

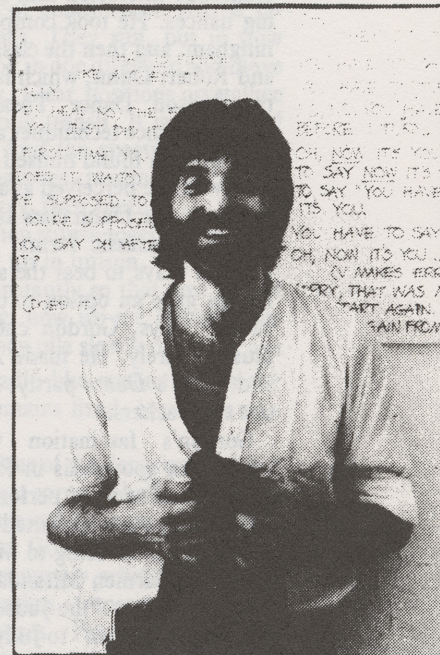
## David Gordon, or, The Ambiguities

By Sally Baner

David Gordon's work over the past 18 years has been concerned with finding structures for framing the individual, fleeting act. His focus on the differences between people's bodies—rather than design or the organization of space—has led him to single out everyday movement, its contexts and distortions, as a central motif.

In one sense, Gordon views choreography as self-defense: since the ideology of modern dance has always promoted tolerance for individual performance styles and body structures, it can be forced to make room for those dancers whose bodies and styles fit no one's vision but their own. They survive artistically by becoming choreographers. But this kind of self-defensive thinking has also put Gordon on the offensive. Inventing new systems for ordering movement—changing the rules—means criticizing and discarding academic formulas. In the heyday of Judson Church, his incisive *Random Breakfast* (1963) parodied his peers' new methods of making dances. And his latest dance, *Not Necessarily Recognizable Objectives*, which opens April 27 at 541 Broadway, comments ironically on its own content and construction.

Finding highly systematic constructions to frame the most elusive or undistinguished movements, concentrating on minute details of simple actions, and using repetition as a key device, Gordon has evolved a choreographic practice that works analytically. Like a Cubist painter, he organizes multiple views of a single phenomenon into one composition—a method that, despite apparent distortion, often reflects more accurately the complex processes of visual perception. As Cézanne and his followers made near and far objects equal in the picture plane, so Gordon erases hierarchies between classes of movement. Transitions between one kind of gesture or step and another become as important as the step itself. Or transitions disappear entirely. Habitual or functional gestures appear side by side with abstract movements. But an inclination of the head or the lifting of a chair



LOIS GREENFIELD

may be given even more weight than a jump. The process of isolating and focusing on particular movements tends to stress their formal qualities, though the dances also bristle with humor and social comment.

In the debate on theatricality among post-Cunningham choreographers, Gordon stands in favor of spectacle. But he uses spectacular moments and glamorous touches cunningly, often intensifying them until a gap between the movement relationships and their extravagant theatrical overlay throws the movement into high relief.

Gordon was born in Manhattan and grew up here, getting a BFA from Brooklyn College and performing with the school dance club. In 1956 he began dancing in James Waring's company. From Waring he learned to value style and wit, to honor any material as something that might be included in a dance, to look at the work of Merce Cunning-



ham, Merle Marsicano, Katherine Litz, and others who were outside of what was then mainstream modern dance. He studied composition with Waring and choreographed his first duet for himself and Valda Setterfield (*Mama Goes Where Papa Goes*, 1960) for a program of work by Waring's students given at the Living Theatre. Studying with Cunningham one summer at Connecticut College, Gordon decided to take the Graham technique and Louis Horst composition classes as well. But he found it impossible to accommodate his own ideas and values to those of the modern dance academy.

Continuing to study sporadically with Cunningham, and by now married to Setterfield, Gordon discovered that refining technique interested him far less than making dances. He took composition with Cunningham, and then the class taught by Judith and Robert Dunn, which later exploded into the Judson Dance Theatre. But having learned chance techniques already from Waring, Gordon found himself as uncomfortable with what he perceived as a rigid approach to chance in the Dunn class as he had been with Horst's preclassic forms. He continued to look for ways to beat the system. When the Dunns gave an option to use Satie music in various ways, Gordon chose to ignore the music entirely. He made *Mannequin Dance* and *Helen's Dance* partly, he claims, to irritate the teachers.

