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DAVIS

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Life Studies

DAVID GORDON's pieces, dancier and less verbal than they used to be, are fascinating in their devious logic. The new, expanded dance portions are not interludes intended to relieve the spoken portions; they're parallel constructions that soak up the content of the speeches and redistribute it in abstract form. Not that the abstraction is immediately recognizable; at first, you just look and listen delightedly. Parallel composing in words and movement has been Gordon's method for some time. The intelligibility of movement takes a lot longer to grasp than the intelligibility of words, and one way he has dealt with the disparity is by playing with common everyday speech patterns, using puns and non sequiturs, and stringing them out casually in rhythmic sentences that slow down thought, bend it, or trip it up. "I hate the word 'out,'" a Gordon character will remark. "It's everything 'in' isn't." A long monologue plays on the colloquial use of "go" for "say." "He goes 'Move over.' I go 'Hold it.' He goes 'Hold what?' I go 'Very funny.' I go 'Ha ha.' He goes 'I'm going.' I go 'Go.'" Lately—in "TV Reel," in last year's "Trying Times," and now in "Framework"—Gordon has been experimenting with different qualities of impetus in dance movement. He now has three or four speeds, from the near-stasis of contact improvisation (or its simulation) right through to straight lyrical dancing. He has also

developed with the designer Power Boothe a kind of portable décor that is flexible; a Masonite panel or a picture frame made of wooden strips can be different things at different times. It is this highly operative, integral décor that gives "Framework" a controlling metaphor as well as a title. "Framework" is an evening's discourse on the way we compartmentalize ourselves as social beings. The panels and picture frames are objectifications of the alienation, confinement, or conventionalized rapport that we feel in our daily relations with fellow-workers, lovers, and friends. They objectify good feelings, too, such as closeness in marriage, but the prevailing tone of "Framework" is wry, and its theme of manipulation, at first amusingly plaintive, darkens gradually to end the evening on a note of desperation. Manipulation isn't only a function of the décor. It's a requisite in dancing, where it functions as the inverse of dependency. The choreographer manipulates and depends on his subjects; partners manipulate and depend on each other. Added to the social picture that Gordon gives us—the absurd behavioral patterns, the pressures, the distractions—these purely formal biomechanical situations, played out to the pounding of rock records, take on a certain psychological realism. Gordon is careful not to press meanings on us, but he does keep attacking. It's as if his manipulation theme acquired its malign shad-

ings as a corollary of his versatility.

Gordon has expanded his technique and his subject matter at the same time. He's no longer content to expose the surface ambiguities of limited movement. Moving more, he sees more. In the manifold machinations of "Framework" he sees tokens of the subtle monstrosity of human relations. And since he seems to be adducing evidence from his own life—the life of a harried, hardworking artist—we're invited to see him as part of the monstrous scheme and, ultimately, when he trudges slowly, slowly across a stage filled with indecipherable hubbub, a victim of it. There may be something too notional in all this. When an artist's theme is what it is simply because of the number of ways it finds to express itself, the artist may feel that he hasn't chosen it—it has chosen him. He feels trapped, while we in the audience want to rejoice in what looks to us like a virtuoso performance. The last word in "Framework," an unspoken pun, is Gordon saying "I was framed." We're showered with droplets of self-commiseration. There was always a moralizing taint to the earnestness with which postmodern dancers went about their anti-technique revolution. I don't think David Gordon believes that technical sophistication is corrupting. But the self-deflating ending of "Framework" may be the last vestige of postmodernist morality in his work.

The emotional ending is surprising, because nothing about "Framework" is facile. The piece, which was produced at the tiny Bessie Schönberg Theatre at Dance Theatre Workshop, will be seen later this month in Cambridge. At the Loeb Drama Center, the deflationary ending will be staged with the addition of a giant collapsing frame descending from the flies. This would account for the protractedness of the ending, but would it justify the emotion? "Trying Times" had an epilogue in which Gordon went on trial for his presumption as an artist. These endings are like last-minute apologies; they may reflect Gordon's wish to dominate our reactions to an even greater extent than he does already. Not many choreographers can sustain a whole evening as well as he can, on the basis of his own invention. His collaboration with Power Boothe is a happy one, and Boothe himself may be the best thing that has happened to dance since Jennifer Tipton. But his contribution to Gordon's work has Gordon's sensibility stamped all



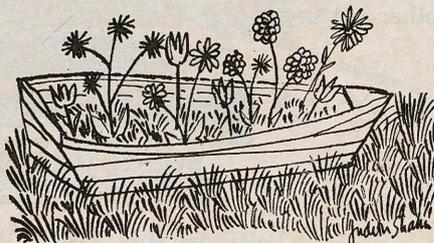
"Everything's a trap if you're not careful."

