



Pick Up Co. members in "United States" include, from left, Heidi Michel, Valda Setterfield, Angela Vaillancourt (partly hidden) and Cynthia Oliver.

By Elizabeth Zimmer
Herald Examiner dance critic

Cross geography with three-dimensional chess, add music and talking and 11 very tall dancers, collect money and bookings from 27 different institutions in 17 states, and you'll have some approximation of the challenge facing David Gordon.

Several sections of Gordon's "United States" will have their California premieres at Royce Hall tonight and tomorrow. Pebbles Wadsworth of UCLA's Center for the Performing Arts was one of the presenters who came on board early, when Alyce Dissette, Gordon's manager, was trying to raise the money necessary for this epic project. Years in the making, it will culminate in September with two full evenings at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.

Putting Gordon's work on the stage costs somewhere between \$3,000 and \$4,000 a minute — not so much compared to the federal budget, but a lot when you remember that it's a big country and the piece, in its entirety, will be several hours long.

The western section, called "Words, Music, Wildlife and Weather," follows dances based on the geography and culture of Minnesota, New England, San Francisco and New York City. Still to be made are pieces on Texas and Washington, D.C.

A touring dance artist covers a lot of territory and comes away with scattered impressions of places visited. One day Gordon noticed that a lot of country and western songs talked about places and he made a dance using them. Baryshnikov danced in the piece last year on a public television program.

"When I started," said Gordon during a break in rehearsals at his New York studio, "I didn't know what I meant by anything about it, except that all the western swing music uses the names of places. Was it about the place, or the word and how it scans? It seemed a good choice of game to play."

Putting together the 'United States'

Parts of dance work scheduled for UCLA

"In this instance, I've been dealing with other people's words, and the musicality of the phrasing in the way people talk and read and stress the meaning in a sentence."

David Gordon



Once the first section was completed, and had its own quality, "with the next section it was no longer open territory. It had to be different from the first. By the time you get to Section 3, you have two sections you can't be the same as. So each part has been an adventure — to come up with something specific connected to places, and not connected in format or design to the things around it. I'm having an amazing, mind-boggling time.

"I'm not making 'Los Angeles steps.' I don't think movement spells out geographic location, or has geographic connotations. Stuff comes in, I'm listening and reading and trying to discover a common denominator. What is going to make this all matter in relation to each other?"

Gordon has several people out gathering raw material for his process, screening music and ferreting out relevant text. One of his

dancers, Scott Cunningham, came up with the New Yorker article by John McPhee that provides the accompaniment for the section set near Los Angeles.

An ominous report about the natural hazards of our landscape, about a phenomenon called "debris flow" and the way it threatens a family, is read by a wonderful actress, Norma Fine.

"Concerns about weather and climate conditions kept reappearing in the touring sections. It's important for farmers to know what's going to happen. In different parts of America, you get different news. We don't describe the weather in New York. In Colorado, our source people could talk about the whole Southwest. Downtown New Yorkers hardly go uptown."

"United States" has introduced Gordon to a whole new way of

working. "Most frequently in the past, I wrote the words and made the movement to the words. I directed the performance. In this instance, I've been dealing with other people's words, and the musicality of the phrasing in the way people talk and read and stress the meaning in a sentence."

Trained as a visual artist, Gordon got into the dance world the way starlets are reputed to get into the movies. A native New Yorker, he was sitting on a bench in Washington Square park one day in 1956 when James Waring, an early experimental choreographer, spotted him. Dark-haired and solidly masculine, Gordon had the right look for a piece Waring was putting together.

At that time he'd had "about two minutes of experience" with modern dance, but he soon became one of the *enfants terribles* of the downtown community in its glory years.

He met and married Valda Setterfield, a tall, elegant English dancer, formerly with Merce Cunningham, who is now the senior member of his ensemble. They have a son, Ain, established as a writer in the same New York performance scene, and a loft on lower Broadway that is part residence and part rehearsal space.

For years Gordon supported his family by designing store windows. Finally he couldn't stand it anymore, and decided to cast his lot with constructing dances. Since giving up his day job, he's had two Guggenheim Fellowships and commissions from many major ballet and modern dance companies, including American Ballet Theater.

In Los Angeles, the Pick Up Co., as his ensemble is known, is staying at the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel. "I insist that I be able to take a walk by myself."

He'll be showing the New York section, called "Pounding the Beat and Slaughter," as well as the first, Minnesota-based piece, "Mozart, Memories and the First Frost." He's happy with this all-consuming project. "It's got some of the most interesting, complex, quietly dynamic group work that I've ever figured out how to make."