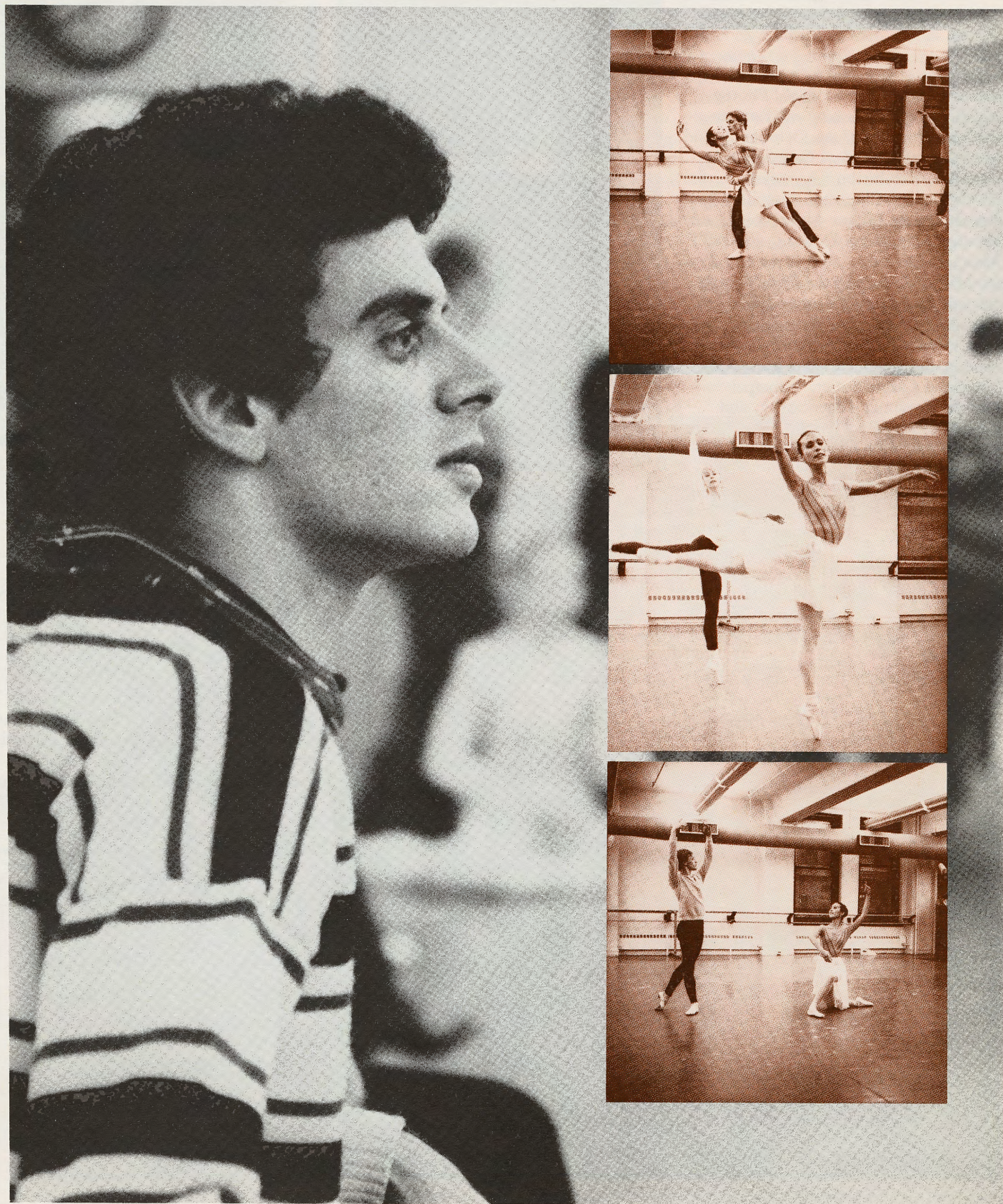


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On Point

ABT



David Gordon's Uptown Whirl

"I feel as if somebody has given me a passport to Mars."

Sitting on a cushion on the floor of his mirrorless dance studio on Broadway, David Gordon reflected on his first piece for American Ballet Theatre, which is also on Broadway, some two miles north. Mr. Gordon, who loathes descriptions like "avant garde" and "post modernist," who insists upon the term "making work" rather than "choreographing" and who considers himself an exceedingly conservative, middle class, middle aged person, may succeed in linking the two "neighborhoods" of dance as no one has before.

"It has been my intention from the beginning not to transplant some kind of Downtown performance piece on an Uptown company," he said, "but to bring together aesthetic and stylistic choices I would ordinarily make with input and physical information from these particular dancers... To be responsive to a very specific technique and vocabulary they have, and introduce into this mix the nature of my own work.

"They are terrific dancers," he continued, "and that means they can do an awful lot of things I can't even think of. So I call upon their experience to enlarge a situation I can only imagine on a smaller plane."

Linking the Uptown and Downtown dance genres was as simple as taking a subway—at least, the decision to try was that easy. "Charles France (Assistant to the Artistic Director) called to ask if I'd be interested in doing a ballet for ABT this fall, and said that Misha would like to meet with me to discuss the possibility. At that point I was negotiating another project, which I later realized wasn't going to get off the ground. When he called two weeks later and said, 'Are you sure you don't want to talk?' I said, 'Oh, I want to talk now.' I went up to the Met and at the end of a 30-minute discussion I said, 'So when will you know if you want me to do this?' Misha looked at me like I was crazy and said, 'Now.