Gordon's fascination with show biz reached an apotheosis in *Random Breakfast*, in which all sorts of performance styles and conventions were presented and pulled apart, from Spanish dancing to Milton Berle's imitations of Carmen Miranda, from striptease to happenings to "the Judson Church Dance Factory Gold Rush" to Judy Garland. In several dances since then, he has used flamboyant costumes, stagy demeanor, lavish music, or Hollywood cliché imagery. But Gordon's use of glamorous signals is paradoxical. Glamour excites a whole set of romantic cultural connotations: luxury, power, mystery, instant success, sexual display and desirability, vanity, artifice, and nostalgia. Partly, those signals function as sincere tributes to movies, performers, and music Gordon admires. But also, embedded in the context of a Gordon dance, the glamorous qualities clash violently with other elements: casual activity, everyday or sloppy clothing, repetition approaching tedium, the acknowledgment that dancing is work, and especially, the presentation of individuals as unique beings with highly idiosyncratic bodies. The notion of glamour proposes a standardized ideal of physical beauty, one that provides a key to total transformation of one's future life. But Gordon's dances ultimately emphasize the differences between bodies and celebrate awkwardness and confusion as well as grace, elegance, and authority.

In 1966, Gordon gave up on choreography after his solo *Walks and Digressions* was badly received. But in 1971, he began to make dances again, partly fortified by his work with Yvonne Rainer, and partly impelled by a teaching situation in which he could work at leisure with a large group of dancers and nondancers. The piece that emerged from the classes was *Sleepwalking*.

The theme of *Sleepwalking* is acceleration. The dance is a cluster of identical solos—a sequence that moves from strolling to walking to running to racing, between two walls. Finally, the performers lean against one of the walls as if asleep, leave to put on hats and coats, return to the wall and fall, writhing violently, as if shot. The differences between the various styles of walking in the group are clear long before the movement changes. But as the walking metamorphoses into running and then racing, we notice how effort and muscular deployment change as speed alters the action. Since each performer chooses randomly when to change pace, at times the dance is a rich field of walking, running, turning, and bolting. The shoot-out imagery at the end provides an overlay of meaning, a possible motivation for the speedup. And the accompanying sounds—sexual moans, sighs, and shrieks that intensify as the movement quickens—provide another possible, conflicting, significance for the heightening activity.

*The Matter* (1972), another large group work, uses an opposite operation for clarifying movement details. Throughout the piece, the performers suddenly freeze, or take positions and revise them. Setterfield's nude solo in *The Matter*, a series of held poses taken from Eadweard Muybridge's *The Human Figure in Motion*, exemplifies Gordon's shared concern with the photographer: to capture the mercurial attitudes of the body by arresting it constantly in motion. The comparisons between nude and clothed bodies, and between people in underwear, night clothes, and street clothes, magnify the different readings of a single pose.

In *Chair, Alternatives 1 through 5* (1974), Gordon uses persistent repetition to point out two types of distinctions. It begins with an empty stage and a 16-piano recording of "The Stars and Stripes Forever"; next, two conflicting, taped fictional accounts "explain" how the piece was made. Then, Gordon and Setterfield repeat four times an eight-minute sequence of evenly flowing action, with folding chair—sitting on it, kneeling on it, lying on it, falling off it, folding it, pulling it over the body, leaning in it, stepping over or through it, etc. But each repetition of the double solo is a slight variation. First, the sequence is stated by the two simultaneously. The second time, each performer stops the flow at various points to re-



peat a fragment of the movement over and over. The third time, Setterfield reverses directions, so that instead of a double image of the same dance, we see one image and its symmetrically inverted reflection. And the fourth time, the two sing the Sousa march while executing the actions.

