

David Gordon Lights Up Your Mind

By Burt Supree

Suddenly, David Gordon is making dances everywhere from Staten Island to Paris, which is a fine thing. American Ballet Theater is currently doing his *Field, Chair, and Mountain*, and his own Pickup Company is at the Joyce this week. The company was always intended to be exactly that, a pickup group pulled together for a particular project and then disbanded, but never was, because, for example, Margaret Hoeffel and Susan Eschelbach came early and stayed five or six years. But now they've left, and there are four new dancers. Keith Marshall, a Pickup veteran of five years, and Dean Moss, who joined last year, stay on. And Valda Setterfield, Gordon's wife, who perfectly inflects every word and gesture and gauges every move with an immaculate sense of proportion and wit, is a permanent special guest star.

It feels a little like members of the family have left home, because in Gordon's work we got to know Margaret and Susan in a way that felt personal, though it wasn't really. (Except maybe it was. You never can tell.) Partly because dancers often address each other by name in Gordon's pieces and we're made privy, blow-by-blow, to their coolly jostling rearrangements. Gordon's never absolutely serious, but, always, *sort of* serious. He speaks not with a forked tongue, but he usually is of two minds. He keeps fiddling the context, changing your relationship to whatever he's presenting, keeping you on your toes. Games permute into emotional wranglings of great delicacy, and little dramas are teased, step-by-step, and partially exposed as clever games. At any given moment, you aren't trust him, because in another minute he'll peel off another layer or turn another facet, and transform the dimensions, the quality, of whatever you've been looking at.

Gordon started dancing with James Waring, was a member of the Judson Dance Theater, worked with Yvonne Rainer and then with the improvisational Grand Union that grew out of that company, before forming his own company about seven years ago. From his earliest work, there has always been a sense of intimacy with the audience; partly because he has assumed that we're as smart as he is, partly because he has sometimes tuned us in to emotion so distilled and unstressed, so tender and modest, that it leaves us breathless. As in *Close Up*, where he and Setterfield alternately slipped out of each others arms, from a series of frozen embraces, leaving the embracer holding air. It was just like un-snarling yourself from your bed partner without waking him or her. That measure of care.

But Gordon's known as a joker, as a clever guy with words. And his economical verbal play is enough to make anyone giddy. He, however, has thought of that element only as a ribbon running through the physical material. The visual events of his dances are always clearly focused and framed, so you know you're being shown something from a different angle, a fractionally changed perspective—and that knowledge is a delight. But what has endeared his work to me is its tactile substance, its measured weight and surreptitious bounce, the way people customarily handle each other with a matter-of-factness that's never cold. Gordon knows that, secretly, they bruise easily. Underpinning the delirium of repetitions and variations, of juxtapositions and overlaps, is a canny wisdom about the necessary foolishness of notions of fixity and attachment in a mutable world.

How come every place you look there's a David Gordon making a dance? Part of the explanation is a change in attitude. "One of the things I did ordinarily was say no to everything," says Gordon.

"Even if I was waiting around to be asked, if I was asked I first said no so people would have to ask me again. So I could be sure that they meant it. In realizing that, I began to think that it was time to try yes. So I started saying yes to everybody.

"Last year, everybody asked me and I said yes because 50 to 60 per cent always fall out, like the no-shows on your reservations list. Everybody applied for grants, everybody got them, nothing fell out, everything I said yes to happened, and I'm busy and crazy. I wound up mak-

ing on to the next doing, and you have all the residue of the last doing to carry in with you and there's a kind of momentum. But this is a little overdoing it."

"I always feel I am somewhere in between knowing exactly what it is I do and knowing nothing at all about what I do," says Gordon. "It's like walking some line between your sophistication, which is the result of your experience, and your innocence, which, as a result of your sophistication, you know you must hold on to. So, the work that I'm now involved



JAMES HAMILTON

ing 10 pieces this year."

The 10th piece is one he's working on now and that will be premiered in Paris in June. But it all started last August, in London with a piece for Extemporary Dance Theatre. Then he came back to start the ABT piece and two pieces for his company, and almost simultaneously started to work with Dance Theater of Harlem. Then, in January, he went to Paris to make a piece for the Groupe de Recherche Choreographique (GRCOP), came back, picked up the threads, made a piece for 11 graduating students at NYU, a piece for Clive Thompson's company, and now he's finishing off the third and fourth pieces for his own company. "Because we have to have two programs in Paris which is what we agreed to do. And because I don't ordinarily have something called repertory. I have to make two programs in order to have two programs."

