

# New York Newsletter

by

DAVID VAUGHAN

Jack Anderson is on a short sabbatical in Europe so David Vaughan contributes this month's report from New York. The picture above is of David Gordon and Valda Setterfield in *Chair*, photographed by Babette Mangolte. Below, Dance Theatre of Harlem in Robert North's *Troy Game* with left to right Ronald Perry, Donald Williams, Lowell Smith, Hinton Battle, Eddie Shellman and Keith Saunders (seated), photograph by Jack Vartoogian. Foot of the page, the Cunningham Company in *Fractions*, with Chris Komar, Louise Burns, Robert Kovich and Ellen Cornfield, photograph by Lois Greenfield.

IN the bracing air of the New York fall, dance activity picks up again — it never really comes to a halt any more, but it slows down during the dog days of August. The newspaper strike has certainly affected business, but the dancing has gone on anyway since engagements planned months ago cannot easily be rescheduled. American Ballet Theatre's fortnight at the Metropolitan Opera was virtually sold out, and the Eliot Feld Ballet's three week stint at the Public Theatre did pretty well. The Merce Cunningham Dance Company, at the City Center, and Dance Theatre of Harlem, at Columbia University, suffered more from the strike, but audiences for both increased as their seasons went along.

Eliot Feld has been a promising choreographer for so long now that it's time the promise was kept — time that he stopped re-making other people's ballets and found out which are the ballets that only he can make. In his latest phase, he's even deriving him from himself. Thus his solo for Baryshnikov, *Santa Fe Saga*, was a kind of pendant to *La Vida*, of which his new *Danzon Cubano* (see Jack Anderson's review last month) is a further spinoff. The second new ballet of the season, *Half Times* to band music by Morton Gould, stems from *Variations on "America"* (also for Baryshnikov, with Christine Sarry), which in turn derived from Balanchine's *Stars and Stripes*. In other words, it's another send-up of Americana, a belated Bicentennial raspberry, in which people are endlessly saluting and marching on pointe. Each number has one joke, whose possibilities are soon exhausted: a cheer leader doing a burlesque routine, a baton-twirler with the blues, the Statue of Liberty also twirling a baton, etc., etc. Feld's craftsmanship is undeniable, but his ballets are the equivalent of well-made plays — the seams show, and there's a lack of real dance vitality. His sensibility remains that of Broadway in the fifties, where he got his first experience.

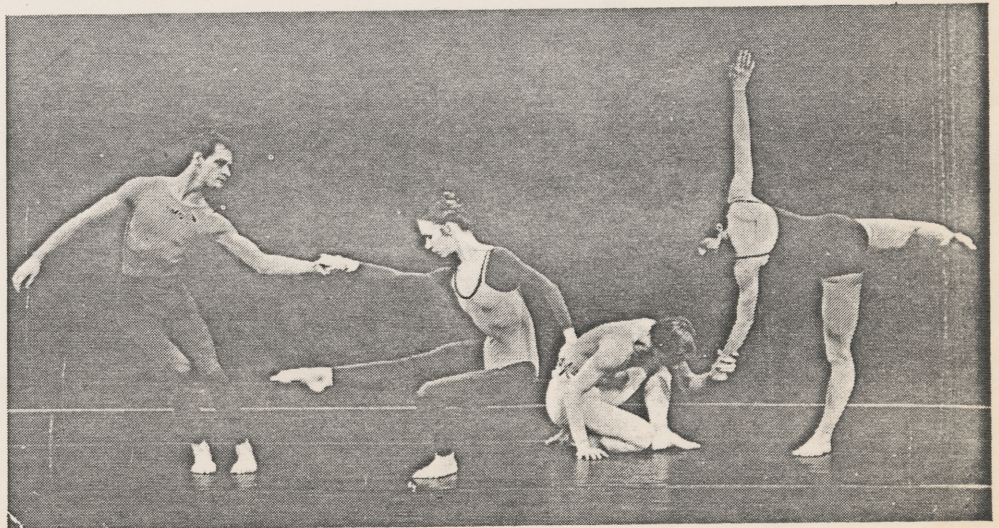
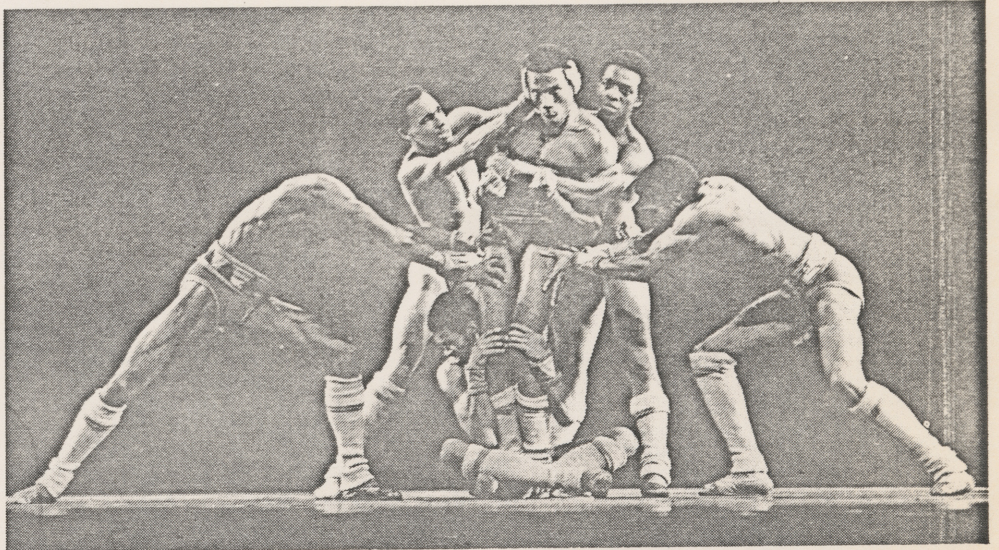
Merce Cunningham's first company was formed twenty-five years ago; he is not given

