

FRIDAY, DEC. 16, 1988

DANCE REVIEW



David Gordon's 'United States,' at BAM through tomorrow.

Images of the 'United States'

UNITED STATES. A work constructed by David Gordon, featuring the Pick Up Co. Produced by Alyce Dissette. Researched by Roger Oliver and Curtis Grund. Lighting design by Mark W. Stanley. Wednesday night at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Through tomorrow.

By Janice Berman

BY THE TIME you read this, "United States" will almost be history, at least in its present incarnation, and that's a shame. If you've no plans for this evening or tomorrow night, try to get tickets to it. What you'll see is the best evening of dance in recent memory.

It's the fruition of work David Gordon's been on the track of for a long time, beginning in the 1960s, when he was one of the key leaders in the movement that came to be described as postmodern dance. In "United States" he uses voices and music to create a world at once dreamlike and very real. In this world, his dances and dancers (a dozen counting himself) make images of striking beauty.

"United States" was commissioned by presenting organizations all over the nation. At the Brooklyn Academy of Music, where "United States" opened Wednesday night as part of the Next Wave Festival, there are four sections: Minnesota, New England, New York and San Francisco. (Ultimately, there will be 27, performed over two nights.)

The New England section, where the dancers move to excerpts from an interview Robert Frost had with a group of students, is really a series of connecting links, golden threads tying the other three sections together. His observations are prose, but they're prose with meter; he likens writing poetry to making a dance.

Frost was elderly, keen but halting, when he was interviewed by a group of students. Listening to him is as touching, embodies as much power, as did his reading at the Kennedy inauguration. Frost's vocal presence would seem manipulative if Gordon hadn't added such a wealth of his own insights, kinetic and emotional, to augment and intensify the poet's observations.

The music provides other connections. The first

two movements of Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 17 in G Major are the background for the most exquisitely supple choreography Gordon's ever created, or, as he would have it, constructed; dancers float and dive and melt and are borne aloft.

The third movement of the Mozart turns up in the San Francisco section, played on a Moog synthesizer whose tones sound like the voices of singers who have sung of San Francisco. Judy Garland overlaps with Jeanette MacDonald and Carmen McRae, and the dancers, whose costumes take on the tones of the Golden Gate bridge and the clear sky above the Bay, lipsynch as they move.

There are other commonalities as well. The narrative is dotted with allusions to falling, for instance, and we see the dancers tilting off center, recovering, at times slipping entirely.

The New York section, which was commissioned by and premiered at BAM Wednesday, is wonderfully reflective of the city's energy, brutality and humor.

There are accounts by Ain Gordon of getting mugged and collapsing in front of Dean and DeLuca (how New Yorky can you get?), by Mike Feder of the absentminded bank robber who stages a holdup on Columbus Day, when the banks are closed; by paramedic Maggie Dubris, talking about a poor derelict who's afraid of falling.

And through and around all this is dancing, gorgeous and seamless. Some of it goes on to Richard Rodgers' "Slaughter on Tenth Avenue," a piece George Balanchine choreographed for the musical "On Your Toes." Cops in platoons leap and swirl, city ladies and gentlemen sashay out, switching this way and that — on their toes.

To the slow section, Gordon and wife / muse / exquisite dancer Valda Setterfield walk, slowly and deliberately, linked together, reversing, stepping smoothly, gliding as if through the fantasy Gordon's just created for us.

The narrated experiences, specific as they are, become universal. A quartet of dances becomes a seamless whole. There are no low moments in "United States," no unanswered questions. Maybe one: When do we get to see it again? **111**