

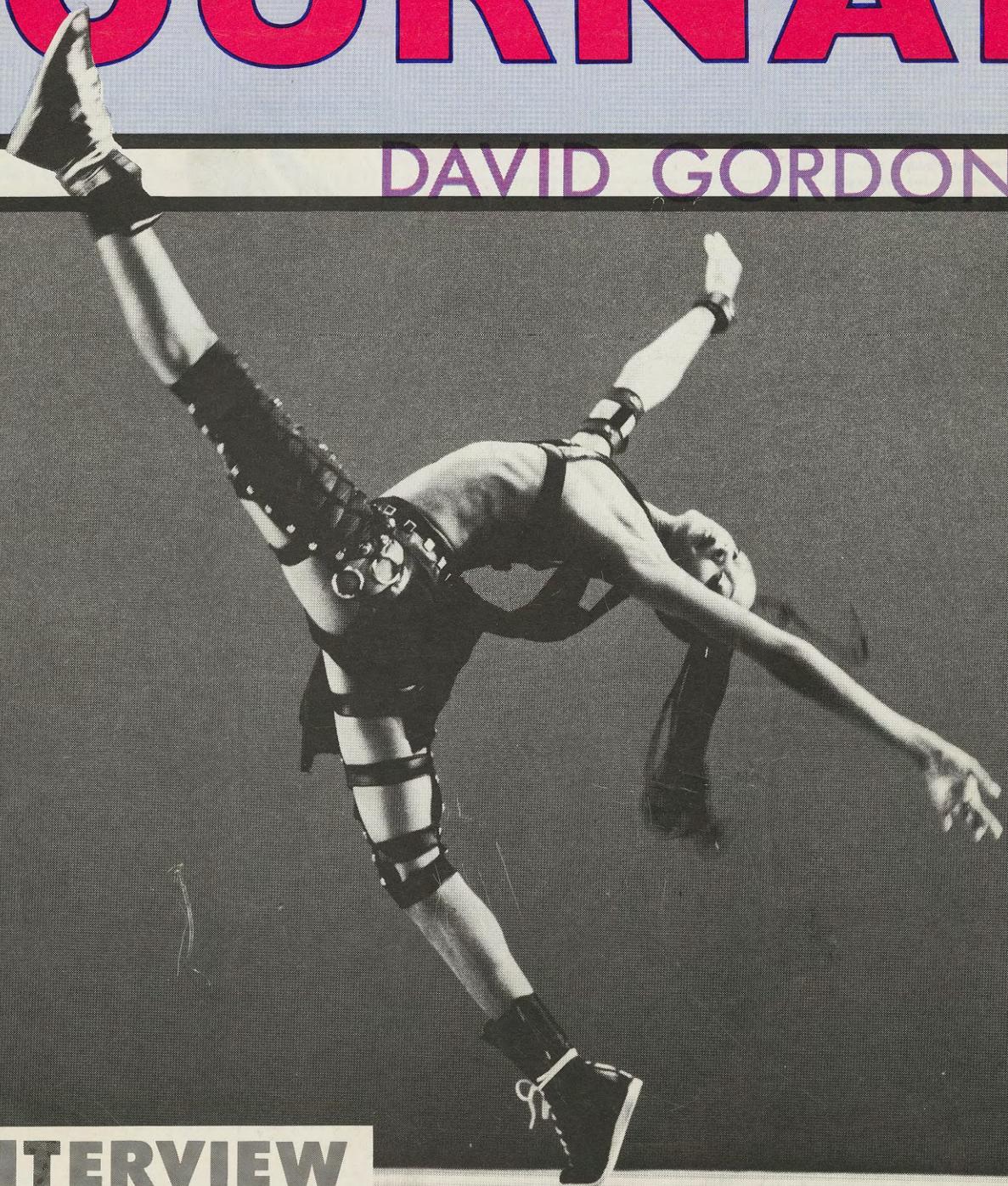
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DANCE THEATRE JOURNAL

