



Richard Move, the immortal Martha Graham

A cabaret act becomes the definitive, living history of one of dance's great artists.

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Richard Move as Martha Graham

Photo: Josef Astor

Google marked Martha Graham's 117th birthday in May with an animated "doodle" on its home page, spelling out its own name backward using five of her most iconic moves.

This year's weeklong, fifth anniversary Chicago Dancing Festival, which begins Tuesday 23, focuses on American dance overall and, in particular, provides

numerous opportunities to learn how and why the daughter of a Pittsburgh psychiatrist became one of the most influential artists of the 20th century. The Martha Graham Dance Company performs her *Embattled Garden* (1958) on and *Diversion of Angels* (1948) on the day between, catch a short documentary on Graham, *A Dancer's World*, during at the Chicago Cultural Center.

Graham died at the age of 96 in 1991. Five years later, NYC performer-choreographer Richard Move donned full Graham getup and performed as her in a one-off tribute to dance legends; the night also featured Robert La Fosse as Nijinsky and Maxine Sherman, a star with Graham's and Alvin Ailey's companies, in an early Ruth St. Denis solo titled *The Incense*. The cabaret would go on to become a popular, monthly variety show called *Martha @ Mother*; its format will be at the MCA Stage.

It was Move's first performance as Graham, but his obsession with her wasn't new. As a high-school sophomore in rural Virginia, he took his first modern-dance class at the Fredericksburg Dance Studio.

"Here was the most extremely beautiful woman I had ever seen, in the middle of summer, in full black, classic Graham, long-sleeved leotard and turtleneck and full, long, black rehearsal skirt, full face of makeup, bleached blond hair up in a high bun, named Margaret Ann Moss, who was a disciple of Helen McGehee, who was a very important Graham dancer who lived in a nearby town," he explains, on the phone from his home near Times Square. "I'm in this class and it's the most extremely difficult technique, taught with the most poetic, almost cultlike, almost religious imagery. I was *totally* swept up into it."

At Virginia Commonwealth University and during summer study at the American Dance Festival, Move felt that Graham's work and its rigor were swept aside in favor of "wearing pajamas and doing release technique," he says.

"One of the reasons why I became so obsessed with Graham is because no one would let me near her. She was considered old-fashioned, very passé. [Graham dances] were these historical, archival things, and yet I thought they were the wildest, almost futuristic, Hitchcock-like *Star Trek* episodes or something. She was so on another plane."

During the days of *Martha @ Mother*, "the B-list gave me grief," he says, laughing. But dancers who had worked with Graham earlier, in the '50s and '60s, "loved the show from the very beginning." In 2006, he was invited to perform with the company, and made original work for its dancers the following year. "At this point, I've amassed an archive and an oral history. People started coming out of the woodwork when I started doing this show, sending me letters that she'd written, or, like, out of the blue I'd get a cassette tape from a journalist in Denver who did an interview with her in the '70s, who said, 'I just thought that you should have this.'"

