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Bringing dance legend Martha Graham to life

American dancer Richard Move brings the legendary dancer to life

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By CORRIE TAN

Over the telephone from New York City, American dancer Richard Move's bright tenor sounds nothing like the husky gravel of his glamorous alter ego - Martha Graham, the mother of contemporary dance.

But on stage, the chameleonic artist and choreographer slips almost effortlessly into her shoes: the imposing presence, the hair piled regally atop the head and the bright, blood-red lipstick.

Graham, who died in 1991, was under 1.6m in height, and Move stands at over 1.9m.

But he says that "everyone talks about how she had the strength of 10 men". Perhaps that is why he has been so successful in performing her - her presence has finally found a body large enough to encompass her dynamism.

Move will be bringing his reincarnations of Graham here for the Singapore International Festival of Arts, as well as its pre-festival programme, The O.P.E.N.

Later this month, he will perform four of her solos at the Asian Civilisations Museum - Night Journey, Clytemnestra, Lamentation and Episodes, Part 1.

For the festival itself in August, he will recreate Graham's 1963 interview with dance critic Walter Terry, who will be played by actress Lisa Kron, also in drag.

Move says of this gender reversal: "I think it draws people in as a sort of curiosity and oddity at first. And then I think adding humour and irony draws people in even deeper, and it's like a magnifying glass into her life."

He hopes this focus on gender will heighten their performances for the audience and also cites how theatre in the past relied on men to play all the roles, including the theatre of Shakespeare and ancient Greece.

His performances as Graham have been praised by many publications. The New York Times said of The 1963 Interview that "some of her greatest works and roles... are all given vivid life in her declamatory mix of lofty sentiment and earthy realism", adding: "The force of her conviction is utterly compelling".

Move, who declined to give his age ("A lady never tells her age," he says coyly), has been resurrecting Graham regularly for almost two decades.

He was first enchanted by Graham during movement classes at a performing arts high school. He says: "I had never seen anything so erotic and visceral and violent and at the same time, extraordinarily beautiful".

Graham has been likened to the Picasso and Stravinsky of dance, creating intense and cutting-edge work with her signature angular and dramatic style that broke the mould of classical ballet.

Move envisioned Graham coming back to life and "setting the record straight", and that is how his dance series was born.

The first show was held in 1996 at a cabaret space in Manhattan's Meat-Packing district to pay tribute to Graham - and he has not stopped since.

This, despite the fact that he initially received "cease and desist" orders and was threatened with lawsuits from the estate of Martha Graham.

He laughs, saying that in a way, the publicity brought more buzz to the show -

and eventually, dancers connected to Martha Graham warmed to the production. He has since performed with the Martha Graham Dance Company and choreographed work for it.

He says he has shed his self-consciousness: "I find this has happened on stage, where I've reacted not as me, but as her - where there was maybe a mistake in the text or a glitch in the music, and I've reacted as her, not as me thinking about how she would react."

And he continues to find new things about her on stage, describing his transformation in almost spiritual terms.

"Oh god, how do I describe that," he says, choosing his words carefully. "I lose myself. I lose my self in her, on stage. I find that it's so amazing sometimes, it's not really me. I feel like she and I are together, we perform together.

"I used to say that I performed as her, or that I was doing a performance of hers. But now I've come to the realisation that I'm with her."

Book it

MARTHA@... THE 1963 INTERVIEW

Where: School of the Arts Drama Theatre

When: Aug 21 to 23, 8pm

Admission: \$30 to \$50 from Sistic