DAVID GORDON



EMILYN CLAUD

INTERVIEW

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ABOUT THE JOURNAL

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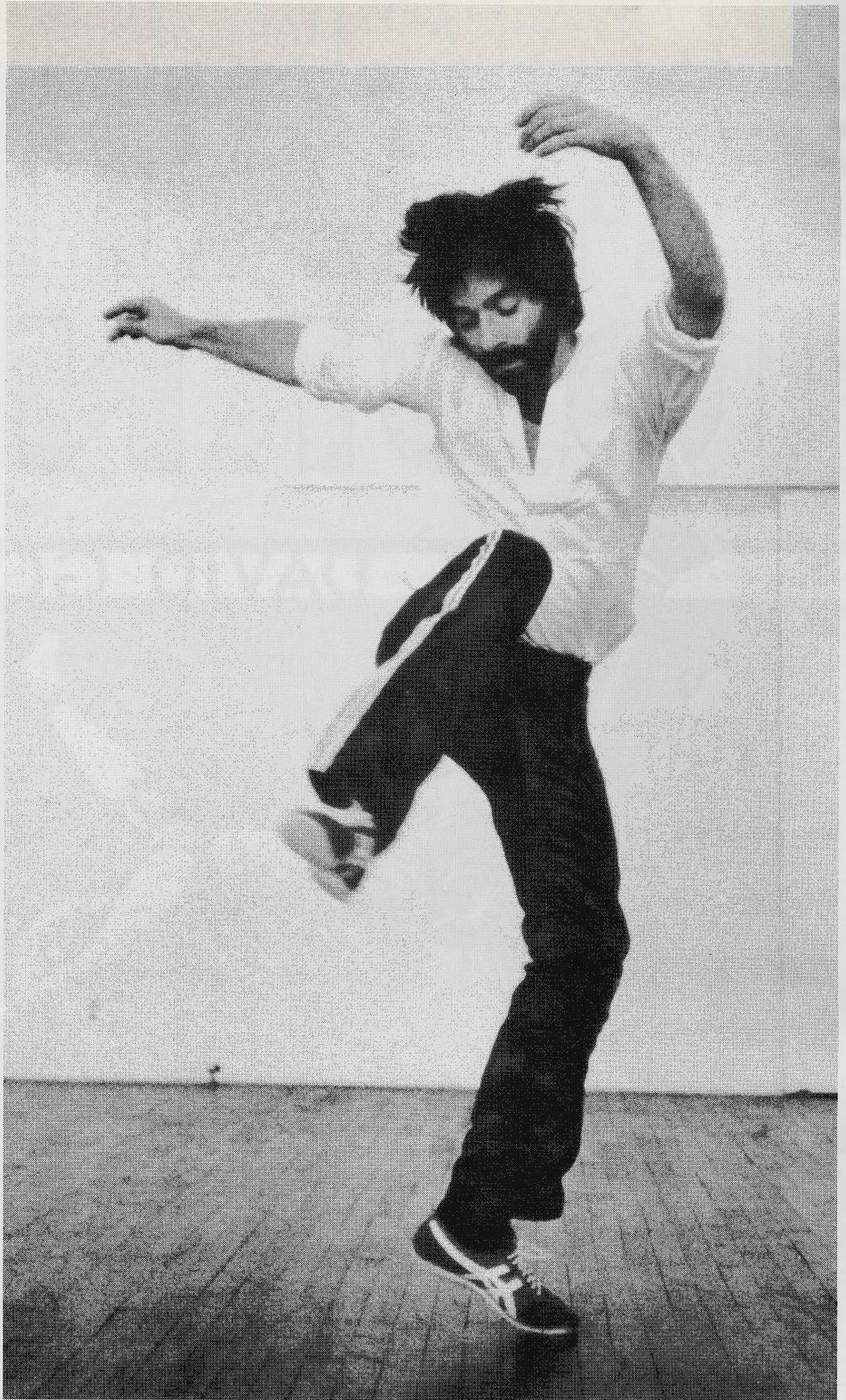
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David Gordon. Photo: Lois Greenfield



Extemporary Dance Theatre. *Field Study*. Chor. David Gordon. Photo: Dee Conway

NEW FIELD - NEW HORIZONS

Chris de Marigny talks to David Gordon, one of America's leading dance innovators and Emilyn Claid, Director of Extemporary Dance Theatre about his new work 'Field Study'.

