

dance/alan brown

The People's amateur hour

The Performing Arts Company of the People's Republic of China. Peking Opera. Acrobatics. Chinese national dances, songs, music, and ballet. And all on the football field-stage of the Berkeley Community Theatre. One of the strangest attractions to ever appear in the Bay Area; it was prodigious in effort, yet it came off like Sunday night with Ed Sullivan.

It is the laudable intention of the sponsors of tours of this sort to promote understanding and friendship between the visiting and host countries. Exposure to their performing arts and artists, it is hoped, will give Americans a feeling for the quality of life of the Chinese people. Nothing of the kind occurred. By overextending themselves, the performers never gave the audience a chance to hold on to anything long enough to break through the surface and glimpse at what was really underneath. The human element was missing completely. Like a gala

performance, artists and acts flashed by so fast that none of the performers emerged as individuals, and a numbness set in, accompanied by a "well, what's next?" attitude. Only the acrobats in the Peking Opera's "Yentang Mountain" managed to break this ice with their outrageous interpretation of "night combat, water combat, and attacking and seizing a city gate."

Combat, the audience was quick to learn, was the central theme for everything to the Performing Arts Company of the People's Republic. Insurgent forces and government troops were everywhere. Dancers pranced across the stage bearing swords and rifles. Battles were fought on land and sea. Mongolian herdsmen sang praises to communism and liberation, and musicians played music of oppression and resistance on their strange and beautiful instruments. And the women never showed their legs. Only their

"arms."

As in any variety show, the quality of the successive acts varied greatly. So unlike anything we are used to seeing in the West, much of it was difficult to understand. But the basis of it all — the common denominator — is theater and entertainment. And using that as a criterion, the evening was a dud, with very little depth, and less excitement.

The excerpts from the ballet, "The White-Haired Girl," concerning the liberation of a peasant girl in a mountain cave by the Eighth-Route-Army, makes "Giselle" seem complex and fraught with Freudian symbolism. "The White-Haired Girl" and "The Red Detachment of Women" are both the result of Chairman Mao's principle of "making foreign things serve China" by combining classical ballet with Chinese traditional theatrical art. Ballet and politics do not mix easily, and the Chinese do not fare as well as Western

choreographers such as Bejart, who also have a difficult time with these strange bedfellows.

In general, plots were naive, and choreography was always weak and unsophisticated. This was especially true for Western audiences, since we are exposed to so much. Carrying out Chairman Mao's principle of "letting a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend," the artists have taken various songs and dances from the different regions of China and rearranged them and, supposedly, improved them. These offerings included the "Peacock Dance," "Long Silk Dance," and "Militia Women of the Grasslands," among others. An integral part of the heritage of the Chinese people, they do not fare well on the professional stage.

One aspect of the evening was impressive, and that was the costumes and the sets — all lavish, beautiful, and very effective. The backdrop for the "Militia



"Monkey Makes Havoc In Heaven" by the Performing Arts Company of the People's Republic of China.

Women of the Grasslands," a Mongolian dance depicting a border patrol, was a real stunner.

But, as they say on Broadway, you can't go away whistling the sets.

dance/michael clemens

Shaggy dancer

IN THE recent film, *An Unmarried Woman*, Alan Bates portrayed a painter whose strong artistic vision matched his dynamic, self-assured personality. David Gordon, a New Yorker who resembles that bearded, somewhat shaggy British actor, appeared last weekend with Valda Setterfield at the Margaret Jenkins Studio in San Francisco. Like Bates' film persona, Gordon maintained a clear-headed, purposeful approach toward his field, dance-making, while displaying an impressively engaging stage demeanor.

Gordon offered intriguing dances that defied being placed in any of the standard categories of choreography. Although attracted to familiar everyday movement and disinterested in dance technique for its own sake, Gordon avoided being classified as a minimalist by stressing the relationship of forms rather than focusing on floor patterns, and by using theatrically compelling spoken words that at times simulated dialogue.

Gordon and Setterfield, with a studied casualness, often "marked" steps and poses instead



David Gordon: simple, intelligently varied movement. of performing them "full out". Although used infrequently, classroom-derived movement was tossed off with a complete disregard for the traditional niceties. However, this relaxed style enhanced the intimacy of the event and appeared neither awkward nor inappropriate.

Gordon and his partner frequently could have been mistaken for athletic non-dancers. (A gymnasium ambiance was reinforced by the costuming: sweat pants, Gordon's headband, shoes that a bowler would have found suitable, etc.) By abandoning the pyrotechnics favored by trained dancers, Gordon revealed the visual delights to be found in simple, intelligently varied movement.

Most of the evening was devoted to the presentation of *Wordsworth and the motor*, a work in six parts apparently hav-

ing nothing to do with the English poet, but instead dealing with "words". Preceded by a taped reading on physics by two voices that gradually fell out of sync (thus pointing to later dances structured in canon), *Wordsworth* opened with Gordon and Setterfield, each separately but without contradiction, defining the vocabulary of the piece by performing movement while calling out labels — some consisting of one word, others almost conversational or even judgmental in nature. This running commentary, an accompaniment to various steps, stances and gestures, either isolated or linked together, took on a disjointed, humorous stream of consciousness quality and became increasingly chatty.

Both dancers eventually embarked on a charade-like exercise in which each independently told the same fragmented story. The duo rarely moved in unison (imitative sequences were more typical), but when the same word/movement phrases did converge, the effect was dramatic. The final spoken segment was dominated by Gordon's recitation of Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy, combined with previously-seen, but now dislocated, gestures.

Wordsworth ended in a wordless mode, as Gordon and Setterfield, each usually facing in different directions, danced identical steps. The hum of a motor intruded on their silent performance (generally a recapitulation

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