

Cabaret at Jewish museum with Martha Graham Cracker

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Dito van Reigersberg, also known as Martha Graham Cracker, works through his act with director Elizabeth Stevens at the National Museum of Jewish History. (Emma Lee/WHYY)

This week the National Museum of American Jewish History, on Independence Mall in Philadelphia, will be re-interpreted by a drag queen.

Martha Graham Cracker, a "gender warrior" with a deep fan base in Philadelphia, will perform a cabaret of selected songs and impromptu banter based on "her" experience at the museum.

The museum asked Dito von Reigersberg, the man under the wig, to be its artist in residence this year. The Open Interpretation residency at just two years old is still in its beta stage. The museum had Reiserberg exploring the stories of the American Jewish experience on display in the museum.

He was particularly drawn to the biographical material.

"Obviously, Ruth Bader Ginsberg," said von Riegersberg off the bat, who considers the Supreme Court Justice a personal political hero. He also was attracted to Jean Gornish, an early 20th century cantor. Due to her gender she was never allowed to sing for services, but her theatrical performances — while dressed in traditional male cantor robes — were popular.

"She was kind of drag, dressed in male cantor robes and a cantor hat," said von Reigersberg. "She was pushing the gender line, which I like to think Martha pushes."

As Martha Graham Cracker, Reigersberg works with a small ensemble normally performing versions of contemporary pop songs interspersed with crowd work — taunts, flirts, and banter with the audience. For the Jewish museum shows this week, he created a more focused structure with more songs from the Great American Songbook by Jewish composers, including Irving Berlin, the Gershwins, and Steven Sondheim.

"And Adam Levine, of Maroon 5," added Reigersberg. "He's Jewish,"

One composer notably absent is Leonard Bernstein, someone Reigersberg deeply admires. Although Bernstein is the subject of a long skit, a memory of a fictitious love affair between Martha Graham Cracker and the composer, none of his songs made the final cut.

Bernstein was known to have extramarital affairs with men while married to Felicia Cohn Montealegre.

"I think of him as someone who was, from our perspective, born too early to appreciate the freedoms we have now. He married to be respectable," said Reigersberg. "Leonard Bernstein in this show is me reaching back to someone I wish I could pull forward into modern history so he wouldn't be quite as tortured."

Even Bernstein will not be saved from Martha Graham Cracker's bawdy, sometimes vulgar brand of humor. The sexuality ranges from subtle innuendo to startlingly frank.

"We're not scared of a little adult humor," said Emily August, director of public programs at the museum. "If you think about Jewish humor, and some comedians we feature in the exhibition, they are known for their around-the-edges type of humor."

The exhibition features comics ranging from the Marx Brothers to Mel Brooks to Gilda Radner.

"There's an irreverence associated with Jewish humor. Martha is nothing if not irreverent," said August. "It's a great fit."

The museum approached Reigersberg to be artist-in-residence for his reputation for interpretive work (he is a founding member of Pig Iron Theatre Company), and his popularity with audiences who do not normally visit the museum. Those audiences accustomed to Martha Graham Cracker's take on contemporary music will hear a dose of popular music from a century ago.

"We think history gets better and better. But in some ways there are things to be nostalgic about, including innuendo," said Reigersberg. "Things are spelled out so clearly these days, and people speak openly about everything. It made me nostalgic about these songs in which there is a lot of innuendo, but it's not spoken."

Case in point is "You'd Be Surprised" (1919), an Irving Berlin song about a woman lauding her lover's unexpected passion:

*He's such a delicate thing, but when he starts in to squeeze –
You'd be surprised.*

*He doesn't look very strong, but when you sit on his knee –
You'd be surprised.*

"Innuendo is something I treasure," said Reigersberg.