Even by the standards of 1968 David Gordon and his wife Valda Setterfield (also his lead dancer and fellow artistic conspirator) presented an extraordinary sight. Not so much flashy dress as unlike any other kind of dress. Just enough of the fashion to be recognisable but eccentric enough by the addition of disparate items to create a stylish question-mark – the artistic non-sequitur. I first met David that year at the first night

of what turned out to be Judy Garland's last concert at the Palace – a glitzy opening full of smart people. Although Garland had lost weight and looked terrific, there was very little left of the voice – very loud at the top and bottom, with nothing in the middle. Nevertheless Gordon loved the performance: she had, he said, such a sense of theatre.

The story illustrates a point.

David Gordon was becoming associated with a then young generation of dancers – Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs and others, later to be collectively known as post-moderns. Gordon has now come to resent being classified, aesthetically and artistically, purely on grounds of generation and place (Judson Church). One only has to remember Rainer's famous manifesto of 1965: "NO to spectacle NO to

virtuosity NO to transformations and magic and make-believe...." Gordon, like Rainer and others, was a rebel: and although he shared some of his generation's ideas, he was then and has remained an individualist who hates to be classified. While continuing to break all the rules including his own, Gordon has always been fascinated by theatricality, style and, yes, fun. Even when looking at some of his most po-faced

pieces, there's a nagging doubt: might he just be being ironical?

Perhaps it is therefore appropriate that the only British dance company that he has made work for should be Extemporary Dance Theatre. Extemporary under Emilyn Claid's directorship has become a company of individualists with a surprisingly wide range of choreographic styles in the repertory. Claid has herself a strong sense of theatre and goes for that in her choice of choreographers.

I caught David and Emilyn in the middle of a busy rehearsal schedule. The new work *Field Study* had just been set on the dancers; David was starting to edit and fine-tune the construction. (Gordon refers to himself as a constructor, *not* as a choreography).

★★★★★

CHRIS DE MARIGNY: Why did you ask David Gordon to make a second work for Extemporary?

EMILYN CLAUD: The first thing I would like to say is that working with David means a chance for dancers that have been trained in a quite traditional way – to be involved in a different kind of working process – what they physically have to do is very different from anything they would have to do in the ordinary repertory of a contemporary dance company – of any contemporary dance company in this country. (*To David Gordon*). Like the last time you came, what was good is that you are actually challenging the dancers to move in a new way.

CdM: What's happened to the dancers in the meantime? I mean, okay, five of them are new from the last time around, but there are still a few who –

EC: Only one of them was there last time – Lloyd (Newson).

Well, I think when David came last time, I'd only just taken over as director of the company and nobody was quite sure what was going on – and we put a brave face on it and said "We'll try". It wasn't until we actually performed the piece (*Counter Revolution*) for the first time and the audience loved it that the

dancers had any idea that the piece was going to be successful, meant something, was a dance! They had no idea that the piece was in the dance category until the audience reacted.

DAVID GORDON: When I first encountered the company, they were a company with a kind of physical hold-out that was not different from most situations in which the company has not chosen the choreographer, who has been chosen by the director. The company was genuinely reserved about what this guy was going to do to them, perfectly reasonably, but within a very short time I felt that I had co-operation and that people were working very hard to try and understand what I was doing.

I didn't know until later that there was no sense generally of effect. When I left the piece behind, I knew relatively how funny it was. And I did try to warn them that, during the piece, when the audience laughed, they should keep their serious behaviour in relation to the tasks I had asked them to accomplish. They said "Sure" – afterwards, I understood, they thought I was crazy – they thought that it would be very easy to remain serious.

I had little or no problem in the daily working – they did work hard. And, although this company is a new company put together by Emilyn with the people of her choice and working in the direction she wants to work in, I still – in the opening days – feel the kind of reserve of dancers who are waiting to find out if this guy knows what he's doing. I mean, some people get to like you really quickly, and get interested fast, and for other people the proof of the pudding is finally the performance – when you go out there, *what* happens. It isn't – it's not like critical acclaim. It's what it feels like and how the audience deals with the stuff in the piece. I think that's finally where I mean something to people.

EC: Do you find it interesting to work with dancers who have had this kind of traditional contemporary background? Do you find it fits well?

