



Oh, she said something! Martha Graham Cracker's NMAJH moment

Bill Chenevert December 12, 2014

I saw the big, beautiful ad for the National Museum of American Jewish History's "[OPEN for Interpretation](#)" artist-in-residence series, "It's High Time I Said Something: Martha Graham Cracker's Intervention at the Museum," and was like *I HAVE TO BE THERE*. Its four sold-out performances were this magical mix of Graham Cracker cabaret—which I've seen a few times before—and a story that her alter ego, Dito van Reigersberg, cooked up with the help of a couple co-conspirators: too-rarely-used director Elizabeth Stevens, and regularly-called-upon musical director Andrew Nelson.

It was a hoot.

So, what does a Martha Graham Cracker performance look like on the top floor of the Jewish Museum? Well, it's mostly just a banquet space, and the room was fully populated with tables, a lot like a wedding. And Martha worked that room, honey. There was a stage where Nelson led a five-piece band with a stand-up bass (aside a dope brass section and drummer), but our heroine rarely used it. Between van Reigersberg- and Nelson-picked-and-arranged songs, Martha mingled and asked her audience interesting questions, questions I hoped would get asked.

For example: *What does it mean to be Jewish?* On the night I attended, a woman responded with the thoughtful, "It's all about asking questions." But van Reigersberg said the responses were mixed; some talked about the food, some touched on a couple stereotypes. Even though there was a little room for improvisation, he says the show was pretty well mapped-out.

“Once I knew exactly what the order of the songs would be, it’s a little bit like jumping from one rock to the next rock when you’re crossing the river,” van Reigersberg told *PW*. And he explained that it was an exciting challenge to weave the museum’s collection into a performance that reflected both Martha and Dito.

“Another balancing act was that I wasn’t really raised Jewish, but I’m actually half-Jewish and half-Catholic, and so figuring out how to incorporate things that are true about me into this weird fantasy of this character who is, ya know, a hairy woman,” he said. The challenge was “how to work the confessional mode but leave it enough in the character’s voice so that it didn’t seem like a violation.”

Emily August, the director of NMAJH’s public programs, said “we started courting Dito for this project, and he was fortunately really interested. There were particular stories that were beginning to resonate with him, and [he and Elizabeth] went through the galleries and identified stories that really jumped out at him.” One such badass story was that of [Jean Gornish](#), a killer vocalist who insisted on singing liturgical music in a synagogue when that simply wasn’t done. “He was just sort of drawn to those stories of strong women,” says August. “And so a lot of that time spent in the gallery helped shape and inform what you ultimately got in the form of a cabaret.”

And clearly the NMAJH is full of music: composers, singers, instruments, sheet music. The song choices were inspired by the multitude of extraordinary Jews who’ve given us some of America’s greatest pieces of music.

Leonard Bernstein is one of the biggest there is. “I’ve always been fascinated by his music,” van Reigersberg maintains, “and I sort of love his weird tortured personality.”

They started out with “[Guilty](#),” the 1980 Barbra Streisand/Barry Gibb jam. They worked a trio/montage that centered around Gershwin’s “[It Ain’t Necessarily So](#).” Turns out Adam Levine is Jewish, and they did a goodie from the early days of Maroon 5, “[Sunday Morning](#).” Of course, Sondheim’s “[Ladies Who Lunch](#)” had to be trotted out. There was also a brilliant mash-up of Earth, Wind and Fire’s “[September](#)” and Kurt Vile.

Personally, I’ve attributed some of the following characteristics to Jewish culture: devoted to education, liberal-minded, often driven and successful. So I assumed Jews would be cool with, as van Reigersberg put it, a hairy woman. For some of them, it was probably their first real drag experience. So, did Martha have to tone it down?

“I had no idea what the audience was going to be like, and I sort of thought I just have to be Martha,” van Reigersberg says. “Mainly, my desire was to make the cabaret have an emotional storyline to it. It was one of those times where I felt a little like it was my show, but also that I was a little bit of a guest in a new place. I think people were really curious about what Martha was going to have to say about the Jewish Museum. And I think all of that was a nice, perfect storm.”

Martha told stories of a boy who wanted to wear his pink unicorn t-shirt to school, Bernstein’s short-lived love affair with Martha, and of Ray Frank, one of the first female rabbis—“people who may have been perceived as different for their beliefs,” says NMAJH’s August. And what about inviting a drag queen into

the museum? Was that scandalous? “By welcoming Dito/Martha into the museum,” she admits, “we were certainly saying something.”

“I felt like there was an emotional journey and shape to the evening, and that was very satisfying,” van Reigersberg says. “I felt like I could win them over, and that felt pretty good.”