

GORDON, PICKUP COMPANY

By DONNA PERLMUTTER

The David Gordon of American Ballet Theatre fame is undeniably clever and engaging, a fertile choreographic mind to prod the big-time terpsichorean machinery from badly worn grooves.

But with his little Pickup Company, which made its local debut Friday at Wadsworth Theater, the New York-based dance-maker beckons a viewer to his other realm—that of post-modern classicism. It is divine.

Gordon's gift lies in his ability to translate all experience into a free-wheeling code of interaction that evokes affect without labeling it. There is no mugging or clichéd clowning in "Four Man Nine Lives," for instance, a down-and-out carouse set to nostalgic Western tunes. But these hobos in battered fedoras, striped pajama bottoms, plaid shirttails and ties suggest all that is endearing about their camaraderie.

A slow perpetual motion makes a fluid stream of their collisions and connections, their casual cabrioles and cartwheels. They lightly bound and faintly slouch and softly stretch, conjuring an unlikely balletic mirage of tumbling weeds and rambling men. A tone of gentle humor pervades the piece. It is engrossing on a moment-to-moment basis, also brilliant in sum.

A variation of this gentle spirit that informs all of Gordon's dances flavors his "Offenbach Suite." Ingeniously complementing a tubby, untethered-sounding score for multiple cellos with the sight of non-academic dancers executing supported arabesques, he asks for flimsy, rather than pristine, articulation.

In the process, he reflects what a young Tudor might do with oblique parody and role reversal (one man wears a skirt). Gordon himself, with several days' growth of beard, partners the white-haired Valda Setterfield (his wife) in Offenbach's Romantic paeon. Their duet becomes the essence of lyric naturalism, resonating a soft and genuine intimacy.

But just as Gordon eschews easy theatricality in the above-described pieces, so does he hold the same standard in "My Folks." While this Klezmer extravaganza seduces the ear with its mix of secular Hassidic music and Harlem jazz, there is never a shoulder shrug, a head wag or any other ethnic gesture to help things along.

Instead, Gordon integrates Power Boothe's stripe-blazened decor into the formal grid maneuvers as black-clad dancers counter an insinuating trumpet and a hiccupping clarinet.