

# David Gordon and Pick Up Co.

A witty exponent of post-modern dance performs in Fort Worth

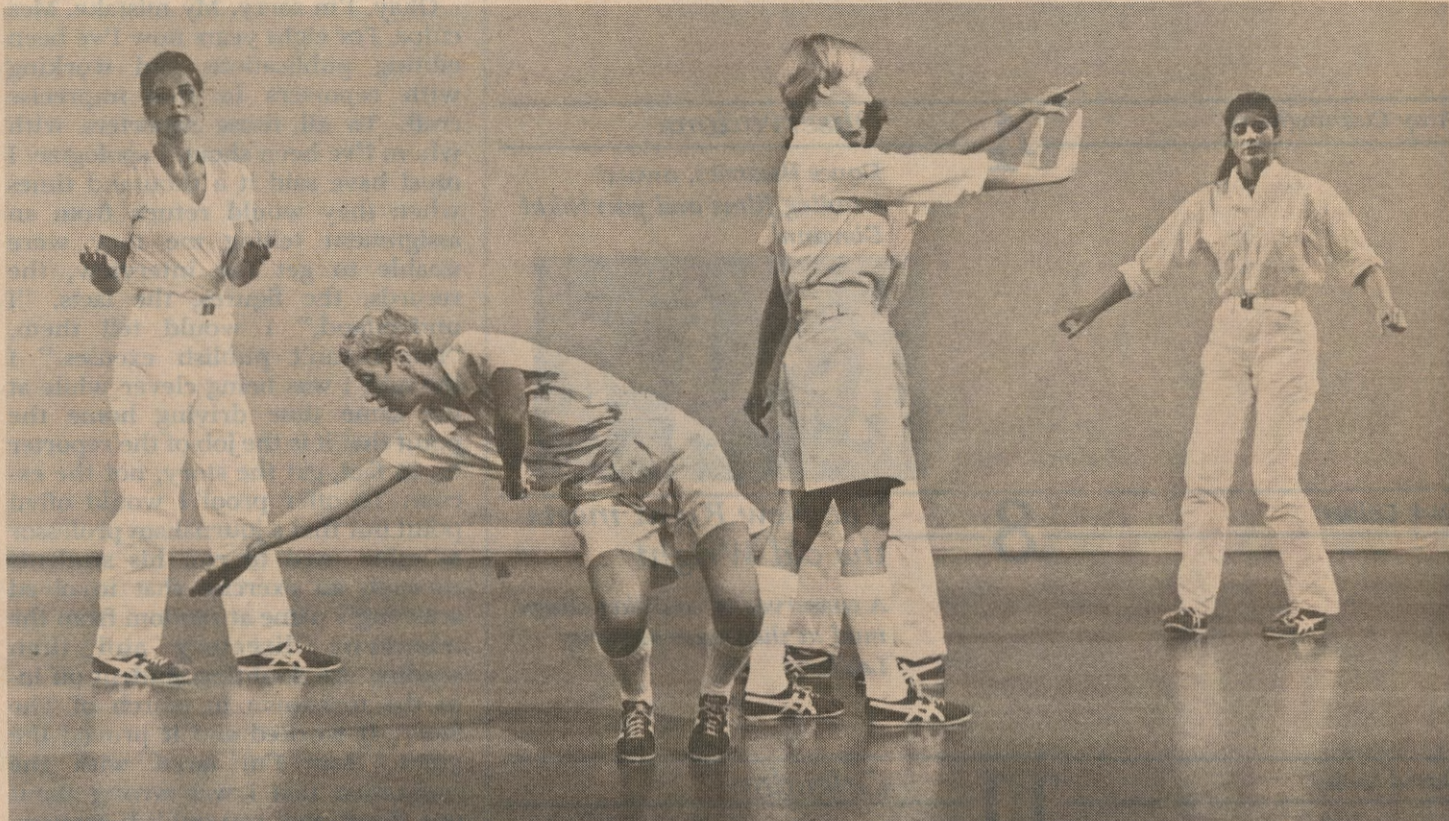
By Margaret Putnam

Though they don't make headlines like Hollywood Henderson or Muhammad Ali, dancers too can wave their handkerchiefs, utter brave boasts, and defy their elders. One of the current bad boys of dance, David Gordon, will give area dancegoers a taste of his irreverent theatrics this weekend when he and his Pick Up Co. perform at the Fort Worth Art Museum.

Gordon is part of the dance phenomenon known as post-modern. He, along with such people as Meredith Monk, Trisha Brown, and Lucinda Childs, were the enfants terribles of dance in the middle '60s. They founded the Judson Dance Theater and were part of the groundbreaking choreographers' cooperative The Grand Union. Recently they were made the subject of a two-hour documentary film called *Making Dances*.

