

## David Gordon

### Pranks and Ironies

BY ANNE PIERCE

The first event of this year's Ninth Street Crossings festival featured the David Gordon Pick Up Company, performing at the Museum of Natural History's Baird Auditorium on two nights early in November. Gordon's dances included almost as much text as movement, with bits of biography, fractured conversation, and rehearsed commentary mixed in, resulting in unusually intimate, regenerative theater. This intimacy comes from many sources, but most obviously from the dancers, who looked, in their individually eclectic and casual clothes, like they could just as easily have been walking off a city street and into a coffee shop for breakfast as onto an auditorium stage to begin a dance concert. They mingled with the certainty and sensible good will of a group of close friends in the dances, which usually contained double doses of cynicism and compassion. Each dancer, from the dusky Susan Eschelbach to the temperate and languid Valda Setterfield, seems as much an independent person up there on stage as part of a unit of dancers, and it's as though Gordon has accepted and incorporated that distinction. The choreography, with its emphasis on process, falls someplace just short of accessible, because it is at once enigmatic and verifiable. The dances present so many ironies together, it's sometimes hard to distinguish between all the messages. What seems accidental may be intentional, or the opposite may be true; you are only sure only some of the time.

In prior decades, Gordon, a longtime associate of the avant garde in dance, participated in the

experiments of the Judson Dance Theater group and the Grand Unmon. His wife, Valda Setterfield, who danced with the Merce Cunningham Company, now performs with him. The choreography is often repetitive, but the broken and replayed patterns seem logical, motivated, and true. The same set of unspectacular movements may be repeated over and over, or halted, reversed and replayed like a film/video sequence, but new information returns each time. Gordon employs the reverberating logic of expertly timed humor like a craftsman, applying just enough distortion in the dialogue, tossing in an objective, razor-sharp remark, and drawing on moments when reflexes go awry. It's as though he never underestimates the irony of these things, or, for that matter, their entertainment value.

He also seems interested in the implications of the same action seen from a myriad of viewpoints as, for example, when he takes his dancers, who have gathered around a table in the corner of a room, tips the table over and regroups them to look just about the way they did before, only sideways. More subtle physical pranks are constant. In a slide-and-live-performance duet, entitled *Close Up* (1979), the sleek, silvery elegance of Valda Setterfield against the slightly rumped vitality of David Gordon is a perfect visual irony. The dancers don't appear to play other people; they are always themselves, except when they're being each others.

See PRANKS AND IRONIES, p. 5.

### Theatrical Hijinks

BY MEADE ANDREWS

THE HUG: the embrace, dissected. Seen from all angles. Variations on it. Stripped down to its basic components. Repeatedly performed with democratic equality by men with men, women with women, men with women. Revolving in differing configurations -- as part of a reel dance and as a real encounter in the dance. My mind reeling from the multilayered kinetic and verbal associations played out in *T.V. REEL*, (1982), David Gordon's evocative new work.

At last! David Gordon performs in Washington (sponsored by Smithsonian Performing Arts and Washington Performing Arts Society, November 1 and 2). An event I've been waiting for since I saw *Making Dances* (1980), Michael Blackwood's documentary featuring Gordon, and read Sally Banes' *Terpsichore in Sneakers* (1980) -- and discovered what a witty, articulate, human, and crazy choreographer David Gordon could be.

In *T.V. Reel*, the first piece on the Smithsonian program, Gordon makes visual and verbal puns that reverberate so quickly and richly that I was literally left reeling at the end. There are so many levels of meaning to see and hear and appreciate. The piece begins by immediately playing havoc with our perceptions. Valda Setterfield leads a group of four dancers onstage. They place themselves very precisely and someone immediately asks, "Where's Susan?" She is apparently a missing dancer, as a

See THEATRICAL HIJINKS, p. 5.



Keith Marshall, David Gordon, Valda Setterfield, Paul Thompson and Susan Eschelbach, members of the David Gordon/Pick Up Co. Photo by Nathaniel Tileston.

# REVIEW

## PRANKS AND IRONIES

In a section of *Double Identity* (1980) three (Susan Eschelbach, Margaret Hoeffel, and Keith Marshall) wrangle into each others' spots on stage, exchanging "physical" identities, claiming to be "Keith as Susan," or "Susan as Margaret," and so on. The audience can only marvel at their ability to commit to memory an endless string of complex patterns so similar to each other, but requiring a relaxed, second nature execution. The clever puns and pointblank remarks also thrive because of their natural delivery. Even in *Dorothy and Eileen* (1980), when two contrasting efforts -- a revelational dialogue between women, and the dance they work through together while they talk -- merge so powerfully it's partly because of the way they speak to each other, naturally, exchanging personal histories like friends.

