

# INTRODUCING MARTHA CLARKE

by [Akiva Fox](#)

[Martha Clarke](#) found dance early. Born into an intensely musical family in suburban Baltimore, she studied at the dance program of the Juilliard School. She then spent three years performing with the modern dance choreographer Anna Sokolow and the Dance Theatre Workshop. After an early marriage she retired from dancing.

When her sculptor husband became an artist-in-residence at Dartmouth several years later, Clarke rediscovered dance. She joined Pilobolus Dance Theater, which had been founded by four Dartmouth students, in 1972. The company combined acrobatic weight-sharing techniques with humorous theatricality in works choreographed by group members. After seven-and-a-half years touring with Pilobolus, Clarke left to found the chamber dance group Crowsnest with Robert Barnett and Félix Blaska.

Not long after, Clarke was approached by Lyn Austin of the Music-Theatre Group, who suggested that she begin directing theatrical pieces. Her early efforts included **Elizabeth Dead**, which featured the actress Linda Hunt as Queen Elizabeth I, and **A Metamorphosis in Miniature**, an adaptation of Franz Kafka's "Metamorphosis." She created her most famous work, **The Garden of Earthly Delights**, in 1984. This exploration of the fantastical painting by Hieronymus Bosch featured vignettes from heaven and hell, with performers flying through the air and assuming supernatural forms.

Moving away from a Pilobolus-influenced style, Clarke created **Vienna: Lusthaus** with playwright [Charles L. Mee](#) and composer [Richard Peaslee](#) in 1986. Performed on a bare white setting designed by [Robert Israel](#), the piece combined the works of Freud, Klimt, and Schiele to present an impressionistic view of fin de siècle Vienna. Clarke revealed a world of erotic and violent dreams beneath this cultivated society. She revisited this

production to great acclaim in 2003 at New York Theatre Workshop.

Clarke staged **Hunger Artist**, a collage on the life and stories of Franz Kafka, in 1987. Again working with Robert Israel, she set the production in a dirt pit. **Miracolo d'Amore**, Clarke's 1989 work depicting Italo Calvino's Italian folktales, featured no spoken text. Instead, she employed five musicians to play and sing settings of the poetry of Petrarch and Dante. She combined the raucous activity of Bruegel's paintings with the beauty of madrigal singing and the sensuality of Italian clowning. Joseph Papp brought this frank depiction of erotic love and fear to the [New York Shakespeare Festival](#).

Clarke's 1990 work, **Endangered Species**, used a cast of humans and animals to connect the fate of all creatures on earth, but the piece was closed early by unfavorable reviews. At the same time, however, she received the MacArthur "genius grant" Taking stock, Clarke turned her attention to directing more traditional texts across the world. During the 1990s, she staged Alice's Adventures Underground at London's Royal National Theatre, Mozart's **The Magic Flute** and **Così fan tutte** for the Glimmerglass Opera in Cooperstown, New York, as well as the Chinese composer Tan Dun's **Marco Polo** and Gluck's **Orpheo ed Euridice**.

Returning to the style of **Miracolo d'Amore**, Clarke created **Vers la Flamme** in 1999. Scored almost entirely with the piano music of Alexander Scriabin, this work blended a number of Chekhov's short stories into a meditation on longing, infidelity, and silence. Performed without words in a sky-blue room, the piece instead explored the language of physical isolation and violent embraces.

Throughout her career, Martha Clarke has developed a unique form of dance-theatre. She repeatedly turns to the works of great authors, visual artists, and musicians to inspire her images and themes. Above all, she uses her theatrical works to uncover the turbulent emotions passion provokes in human beings. [A Midsummer Night's Dream](#), Shakespeare's vibrant fantasy of the transformative power of love, represents an ideal text for

Martha Clarke.

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