DG: Generally speaking, and not particularly about Extemporary, I find that a lot of the time what this traditional training teaches (I am not making a statement against traditional training or against training) is how to reproduce action in various ways. I find that traditional training takes what may have been a natural mover and in a

very short time, because it doesn't explain the things it's trying to do, it replaces natural movement with a final position and gets rid of the *process* of moving. So you find a lot of, and meet a lot of, dancers who know what it *looks* like to have jumped and know what it *looks* like to have turned. But the thing itself disappears and people don't seem to understand the middles of phrases, and only understand the high point of phrases or the *preparation* for the phrase. The phrase itself, or how you get from one phrase to the other, is not there. I find it in America and I see it here in a number of people. It is really peculiar: it is the *appearance* of dancing in the way that there used to be the *appearance* of passion – but there wasn't any passion. You saw what looked like passion; you saw eyebrows and shoulders. This is the *appearance* of dancing and a lot of training results in it.

The other thing that I find very peculiar is that people are still being trained without any relation to the physical relationship that they have with another person – there is no partnering of any kind. Contact improvisation is the only thing that has attempted over the last five years to get anybody to understand what it is like to deal with anybody else



Extemporary Dance Theatre. *Breaking Images*. Dancer and Choreographer: Lloyd Newson. Photo: Doris Haslehurst



David Gordon. *Trying Times.* Chor: David Gordon. Dancers: David Gordon and Valda Setterfield. Photo: Gerald S. Ackerman

physically in a space. As I understand it, there are ballet partnering classes that are very specific. It seems to me that about 80% of the time in *most* dances *somebody* is dragging *somebody* round this space. How come *nobody* learns to do that? I don't understand it.

CdM: What attracts you about David's work, Emilyn?

EC: There is one aspect of the work that really interests me. How he deals with the efficiency. How long it has taken you to see that that's too many steps to get around that chair, to pick that chair up—that process of weeding out the inefficient movement.

DG: I didn't even know that it was a remarkably conscious process. When you do improvisation for a long time and you pay attention to what's going on in it as I did in the Grand Union, you begin to understand the difference between a kind of inventive, but economically arrived-at, moment and a "shuffle, shuffle, think, think". With the latter, if you can't do it faster, if you can't do it more expediently, then you are spending an enormous time to arrive at what is generally less than an enormous end result. So I began to understand then about less, doing less.

There is extraneous material in the action and non-extraneous material. In certain cir-

cumstances I have tried to make something of the extraneous material — "shuffle, shuffle, shuffle" and *more* "shuffle, shuffle, shuffle".

EC: There is one very similar aspect of the work from last time, although the two pieces (*Counter Revolution* and *Field Studies*) are completely different, and that's what I call "cause and effect". That's what I really enjoy about the work. Movement only happens because it's the effect of the movement before and that leads on to the next movement. That makes the piece make a lot of sense. It is all actions and each action is tied to the next action and there are no counts.

CdM: Is there any music?

EC: Yes, wonderful music. I find the relationship between the piece and the music very interesting. The music is John Field *nocturnes*, turn of the century (eighteenth to nineteenth) Irish piano pieces. How do you see the movement in relation to the sound?

DG: When I have more time than I do here, I work for longer without music with the company. Here I brought the music in relatively quickly but I don't want, particularly at the beginning, the movement to start being coloured by the music. However, I listen to the music a million times and I colour the movement in some fashion, in

my fashion, in relation to the music. I start to make what I think goes together with that music and by keeping the parts separate — the parts being the dancers, me and the music — I have the feeling that I arrive at a slightly richer relationship between those things. Because not everything in it knows about everything in it at every moment. That way, it doesn't get to be a sort of Mickey Mouse relationship, people emoting, movement responding, music enveloping. In this work I brought the music in relatively early, but I asked everyone to stay cool about what they were doing to it.

I listened to Mozart a lot in America, but I realised that it would be very hard to ignore, or keep some sort of ambiguous relationship with, the phrasing of Mozart and the climactic — the way the music climaxes. Then I found this Field music which is full of climaxes and full of phrasing but which in some peculiar fashion is arbitrary — it does do A-B-A as one would expect, but it is so arbitrary in its B — I mean it does A-B-B-Prime B-Second, I don't know *what* it's doing — and you can sort of both avoid the climax or ride it into the next place in the music. I'm not really musically educated, but this is wide open for the kind of activity that I want.

EC: Do you think you're making as a theatrical piece?

