

Dancers make journey with poetry, motion

By TOM STRINI
Journal dance critic

ENTERTAINMENT

Chuck Hammer's tape collage for David Gordon's "United States," which Gordon's New York-based Pick-Up Company danced Tuesday evening at Alverno College, alludes to San Francisco and California's redwood country, New England, San Diego, Iowa, Nebraska, Washington state, Colorado, San Antonio, Los Angeles and New Mexico.

The aural allusions — texts about various regions, songs about San Francisco, a Dvorak string quartet composed in Iowa, and so on — are specific. To a lesser extent, so are the costumes — baggy pastel chic for Act 1, which focuses on San Francisco, and hoe-down jeans and shirts for the men and rather ill-chosen white smocks patched with bandanna patterns for the women in Act 2, which is ostensibly about the West and Midwest.

The dance itself, however, makes only fleeting and oblique reference to locale. Gordon lets the text tell about place; the dances are about travel between places, about the rhythm of motion.

Most of the dancing in the two 45-minute acts is gentle and curvilinear. In Act 2, especially, the dances roll by in an almost unbroken flow, smooth, arbitrary and logical as the landscape rolling by a rural interstate. It is easy and pleasant to surrender to these dances and let them simply wash over the eye. It is more challenging and rewarding to probe Gordon's detail, structure and relationship of text and music.

Snippets of songs about San Francisco accompany the long segment about that city. The dance is loaded with flirt-with-the-audience gestures of pop singing, from the balletic poses of Jeanette MacDonald to the over-the-shoulder throwaways of Tony Bennett. Those presentational conventions, often linked to unlikely and funny bursts of lip-syncing, leap

out from Gordon's basic style, in which the dancers direct their energies more to one another than to the audience.

Gordon establishes his motifs early, in a slow-motion sequence in which his 11 excellent dancers traverse the stage from audience left to right. They trade places in space and in supporting positions. They sway far to one side, then to the other, and let the accumulated momentum carry them away, as weight activates motion. That motion might be suddenly arrested by the clasped arms of two other dancers and then reversed, as if by a giant rubber band. These actions occur again and again in many guises, including that of a square dance.

Variations on these motifs unified "United States," but my favorite passage was an extended digression to a taped interview with poet Robert Frost. A unison sextet spelled out the rhythm of Frost's speech with uncanny grace and accuracy, making visible the difference between prose and poetry when Frost broke into a bit of Robert Browning. Just for fun, every now and then the six poked in a touch of comic literalism — a shake of the head for a "no" from Frost, maybe, or a quizzical look for a questioning phrase.

"United States" is witty, and one expects that of Gordon. But it is unexpectedly gentle and affectionate toward the subject matter of record, in the graceful arc of its forms, and in the relations among dancers. There is a lot of eye contact, hand-holding, embracing and courteous support in this piece, and it all looks friendly and unaffected.

"United States" is a sweet dance, but not at all saccharine. That it was performed here on Valentine's Day was mere coincidence, but a happy and apt one.