself has mentioned that the interview text is a brilliant, rare find. Terry's questioning evinces an ardent fan enamoured by Graham's presence. Actress Lisa Kron, as Terry is inevitably overshadowed, but nevertheless provides much of the work's humour in her posing of Terry's long questions and encouraging applause from the audience.

Graham is led to analyse the dizzying array of characters in her oeuvre and the motivations behind her movement. A contraction is "an entire enfolding of the body" rather than a button-push reaction in the navel. The conversation is esoteric at times, but that is to be expected of Graham speaking of herself. Dancers Catherine Cabeen and Suzzanne Ponomarenko perform excerpts of Graham's work, serving as a reminder of how new her choreography must have been to audiences decades ago.

Move poetically describes the "Dark Ladies" of Graham's works inspired by Greek mythology. Instead of the music of Wallingford Riegger and Samuel Barber, here the lusty spread-eagle legs of Phaedra, the consuming anguish of Medea, the anger in Clytemnestra's angular limbs have the rhythm of their creator's voice as a guide.

It is wholly expected that the then 69-year-old Graham would have stood up and performed during the 1963 interview despite being on the brink of retirement from the stage. Move rises and performs the role of the Bride in an excerpt from Graham's Appalachian Spring, alongside Ponomarenko's Pioneer Woman and Cabeen's Priest.

The performance fascinates due to its many layers. While Graham speaks of the meticulous research and total submission it takes to play one of her heroines, she herself is being performed on stage with Move having undergone the same process. Her superlative personality and elaborate mask of genius make her one of the "Dark Ladies", perhaps the darkest of them all.