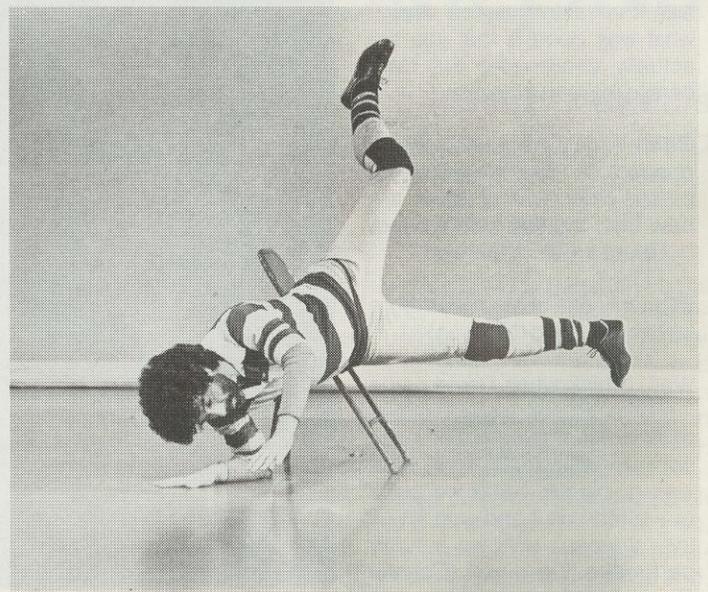
DG: Yes, I think I always make a theatrical piece. I remember

one time in the old days somebody called me at the Paula Cooper Gallery in New York, where I was going to give a performance, to ask me if this was going to be one of my boring pieces or one of my funny pieces. I think even the boring ones were theatrical. They were very purposefully monotonous or extended in time, even going into the tiniest detail.

For me — I don't know what it is for other people and I don't know what the definition of "theatre" is — for me to make a theatrical piece is to make a piece that works on the stage; and people sit in the audience and learn from it; and it isn't about group participation; and it isn't about feel-good relationship. It is that I, as a member of the audience, am aware that I



Emilyn Claid Photo: Chris Harris



Chair. Dancer & Choreographer; David Gordon. Photo: Lois Greenfield



David Gordon/Pick-up Co. *The Photographer*. Valda Setterfield (centre). Photo: Tom Caravaglia

am in an audience for an event which seems to be – which seems to make the maximum use of its *stage* capacity – what is available to it by being on the stage.

CdM: Coming back to this question of theatre – in your case, your works never seem to be abstract. You always have references, human references in a work. Either they're to do with relationships or to do with quotations that sometimes are obvious. Does the term "theatrical" take these elements into account?

EC: I think it's also in the movement. It's not abstract movement but real movement, real time everyday action.

DG: I don't believe that the movement that goes into those pieces that I make is normal everyday movement. I don't think there are many people who do. I think there are *elements* of ordinary movement, I mean one does a *rond de jambe* and at the end of it one walks out of it, in the way that one might not in another kind of dancing. One sits down in the chair and gets pulled up in a particular position with one leg extended and the other one straight. One doesn't normally get pulled out of a chair in such a way so there are combinations of those things. You said abstract dances with human references. I think I make human dances with abstract references. I think that the pieces are frequently chock full of kinds of human behaviour or simulated behaviour. Somewhere in the course of it, some

of it is turned into something that looks like dancing or moving.

We had a conversation and she said (*pointing to Emily*) "This is an abstract movement".

EC: I was teasing, David.

DG: She always says the truth and then afterwards she says she was teasing! She says what she really thinks and ...

EC: No, I was teasing. Honestly, there were elements ...

DG: I'm teasing now.

EC: When he's teasing he says it very seriously.

CdM: David often likes to be ambiguous.

DG: Last night I want to see *Wild Honey*, and Michael Frayn (*the playwright*) writes in the programme that the thing that's really difficult to do about this play that everybody acknowledges, is the absolutely confusing ambiguity between comedy and drama – and that's really its basic flaw. I think that's the basic flaw in my work. But I never understood it as a flaw until I began to realise that the people who saw it and the people who produced it had a very hard time trying to figure out whether they had permission to behave in one way or another – based on the work. And it was the very fact that the work in some way keep *drifting* or *skewing* back and forth between *what* might be funny and *what* might not be funny, between *what* might be personal

and *what* might not be personal. This hanging around in that land is what interests me.

