

Gordon's 'United States' dancing entrancing

By Anne Marie Welsh
Arts Critic

David Gordon's "United States" is a brilliant, colorful piece of dance-making, the most fascinating to play San Diego since Mark Morris and his group visited two years ago. There's just one more Gordon performance tonight at UCSD's Mandeville Auditorium.

Drop your plans and go. Mind, heart and soul will be rewarded.

Gordon emerged from the creative ferment at New York's Judson Church in the early sixties. Even then his work had a wit and self-criticism that distinguished it from the more introverted and cerebral experimenting of some of his fellow postmoderns.

"United States," a many-sectioned piece that will be two evenings long when complete, continues Gordon's linkage of the spoken word with nat-

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ural-looking, uninflected movement. Though the subject is epic in scope, the work itself is quiet, clear, modest and often funny.

There's none of the rhetoric (visual or verbal) we associate with such a theme. No patriotic sentiment or political satire. Instead, real feeling and a sense of place determine the shifting styles and changing energies of its various sections. Each was inspired by a geographic part of the country.

Sometimes text, music, movement and gesture make poetry of the ordinary — a Nebraska drought, an Oregon rainshower, a Colorado family story.

Often the stage events are in counterpoint to the texts. For "Waltzin' Across Texas," Gordon's 10-member

PickUp Company mostly walks, in smooth contrast to the beat of the country music.

Sometimes the events recounted and staged are quite extraordinary. "Los Angeles against the Mountains" concluded the first half of last night's program. A quartet of dancers here captures the dark, frenetic energy of L.A., that feeling of being on the edge of danger, hemmed-in despite the distances.

The taped reading is from John McPhee's chilling report of a monster mud slide that picked up cars like raisins in bread dough, then buried a West Side neighborhood in the glop. I remember sitting transfixed a while back as I read the piece in *The New Yorker*, so intensely did it suggest that nature will someday take its revenge on the unnatural developments of Southern California.

But who would have thought to

make such writing into a dance?

The second half of "United States" has the punning title "Sang and Sang and the Final Frost." Mostly it celebrates (tongue-in-cheek) trendy San Francisco as it appears in recorded song — by Carmen McRae and Judy Garland, obviously by Tony Bennett, and surprisingly by the thin, girl's voice of Jeannette MacDonald.

Wearing pink chiffon and roses, Valda Setterfield roams in and out of this section with little mincing steps and ballet poses, pantomiming the words, in a deadpan imitation of MacDonald's sweet style. Setterfield is Gordon's partner and wife of 25 years.

A twice-repeated duet for her and Gordon is the highlight of the evening. Created of the simplest possible material but assembled so elegantly it unfolds like silk, the dance speaks volumes about trust and mutual un-

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Pick Up Co. dancers perform David Gordon's 'United States.'

derstanding.

The voice of Robert Frost accompanies the last section of "United States." Like Frost's poems, Gordon's dances seem plain-spoken, natural, direct. Then you realize how hard-won over a creative lifetime such

seeming simplicity is. Gordon is our dance-constructor laureate.

Gordon's collaborators here were dramaturge Roger Oliver, lighting designer Mark W. Stanley, sound designer Chuck Hammer, and the dancers.