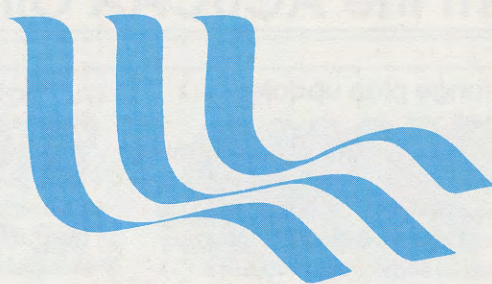


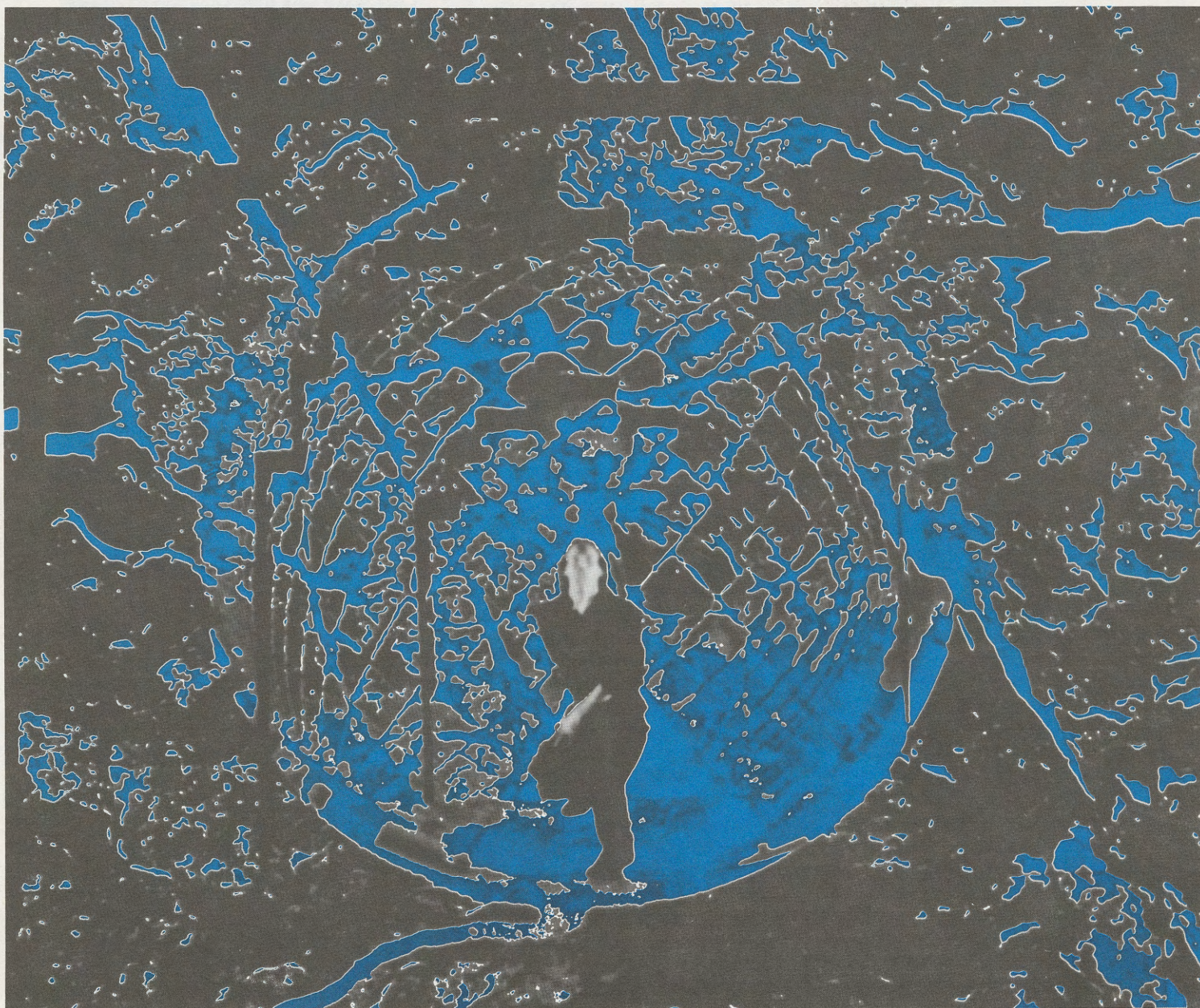
United States

ACUCAA Bulletin



Information and Ideas for Performing Arts Presenters

October 1988/Volume 31, Number 9



Scene from "1000 Airplanes on the Roof"

New work makes its mark

Where is the audience for new work? Maybe in your hall: page 5

In "United States," a new project takes shape: page 11

Ins and outs of presenting new work: page 13

Report

"United States" comes together

The crowd was turned up high. Packed into the small lobby outside the Crafton-Preyer Theatre in the University of Kansas' Murphy Hall, buzzing with nervous energy as they waded across box office lines and toward the still-closed doors, the several hundred ticket-holders—comfortable looking young professionals, wild-haired students, conservatively dressed older couples and even a few children—emanated the aura of "Event."