EC: You say you're not doing everyday movements. That's a bit relative. For us a lot of what you do – running, walking and sitting down – that for us is fairly everyday. Obviously they are movements that have to be physically acted ...

DG: I think there is everyday movement but I don't think *that's* what this piece is all about. I think there is far more non-everyday movement than there is everyday movement. I think people do walk from some place to some place, but I think what they do when they get there is not everyday. I think that all those leg lifts and turns and jumps are not everyday things, they are performed – they are to be performed in a very un-presentational fashion, but the activities themselves are specialised activities.

We are probably discussing the common dislike of a stylistic exercise laid over movement so that they form two separate layers; and the audience has to look through both of them to see anything, but basically sees nothing. For most people it is the excuse to be passionate about work that is not passionate or does not require them to be passionate.

EC: Again, what attracts me to your work, and to that of a lot of other choreographers, is that it's work that is honest in how it is put together, where each movement comes out of the move-

ment before. And particularly your work brings out that honesty and that connection, and it's an intelligent connection.

DG: The process that you were asking about earlier, that really is a kind of a process, except that for me it doesn't happen so. It is first of all not organic in the way that you described as "logical". That is, for me, movement should in some way seem to have a kind of logic, so I go in search of it, except in certain places where I have absolutely attempted to obscure the logic.

But this is not the kind of logic of movement which might be termed "organic" – which I don't find theatrical. I find that nice to do, I find it nice to have a friend to sit and watch me do it in the studio, but I don't find that when it is done by someone for any length of time in the theatre, it keeps me interested. I make another kind of logic and that other kind of logic has to do with happening in the theatre. Things get bigger when you have to do them for other people. It isn't all about insight and it isn't all about something personal, it is about in some way revealing something to a group of people.

EC: That's what you mean by being "theatrical".

DG: What I am saying is that there is another kind of logic; and that other kind of logic is not for me – the organic kind of logic. Frequently contact improvisation performances are exceedingly logical – the ebb and rise and flow of movement....



David Gordon/Pick-Up Co: *Profile* Chor: David Gordon. Dancers: Keith Marshall, Susan Eschelbach and Margaret Hoeffel

At this point we had to break up the conversation. The dancers were coming from their lunch break. I resumed the conversation the next afternoon without Emilyn who was busy sorting video recording problems on another company piece. It was a marvellous sunny day; David and I sat outside on what he referred to as the "stoop" or the steps up to someone's house.

CdM: *Field Studies* is different from anything I've seen of yours.

DG: Do you think it all looks like ordinary movement? Emilyn thinks it does.

CdM: Well, there is a lot of ordinary movement in it but there are glissades and jetés, pirouettes and penchées in between all the other bits. I was talking to Betsy Gregory yesterday, who said that when she was watching it last week you were concentrating on the ordinary movement. Was it difficult to get dancers to move in a non-dance manner?

DG: If you don't know that you have a style. Emilyn says I have a style, Valda says that I have a style, you see, I've never understood that I have a style, I always keep ...

CdM: I always thought that you had an attitude.

DG: (laughs): Perhaps I have an attitude. A long time ago when Valda did that Muybridge piece and the tape got made with Ain (Gordon's and Setterfield's son) ... In the tape, the original tape, I say to Valda, "No, no *no*, that's not right, do it *naturally*," and Valda says "You're talking about *your* 'natural', not *my* 'natural'. This is *my* 'natural' ... Do your own bloody solo," she says! And I finally am figuring out after all these years that I am talking about my "natural". My natural is – there are things that happen in my body that are like what Emilyn calls "cause and effect". Meaning that if I take this shoulder down, my arm does something with it. If I take this shoulder back, my arm comes back, but it isn't a gesture and it isn't articulated in some fashion, it is the *swing* or the *arc* that is described by the *action* of my shoulder or the upper part of my body.

So I make things that I think have this kind of natural flow and then I watch how on other people they don't. Then I have to ask for it – then somebody tries to duplicate it – then I realise that it is as artificial for *them* to do what I can do as it is for *me* to do some other things. But eventually I get to the point – and this is absolutely arbitrary, totally arbitrary – you can get seven people in a room, somebody can do some very different things than you do stylistically, and it's palatable and all right. It even, in fact, endows the piece with a slightly skew material value. But some of the others can do some other stuff and that isn't all right and you've always got to work to change it. Sometimes you even have to get rid of these things you liked from one person, because you can't pick somebody out and say "You're okay, but none of the rest of you can do that". In my own work, it's Valda: those arms are not like anybody else's in the modern dance world. Sometimes I absolutely stop them doing what they're doing and sometimes I let her get away with it because it's so gorgeous, how can you stop it? So it becomes a part of the work.