to celebrating such anniversaries, but the current season has provided a retrospective of his repertory as far back as *Summerspace* (1958) and *Rune* (1959), as well as including four works new to local audiences, danced by the largest company he has ever had (fifteen in

all). It is also the strongest company he has had in several years, the perfect instrument for his present choreographic concerns: extreme precision in detail, coupled with largeness of phrasing. In his own dancing, it is the detail Cunningham goes for now rather than the largeness: he does less and less, but finds more and more ways to do it. His stage presence still has enormous power: in his new solo, *Tango*, he shares the stage with a colour television set. The movement is marvellously eccentric, arms and legs shooting out at strange angles while he passes a small red cloth from hand to hand. Finally he puts one arm into the sleeve of a trenchcoat and stands motionless in front of the TV, which hasn't upstaged him in the least.

The drama of natural events has often supplied the subtext of Cunningham's choreography: *Inlets*, first given in Seattle, Washington, a year ago, seems to be "about" the weather and geography of that beautiful part of America, with figures looming in the mist through which the large silver disc of Morris Grave's decor palely glimmers. *Exchange*, the big new company work, on the other hand, depicts an urban landscape, with the gritty greys of Jasper John's backcloth and costumes and the industrial noises of David Tudor's score. Both pieces are gripping, not only as dance but as theatre.

Dance Theatre of Harlem went through a



crisis a year or so ago when many of the dancers left, leaving the company almost literally decimated. Arthur Mitchell is not one to be downcast by such a development, and lost no time in bringing forward dancers from the ranks and the school. Fortunately, two of the best dancers, Virginia Johnson and Ronald Perry, stayed. The company has entered into a relationship with Columbia University that should prove mutually beneficial, though Columbia's Wollman Auditorium is far from ideal as a theatre.

The repertory has been undergoing some revision, a still uncompleted process. The main strength has always been in its Balanchine ballets, and two important additions, *Divertimento No. 15* and *Square Dance*, have been rehearsed but so far not performed. But the dancers also need to have ballets made for their particular qualities, instead of second-hand goods from all over, which is what they are getting. Of those I saw, only Robert North's *Troy Game* looked like a real piece of choreography, and the male dancers seized on its opportunities for both technical display and for clowning. The directors' faith in the talents of Royston Maldoon (the very name is like a knell) seems entirely unjustified by the works of his that I have seen.

The English dancer Valda Setterfield, a former member of the Cunningham company, now works mostly with her husband, David Gordon, one of the founders of the avant-garde Judson Dance Theatre in the early sixties. His new "permanently temporary" Pick Up Company opened the season at Dance Theatre Workshop. Gordon makes witty and ingenious use of the spoken word in his pieces: both dance and dialogue have that seeming spontaneity that can come only from precise construction, careful rehearsal, and concentration in performance. *What Happened* is a kind of danced rebus in which spoken words are illustrated by gestures and movements, e.g. on the word "grandfather" the dancers delineate the outlines of a tall vertical clock, complete with hands and pendulum. Gordon's *Mixed Solo* is first performed by himself, with ego-deflating comments from the company (Q: Do you ever wonder what he's thinking? A (Setterfield): No), then by four others who reproduce exactly not only his movements but his expressions and his tone of voice — the sincerest form of flattery. An evening of pure virtuosity.

The American Dance Machine, Lee Theodore's enjoyable anthology of great numbers from vanished Broadway shows, has undergone inevitable changes of personnel, not all of them for the better, but two valuable acquisitions are Grover Dale and John Jones, the latter well remembered in London for his performances in Jerome Robbins's *Ballets: USA*. Some of the material in the show is familiar, like Agnes de Mille's dances from *Brigadoon* and *Carousel*; other numbers are merely slick, but there are one or two surprises, numbers from forgotten shows, like Danny Daniels's Clog Dance from *Walking Happy*, that prove to be well worth rescuing from oblivion.