"The most amazing thing about all of this is, when I used to do work every two years or so, I sincerely thought that when you did something you got empty, and then you had to wait around to get full again so that you could do something else. I now see that you're all oiled to go

with pursues, perhaps, the more formal aspects of things." Suddenly he's rapping at triple speed. "I mean, one of the things that's happening is that I'm getting more and more interested in mechanics of movement and possible relationships of movement to music. I'm very much less interested, at the moment, in talking and/or writing the material that goes into a talking performance. I'm tired of listening to everybody's true confessions. I've decided it's time to shut up. And in shutting up, I have looked for what it is that's going to make any piece of mine different from any other piece of mine.

"Not simply its costuming, which, mostly, I do. Mostly it's all variations on the same stuff, which is a lot of clothes. Everybody just wears a lot of clothes.

"So, how's the movement of the piece going to be different from one piece to the other, and how is its relationship to sound going to be different? How do you make a whole really different-feeling thing?

"I like working with a very few people a lot of the time, and I don't like working with a lot of people a little amount of time. The option, which has become sort of an economically viable one for spon-

sors, of pursuing collaborations between various artists for performances is just not an option that interests me very much. It's like Seventh Avenue fashion. St. Laurent's sailor collar is going very well and so is Geoffrey Beene's peasant dress, so let's make a peasant dress with a sailor collar! I'm not interested in getting involved in this process.

"What do you get involved with? And how do you move on? When I got about halfway through the making of *Framework*, last year's full-length piece, I said to my pal Bruce Hoover as we were talking in the street late at night after rehearsal, the problem with *Framework* is I'm halfway through it and I know I know how to make it. And it's the third or fourth full-length piece in four years, and I know what I'm doing. I even know how much editing I'm going to do at the end. I know too much about this piece. And I'm not interested in doing this again. I want to do something else. And the something else I want to do is really idiotic, because it's what everybody else has been doing all along. And it's called, make three pieces in an evening and find out if you can make them different from each other.

"I start working over here, making this something. And then I start working over here making this something else. And without my really being very aware of it, these two things start growing together. That's how the full-length pieces started to happen in the first place. I started making this piece and I started making that piece and halfway through I said, what's the difference between this piece and that piece and why shouldn't they all be part of one piece? Well, now what I'm trying to do is keep those pieces separate and find out if I know how to do that.

"I told Baryshnikov in our first meeting, if you're interested in some downtown work of mine transplanted on to your company, I'm not interested. The reason I want to do this is I never did it before. You have a ballet company; I want to try to make a ballet. The schizophrenic part is that all the while you're working on it, you're saying, I want to make a ballet, but I want to make my ballet. Somehow or other I want not to erase myself. So I keep looking at it and I say, well, that looks like mine, *that* looks like a ballet, that looks like *mine*. And I just went ahead. Sometimes I wasn't sure it looked either like a ballet or like my work or like anything at all."

"But," I start to sputter, "you were dealing with something much more elaborate in scale and design, with a whole army of people..."

"That was pure *idiocy*. It never occurred to me to say, I mean, *it never occurred to me* to say, 'Hey, I think I ought to start with maybe six people.' They said, 'Martine van Hamel said she wanted to be in it.' I was thrilled. Martine van Hamel wants to be in it? Are you kidding? Here she is. She wants to meet you and be in it. She's been to see your work, she's seen *Framework*, and she wants to be in it.' Oh! Well, okay, swell.

"Well, that means Martine has to have a partner and then there has to be this second cast and then soloists. 'Now, shall we say six soloists?' 'Oh, yeah. What are soloists?' Oh, I see. 'And the corps.' 'The corps?' And it never occurred to me to say, 'Oh, wait a minute. I think that's too many people.' I just said yes."

"One of the questions that gets asked when you do interviews or answer audience questions is people keep wanting to know what your feelings are about the audience. The answer is *I'm my audience*. I watch this stuff day in day out, day in day out; if I put something in that I loved to pieces on Monday and three Mondays later I don't want it there anymore, it doesn't matter that I once loved it—it's

out. If I put something in that I loved to pieces all the way through the Mondays, if the piece has grown someplace else without it, I toss it out.

"There is stuff that gets done in my work for the audience. But it is not the stuff of condescension. It is not my world made simpler. It is the ordinary stuff of theater; it is: Your arm is in front of your face; we want to see you; move it. It is: You're going to have to be louder there. It's about performance and about certain theatrical conventions which are expedient to keep hold of. Others I have thrown out because they're not necessary for my work. But nothing about the content, which includes the physical content or the verbal content or the possibly conceptual or ideological content. If I can understand what's going on, I make the assumption that the audience is composed of at least a few people like me. If I don't understand it, who am I making it for?"

