

DANCING

Arts and Sciences and David Gordon

PERFORMANCE art, a newish category, consists of the making and exhibiting of visual events, which may or may not be dances, but which have their existence in time as well as in space. Most performance art originates in painting, sculpture, or music, and it ends in theatre—usually a kind of wordless theatre that resembles dance. Excitement comes from impurity—from the impingement of various art forms on each other or from the attempt to extend the scope of one art form beyond its normal boundaries. In the dances of the painter Sylvia Whitman—or perhaps one should say in the paintings of the dancer Sylvia Whitman—human performers and décor merge on the same figurative plane. Her most recent concert—or exhibit—held at the Truck and Warehouse Theatre, was filled with images that began as paintings or assemblages and extended themselves through manipulations in performance. Sometimes a line was crossed which turned an art object into live theatre, but that didn't happen often.

Performance art aims at transformation, and the process whereby two or more art forms (or communications systems, such as video) are reciprocally reconditioned by the exchange of ideas is a complex one. Where there is complexity, there is likely to be confusion. In a recent presentation at the Brook-

lyn Academy, Kenneth King used dance, spoken commentary, visual aids, and some highly inventive props to transmit a number of thoughts about science and culture, none of which emerged with clarity. King is one of our most cerebral gagmen, and not one of our most cogent. His various means kept diverting attention from each other, and the evening disintegrated into a bewildering display of resources and strategies. Among his most powerful resources is the one he uses least—his fascinating refinement as a dancer. King would rather think, write, and speak; he is obsessed with linguistics. Even in this attempt at a protean (or, as he might say, protein) media spectacular, there were too many words.

One of the most controlled and sophisticated performance artists is David Gordon, who also happens to like words, although he classifies himself as a dancer, not a writer. (I don't know of many writers who have been attracted to the form; those who have been have generally seen it as an occasion to lay their verbal gifts aside.) Gordon, too, can be a wordsmith, but his current work is characterized by brilliantly elliptical dialogue or parodies of real conversations. Whether it's delivered by the performers or by taped voices, this verbal material is balanced and coordinated with choreographed movements that reveal the same flair for

selection and for lifelike imitation. Gordon's type of dance movement is the simple, technically ungroomed movement that was promoted in the post-Cunningham rebellion of the sixties by Yvonne Rainer and others. Gordon, who worked with Rainer, is the first to use this movement non-ideologically. He seems to see it paradoxically—as being interesting in itself but also somewhat absurd in its presumptive amateurism. Valda Setterfield, his wife and partner, is a former member of the Cunningham company. A trained dancer, she's particularly good at projecting the double edges in the material. Because he is by nature a satirist and a critic, Gordon has instinctively developed into an avant-garde comedian. The subject of his new evening-length piece, "Not Necessarily Recognizable Objectives," is performance. By the end of the evening, the inference that he is criticizing his own performance—as dancer, choreographer, scriptwriter, and host (the event was held in his loft on lower Broadway)—as well as the conventions of performance has grown into a certainty.

The piece begins as Gordon and Setterfield circle the space slowly in a jog-walk. They wear satin gym pants, white shirts, jogging shoes. An atmosphere of trial, of self-tempering, begins to gather. Meanwhile, a voice catalogues, casebook-style, the perils of performance. Another voice (Agnes Moorehead's in "Sorry, Wrong Number") pleads with an operator to dial a wrong number on purpose. Soon we find ourselves unable to distinguish the planned accidents from the real ones. The action pauses momentarily and an ingenious floundering conversation takes place—ingenious because we can plainly see that it's being read from posters on the wall. But, in spite of the cue cards, there's a place where the talk takes off on its own. We grasp this when the entire conversation, which deals with the course the performance is to take, is repeated with the roles reversed, and we come back to the improvised section. Whether we recognize it or not, Gordon has made a point about perception and about conventional ways of listening and reacting in the theatre. He can be quite ruthless in pressing this point. Later in the action, a similar incident occurs after three other members of the troupe have joined the principals and become confused about the next step to take in a walking pattern. Somebody says, "Oh, now I know what to do," and instantly the line and the gesture (hand clapped to head)





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are incorporated by all five dancers into the pattern. Was the confusion real? Of course not. Gordon now springs his trap. On the next repeat, "Oh, now I know what to do" is said not with dancers smiting their brows but with them holding their noses, and even as we begin to laugh Gordon takes the laugh out of our mouths and puts it in the mouths of his dancers. The line then becomes "Oh, now I know what to do" [laugh]." And to this demonstration of indifference to our reaction we *really* don't know how to react.

Gordon creates a triple-distilled mixture of dance, drama, and words. The text develops an almost insidious relevance to the movement, and the movement keeps commenting on itself. Specific sequences take on new aspects when they're done faster or more slowly, by different people, in different directions, or with as little as one element in the sequence varied. A bewitching women's trio, which follows a simple loop pattern of slowly descending to the floor, rolling over, and getting back up, is complicated by the tightest unison possible: the women are pressed one inside another the whole time. Gordon adds a final variation to the roll on the floor and accompanies it with the sunrise music from "La Fille Mal Gardée"—a touch that mingles humor and erotic mystery. Another movement sequence is a series of dashes broken by abrupt directional shifts and off-balance skedaddling whirls. It runs like a spine through the piece, alternating with its companion motif, the slow jog in a circle. Gordon keeps this material so clearly focussed that we easily see it turning over on itself, its effects as differentiated as the words in the dialogues. Gradually, within its limits, the piece develops a disarming openness. We know that if anything can happen, it surely will.