And it was an event: the Lawrence, Kansas premiere of "United States," a coast-to-coast exploration of the American heart and mind, choreographed by David Gordon and performed by Gordon's Pick Up Co.

"United States" has been commissioned by 26 presenters in 16 states. When completed in the fall of 1989, it will represent two and a half years of work to which the commissioning bodies have contributed not only money, but some of the raw material from which Gordon draws in articulating his vision.

Lawrence is one of the seven sites where portions of the work have been presented since last fall, when "Minnesota" debuted at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Portions have also been shown in San Francisco and Boston (both commissioning sites); Paris and Chateauvalon, France; and Madison, Wisconsin.

In Lawrence, a full-evening performance featuring "San Francisco," "New England" and "Minnesota," gave the audience a chance to see the choreographer's witty and acute vision wed itself



to—and ricochet off—the music of Carmen McRae and Mozart, the voice of Robert Frost, and the words of ordinary Midwesterners, reflecting on their lives.

The September 10 performance was part of the university's "New Directions" series, as well as a featured attraction of the 1988 Mid-America Dance Network Conference, which took place on campus that weekend. The audience included not only patrons from the Lawrence area, but dancers, arts administrators and critics from around the Mid-America region, as well as New York dance critics Deborah Jowitz, Joan Acocella, Mindy Aloff and Jack Anderson, who were presenting sessions at the conference.

A tape of "David Gordon's 'Made in U.S.A.'" was also on the conference bill. This work, originally commissioned for the PBS "Great Performances" series, sparked the idea for a geographically based monsterpiece, according to Pick Up Co. manager Alyce Dissette.

"Then we went on a tour of Montana where audiences were in some cases small, but very enthusiastic. David thought he'd like to do something really

personal to specific audiences in specific places."

Dissette had already been talking to Pebbles Wadsworth at UCLA, Ruth Felt at San Francisco Performances, and Robert Stearns at the Walker Art Center about commissioning some work. After the Montana tour, she began talking to presenters in various places about investing small amounts of money for small amounts of work.

"No rules," she says. "Just putting money in a pot to make a full work that would tour. We would do something in their place that would make reference to their place."

Pebbles Wadsworth helped Dissette circulate a letter to 40 presenters, asking them whether they'd like to apply jointly under the auspices of UCLA for project funds from the "Partnerships for Touring and Presenting Program" of the NEA's Inter-Arts Program.

"A heartening, amazing response came back from the presenters," Dissette says. "About half the presenters involved in this project are not in the accepted avant garde/new work network. That was the part I thought was wonderful."

We...we...we rise out of disorder into order and the poems that I make are little bits of order, see, as if I made basket or...or a piece of pottery, y'know, a vase or something and...uh, if you suffer any sense of confusion in life the best thing you can do is make little forms...uh, blow cigarette smoke rings...y'see...even those have form, y'know, and form is what gives...saves us from the sense of confusion.

--Robert Frost, from "New England"

Earlier on the day of the performance, Gordon discussed his work while taking a quick break during the rehearsal.

"The material keeps getting revised and reworked in relation to the next material that gets made," he says. "We're now performing them in part 1/part 2 format. Part 1 is Minnesota and New England; part 2, New England and San Francisco. I don't know how it's going to work when it gets to New York, in relation to the New York section."

The fact that the work is being commissioned by multiple sponsors is an entirely new proposition for Gordon, and the input from sponsors—memoirs from Minnesota, music from Austin, Texas,



Dean Moss and Valda Setterfield of the David Gordon Pick Up Co.

suggestions about the quality of light in Nebraska— is also new.

"But it's not essentially different from working on a piece in which you slowly pick up material yourself, here and there, except that the material keeps coming like missiles from the outside," he says.

"I find it interesting and exciting that people are willing to invest in a tin mine in Bolivia; we've got the mine and hope we'll find tin— or gold, or diamonds."