The most recently created dance presented that evening was *TV Reel* (1982), a kind of soap opera with dancers, which revolved around the temporary absence of one company member, and ensuing interpersonal adventures, mostly implied. The dancers engaged in a gossip, affectionate game, changing places and exchanging hugs, suggesting "significant," though conspicuously brief, relationships. Though there is irony and insincerity in the game, their patterned activity also reflects the gentle discipline of traditional American social dancing.

Gordon is not the only overseer in the group; the dancers may get involved in the unfolding action on stage, distance themselves and comment on what they see, and then go back to it. Dance audiences are used to a form of sincerity in performance. In the worst of productions it can be seriously pummeled, even mocked, but it usually pervades even the most abstract dances. Gordon toys with this custom, turning it over, and giving us an opportunity to examine it, and also to enjoy the twist.

## THEATRICAL HIJINKS

place seems available for her. Valda says, "Let's place Susan" (giving her a context). Playing with the text, the others say, "Let's play Susan," and Valda immediately repeats her first statement: "Let's place Susan" (setting them straight on the reality of the situation). Everyone continues to change places and talk about the missing Susan; eventually, the real Susan enters (it appears she has really been in California). The piece continues to explore real vs. reel situations (such as t.v. soap opera plots) with a precision of timing and movement shaping that is intellectually, kinetically, and visually entertaining in the purest sense of that word.

In 1975, Gordon stated that repetition is the basis of his work (*The Drama Review*, March 1975). And it still is. In *T.V. Reel*, the repeated hugs, the reel dancing, and the "changing places" motif provide the rhythm and texture of the work. For Gordon, repetition creates a rigorous structure, often replete with elements of fun. The fun emerges from continuous word-play, movement by-play, and the connections between the two. For instance, the words "falling in love" are first spoken and then visually rendered in a myriad of falls and catches occurring all over the stage. Later, the falling is interspersed with the hugging, and as people change partners, commentary on the shifting nature of relationships is provided. The repetition evokes multiple layers of association; one activity is added to another and several are seen in tandem. And always with new levels of meaning.

Gordon himself does not appear in *T.V. Reel* until the end of the piece. At that point, he simply walks on stage and begins a duet with Satterfield. Their Fred and Ginger ballroom routine, based on repeated turns and dips, adds the ultimate comment on love and relationships to the work. Gordon's romantic and gallant partnering of the woman with whom he daily lives and works suggests both a comic send-up and a touching tribute to their partnership. Again, the layers and the repetition.

*T.V. Reel* is followed by *Close-up* (1979), an earlier duet for Gordon and Satterfield, that also focuses on repeated variations on the embrace. Here, the partnering similarly suggests both the mundane quality of the couple's connection as well as the power of their physical intimacy. Yet there are

differences in the focus and structure of this work.

First, the sole movement component is the embrace; wide-ranging possibilities of spatial levels and physical configurations are richly explored. *T.V. Reel* continuously spins out nonstop movement and dialogue. *Close-Up*, as befitting the title, focuses on stillness and silence. The dancers stop in an embrace, seconds later, one slips away, leaving their partner empty-armed but still maintaining the shape of the connection. The piece is built on a pile-up of these ever-dissolving physical relationships. At the same time, a series of large slides, featuring Gordon and Satterfield in practice clothes or vintage street wear, provide close-ups of various body parts involved in each connection.

The work is fascinating, not only for the shifting visual perspectives provided by the slides and the dancers, but for the beauty of the varying intimacies Gordon and Satterfield suggest. The actuality of the physical closeness of the two people and their vulnerability when left unpartnered offer an unsentimental, extremely moving commentary on love.

The remaining works on the program, *Double Identity* (1980) and *Dorothy and Eileen* (1980) continue the structural themes involving repetition and visual/verbal punning. They also encompass Gordon's concerns with both the absolute reality of human relationships and the theatrical possibilities inherent within them.

What I really like about David Gordon's work is the pristine clarity of the seemingly cluttered ordering of his many-layered images. I was never confused while watching his work, although there is always a lot going on at once. The repetition allows me time to make the necessary associations and also to connect with reappearing motifs from section to section within the piece. The only time my attention wandered happened during the reel dancing that occurs after each t.v. reel episode (in *T.V. Reel*). Basically, the reels are resting places for the audience, similar to choral interludes in ancient Greek comedy. But the movement variations are too slight, the repetition wears thin, and the reels too long to sustain their frequent appearance; at times, their evenness disrupts the forward progression of the piece. However, my objections to the reel dancing can be cited as a minor annoyance in contrast to my real enjoyment of the vibrant dancing, inventive verbal allusions, and theatrical hijinks of David Gordon and The Pick Up Company.



Members of the David Gordon/Pick Up Co. in Gordon's *T.V. Reel*. Photo by Nathaniel Tleston.

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