

Wilmers Week

MARCH 16 • MARCH 22, 1989

PORTLAND'S NEWSWEEKLY

VOLUME 15 NUMBER 20

DANCE REVIEW

DAVID GORDON DISCOVERS AMERICA

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David Gordon's dance opus-in-progress *United States* is a series of postcards from an experienced traveler: Concise, evocative images and thoughtful, often humorous texts combine in a kaleidoscopic look at America's vast landscape and complex culture. Performed last Friday and Saturday at Portland State University's Lincoln Hall by Gordon's superb Pick-Up Company, it is dance at its best from a man who for 25 years has relentlessly explored the contemporary terrain. Insightful, thought-provoking, ironic and always engaging, *United States* offers something for every viewer.

The piece begins with an impenetrable collage of colorful noise, like the sound of the entire country as heard by a radiotelescope deep in space. As the work unfolds Gordon metaphorically separates this dense aural blanket into its component parts, revealing a number of fertile levels on which it can be understood.

The dancing is superlative: Elegant, balletic grace and sweeping leaps blend with movement as common as walking or a lover's embrace in an impressive range of kinetic dynamics. Although Gordon was one of the original members of the seminal dance group the Grand Union, whose performances were marvels of on-the-edge improvisation, his work now leaves nothing to chance. His choreography, even at its most complex, has the clarity and organization of a well-conceived and well-executed painting. When long, apparently extemporaneous phrases are repeated exactly, one realizes that they are clearly *not* improvised; the movement only *seems* spontaneous, because it flows so naturally.

There is a felicitous use of indigenous music, such as the country lilt of "Waltz across Texas," which sets the right mood for a sort of visual and aural oxymoron—a *hip* square dance. The dancers mock the tune's laid-back, monotone drawl with movement that is cool and reserved. With urban sang-froid, they slide through witty variations on traditional square-dance formations. Gordon has said, "When my tongue slides into my cheek, my hand moves to my heart"; he's not poking fun here, but rather taking something we have all seen before and showing us a new way of looking at it.

But *United States* achieves its strongest resonance in the marriage of words and movement. A pioneer in the use of the spoken word in dance, Gordon often treats texts like music—the dancers respond to the rhythm and sound of words as well as to their meanings. In "Weather Cast," the Portland-inspired section of *United States*, Gordon stretches a regional stereotype to the breaking point. While a fictional weather report, accompanied by the sound of running water, repeatedly predicts endless rain in waves of dialogue, Gordon's dancers trudge languidly through a space that is almost palpably wet, their soggy steps echoing not only the spirit but also the tempo and tone of the forecast.

In the evening's final selection, "New England," the dancers create a series of stately, beautifully clear patterns while Robert Frost's wise and droll voice expounds the virtues of poetry. Frost concludes, "Form saves us from a sense of confusion." In *United States*, Gordon takes on the overwhelming chaos of diverse images and ideas that make up this country; in giving them form, he shows us another way to escape confusion. His work integrates words, movement and music into a united state of mind.