

DANCE / Judith Mackrell reviews
Extemporary Dance & The Cholmondleys

Fishy baroque quadrilles

AFTER THE woolly and anonymous performances given by Extemporary Dance Theatre last season, it is good to see them approaching their old form again: with a stronger cast of dancers and works by two of America's distinctive choreographers, David Gordon and Viola Farber.

The no-nonsense title of Gordon's new piece, *Bach and Offenbach*, reflects the bare functionalism of his choreography. He opens the piece with little eddies of movement, the dancers falling into each other's arms or nudging into elegant turns, and out of these a rich ebb and flow develops: surging passages where the dancers career round the stage at full throttle, quiet empty sections where they simply walk in twos and threes. The choreography is both simple and brainy and as the dancers slip from one partner to the next, we watch them perform a thousand different variations on turning, lifting and balancing.

The company dances with a relaxed friendliness, alert to all the changes in speed, weight and rhythm: and for much of the piece we are simply swept along by its seamless energy. By the end, however, it has begun to pall. It might be the music which finally grates so badly (Bach's unaccompanied Cello Suite No 1 in G, followed by a synthesized treatment of Offenbach's Suite for Two Cellos Opus 54), or the seemingly endless *déjà vu* of the final section.

Where Gordon sets his dancers in constant wheeling motion, Farber has them stopping and starting in odd isolated phrases, with short moments of unison that disintegrate into a series of disconnected solos. In *Winter Rumours* these discontinuities create an edginess that is intensified by the fragments of Russian song to which it is set — harsh lilting sounds which carry a painful sense of nostalgia.

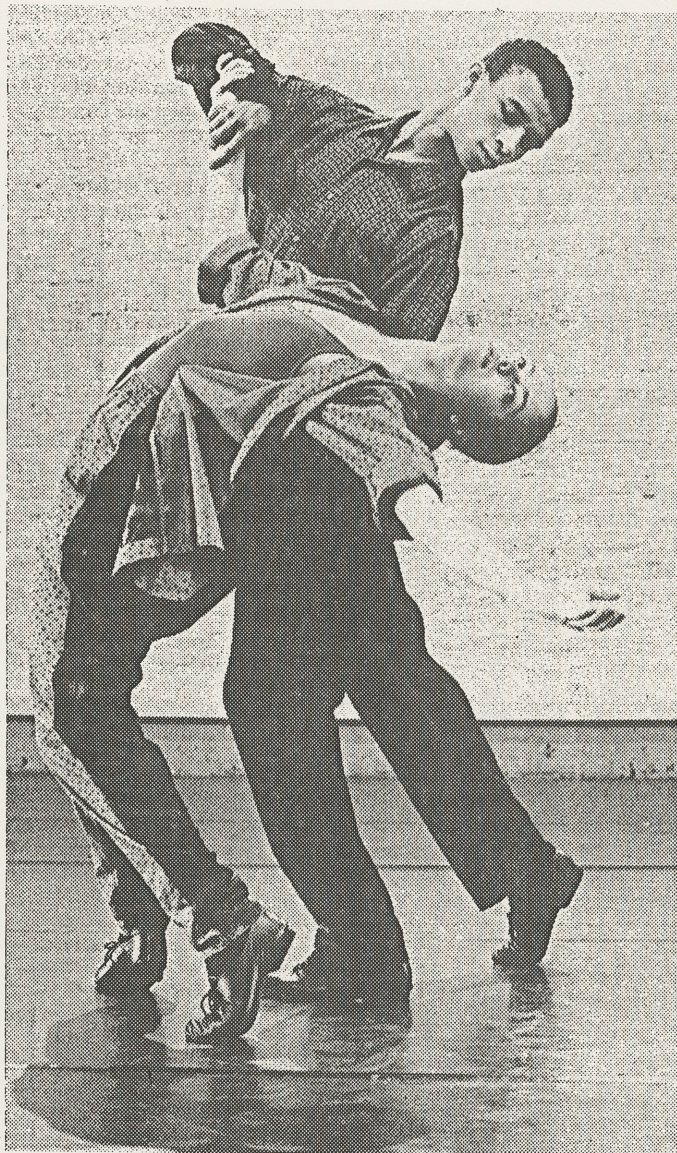
At first, the dancers move fitfully: freezing in archetypal ges-

tures of tenderness and conflict which look like snapshots from a collective past. These gradually evolve into longer passages of dancing, but the troubled complexity of the rhythms, the crumpled skittering movements, the obsessive clumsy jumps, heighten the sense of tension while brief passages of lyricism make human contact seem intensely vulnerable. As pure choreography, the work's and unexpected patternings are riveting: as an evocation of profound and unsettling emotions, *Winter Rumours* touches the nerves with a poetry that is as elusive as it is haunting.

While Gordon and Farber have created styles which are unmistakably their own, the Cholmondleys have raised idiosyncrasy to a fine art. They make dance which is rooted in gesture and image, and it functions like a kind of private language. Characters and situations are suggested by fleeting expressions, descriptive mime, curious costumes and quirky movements — but the suggestions flit by so quickly that we are scarcely given time to make sense of them.

Their programme follows a cabaret format. Some of the pieces feel underdeveloped but their longest piece, *Marina*, is wonderful. It is a baroque underwater quadrille in which the dancers wear blue jackets cut into seaweedy fronds and dance to excerpts from Bizet, Verdi and Rossini. They trace simple floor patterns using elementary ballet steps, but at the same time their arms are diving and wriggling, their hands flapping, and their bodies undulating with an occasional fishy flourish. Like the Walrus song in *Alice*, the piece has a grave formality that is sometimes rather beautiful and sometimes terribly funny.

□ Extemporary Dance Theatre are at The Place until 21 March; The Cholmondleys will appear at The Old Bull Arts Centre, Barnet, 11 April.



Reflecting the bare functionalism of David Gordon's choreography: Jon Smart and Liz Lavren in E.D.T.'s *Bach and Offenbach*