

Choreographer changes tune

Gordon opts for verbal silences

By Wynne Delacoma

Until last year, choreographer and dancer David Gordon was known as a witty, brilliant and definitely avant-garde choreographer. Works for his small Pick Up Company typically included spoken texts, very little music and everyday gestures mixed with recognizable dance steps.

Then last season American Ballet Theater danced his "Field, Chair and Mountain," a ballet full of romantic sweep for soloists, corps de ballet and a dozen or so folding chairs. Set to a piano concerto by the 19th century composer John Field, it was Gordon's first ballet and a surprise hit of the company's Chicago engagement.

Gordon returns to Chicago with his eight-member Pick Up Company this week and we will see two works that continue some of the themes he raised in "Field, Chair and Mountain." Performances tonight through Saturday at MoMing Dance and Arts Center, 1034 W. Barry, will feature "A Plain Romance Explained" set to four piano nocturnes of Field and "My Folks," danced to klezmer music, a kind of Yiddish folk jazz. Neither work has spoken text.

The program promises to be very different from "Framework," a fascinating mix of random conversation and rigorous dancing that the David Gordon Pick Up Company presented last spring at Columbia College Dance Center.

"I feel that I talked for a goodly period of time," said Gordon about the verbal silence in his two new works. "I got pretty good at

talking. Then I began to go to other people's concerts and everybody was talking all over the place and I decided it was time to shut up. I just got very tired of walking in and the curtain went up and somebody opened their mouth."

Using music is also a major departure; Gordon avoided using any extended piece of music in his work for many years. At most, music in his works popped up for a minute or two and then disappeared.

"I had seen a fair amount of work," said Gordon, "in which I felt I could watch the diminishing enthusiasm of the choreographer in relation to a piece of music. All hot and interested at the beginning, workmanlike in the middle and frequently losing momentum before the end. But the music went on and they had to finish, so it was 'Let's do this again, maybe upstage and backwards.' So I avoided that kind of relationship to music."

For Gordon, then, to have chosen a sprawling Romantic-era work like Field's Piano Concerto No. 7 for his first work with a big, established ballet company took courage. He was scared, he admits.

"I had very good, strong support from everyone [at American Ballet Theater], so that took a lot of the terror out of it. . . . But one point in rehearsals, I made some little piece of material that I thought looked reasonable and was satisfied with. Suddenly I had this terrifying idea and I turned to David Richardson, an ABT ballet master, and asked, 'Am I making everybody's first ballet?' He patted me on the back and



David Gordon and Valda Setterfield dance Gordon's "A Plain Romance Explained." Gordon, who is also a choreographer, returns to Chicago with his eight-member Pick Up Company this week.

said, 'Don't worry, this is far more complex than everybody's first ballet and you're doing fine.'"

Working with such a professional troupe helped, said Gordon. He figured that if the ballet was headed toward disaster, someone would quietly take him aside and help him discreetly bury it.

"A Plain Romance Explained," with its four piano pieces, is less risky for Gordon in terms of the music.

"It's really not such a departure for me," said Gordon, "because it's still a linear use of short pieces of music placed where I want them." Each nocturne is separated by moments in which the dancers move in silence.

Ballet fans might think "A Plain Romance Explained" is Gordon's piano ballet, making him the 1,000th choreographer in recent years to set his dancers wafting about to the music of an onstage piano. The work is no such thing, he emphatically states. And his very newest piano ballet has a comic twist to it.

"I've done a very peculiar piano ballet for Dance Theater of Harlem," said Gordon, "called 'Piano Movers' in which there is a piano on stage but nobody plays it. There's a tape of Thelonious Monk and the dancers move the piano around." It will be performed next month at the Harlem troupe's Metropolitan Opera performances.

Recalling the way "Field, Chair and Mountain" evolved, Gordon said "The ABT piece was a real, sort of hold-your-breath-and-jump-off-the-cliff situation. . . . But if you're going to be scared, you may as well scare yourself to death. Don't be half-scared. I guess that I think part of this process of doing what I do is one of placing yourself in danger, taking some kind of risk. And if you're not willing to do that, I think you're in the wrong business."

Performances of the David Gordon Pick Up Company are at 7:30 tonight and 8:30 p.m. tomorrow and Saturday at MoMing. Tickets are \$10; call 472-9894 for information.