

Musical chairs

DANCE / DAVID DOUGILL

THIS YEAR'S Dance Umbrella Festival, which is the seventh and the longest – running until December 1 – opened last week with a series of performances by the New Yorkers *David Gordon and the Pick Up Co.* at Sadler's Wells.

The involvement of the Wells theatre repeats an innovation of last year, offering a much larger house than any of the regular Umbrella venues and the possibility of attracting an expanded audience. It may be that some Sadler's Wells dance-goers are seduced into sampling other Umbrella offerings at The Place, Riverside Studios, the Almeida Theatre and the ICA. In that case, a lot depends on the appeal and "accessibility" of the inaugural event.

David Gordon has been a significant figure in American modern and experimental dance for two decades; and lately he has created works for large established companies, American Ballet Theatre and Dance Theatre of Harlem, as well as for the Paris Opéra Ballet's contemporary group, the GRCOP. Earlier participation in Dance Umbrella festivals led to his making two dance-works for the small British group Extemporary Dance Theatre.

"Nine Lives", the first piece on the Wells programme, opens boringly with the stocky, moustached Gordon (who is 48) rolling casually on, off and through a folding chair. Chairs play a prominent role in several of his works, and sometimes he makes ingenious use of them. In this piece, as thrown or otherwise manipulated by the eight dancers, they represent – among other things – horses and wagons, the sound accompaniment being a collage of music and dialogue from old western films.

Gordon also incorporates a chair, rather nicely, as the third participant in a gentle duet with his wife and long-time dance partner, Valda Setterfield (who is 50, and many years ago, before she joined Merce Cunningham, was a *corps* member of the old Ballet Rambert). The couple's work has a mature elegance and feeling which sets them apart from the six younger dancers, who are not to be faulted in any way for their dancing skills: they have splendid timing and coordination but they never express any individual personality. The responsibility for this is probably Gordon's.

The title of the second piece, "Offenbach Suite", suggested a pun to me, and I was expecting chairs *and* a sofa; but it turned out to be unfurnished. I have been avoiding the word "choreography", which Gordon himself eschews – he prefers "dance construction" – but this work, performed to music of two cellos, contains a good deal of formalised dancing, rather bland in tone, with occasional touches of humour for the Setterfield, whose quizzical expression reminded me of Joyce Grenfell.

Finally "My Folks", Gordon's tribute to his background and family, using the robust klezmer music of Jewish celebrations, is built round what he calls a "visual device" – lengths of cloth in striking colours, used as integral parts of the dances, and all eventually draped round Gordon and Setterfield like a royal wedding window-display. "My Folks" offers neat ideas and images, and attractive passages of dance, but all that cloth business is repetitious and overdone.