We had a conversation in the first week, which was interesting – Lloyd (Newson) brought it up and said about, you know, the section where they stand up on the chair and lean on the back of somebody and the arm comes round ...

CdM: Yes, beautiful movement, almost classic épaulement.

DG: And Lloyd said "How do we know when we're supposed to be being pedestrian and when we're supposed to be being aesthetically elevated? How do we know?" And I said, "I'll tell you this is ... Okay, now you can do that and now you can stop doing that." One of the things that goes on in the work is that there is more than one kind of material going on and it's what makes it as interesting as it may or may not be. It is not determinedly pedestrian, it is a lot of things – including, I think, sometimes poetic.

CdM: It is a poetic piece, a lyrical piece. I know there are great moments when there is a good

deal of rushing around and the chairs are flying and the bodies are flying and you're not sure which thing is going past your eye at which moment. But on the whole it has a kind of classic calmness. It has a lot of elegance and that's another aspect of the work I've not seen from you before. One should know better than ever to think that you only do two or three different kinds of things.

DG: I do attempt to walk out on a fair number of limbs, the latest limb being that I have met with Baryshnikov here and agreed to make a ballet for American Ballet Theatre in September. I don't know how to make a ballet.

CdM: You've never worked with classical ballet dancers ever?

DG: No. Everybody in my company takes ballet class but they aren't classical ballet dancers. But I've agreed to do it and after that I've agreed to work with the Dance Theatre of Harlem and do a piece for them – another kind of classical ballet.

CdM: When you get ballet dancers, will you be tempted to put them on pointe? or not?

DG: I'm going to make them do everything. You know what interests me about continuing to make work at this point? Can the work, can the movement *change* and can it, in some way and by some kind of sensibility or some aesthetic decision, still be *mine*? I mean, I don't want to make somebody else's ballet. I don't want to make a ballet that looks like a ballet and everyone to say "Oh, that looks like a ballet and it looks like every other ballet". But, on the other hand, can I not make a ballet that looks like a ballet and at the same time seem as if only I could have made it? And that's what is part of what's going on in this work: a number of kinds of dancing together, which, somehow, are mine in the way that it's all strung together, in the way that it's phrased or in the kind of blocks of activity that are like I would do.

CdM: One of the things I was curious about is that, as your generation has come to be successful, its members have had to grow in terms of not only *who* they work with but *where* they work. For instance, you've

spent years and years working in lofts and then in sort of small spaces like Dance Theatre Workshop, and now you're working in large places like Brooklyn Academy of Music – in large-scale opera houses. How does that affect your work? Does that mean you have to change the way you think about or construct a piece?

DG: For me personally, the working in lofts and small spaces was not a political and/or an aesthetic decision, it was an economic decision. One worked in those spaces because those were the spaces that would have one. I would, ten years ago, have worked on a stage somewhere if someone would have let me onto one. They wouldn't, so we went into all those other spaces.

When I did *The Photographer* at Brooklyn Academy of Music, I had eighteen people and I rehearsed a lot on the stage, but basically it was made in the Le Perc Space which was basically the equivalent of a large loft space with me straight on to the dancers and actors. Then we took it down onto the opera house stage and I looked at and I ran around that theatre like a little rat – up and down everywhere – and took everybody back into the Le Perc Space and started to make more material and more cross-throughs. I had seen from upstairs that what *here* looked absolutely complex and magical, from *up there* looked like activity – wide empty space, activity, wide empty space. I began to deal with those spaces *in between* the spaces, which only made it from *downstairs* more complex and amazing. I think that kind of amplification of movement and of movement in space is learnable and an interesting project: I mean, why not learn to make things that kind of big? For the performance we were in, *The Photographer*, it became very clear that I would have to talk about the fact that, whereas in most spaces *we* would ever be in, this (*points ahead*) is your contact, in the opera house this (*points ahead*), this (*points upwards 45 degrees*) and this (*points up to the gods*) are your contact. So now your focus changes to include an enormous space up there, and that becomes part of the movement

too. It was an interesting thing to do.