During the first statement of the chair material, you notice how Gordon's solid, muscular male body and Setterfield's thin, angular yet sinuous female body accommodate the physical facts of the chair and, reciprocally, are emphasized by it (dragging the chair over the body traces a profile, for instance). Differences rather than similarities are stressed since the movements are rarely synchronized and tend to slip into rhythmic canon. And the internal repetition and the music evoke images that lend contrasting meanings to the abstract movements in two of the alternatives, making any interpretation ambiguous.

The duet *Wordsworth and the Motor + Times Four* (1977) carries this ambiguity further. A series of arm and leg gestures, again performed several times in overlapping rhythmic canon, reads differently when the performers (a) describe what they are doing ("turn, jump, straight arm, walk, walk, walk"); (b) assign functional meaning to the gestures ("hi, put it there, where did I put it? who's he?"); (c) give soliloquies from Shakespeare while moving. Spectators' visual screens are wiped clean with an interlude, *Times Four* (1975), a chain of semaphoric actions performed in precise unison, with each gesture or step repeated in four opposite directions. Then the *Wordsworth* sequence is done again, accompanied by the sound of a motor, as a wall is built between the two dancers that blocks each one from the view of half the audience.

In order to understand how Gordon's repetitions function, you have to visualize his movement style. He says of himself that he is not a technically trained dancer, and that he is lazy. Yet movement looks easy and authoritative on him. Whether working with dancers or nondancers (in *Not Necessarily Recognizable Objectives* there are three dancers—James McConnell, Martha Roth, and Stephanie Woodard—besides himself and Setterfield), he uses movement that looks more like *behavior* than choreography. The sorts of movements people make routinely, unconsciously, and therefore decisively. Legs rarely go straight in the air; even a high kick is done with a bent knee. Torsos yield, arms relax. Only occasionally do gestures reach out beyond the area close to the body. In every Gordon dance I've seen, the movements are specific and deliberate, yet performed with a casual demeanor that nearly belies their careful design.

If all behavior is performance, as sociologist Erving Goffman argues, how can we dis-

tinguish between performances that are spontaneous/rehearsed, scripted/improvised, accurate/flawed, controlled/out of control, fact/fiction? NNRO rubs the possibilities together. In this dance/play, where occurrences at rehearsals were incorporated into the script, almost every action possesses an ambivalent meaning. The dancers trip and fall, but when they trip in unison you realize it's planned. They stop to have an argument—is it real? They express confusion verbally as well as in movement, but provide clues that the confusion is scrupulously choreographed. They scratch their arms, smooth their hair, rest their hands on their hips, stop to complain, hold their noses, mutter to themselves, ask to go back to the beginning, consult with each other. And all this behavior forms a movement combination that is repeated many times. They run, but in slow motion. They look in one direction and move the opposite way. Clear positions crystallize momentarily during transit. It is a dance of crossed signals. And the spectators participate in the ambiguities, reading the crossed signals first one way, then another.

The three women squish together gently to lie down and get up in unison, turning their action around constantly so that now we see knees descending, now we see buttocks rising in the air. They pile slowly on top of one another, then cradle like spoons across the floor. Nothing remains fixed, even for a moment.

At one point, four of the dancers stand in a cluster, becoming a corps de ballet that functions now as dance critics, now as groupies. They comment on Gordon's solo, an erratic distribution of seemingly arbitrary off-hand gestures, preparation, repetitions, transitions, and stillnesses. They misunderstand each other. They note his character and depth ("Oh, I didn't know his work was like that," one exclaims), and they worry that his appearance of indecision will be misread ("What if someone thinks he doesn't know what he's doing?"). A taped voice has earlier explained that these comments are supposed to undercut the vanity inherent in the solo; but "Don't be fooled for a minute," the voice warns. And yet, the solo as egocentric manipulation by the choreographer is undercut when the group replicates it exactly, and in its slowest, most concentrated version it is transferred to Setterfield as a grand finale.

Gordon's dances, persistently changing meaning, raise questions about the theory that movement constitutes a language. Yet the most appropriate description of his stragem is a literary one. He is a supreme ironist, subverting impressions as fast as he projects them. ■

PERFORMING ARTSERVICES, INC.  
403 WEST STREET • NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10014  
PHONE (212) 262-1923