

# Dancers merge for absorbing program

By Mike Steele  
Staff Writer

David Gordon merged his own Pick-Up Company with Minneapolis's New Dance Ensemble for an altogether fascinating dance evening Tuesday at the Children's Theatre.

Gordon is a singular force in the dance world. There's nobody quite like him. Though by now we're quite aware of his background—Merce Cunningham, the Judson school, Yvonne Rainer, the Grand Union—it's unfair and fairly impossible to lock him into any easy category. Though bits and pieces of his background continue to resonate through his works (especially the use of spoken text and natural movement), I'd swear I also detected influences from vaudeville, Buster Keaton, W.C. Fields certainly, Russian Romanticism diffusely and, heaven help us, soap operas. What pigeonhole does that fit?

It's not traditional dance—technique is unexceptional and hardly tested; his movement vocabulary is small—yet Gordon's pieces finally work in dance terms. His knowledge of weight and balance is superb and his use of bodies in relation to each other is dynamic.



Staff Photo by Mike Zerby

**David Gordon: He's a singular force in the dance world.**



## A review

couples, the partners rotating. The partnerships in both dances are about support. They're heavy on odd, difficult balances, one dancer leaning precariously against another, on dancers falling, often with daring speed, and being caught, or on dancers stretching out and being held in balance by a partner. Sometimes it carries over into lifting and, in one case, supported handstands.

"T.V. Reel" is the longer and denser of the two. It has a strongly romantic, even sentimental overlay undercut by Gordon's verbal and visual punning, which gives it a surprisingly hard edge by not allowing us to take the romantic partnerships seriously.

The two works on the Tuesday program related nicely to each other. The first, "T.V. Reel," was created last year and has been very successful in New York (where it included sections on video screens that were dropped for this performance). The second, "Limited Partnership," is a commission by the New Dance Ensemble and, though it was danced Tuesday by both companies, eventually will be danced by the ensemble alone.

What the two have in common is partnering. Both deal with constantly switching, changing sequences of duets. Even with as many as 16 people on stage we're aware only of eight

It begins with five dancers on stage talking about the absence of Susan (Eschelbach). Valda Setterfield leads the talk with her fluent, deadpan wit, instructing dancers where to stand and giving them their lines. They talk about how they love and miss Susan, each confession leading to a big, comforting hug. Occasionally dancers seemingly break from the text to give personal feelings and we begin wondering about the differences between what they're saying and what they're really thinking, about them as people and them as performers.

This goes on until Susan bounds cen-

ter stage and announces she's back. Suddenly it's a love feast. The hug becomes the basic move. The movements are precarious and the pairings are rapidly changing, like musical chairs for partners. Gordon here can't resist turning this soap opera orgy of friendship into visual-dance puns with dancers falling in love, leaning on friends, throwing someone over, going around together. It's hilarious.

The music is a "Miller's Reel" orchestrated by Gunther Schuller and it's played over and over, its quick-step rhythmic pace adding energy to these permutations of love and friendship.

Setterfield tells some funny stories, about falling in love with four men, about W.C. Fields, who lost his wife to another comedian but stole the comedian's delivery and thus got the best of the deal. Gordon finally emerges for a swirling, very tender duet with Setterfield, which leads to the ambiguous finale with three couples embracing and the seventh person, Paul Thompson, sitting alone, odd man out. We've had love as soap opera banality and bad joke, love as friendship and tenderness and now we sense love as transitory, hauntingly elusive.

"Limited Partnership" is all dance with no dialogue and, though it deals with much the same kind of partnering, it isn't romantic. In fact, it's quite cool and formal, the dancers

carrying out movement tasks rather than being motivated by outer (or inner) provocations. It begins with a soft, stretching duet for Leigh Dillard and Wil Swanson, again a partnership based on mutual balances and support.

That moves into a configuration with four couples. Again partners quickly change in sequences, and soon it becomes clear that the dance will consist of variations on the original duet. In time both companies are stretched across the stage on the diagonal, at first dancing independently of each other, then slowly merging. Much of the 25-minute dance is to silence interspersed by brief piano miniatures that have little apparent effect on the dancing.

The piece becomes heavier and more complex as it develops, the movement finally blurring as the number of dancers increases until it all merges seamlessly into a curtain call. It's a provocative piece and sometimes a lovely one. The ever more complicated interrelationships kept the audience busily involved, though I thought the dynamic flagged a bit toward the end, perhaps because the complexities were piled on without any real deepening of the structure. The New Dance Ensemble will dance it alone June 24 and 25 at the Children's Theatre, and my guess is that it will be a stronger, cleaner piece with fewer dancers. It should be a substantial addition to that company's repertoire.