We know now. You're doing it.' And I said, 'It doesn't depend on something somewhere somehow?' And they said no. I thought that was rather amazing because nothing happens that way.

"I walked out of the Met—it was raining very hard—and I thought, you've just said you're going to make a half-hour ballet. You don't know how to make a ballet... and you don't know how to make a half-hour ballet. What are you going to do?" The answer may not have been evident then, but the

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question indicated he was on the right track. "There's a certain kind of fear that I love being in the middle of, a kind of discomfort that makes me exceedingly comfortable. When I'm in that situation, I know I'm heading toward a project of some interest. And this is one of those."

The project is *Field, Chair and Mountain*, a work for Martine van Hamel, Clark Tippet and 18 other dancers, set to the Piano Concerto No. 7 of John Field (1782-1837), an Irish composer who invented the nocturne. Field's irritation over the commonly held belief during his lifetime that Chopin had invented the nocturne hints at a jealousy to rival Salieri's of Mozart. The concerto contains two movements instead of the usual three, and the first movement features one of Field's nocturnes in its entirety. Asked if the choice of a classical score wasn't paradoxical, Mr. Gordon said that rather it was consistent with his history of eclectic musical choices, which in fact rarely include contemporary or newly composed work. The choice of *any* music before he has almost completed a work, however, is a departure for him.

"I make a great deal of the material of a piece, and it begins to suggest

to me the kind of music I should be looking for. Then I find the music and start feeding it into rehearsal after the piece is two-thirds made." ABT's dancers are used to knowing the music at the beginning of rehearsals, and although Mr. Gordon knew in advance what music he would use this time, he didn't expose the dancers to it immediately. "I'm really not interested in being *on* the music; I'm frequently interested in moving through the music and in getting on the music when I want to be," he said. "Dancers start phrasing on the music right from the beginning; to get a less calculated relationship between movement and music, I have to stay away from it."

Mr. Gordon's vocabulary of steps, he said, expands with the ability of the dancers he's working with to fill it. If a certain naturalness or ease of movement results, it is completely intentional. "If in order to get into some beautiful lift you have to do three ugly things, I'm not interested—unless we can arrive at it in some way that doesn't look like it required all the strenuous and uncomfortable preparation in the world. I try to keep things looking as if they have a flow to them. Eventually everything looks as if we could all do it, so people make the assumption that we *could*," he said, implying that the appearance of simplicity is illusory.

Space Exploration

Assisting Mr. Gordon have been his wife, Valda Setterfield—a member of his troupe, The Pick Up Company—and ABT Ballet Master David Richardson. "It's been great having David there," said Mr. Gordon. "I look at a section I've made and ask him if I'm making the same first ballet that everybody else makes; 'Am I reinventing the wheel, and glorying in having invented it?' He's spoken to me very candidly about what I was or was not doing. Valda has served that function in the studio, and in the other 20 hours of the day."

One of the adjustments Mr. Gordon has had to make is getting used to the limited time he can spend with ABT dancers, as opposed to the daily four-hour sessions he has with his own company. A group of 20 dancers plus their covers have had to learn not only his work but other new ballets in addition to rehearsing the remaining 30 in the 1984-85 repertoire. The potential



for occasional frustration and fatigue is great, but Mr. Gordon, whose sympathetic face and soft-spoken manner give him a gracious air, has taken everything in stride. "I don't think the world really understands that dancing and rehearsing are an astonishingly intimate and exhausting activity. You are dealing with other human beings in a physical and emotional way that most people only deal with lovers... They have the right on the basis of their professional behavior, which is wonderful, to 'lose it' every once in awhile; to fall apart, or bring the rest of their life into rehearsal. It's okay."

Mr. Gordon's work often includes dialogue, but that requires significantly more rehearsal time than he now has and performance spaces far more intimate than the Met or L.A.'s Shrine, so the ABT work will have none. It will, however, contain another of his signatures: chairs. His fascination with them revolves around a desire to extend their pedestrian nature. "It is always clear to the audience that it is a chair," he said of its role in his new work, "but if

somebody is being promenaded on point on the chair, you get a lot of images at once—the abstract image of more height, a promenade in the air... You keep going back and forth from some kind of lyrical, romantic or amusing image to the fact that it's a chair." The dancers began rehearsing with the chairs that normally occupy Studio Five, while designer Santo Loquasto searched for the perfect chair. With some of those he found too low, some too high, some too raked and some lacking the necessary padding, it became clear that the ABT chairs were the answer, so the ones that have been used all along in rehearsal will get a fresh coat of paint and make their debut on opening night at the Kennedy Center, sparkling with utilitarian pride.

With all the focus on what effect Mr. Gordon might have on ABT, he has found the reverse effect occurring as well. At one point in the second movement of the Field score, for example, he has constructed a waltz. "I ploughed through it, went under it and finally decided to see what would happen if I

also went on it. It seems nicely surprising to me that at that moment, everything that has been sneaking through the music suddenly walks right across the notes of it. And now," he said as he indicated his own studio space, "funny enough, there's some waltzing in here."

If the ABT experience has seemed so profoundly different to David Gordon from what he's been used to, will ABT audiences find his work to be profoundly different from what they're used to?

"ABT's been providing repertoire programming for the last 45 years," he said with a smile. "If they've managed to get through an evening in which they've looked at Merce Cunningham's *Duets* and Roland Petit's *Carmen* and Lynne Taylor-Corbett's *Great Galloping Gottschalk*, the likelihood is that I won't confuse them!" □

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