For the first three sections of "United States," Gordon has worked with presenters with whom he has long-standing relations. ("Next, we'll start coming to people I don't know very well.") The nature of the presenters' involvement in the project changes the usual presenter/artist relationship, he believes.

"I think there's a very different kind of investment here from the sponsor than there is in the usual performance. We have something in common here other than I show up on Thursday and leave on Sunday."

That's a situation that Gordon likes.

Alyce Dissette believes it is a positive situation for both artist and presenter.

"One of the primary problems of presenters is that there's no relationship between presenter, artist and audience," she says. "As long as we continue to market work as an end product, and not allow the public to get involved in work as a process, we're going to have a problem. That's why I think it would be rewarding (for a presenter) to choose an artist and develop a long-term relationship with him or her, let the audience watch the artist and the work grow."

"Then you asked me a few minutes ago 'how thoughts come into poetry?'"

"Well, they come into poetry the same as they come into words at all...They come into poetry, with me...metrically because I'm...in the...I keep the swing up...it's in my...it's in my head...I'm like a dancer...I'm...I'm like Mozart who they say never could keep his hands still, was always making some sort of rhythm or...or music...You know...his whole body m...moved with music all the time...I'm not as extremely that way as he is...as he was...but I'm somewhat that way."

"Everything I think about tends to run into...into meter."

--Robert Frost, from "New England"

Roger Oliver, who is serving as dramaturg for the piece, works with the sponsors on collecting materials. Once the material is in, it's up to Gordon to decide how it will be used.

Oliver says that putting the pieces together has been a trial and error process, since they have no real precedents to follow.

"For 'Made in U.S.A.,' both Valda (Setterfield) and Misha (Baryshnikov) talked about their experiences and he (Gordon) edited the material into a text. But for this sort of thing, there has been a process of feeling our way into a relationship that works; for my part, it's figuring out how to service David's needs in terms of the music and the material."

"We're sort of striking out into terra incognito, but it's been fun."

For the upcoming New York section, they are commissioning writers to do one-minute dialogues.

"Beyond New York, what we're doing is inviting the presenters from the other venues to submit material, to tell us what they think is interesting in their area. As soon as the New York section is underway, David is going to start reading and listening to this material."

They look primarily for music and textual materials. Although sponsors are free to provide any suggestions they like, Gordon has, in the work to date, usually had an idea about what approach he

wants to take even before finding the material.

"For the Minnesota section, David told me from the beginning he wanted personal anecdotal material," Oliver says. "Other than that, he wasn't specific. It just so happened that the material and the music all seemed to come together and create the kind of lyrical memory piece of Minnesota that certainly was appropriate to the vision that we here in the East might have of the Midwest."

"There's no attempt for this to be any objective kind of portrait of any part of the country; it's David's view of things."

"David's view of things" includes continually rethinking the core material, recombining and putting fresh twists on it. The structure of the project is perfectly suited to this approach. In fact, according to an article by Debra Cash in the July 26 *Boston Globe*, Gordon never conceived of it as "one giant project."

"Producer Alyce Dissette just built a funding structure that would let him work at one theme as long as it interested him," Cash says.

Dissette puts it this way:

"Audiences don't know that these pieces are forever new. But I think it makes a difference; that's why it was structured the way it was, that's the way he works. It was the heart of the idea."

—Gayle Stamler

THE COMMISSIONING PRESENTERS

Alaska	Anchorage Concert Association
California	UC Berkeley, Cal Performances
	Humboldt State University
	San Diego Foundation for the Performing Arts
	San Francisco Performances
	Stanford Lively Arts
	UCLA Center for the Arts
Colorado	University of Colorado, Boulder
	Colorado State University
Iowa	University of Iowa/Hancher Auditorium
Massachusetts	Harvard Summer Dance Center
	Jacob's Pillow
Michigan	Music Hall Center for Performing Arts
Minnesota	Walker Art Center
Missouri	Dance St. Louis
Nebraska	University of Nebraska, Lincoln
New Hampshire	Dartmouth College
New Mexico	KIMO Theatre, Albuquerque
New York	Brooklyn Academy of Music
	Cornell University, Ithaca
Pennsylvania	Dance Affiliates, Philadelphia
	Pittsburgh Dance Council
Texas	San Antonio Performing Arts Associates
	Society for the Performing Arts, Houston
	TITAS, Dallas
Washington	University of Washington, Seattle
Washington, DC	J.F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts