

10 Minute TV

David Gordon

by Ronn Smith

David Gordon, choreographer, dancer, and founding member of The Grand Union dance company, approached video a scant three years ago with a great deal of skepticism. "I didn't think it functioned in relation to what I did," Gordon explains. "All the video I'd seen of other people's work seemed to flatten the dance out—to kill it. And I didn't see that it was going to do any better for me. But now video seems like the answer to a transient art form's prayer."

The seeds for his radical shift in attitude were planted in 1980 when *Dance in America* taped Gordon's company (David Gordon/PICK UP COMPANY) for their program "Beyond the Mainstream." Although Gordon was not entirely pleased with the resulting tape, he is quick to jump to the producer's defense. "It was done with the best intentions," he says, "but I thought it was wrong for what I did. It was then that I began to think that I ought to learn something about video. I didn't want to be a victim of it."

It was not until a year later, however, after a performance of a new work entitled *Profile at Dance Theater Workshop* that Gordon gave serious attention to how he would investigate video. "People said that *Profile* looked like television," Gordon offers. "I didn't exactly understand what they meant by that, but I said, 'OK, how do we make it be television?'" Gordon received a small video grant from DTW that enabled him to explore the medium experimentally with

their video projects director, Dennis Diamond. The result was *TV Reel*, a live performance piece interspersed with pretaped video. "In the process," says Gordon, "I learned that making television to happen in performance was not making television. It was something else entirely."

Meanwhile, the negotiations for taping *Profile* continued. Grant applications were sent to the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York State Council on the Arts. CBS Cable also expressed interest in the project. "We were all set to work with CBS Cable," Gordon explains, "when I noticed something. As the budget climbed—we were up around \$300,000 by this time—my power diminished. It seemed to me that I wasn't to have any say in what was to happen to my work." Fortunately, the company was awarded two sizable grants, from NEA and NYSCA, around this time.

Gordon severed the ties with CBS Cable and struck out on his own. He approached Ed Steinberg, a producer of rock promotion tapes, and described what he wanted. "And we just started doing it. It was wonderful. We just said, 'Ready to go? Here's the money. Let's go.' And we did." The result—three pieces, each lasting ten minutes—is collectively identified as *10 Minute TV*. "A lot of the dances I make," Gordon comments, "seem to function in ten-minute time slots."

For this project, Gordon chose *Dorothy and Eileen*, *Close Up*, and *What Happened* from the company's repertory. His concern was not to document or reproduce the pieces, but to "reinvent" them,

to make new television pieces out of old dance material. "Each piece was rehearsed for what I understood the camera could do," explains Gordon. "The way to tape my work, I thought, was not to set every dancer in a space with a margin of about 2" above their heads, below their feet, and to either side, so that the fabled audience could know exactly where we were. It seemed to me that a lot of my work could be shot in very tight close-ups—that there were certain activities which could be seen from the waist to the head or from the shoulders to the head that could very clearly tell us what was going on. We could cut or dissolve back and forth between a full shot, where the head would hug the top of the frame and the feet the bottom, and these close-ups."

A rehearsal tape was shot, allowing Gordon to rethink camera positions. The final performance tape was shot in two New York studios—Mothers Sound Studio and one owned by American Express—and on location. Post-production work, with Gordon and Steinberg collaboratively editing the tapes, was conducted at Reeves Teletape.

The complete work demonstrates Gordon's perception of space and time as they relate to dance on both stage and video screen—that is, real (performance) space versus TV space and real (performance) time versus TV time. In *Dorothy and Eileen*, for example, two women (Valda Setterfield and Margaret Hoeffel) interact with each other through a very specific set of movements while improvising a conversation about their

mothers. When it came time to "reinvent" *Dorothy and Eileen* for television, Gordon realized that it was not necessary to preserve the precise sequence of movements: the piece could be radically restructured visually with the dialogue as the connective thread.

Gordon decided to tape the two women sitting opposite each other at a table in his kitchen, talking about their mothers. Another tape of the two women dancing together was shot in a studio. In post-production, Gordon cut and dissolved from the women talking and drinking coffee to the same two women dancing. While the visual element moves back and forth between the home and the studio environments, the narrative acts as a bridge between life and art. *Dorothy and Eileen*, as it appears on tape, would have been impossible to create onstage.

The same is true of *Close Up* and *What Happened*, the latter of which incorporates many television tricks of the trade, specifically the use of the Quantel (a highly sophisticated special effects generator). Existing dance material was rethought, reworked, and reordered to suit the video screen, which Gordon refers to as "a new proscenium—one that is flat and small." Behind this new proscenium, Gordon's images seem to pop up out of nowhere, divide and multiply, fold in on themselves, and fly from side to side with split-second precision.

Gordon jumps from real space into TV space with ease. "There are times," he says, "when I watch something in rehearsal as a camera might watch it. I'll zoom in on something I want to see closely or, as the scale changes, I'll pull back in order to see more of it."

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"The camera does what I expect the audience to do— zoom in on action. Then later, through the techniques of editing, I can have my cake and eat it, too. I can have both the zero-in and everything that happened around it, except it's in another kind of sequence and in another kind of space. In television, however, I don't feel that I can get further away than a tight full-figure. And this limits the number of dancers. I wouldn't want an enormous crowd—I wouldn't know what to do with them. The six or seven people I'm working with now are all I can use in a visually meaningful way.

"I think also that you can vary television's real time by how intimately you deal with the dancers, how successfully you establish the dancers as people, as opposed to dancing fleas," Gordon adds. "I think that the attention span for dancing fleas in the middle of the screen is very short. Mine is, certainly. But once the camera starts moving in and I know who it is I'm looking at, my attention span is much longer. The camera has to be involved with the dancers as real people to hold my attention.

"In terms of the technology, you have to learn what the parameters are, what it can and cannot do. It's no different than learning what the parameters of a dancer are. If somebody can turn, turning is a good thing to ask them to do. If they can't turn, you can ask them forever but it's not going to happen."

Although a market for Gordon's videotapes does not exist yet, that has not prevented him from thinking about other ten-minute video pieces. "There are other pieces of ten-minute lengths that I want to rethink and rework for television," Gordon says. "But I also want to make pieces for television that are entirely new. I look forward to starting at the beginning and making, not remaking, work for television."