

'Framework' a strong foundation

By Allan Ulrich
Examiner dance critic

"CASUAL ANYTHING is hard," announces Valda Setterfield in crisp, elocutionary tones, posing at the stage apron like a tipsy wraith. "Formal anything is harder."

She voices those two propositions near the beginning of David Gordon's stunning new evening-length "Framework," and they immediately establish a nifty thematic hook to the New York choreographer's latest work. Introduced to the West Coast during the past weekend at the Herbst Theater, this droll, impudent and sometimes romantic 80-minute blend of dance and dialogue served notice that Gordon is more than a force to reckon with on the modern dance scene. If he keeps producing material like "Framework," he'll graduate into the old master category before long.

Designed for Gordon, Setterfield and six current members of the Pick Up Company, "Framework" assays a typically Gordonian fusion of wordplay, daffy, punny dialogue, kinetic enigmas, reiterated pedestrian movements, flurries of classical vocabulary, autobiographical chatter and mild horseplay.

"Framework" is at once densely layered, profligate in possibilities, almost ridiculously rich and capably diverting. It is sophisticated about where dance has been — notably to the Maryinsky Theater and to the Judson Church structural experiments of the 1960s — and sanguine about how it might travel profitably into the future.

And, even at its most obscure, "Framework" brims with a diverse, circusy cheerfulness that captivated at least a venturesome segment of Saturday evening's San Francisco Performances subscription audience. Someday, an enterprising local impresario may import the Pick Up Company for one of Gordon's video extravaganzas, which may even double the pleasure.

Until then, his subtle interweaving of word and movement in a vaguely narrative guise against a bare cyclorama will have to suffice. If "Framework" is about anything, it is about language, which, for Gordon, seems to have evolved as an expression of movement. But the piece, at least in these, its second performances (the first was in Colorado) also concerns, in a most pertinent way, the nature of relationships.

A ringing phone creates an urgency at the outset (it rings periodically through the evening). And the frame, metal and rectangular, gets trotted out so Setterfield can



David Gordon, Margaret Hoeffel in 'Framework'

grip it while doing classroom bourrees, before the others join her for some prototypical party activity where everyone must run just to stay in the same place ("Framework" may be the most devastating statement about social behavior since Paul Taylor's "Cloven Kingdom").

People are invited to sit (on other dancers' bended knees) and the "chair" disappears before the guest can deposit himself. Dancers link arms for ritual routines reminiscent of the pictures you might find on the labels of those off-brand wines. There's a delirious bout of free association, and Setterfield realizes she's nothing but a part of the furniture.

The taped percussive score starts to thump and syncopate, and there's a bouncy episode for dancers with numbered T-shirts who desperately seek to align themselves in sequence. There's a lesson in linguistic cliches, as expressions like "hold it," "he goes for me" and "don't play hard to get" are given kinetic shape and there's an elaborate, teasing combination of talk and dance, involving the plywood board that fits into that steel frame. There's a section of repeated arabesques and twists in which the dancers mesh in an Escher-like design.

And, then, there are Gordon and Setterfield (his wife of 23 years) giving us what must be the first great post-modern pas de deux around that rectangle. He balances her, restricts her within that frame, fixes her in portrait fashion, and yet she escapes categorization. Chopin slowly supplants the disco beat. Has a choreographer ever idealized his performer thus?