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Pick Up Co. works its way across our land

DAVID GORDON/PICK UP CO. — In David Gordon's "United States," presented by the Harvard Summer Dance Center at the Loeb Drama Center, last night. Program repeats through tomorrow.

By Debra Cash
Special to the Globe

A Minnesotan memoirist describes music as a "disciplined pleasure," a phrase that does double duty as an assessment of the first phase of David Gordon's "United States," with its evocations of Minnesota, San Francisco and New England. Gordon's map is unified without being too elevated to zero in on details, and his tone is tender without getting sticky.

"Minnesota" opens in simplicity: Valda Setterfield in a blue workshirt and white petticoat taking little steps and eloquently swooping her shoulders. Eventually she is displaced by the younger members of the company, who wear sundresses and denim. They swing their legs high, but their motion continues to scan as variations on walking, albeit walking swept along by Mozartian exuberance and invention. They jostle like kids on a playing field. They lean into each other with increasing familiarity. They pair off as the narrator's voice turns to memories of a rustic dance where a girl improvised her cosmetics by using burnt matchsticks for mascara and crepe paper as rouge. Later, when Setterfield joins the group, her simple back-and-forth walking patterns become a motif for the temporal shifting of recollection.

"New England," which was funded in part by the Mass. Council and was having its premiere last night, is shown in three fragments that knit the previously completed pieces together. (And the way things were arranged, New England got the evening's last word.) At first, Gordon matches with gestural translation Robert Frost's gravelly and, well, folksy voice in a taped discourse by the poet. The phrase "rise out of disorder" inspires the dancers to shift onto tiptoe, and when



Members of the David Gordon/Pick Up Co. rehearse "United States."

Globe photo/Paul Robicheau

Frost mentions that there's "nothing so composing as composition," they assemble into the tableau of a family portrait, not too different than the one in Gordon's "My Folks." This is all done with a light hand, and is stylistically all of a piece with "Minnesota." It's just that the New England sections seem to have a little more space around them, a more orderly architecture.

It's easy to see why some San Franciscans took umbrage at the

way Gordon portrayed their home. He makes fun not only of Tony Bennett's "cablecar to the stars" romanticism, but also the civic cheerleading that goes along with it. The dancing is as kitschy as it is clever. Setterfield is festooned with blossoms and dances to Jeannette MacDonald's warbling like a cheery, garden-party fairy godmother. The rest of the company lunges and stumbles drunkenly and lip synchs to the classic songs. When they dance to Mozart

this time, the music is synthesized, and the choreography looks like a tepid replay after we've come to expect something more real and substantial. However, the dancing itself is beautiful, with lucid performances from the entire Pick Up Co. cast: hats off to Setterfield, Dean Moss, Chuck Finlon, Needham native Scott Cunningham, Karen Graham, Cynthia Oliver, Sari Eckler-Hart, Heidi Michel, Spencer Nichols and Angela Vaillancourt.