

Entertainment

Dance performance given standing ovation

By AGNES BUSHELL

David Gordon once told an interviewer, "As my tongue moves into my cheek, my hand also moves to my heart."

That combination of irony and heartfelness was evident in last night's performance by David Gordon/Pick Up Company, which brought a full house

to its feet on its first of a three-night engagement at the Performing Arts Center. The company, which includes a former Ram Island dancer, Chuck Finlon, is one that should not be missed.

The program consisted of three very different works, each one appealing either intellectually or emotionally, and each one completely satisfying. "Four Man Nine Lives," which opens the program, is a dance for four men and a chair set to a musical collage of cowboy tunes. The dancers, dressed like hobos in fedoras, ties and vests, re-enact all the possible male relationships of the Old West, from simple companionship to rivalry, fist fights and gun battles, sometimes dancing in slow motion, sometimes with dynamic, slap-stick energy, always deadpan and always to the great amusement of the audience. The dancers move through series of difficult balances, configurations and slips and slides with an admirable nonchalant grace.

"Transparent Means for Travelling Light" is the most challenging of the three works, intriguing, fascinating, open to many interpretations. The dance begins dramatically, with Gordon standing on a stage crowded with spotlights, encircled by radios blasting out a jumble of sounds. His hands are raised, he is a figure of power and calm within a chaos of sound.

When the lights are raised, three dancers appear in black net and colored costumes which blur genders. This gender confusion is mirrored by John Cage's score, which duplicates the sound of a radio dial being moved back and forth. The dancers move randomly, never interacting with one another.

Relationships begin to develop in the second section when dancers appear with their arms linked,

but the lighting and costumes are lurid and the dance seems pagan. Ritual and civilized movement evolves as young male dancers gather around and vie to partner, quite classically, Valda Setterfield, a striking woman with silver-white hair. Later, in the midst of an almost Dionysian rite in which couples peel off layers of each other's clothing to very chthonic music, Setterfield and Gordon move upstage and make their way across the stage with an elegant dignity.

The sense of these two as a primal couple set apart from the younger dancers, an essential and powerful force for order, is a poignant and very human element of this piece. The last image is a beautiful one of Gordon holding Setterfield's limp body over his head while all the artifices of the stage disappear except one, and that most provocative: a square made of bricks which hangs suspended over the stage.

If "Transparent Means" leaves a viewer moved but perplexed, "My Folks" comes as a delightful and enchantingly accessible piece, set to a score based on traditional Jewish tunes. The black costumes of the dancers are relieved by yards and yards of red and black and white and black striped cloth which metamorphoses into gowns and robes, vehicles and jump ropes as part of the constant flow of movement on the stage.

Again Gordon and Setterfield are the primal couple, the younger dancers their children, the central image, the family and its joy: the happiness of youth, the contentment of age. The piece is so human, so playful and so filled with images that delight the eye and the mind, from dancers floating across the stage on boats of cloth to the dignity and grace of Gordon and Setterfield's slow hora. The final image is a family portrait — Gordon and Setterfield bedecked with cloth surrounded by their children. As dancers who have worked at their art for more than 25 years each, that image is not far from wrong.

David Gordon/Pick Up will be at the Performing Arts Center through tomorrow.

Agnes Bushell of Portland is a writer and former dancer who teaches at the Portland School of Art.

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