

# Review: In 'Herstory of the Universe,' Ancient Myths Are Brought to Life

The choreographer Richard Move's new work, partly inspired by Japanese, Indian and Greek mythology, wends its way across Governors Island.



By **Siobhan Burke**

Oct. 10, 2021

If not for the crowd gathered around, you could have missed her: reclining in the branches of a tree, as if dozing in her natural habitat, a woman adorned in feathers and tulle. At the brisk ring of a bell, she started to stir, arching her sinewy back, the beginning of a delicate descent down to Earth from her comfortable perch.

This avian-human creature was the dancer Celeste Hastings, the first of seven women to perform in Richard Move’s [“Herstory of the Universe,”](#) which had its premiere at Governors Island on Saturday. A six-part, nearly three-hour journey, the vivid, whimsical “Herstory” wends its way across the island, pausing at sites where solos and duets emerge from the landscape.





From left, Gabrielle Willis and Natasha M. Diamond-Walker are “Demolition Angels.” Julieta Cervantes for The New York Times



Celeste Hastings in “Laughing Gull/Leucophaeus Atricilla.” Julieta Cervantes for The New York Times



The dancer PeiJu Chien-Pott performs "Amaterasu," named for the sun goddess in Japanese mythology.  
Julietta Cervantes for The New York Times

Move (who uses they/them pronouns) is perhaps best known for

Move (who uses they/them pronouns) is perhaps best known for conjuring the modern dance matriarch Martha Graham, in devout, lovingly comedic performances that they have described as [akin to spirit possession](#). (The term “impersonation” irks them.) The marvelous “Herstory” cast, ranging in age from 22 to 64, includes current and former Graham company members — the elegant Natasha M. Diamond-Walker, the ferocious PeiJu Chien-Pott. And the movement, choreographed in collaboration with the cast, borrows from Graham’s high-drama idiom.

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At each stop on the roughly milelong scenic walk, we meet another figure (or two) in the mythic pantheon that Move has dreamed up, brought to life with the help of Karen Young’s fantastical costumes. According to program notes, the characters draw inspiration from the ecology and architecture of Governors Island, as well as elements of Japanese, Indian and Greek mythology.

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Outside the Climate Museum in Nolan Park — an elm-dotted lawn encircled by 19th-century houses — the Butoh-trained Hastings channels the laughing gull, a local seagull with a cackling call. Tentative at first, she gathers speed and abandon after plucking a mechanical bird from beneath a nest of giant eggs, a suggestion of



giving and receiving life.



The dancer Megumi Eda performs in Hammock Grove. Julieta Cervantes for The New York Times

In “Devrai (Sacred Grove),” the formidable Megumi Eda slithers and bounds through the grass of Hammock Grove, a tranquil area set back from pedestrian walkways — and, for these 15 minutes, her kingdom. On the granite steps known as “the scramble,” which wind up the recently constructed Outlook Hill, Robyn Cascio clambers across the rocks or balances atop them, as if on a pedestal, assuming athletic, finely etched poses.

The word “site-specific” is sometimes thrown around, applied to works that aren’t all that specific to their sites. But the vignettes that make up “Herstory,” which is the first performance work commissioned by the Trust for Governors Island, are inseparable from their surroundings. At the summit of Outlook Hill, in “Demolition Angels,” Diamond-Walker and Gabrielle Willis scale a steep, grassy slope in diaphanous dresses, unfazed by the terrain as they lunge and leap. In the urgent “Amaterasu,” named for the sun goddess in Japanese mythology, Chien-Pott dashes along the switchbacks of Discovery Hill, at times just a distant yet still-radiant blur.



The dancer Robyn Cascio performs "Ascent" on Outlook Hill. Julieta Cervantes for The New York Times





Willis and Diamond-Walker scale a steep, grassy slope. Julieta Cervantes for The New York Times



The aerialist Lisa Giobbi performs "Hamadryad" at Picnic Point. Julieta Cervantes for The New York Times

In the grand finale, “Hamadryad,” the aerialist Lisa Giobbi embodies the titular tree nymph of Greek mythology, with a sweeping view of New York Harbor and the Statue of Liberty behind her. Aided by Yoni Kallai, who controls her harnesses, she floats up and along the branches of a towering tree, achieving an otherworldly illusion of weightlessness.

While occasionally plodding in its structure and timing, “Herstory” is a pleasant way to spend an afternoon and experience the beauty of Governors Island; its glimpses of old-school theatrical magic outweigh any logistical flaws. Unfortunately, on Saturday, the insistent presence of a buzzing drone camera — part of a video documentation project by the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts — often distracted from the work and its natural setting. It was a drawback for those who were there, but good, at least, for future viewers, who will be able to encounter “Herstory” long after it has left the island.

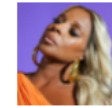
#### **Herstory of the Universe**

Through Oct. 16 on Governors Island; govisland.com.

A version of this article appears in print on Oct. 11, 2021, Section C, Page 5 of the New York edition with the headline: Where Goddesses Come Home to Roost. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)



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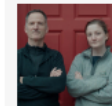
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