over it. The boards and frames of "Framework" (which first appeared in "Trying Times") sound like clichés until you see how Gordon has used them. In the first of several long pas de deux, Gordon and Margaret Hoeffel put a frame against a board and keep the two moving between them like a sliding door. They slip the frame ahead and step into the opening, close it up, and step in on the other side. This develops into variations, no two alike, in which they take turns setting and eluding traps, supporting each other's weight on the board, or disappearing behind it. The "board" pas de deux is offset, in the second act, by a "frame" pas de deux, in which Gordon holds a frame for Valda Setterfield to step through as she executes a fluid adagio in classical style. In neither case do the man and the woman touch. The nature of the relationship in the first duet is defined by the way each perceives the other's "space." In the Setterfield duet, the frame is her barre, her home, her Platonic halo. Possibilities multiply and crisscross. It is the hoop that her husband the choreographer puts her through even as it is the image of his adoration.

Like every other David Gordon piece, "Framework" teaches us how to see it. It is a total system discharging interior meanings. But it is also a view of real life. We recognize the times and the customs, the clothes, the postures, the lingo. The music sounds as if someone backstage had turned on the local rock station and let the dial drift, so that wisps of Chopin now and then float above the beat. Gordon keeps the dualities so delicately balanced that we can be lulled by the formal beauty of the piece into ignoring signs of its double life. When, at some point in the action, the dancers pause and sum up "the story so far," we're startled, because so much of the action has been abstract. Are these dances staged to look like social rituals or are they social rituals staged to look like dances? The content seems at all times reversible, and though the suggestion of a "story" is partly ironic, it is serious in its urging of a non-insular, non-relativistic point of view. In fact, the synopsis turns out to be a completely acceptable literalistic interpretation of the borderline drama of the piece. ("Margaret and David had a falling out," etc.) For a moment, we get to see things in the "framework" of a story, then back to the mirror world. The wonderful "I go 'Go'" monologue, vivaciously de-

livered by Susan Eschelbach to five other dancers as they group themselves around, behind, and beneath a panel (a table, a door, a bed), seems to open up another story. Whether or not it is one depends on how you read the pas de deux of Eschelbach and Paul Evans which immediately follows. Gordon is a collagist. Many of his dances and set pieces (like Eschelbach's monologue) can be lifted out of context and combined with new material to make a new impression. The pleasure we get from Gordon's work is the pleasure of synthesis. The integrity each new piece has is always a surprise. We go to see how the collagist's beads and shells and feathers and pinwheels will work this time and what new things have been added to the collection. For me, the novelty item in "Framework" is a group dance that goes to the song "Fresh." A sextet that frequently divides into three couples, "Fresh" has a momentum unlike any other ensemble that Gordon has done; it keeps on unrolling itself like surf as the dancers spin, dive, re-dive, tumble, shove, and toss each other into the air. Then, with a shift into slow motion, it seems to plunge underwater and go on travelling. This five-minute dance, which ends the first half of the show, sums up many of Gordon's movement motifs; it's awash with seashells and pinwheels. It's exciting—new and old at the same time—and somehow I think I'll be seeing it again.

IF Gordon is a collagist, Douglas Dunn is a draftsman who keeps sketchbooks. His sketches are admirable; each has a life, a secret of its own, a brilliantly opportune idea that seems to lead the eye. The trouble is, Dunn's ideas don't extend themselves for more than a few seconds; they keep erupting, ever new. While we long to scan a landscape, to see large configurations develop and details recede, Dunn keeps showing us page after page of motifs. There used to be a fidgety, short-winded quality in his movement. The newer numbers in his recent concerts at the Joyce showed very little of this. In "Elbow Room," Dunn's phrases



have lengthened, and they've never been more beautifully formed, more inventive than they are in "Pulcinella." But they are still fragments. Dunn originally staged the Stravinsky score on commission from the Paris Opéra Ballet. The New York production has a drop cloth, by Mimi Gross, showing a sunbaked Bay of Naples, and an array of crumpled white silk costumes, also by Mimi Gross, that suggest a down-at-the-heels commedia-dell'arte troupe. There is no plot. The dances ramble along in the disorderly fashion and with the diffuse impact of a street festival. Stronger continuity could have made the image a valid one, but though Dunn's phrases are set on the music they have no adhesive power, and forty minutes is too long a time to deal with fugitive impressions.

