

Dance by Consortium: 'United States'

By PAM LAMBERT

No matter what the New York critics make of David Gordon's "United States," which bows tonight at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, the dance/performance piece already is a success.

That's because of the behind-the-scenes choreography, as intricate as anything the audience will see on the Opera House stage. The project, an evolving exploration of America in movement, music and words, is an unprecedented collaboration among 27 presenters in 17 states. The consortium not only is commissioning the piece but also serving as a network for its performance, on a national tour scheduled to end next December.

Already "United States" is being hailed as a model, an answer to the dilemma so many artists face financing new work and funding tours. In fact, says Peter Pennekamp, director of the Inter-Arts Program at the National Endowment for the Arts, the project prompted the NEA to create a new grant category, "Partnerships in Touring and Commissioning," to promote more such collaborations.

These problems are particularly acute in dance, where most troupes lack an institutional base. "For theater and music touring is outreach," Mr. Pennekamp says. "With the exception of 5%, dance lives and dies by presenting."

In the case of Mr. Gordon and his 10-year-old Pick Up Co., touring wasn't something they did much of—an annual average of three weeks. This was despite the New York Performance Award he received in 1984 for "sustained choreographic achievement" and commissions from companies including American Ballet Theatre.

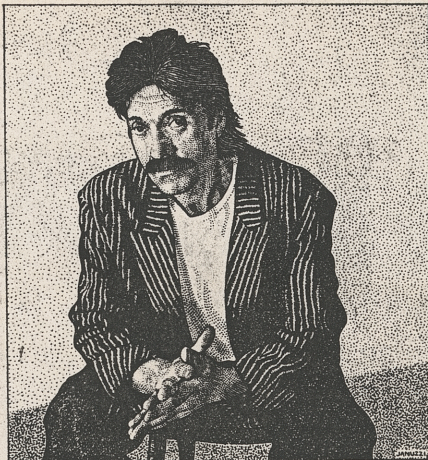
"Not an enormous number of places have been willing or able to produce the kind of work that mine is labeled, the so-called 'post-modern,'" the 52-year-old says in his SoHo studio. Though there's a bond between him and such putative post-moderns as Trisha Brown, with whom he collaborated in the '60s as part of the experimental Judson Church group, his work is highly individual, particularly in its verbal wit. By turns satiric and lyric—"as my tongue moves into my cheek, my hand also moves to my heart," he once said—Mr. Gordon is hard to categorize and, at least in the past, hard to sell.

"You don't like to evaluate necessarily on the basis of who does or doesn't want you, but you can't quite dismiss it," Mr. Gordon observes. "And you either have to determine, well, I must not be any good, or, why can't this be possible? Now I see it is possible. What you need is a tiger in your office."

The "tiger" in question is Alyce Dissette, who joined Pick Up Co. three years ago as producer. During the 36-year-old's tenure she's more than tripled the budget. She's also helped make Mr. Gordon much more visible, most notably through an Emmy-nominated television special last year that starred Mikhail Baryshnikov in three of his works.

The epic "United States" project grew out of an offhand remark of Mr. Gordon's

The traditional Western "swing" music he was using in the special. Mr. Gordon told his producer, was interesting him in exploring "music that makes geographic reference." Ms. Dissette mulled that over, brainstormed with a couple of presenters, and came up with the "United States" con-



David Gordon

cept: An evolving series of place-inspired pieces, with the order and selection of the segments shifting to suit the locale of the presenters. There would be no guarantee of a segment for each participant. "It was made very clear that they were investing in a process," Ms. Dissette says, "and that David was free to do what he wanted."

A \$35,000 grant from the Rockefeller Foundation got the ball rolling. Next the University of California-Los Angeles Center for the Performing Arts agreed to initiate a grant application to the NEA, and contacted 40 potential co-commissioners.

The application went in with an unheard-of 22 names on it. (Typically three to five organizations collaborate.) It came out with \$35,000. The project gained momentum with several more grants, ranging from the \$5,000 the Santa Fe-based Western States Arts Federation gave regional presenters, to a whopping \$105,000 from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund.

Other presenters, including the Kennedy Center, wanted to get into the act; they submitted a second application to the NEA and got \$25,000. Ms. Dissette estimates the total cost of mounting "United States," which is expected to stretch over two full evenings by the time it reaches the Kennedy Center next September, will be three-quarters of a million dollars.

The "United States" co-commissioners span the presenting spectrum. They range from leviathans like UCLA, which attracts an annual audience of 400,000 to its 350 events, to tadpoles like the Contemporary Dance Season at Oregon's Portland State University, which presents five programs a year. Some are veteran commissioners like BAM; over half were tenderfeet.

You sense the presenters' enthusiasm not only for Mr. Gordon's work, but for the commissioning process itself. "I think we're gradually recognizing that we can present something other than Broadway or Entertainment with a capital E, that we can interest and excite our audiences

about new work," says Wallace Chappell, director of the University of Iowa's Hancher Auditorium. "Even for the avant-garde programs my audience turns out rather proudly because they feel they've been part of the process."

For "United States," the presenters are playing a more active part than usual. They're sending Mr. Gordon, a Manhattan native, background materials about their areas. Big cardboard boxes in the company's office are bulging with such bits of Americana as the northern California cookbook "A Taste of Humboldt," tapes of Cajun bands, and a volume describing the summer Dvorak spent in Spillville, Iowa. Some of the material has been used in the four sections that will be performed at BAM tonight through Saturday; for instance, a reverie about her first dance by octogenarian Meridel Le Sueur (spoken by Mr. Gordon's wife, Valda Setterfield) is one of the most compelling moments in "Minnesota."

For some of the presenters, the legacy of "United States" will last long after the curtain comes down. Marjorie Neset, of Albuquerque's KiMo Theatre, says the experience has made her "a born-again commissioner" who subsequently has co-sponsored two other projects.

"I had never even considered commissioning before," comments Portland State's Nancy Matschek, whose group's participation was made possible by grants from Western States Arts and a local foundation. "Too often as soon as something is mentioned, people say, 'Forget it, I have no money.' Well, I have no money but now I have two evenings of performance and a week-long residency. If presenters have the same commitment that the artists do, wonderful things can happen."

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