In a studio rehearsal, the dancers are working on one of the pieces for Paris in June. They're jumping on and rolling off folding chairs—to which Gordon has shown an intermittent addiction for many years—swinging them around, sliding a seated partner around on them. There's a bumpiness to the action that really digs into the spirit of the music, Western swing. Next on the menu is a circusy part of *My Folks*, to klezmer music, in which the dancers tumble and cartwheel, and wield red and black zebra-striped cloths they partially wrap up and lean in or are heaved out of, or use to frame or chop off part of the action. In a section where the music seems especially melancholy, they saunter and swim, with lazy and gently twisting motion in the upper body. The humble material is exquisite here, but Gordon has lifted it

from *Offenbach Suite*, another piece on the program.

Propitiously, Setterfield pops in with shopping bags to make a timely cameo appearance before zipping off for class or something. In a white jumpsuit and black belt, with a bandana around her swirly silver cap of hair and cheapo black-and-white running shoes, she gets a "public" crack at a solo she's been mostly working on by herself. She whips lightly across the space, hands on hips, with little Jewish-Russky patty-cake feet and soft leaps. As a trumpet's blating, the movement eases into grand brushes and more drawn up steps that pause briefly in passé. I'm loving the combination of her elegance, those fat shoes, and the way they squeak.

Gordon's pieces can be as full of reflections as a funhouse hall of mirrors. They're assembled of surprisingly unextraordinary elements. The dancers, for example, don't have to bust their balls every minute doing amazing feats. But Gordon gets a pinball game going where the balls never stop banging around and lighting things up in your brain, making connections. "Most of the time I don't have to think about what the implication of the connection is," he says, "as long as I feel things connecting. Those connections are frequently what I want. If I'm in a never-ending sentence, I want to at least know that's what I'm in. That it all has to add up to the Gettysburg Address, I'm not interested."

"In writing material for the verbal pieces, I gave myself the freedom to use language the way I use it ordinarily. Which is, I don't use a lot of very big words and I don't make great complex sentences, and in the stage work that seemed perfect. And even when a three-syllable word would say exactly what I needed, I would find a way to turn it into

five one-syllable words.

"Once I was asked to write something for the *Drama Review* about what I'd done. It was appalling. It sounded like kiddie talk. I finally called Yvonne [Rainer] and I brought it all to her house, and she sat and read it all. And the first thing she said to me was, 'Don't you remember what you did? You are belittling everything.'"

"When I went back home and started taking out the parts where I said, 'And this wasn't very important,' I found out certain things I didn't know. There was a piece called *Random Breakfast*. And I wrote a sentence and the sentence said, this piece was 80 per cent improvisation. This was astonishing to me. I didn't realize that this piece was 80 per cent improvisation, number one. Number two, the story I have been telling for years to everybody who asked about the Grand Union was that when the Grand Union started, they all wanted to improvise. I didn't know anything about improvisation and I had never improvised. I didn't know what they were talking about and I thought they were crazy and I went into all the performances with Yvonne Rainer's material which I did while they were improvising up the kazoo.

"And now I write this sentence that says, in fact, that *eight years before* I made a piece that was 80 per cent improvisation. Now *what is it I'm talking about?* What is it I think I did or think I do or think I know?"

"When the article was finally written, I thought this still sounds like baby talk. It's positive baby talk instead of negative baby talk. They seemed very happy with it. But I'm not the person who can ever love the writing of that person. I do it because it's what I seem to do or know how to do, and when I try to push in another direction I just start sounding exceedingly pretentious. And that sounds

worse to me than the baby talk. But I read Annette Michelson and I think, 'Oh!' I don't really understand it entirely, but I'm in awe of it. It's my idea of being intellectual.

"You see, I wanted to be the others. I wanted to be Trisha [Brown] or Steve [Paxton]. I wanted to be making brilliant innovative work, and I was making *show business*.

"And I was dealt with in that way. I was the comedy. And it continues to be hard to be in that position. Trisha Brown, whose work I admire more than anybody's, gets half the contemporary art world to come to her performances. I don't. And I'm never going to get those people. My work isn't art enough to get the art world, and it's not entertainment enough to wind up on Broadway. Frequently it hasn't been dancy enough to get the dance world in. I don't exactly understand it all. I don't have a lot of choice. I couldn't figure out how to suddenly be that thing the art world might be interested in, nor do I know how to turn into something called pure entertainment.

"I value very much the fact that I am still investigating. I feel amused that somebody can refer to something I've done as a *seminal* piece, because, for me, it was just another piece in a series of pieces in the midst of a particular investigation. At the moment it was made it was not important.

"I've arrived at 48 and I know there's still an enormous amount of things I don't know anything about and can investigate. I *don't* have to spend the next 20 years making *TV Reel*, my big hit of 1983 or whenever the hell it was. I don't have to do it again. They can't force me to do it again. And I don't have to make the same bloody piece with another name for the next 12 years. That feels like something terrific."

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