Dunn himself is a gifted dancer and a highly civilized artist. His too assiduous imitations of Merce Cunningham's performing style are an obstacle. A former Cunningham dancer, he was also a member, with David Gordon, of the choreographers' collective known as the Grand Union. His style is nervous, sensitive, refined, but inconsistent. Some steps in a sequence are perfectly pronounced, but others are tentative, so that the clarity of the connection keeps breaking down. Gordon, who lacks Dunn's phrasemaking talent, is technically cleaner and more precise, and he seems to have learned more about sustaining effects from those improvised Grand Union evenings than Dunn did. As a choreographer, Dunn remains a soloist, and he heads a company of soloists, augmented for the Stravinsky ballet. He danced a frazzled, hallucinated Pulcinella. Karole Armitage made a guest appearance doing odd, violent, high-tension solos that seemed to relate more to her own work than to Dunn's.

I also saw at the Joyce two programs by San Francisco choreographers. Brenda Way's choreography, which I had not seen before, struck me as energetic but crude, and I found nothing to admire in her costumes or lighting. Margaret Jenkins' pieces aren't much on the production side, either, but the fertility of the movement ideas makes up for this. In "First Figure," and even more in "Max's Dream," I was held by a succession of ideas mounted in long, full, rhythmically taut phrases. "Max's Dream," suggested by images from Max Ernst, was something in the surrealistic line; the choreographer wandered among

her dancers wearing a tuxedo, her upper body encased in a huge cabbage rose. What the dancers did was more penetratingly eccentric, more Ernstian: a woman was inserted head downward through the arms of an embracing couple; a woman dove down a man's back into the wings. Partners holding each other by the hand swung apart and together in wide, whipping loops. Jenkins likes to counter flowing big-scale body movement with small staccato gestures of the head and arms; here these looked like the manic chattering of puppets. There was live music, by John Geist, brought all the way from San Francisco by the Kronos Quartet. The Joyce, a converted movie theatre, has no pit, and uneasily accommodates musicians in groups. It was planned for dance, but its inordinately wide stage creates problems for choreographers. Even so, it is not cheap to rent. It has become a showcase for solidly established, old-guard American dance companies and foreign companies with subsidies. The loft-generation choreographers who have been carrying on in the uncompromising tradition of American modern dance are, for the most part, still in their lofts, hoping for an invitation from the Brooklyn Academy. Dunn's and Jenkins' concerts were the first serious choreography and serious dancing I had seen at the Joyce in the two years of its existence.

THE version of the "Paquita" Grand Pas Classique that Natalia Makarova has staged this season for American Ballet Theatre is better than the one Makarova and Company presented four years ago on Broadway. The adagio is now done with the complete participation of the corps; the interpolated pas de trois is gone. The difference amounts to an architectural restoration—I won't say "of a monument," because the result lacks structural integrity in the two principal roles. A fragment, then, on the scale of a monument. And watching "Paquita" is very much like walking through a building. The female corps comes on in symmetrical formations of four at a time, then two, then eight. The ballerina enters in their midst through a kind of portal. The male soloist walks down a diagonal corridor, steps behind the ballerina, and supports her in an adagio. To a broad, slow melody, she arches her torso, tilts this way and that, deploys a leg forward, back, and to the side, and turns

repeatedly on one spot. Tipped low to the ground in arabesque, she becomes a study in cantilevered weight. During this, the corps revolves and repositions itself at intervals, buttressing the ballerina's line, echoing her poses. From the main rotunda of the grand adagio we move through a colonnade: six solos, of which the man takes one. I could have wished for a more interesting assortment, with less repetitious brickwork. (The Kirov, which indirectly furnished this choreography, has heaps of interchangeable variations lying around labelled "Petipa-Minkus.") Suddenly we step down a flight of entrances and exits and out the back door. The ballet is ending the same way it began, but twice as fast. There's a whirl of fouettés by the ballerina—a fountain—and a final assembly like a low, arched gate. The curtain descends like a portcullis. Your souvenir is the damnable tunes of Minkus, which echo in your head for days.

"Paquita" has a Spanish flavoring; parts of it turn up regularly in "Don Quixote." The Ballet Theatre casts do each variation so slowly and with such definition you could write down the steps. The spice of Spanish dancing doesn't enter into it. The gruel of pedagogical discipline does. This, too, comes from the Kirov—this methodical step-by-step concentration. It puts the dancer under a microscope and magnifies every technical flaw. The Kirov dancers, who have grown up with the method, are able to do more under exposure than the Americans, who, I'm afraid, will always look like students. As for the principals, it's no longer news that Cynthia Gregory can turn six inside pirouettes unsupported or that Fernando Bujones overjumps his entrechats. Exciting the audience is their job, and that's what their choreography is about. When Martine van Hamel and Patrick Bissell take over, it is rather a waste. The claptrap star routine doesn't bring anything exciting out of them; they need real parts. And in the "Sylvia Pas de Deux," André Eglevsky's staging of Balanchine choreography, they get them. —ARLENE CROCE

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