CdM: I've always felt you would handle scale well, because I remember when I used to look at your Azuma windows back in the early '70s, some were small but you would always make them appear gigantic because of the way you assembled objects in there. They were unlike any other windows one saw anywhere in New York but they had this great feeling of scale.

(Until 1980, Gordon used to support himself by designing windows for stores, particularly the Japanese owned group AZUMA. Window design in the States is taken a great deal more seriously than it is here. Gordon had a formal visual arts training and his window design career has an artistic pedigree: both Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg designed windows in their early careers. I once heard Andy Warhol ask who designed those amazing Azuma windows...)

DG: Another thing about those windows! I realise that I couldn't be doing what I'm doing now if I hadn't done them for all those years or at least I would have a much harder time understanding how to do it. I've been here for two and a half weeks and this piece was finished to the point that it could be rehearsed and fined down and edited and played with by Saturday. That's about ten rehearsals. We had about ten four-hour rehearsals and a twenty-and-some-odd-minute piece was put together. That's because of those windows. I did fifteen, sometimes seventeen, windows in a week and I generally, because I was dancing at the same time, moved all those windows into two and a half days. On weeks when I had big rehearsal schedules, I gave myself a maximum of forty-five minutes per window to do it. I learnt to work in the window and to look around me and to know what it would look like outside. So I learned to work very quickly, and as expediently as possible. I think of myself as a water-colourist as opposed to an oil painter. The details gradually emerge from the layers of wash that go on. I start with those washes rather than "No, move the body, well, the head," I don't

do any of that at the beginning. Broad strokes of something so that I begin to know what it is I have and then I begin to focus in...

CdM: You put structure inside that?

DG: Yes. And, in that way, I work very fast. What's incredibly important to me is that I have enough time at the end to go to work with my scissors and start

my manager had been in touch with Sue Hoyle here (*Extemporary's administrator*), who said that they would like to have live music (number one) that was public domain music, so that was an issue, and (number two) they have a pianist that travels with them and, if it's going to be live music, it would be nice if it could be piano music. I had just finished working on a concert in America, which I had been working on for six months and



David Gordon/Pick-up Co. *Framework*. Dancers: David Gordon, Margaret Hoeffel. Photo: Nancie Battaglia

cutting out those things that I've been looking at for some time, and say, "Well, maybe that idea is good for something, but it isn't good for here." And almost inevitably there comes a moment when you say "I'm taking out that part, that part and that part" and the dancers all groan and say, "Oh, that's my favourite part. That's the only place I have something".

CdM: One other question about music? Why did you choose the music—John Field nocturnes?

DG: Well, before I left New York,

telephone and that telephone leads into the big box music. Later on Valda and I do a duet to some of that contemporary music and simultaneously played on the same tape is the Chopin that Valda's been dancing to earlier. So there's the Chopin nocturne and there's this incessant other music going on.

Then, when we went to Harvard, I had a Chopin tape with me and I was just listening to them – I didn't know what to do there and I said finally "I'll do Chopin, I'll just make the schmaltziest piece and get it off my chest." As I was listening to it and listening to the kind of the sentimentality of the nocturnes, I said to Valda, "What is a Nocturne and who else wrote them? Are they always this sentimental and what is this form?" At that moment I noticed in my cassette that there was a little blurb, and it said a man named John Field, who was Irish, invented the nocturne and wrote them before Chopin and objected to Chopin's as being too sentimental! I thought "Well!" So Valda went to the Harvard music library and found the Field nocturnes there. And I went and listened to them one time and heard these two and said, "Well, this seems like this might be the direction to go in, but of course I won't need to get anything about it because I'm going to London and this is an Irish composer and there will be lots of records." And of course there were *none* anywhere.

CdM: That's very British.

DG: So, very happily, just before I left, Valda found this wonderful cassette of, not the complete Nocturnes, but of some of them. And the two I was interested in were on it, and I have them with me, and that's what we are working with for the whole thing.

CdM: Here come the dancers – back to the dance.

DG: And that's that.

We amble slowly back into the cool dark studio theatre at The Place, discussing the work with the dancers. Annelies Stoffel starts talking about performance attitude.... ■