

FAR FROM DENMARK

Marcia B. Siegel

David Gordon/Pick-Up Co.
Dance Umbrella
Camera Mart/Stage One (Dec. 4-9)

Coming back to Gotham from anywhere is not easy, but after a week in the cozy arms of Denmark's 19th-century choreographer August Bournonville, it's going to take time. Like a lot else in New York this week, I saw David Gordon's *The Matter (plus and minus)* as some weird inversion of the world of Bournonville.

Some of Bournonville's most charming compositions celebrate the Danes' love of travel, their attraction to the exotic behavior of people who live where there's no snow or winterlong darkness. The dancers depart from their own tidy and complex dancing to dress up as Spaniards, Neapolitan fishermen, vaudeville darkies, and let rip with the pyrotechnics that Bournonville style normally keeps under restraint.

David Gordon's intention is not to spice up a too-tame existence, but to make even the exotic seem drab. He uses virtuosic skills to do it. This is not so perverse when seen as a logical development of the avant-gardist revolution of 15 years ago. The plainness that was needed as a corrective to hype and overdecoration in dance has now become a theoretical substructure for many people. The natural set of the body, the unstressed transition, the neutral, private face, are as essential to the look of postmodern dance as the turnout and the pulled-up chest are to ballet. Any discussion of postmodern dance today, I suppose, is really about where the individual choreographer goes from there.

David Gordon's 22 dancers look a lot like ordinary people wearing their ordinary everyday clothes. But quite soon you discover they're real dancers. The motley assortment of clothing blends curiously in color and style — it turns out

to have been Selected and Coordinated by Suzanne Joelson. Gordon and Valda Setterfield — he informs us rather possessively in his program note that she's his wife — do a duet made of a series of very convincing, even erotic embraces. Just at the climax of each clinch, slides flash on the backdrop showing different views of them in the same pose. Then one partner slips out of the grasp of the other, leaving him or her encircling thin air.

A lot of this concert seemed to be about freezing and prolonging the postures of natural movement. Ain Gordon sweeps out a prop doorway, stopping at the end of a stroke for what seems like a whole minute before continuing. David Gordon arranges chairs, cardboard cartons, large quilted pads in the center of the space, pausing after he's placed each one, not to inspect its position but to get us to notice both it and himself in the act of positioning. Later, big groups of people make accidental-looking tableaux, leaning and twining around each other, holding someone overhead in a chair.

Several times masses of people cross the space and stop in attitudes of going. The stopping poses seem as calculated as they are meaningless. Toward the end, the mass freeze consists of small groups, facing each other and sometimes touching, looking almost conversational, almost like snapshots. But somehow the groups haven't got the right focus or immediacy either then or after they leave one by one and come back to the same positions dressed in bathrobes and nightgowns. Although you see them getting into and out of these positions, once they've congealed there doesn't seem to be any reasonable explanation why there should have been caught like that.

This is not true of Valda Setterfield's reproduction of the poses from Eadweard Muybridge, the photographer who made multiple shots of people in motion. Maybe that's because Setterfield tries to capture



David Gordon's *The Matter (plus and minus)*

the particular intensity that belongs to each act of running, throwing, bending over. Gordon, discussing the poses with her on a soundtrack, is too knowing, placing disproportionate importance on something basically pointless. He *wants* the process to sound contrived.

Setterfield takes it seriously. Somehow she redeems a lot of Gordon's artful objectivity, his implicit exploitativeness. When, at the beginning of the piece, the first notes of *La Bayadere Act IV* begin to play and you see Setterfield come out slowly with a line of people behind her, you get Gordon's whole joke. The Kingdom of the Shades is a famous ballet image, 24 women coming down a ramp doing arabesque after arabesque. But for Setterfield the image is full of meaning, even feeling. So is the end of *The Matter (plus and minus)*, when Prokofiev's Death of Juliet music plays, and she's picked up and held high overhead by five people like a corpse in an old-fashioned ballet.

There seemed to be less dance in this performance than is usual for Gordon, and what there was was downplayed. Gordon did a solo of offhand poses, not exactly finished or connected, while singing snatches of something like "In the Mood" in a whiskey tenor. The other dancers did what might have been the same dance or something derived from it, all together but not in unison, during what was announced as an intermission. Later five women did a sequence of vaguely sexy gestures that might have been derived from *that*, while the others made a big tableaux with props.

Throughout the concert, my eye kept wandering with relief to whatever was moving that seemed to be motivated and sequential — Ain Gordon's shadow on the wall as he paced inside his prop doorway before his entrance; Setterfield and later everyone else changing clothes at the side of the space; audience coming in late or leaving early. Maybe Gordon meant for me to notice all that too. I hope so. ●