In the '60s, Gordon and his cohorts were like sandlot athletes who played for the sheer pleasure of it. They performed in odd spaces, and they lacked the accoutrements of the professionals. On the other hand, they were free of that mean old spoilsport, the coach. They wanted to get away from the theatrics, commercialism, and killjoy emphasis on technique that characterized modern dance, and they especially wanted to break free of the dominance of the choreographer.

They had another objection to modern dance too. Only the ideas of a few prominent choreographers, such as Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, and Paul Taylor, had much clout in the dance world; the work of most of the others appeared to be spinoffs or imitations. Eventually, David Gordon believes, this situation led to "debased choreography."



Mixed Solo, a work conceived and directed by David Gordon.

"What we had," he remarks, "was the retarded children of incestuous couples."

Gordon's dislike of what he considers the negative connotations of "choreography" have led him to strange circumlocutions. He once remarked that he never sends out a press release that says the dance was "choreographed" by him. He "constructs" or "designs" his works.

One may ask how there can be dance without choreography, or choreography without a choreographer. The Judson Group would reply that it's easy. A group of dancers can devise a set of steps and then one or another of them can call out instructions, during the performance, as to who will dance what

steps. Trisha Brown, and a number of others after her, have done this. Or everyone can perform the same basic sequence, but with the tempo left up to individual dancers. Or, David Gordon might say, you can give everyone a movement or two—say a fall and a roll—and a certain beat, but allow everyone to fall and roll in his own way. And Gordon speaks for the others when he says he doesn't want his dancers to be David Gordon clones. He wants them to "look like themselves."

Another modern tenet the group challenged was the taboo on vocalizing. They asked, why can't dancers move and make sounds at the same time? Meredith Monk vocalizes because she thinks utterances give

dance another dimension. Kenneth King thinks movement and speech naturally belong together; they have, he says, the common element of rhythm.

David Gordon's decision to join words, music and movement has been especially fortunate, because his gift is as much verbal as kinetic. *An Audience with the Pope* (excerpted in *Making Dances*) gives a sample of Gordon's wacky, witty humor. At first you might think the script is an actual newscast on Pope John, and you might wonder why Gordon is somersaulting while soliloquizing somber comments on the Pope. The straight commentary quickly

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# David Gordon

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becomes wry and absurd. As Gordon does an ungainly roll on the floor, he observes that the word "pope" gave rise to our words "popeye" and "popcorn." Inexplicably, his words and movements enhance each other.

Besides combining speech and dance in unlikely ways, post-modern dance departs from modern dance in its use of a radically simple movement vocabulary. Ballet and modern dance both claim that their vocabulary is derived from elemental gestures and everyday movements. Nevertheless, ballet and modern dance have refined and purified movement, and have codified it into "steps." The post-modernists do not: a leap is just that, and not a *grand jete*. A turn is a turn, and not a *pirouette en dehors*.

One might wonder how everyday movements can possibly interest an audience. Anyone can visit a playground for twenty minutes and see a hundred fidgets, skips, falls and tumbles. Why pay to watch such antics?

First of all, post-modern performances are more complex than playground antics. They remind us sedentary folk how physically restricted we've allowed our adult lives to become. Even people who jog or chase a ball move in limited ways, and seldom for the sheer pleasure of motion. In this respect, post-modern



dance restores a little of our childhood by making us aware again of the wide range of fairly ordinary movements that are open to us.

Secondly, experimenting with the contexts of movement creates a new awareness. A dance of any sort looks quite different without musical accompaniment, or tutus, or a set—or when performed on a grassy knoll. Post-modernists often prefer streets, parks, museums and rooftops to big empty stages. These environments allow dance to attain an eye-opening larger scale. And, conversely, when David Gordon's tennis-shoe-attired dancers go through their walks, tumbles, and twists in a small gallery, the dance acquires a new intimacy, almost an effect of minimalism (though Gordon doesn't like the term).

Whether "choreographed" or "constructed," post-modern dances do have a formal structure. It may be hard to detect at first. Nevertheless, whenever bodies move in time and space, they form a pattern. Put on stage, the playground game Red Rover would reveal an underlying formal structure, and post-modern dance brings that kind of action-and-response structure to our attention. Part of the fun of watching post-modern dance is knowing the script is being created on site, not merely performed. Post-modern dance leaves ample room for the random and spontaneous. Gordon, for example, refuses to decide on a program beforehand, choosing instead to let the performing space determine how the dance will take shape.

The challenge to the viewer's alert-

ness may leave some people puzzled or put out. It is likely, however, that dancegoers bored with the predictability of ballet and the super-seriousness of modern dance will find post-modern a refreshing change.

David Gordon's weekend residency is sponsored by the Fort Worth Art Museum. Performances are Friday and Saturday at 8:15. Tickets are \$5 for the general public, \$3 for museum members. For further information, call (817) 738-6509.

Gordon will conduct a master class at the Dallas Arts Magnet High School, Monday, November 3, from 1:30-4 p.m. Admission for observers is \$2. For further information call 747-7921. ▀