David Gordon does not look like a dancer. He has an actor's weight and presence, fierce black hair and whiskers that set off a sleepy expression, and a resonant voice. He is soft and shaggy in texture and sensuous in movement, with an overall look of ovals slipping within larger ovals. Sometimes in motion he looks as if he had popped out of Max Fleischer's inkwell. His personal peak in "Not Necessarily Recognizable Objectives" is reached when he does a solo, first having told us on a tape how aware he is of the egocentric temptations of soloing, how he has arranged to undercut these by having his group comment as he performs, and how we mustn't be fooled into think-

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ing *he* thinks this will do anything but force us to pay all the more attention to "his person" (Gordon talks of himself Mailerishly). He does the solo, which appears to be made up of all the movement material in the piece so far, to the accompaniment of remarks that send up crowd psychology, cultural fetishes, dance criticism—everything that performers have nightmares about. And dreams of revenge, too. How to end? The four remaining dancers are given the same solo to do in the form of a round, ending as Gordon ended, by slipping behind a sliding door. Thus we conclude with another recapitulation in a different form, which makes it a fresh statement.

It is very hard to break the spell of a satirist. I find among the many pleasures of Gordon's work that it places the work of other performance artists in perspective. He seems to stand midway between those who are moving from a fine-arts base and those who are moving toward it. In the work of painters, sculptors, and other non-dancers, performance art is an impulsive movement toward theatre. The impulse of dancers like Lucinda Childs and Trisha Brown is to imitate non-dancers in a kind of backward progression out of the theatre and into the gallery. Childs and Brown reduce dance to its basic elements, and even delete some of those basics. As a gallery art, dance doesn't withstand scrutiny the way its neighboring arts do—it's had to give up too much to get there. In thinking about this kind of rarefied, conceptualized dance, I've tried to resist the idea that the move away from theatre which it represents is for a dancer a move against nature. But in the non-theatrical arts "theatre" is abstractly present. So for a painter's or a sculptor's image to take on the dimensions of live performance reifies something in its nature. Separating dance from theatre doesn't make dance more lively—doesn't make it strong in its own right, the way a self-sustaining art like painting is strong. The mistake here is to confuse theatre explicit in dance with theatre implicit in painting. Rudimentary dance as its devotees see it is really sub-rudimentary. The result is not the transmogrification of an art form but its reduction to a scientific exercise. "Performance science" might be the correct term for what Childs does when she walks backward as swiftly as she walks forward and without breaking rhythm. It's a parody of the refined technique we see in ballet dancers, a bit as if technical standards in dance could be



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ON the new wood floor of the Opera House stage at the Brooklyn Academy, Douglas Dunn and a company of thirteen dancers performed, on different evenings, "Lazy Madge," with the audience seated on-stage, and "Rille," with the audience in its accustomed place. "Lazy Madge," Dunn's name for an ongoing group project, was looser in format than "Rille," a première. There was otherwise not a great deal of difference. At the time, I enjoyed "Lazy Madge" more, because Dunn's dancers, who work at varying levels of proficiency and imagination, are more watchable at close range, and also because the lack of any musical or sound accompaniment wasn't as deadening as it was when they were seen at normal theatrical distances. Long-distance viewing isolates and enhances Dunn's own sophisticated performing style at the expense of the group. In memory, "Lazy Madge" decomposes to a pile of shticks, and "Rille" is all but lost; besides Dunn's role in it, I can recall very little. (The experiment of switching the audience's viewpoint might have been more gripping if Dunn had cast both pieces with the same dancers.)

I last saw Dunn on this stage five years ago, when he was dancing with Merce Cunningham's company. A tall, thin, straw-colored man, with a slack, impalpable style, Dunn in those days often looked semi-collapsed. Now his slackness has a flyweight elegance. He keeps a thread of tension loosely wound, ready to tug at; the phrases are tossed lightly but observably together or are strung in casual juxtapositions. He still has his airiness, his butterfly skitter, but he has acquired edge. This is something that hadn't been apparent, to my eye, in the studio performances I'd been seeing him give. And somehow, there on the big stage, the sensitive touch of his feet on the floor was extraordinarily affecting.

Dunn has taken Cunningham as one of his obvious models, with mixed results. Like Cunningham, he's a naturally lyrical dancer, with a long line and fast feet, but sometimes he seems to be giving us pallid imitations of the way Cunningham looks now. As a choreographer, Dunn hasn't yet reached the point where his work can stand alone and absorb us for seventy minutes, like a Cunningham Event. His dancers don't appear to be coerced in any particular stylistic direction, and they don't push themselves technically.



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