



David Gordon in the pretelevision version of "Chair"

# Prisoners of the Lens

By Deborah Jowitt

**BEYOND THE MAINSTREAM.** Dance in America program directed by Merrill Brockway, aired on PBS.

**MAKING DANCES.** Film by Michael Blackwood.

**DUNE DANCE.** Dance-film by Carolyn Brown, filmed by James Klosty.

**4 SOLOS FOR 4 WOMEN.** Videodance by Amy Greenfield, filmed by Richard Leacock.

Post-modern dance is now the subject of two camera treatments; one, *Dance in America's Beyond the Mainstream*, directed by Merrill Brockway, aired in May over PBS stations; the other, Michael Blackwood's *Making Dances*, has been shown on European television, but not here yet. The differences and similarities between them say a great deal about the power of television to shape our vision.

Neither film shows a dance unedited or without accompanying commentary, with the exception, I believe, of Yvonne Rainer's *Trio A* in *Beyond the Mainstream*. By showing rehearsals as well as performances, by allowing the choreographers to speak in close-up or in voice-overs, both acknowledge the importance of new ways in which the choreographers they're concerned with construe and make art. They even share two of the same choreographers—David Gordon and Trisha Brown—and treat Brown in surprisingly similar ways.

*Beyond the Mainstream* attempts in one hour to present the genesis of post-modern dance in the Judson Dance Theatre of the '60s (terrific old footage of Robert Rauschenberg's *Pelican*, Claes Oldenberg's *The Birth of the Flag*, excerpts from the controversial *9 Evenings of Dance and Engineering*, a '70s tape of a Grand Union performance), as well as introducing the viewer to Brown, Gordon, Steve Paxton, Yvonne Rainer, and younger vanguardists Kei Takei and Laura Dean. *Making Dances* doesn't go out of its way to explain post-modern dance as a movement in history; it simply investigates the work of each of the seven choreographers selected (Brown, Gordon, Lucinda Childs, Douglas Dunn, Kenneth King, Meredith Monk, and Sara Rudner), without any cross-referencing by the camera, except for opening footage of each choreographer and a conclusion in which each responds to an unheard question about plans for the future.

In Blackwood's film, there is no narrator: each choreographer speaks for him/herself. Marcia Siegel conducted the interviews that produced this material, but she's neither seen nor heard in the finished production, and the choreographers come off as people of immense integrity, as the intelligent and original (and often witty) thinkers they are, whether it's Sara Rudner saying, "Dancing is too delicate; it won't be manhandled" in explaining her need to treat dancers considerably in rehearsal, or David Gordon offering his view of some supposedly modern dances as "the retarded children of incestuous couples." Brockway, on the other hand, having opted for more of a collage, relies on a narrator to stitch it all together. But Faubion Bowers's script is disturbingly glib; he leans toward catchy phrases like "After the pirouette and the contraction . . ." or " . . . they proceeded to violate every basic law and get away with it." And, while first names have been used within the contemporary dance field since the '20s, for a TV narrator to refer to Trisha Brown as "Trisha" (when you know that no contemporary painter or musician of her stature would be so first-named in a documentary) compounds the patronizing tone of the commentary. You're convinced they're mavericks, not so convinced they're good.

*Beyond the Mainstream* has the air of having been made with the supposition that the TV audience doesn't know and may not like these choreographers; it might well be titled *The Avant-Garde Without Tears*. Brockway has been so concerned with not boring or offending viewers that he has denied them the lessons in patience and new modes of perception that these choreographers give to live audiences. It all seems quite justifiable as you watch shortened versions of two sections of Takei's *Light* put together, or cut with the camera from David Gordon and Valda Setterfield performing *Chair* to a chair, to the audience, back to Gordon and so on, when you note how rarely the camera shows the feet of Laura Dean's dancers. Yet despite Brockway's conscientiousness and the skill of Dance in America's crews, you're left slightly baffled, and with the impression that the camera is impatient, that it doesn't really love or respect these people enough (for instance, you don't cut the feet out of a Balanchine frame, but the feet of Dean's dancers

"aren't doing anything").

Blackwood's camera is a much more tolerant and interested observer. Interestingly, both Brockway and Blackwood cut back and forth between Brown's solo *Accumulation* and her *Spanish Dance*, as if simulating Brown's own way, in the solo, of jumping in and out of two different dances and the two different stories she's telling. Both productions include a closeup of four women's hips stuck together in a snug procession and swaying. (I prefer Blackwood's shot taken from the perspective of a theatre audience to Brockway's diagonal view; and Blackwood, as I remember, considerably returns us to the dance at the same point we left it instead of two a point further on.) Blackwood does play a few games that don't work for me; one is sandwiching performance shots of Lucinda Childs's *Dance* into a rehearsal of the same sequence. Later you understand what happens, but at the moment you think the studio wall behind the dancers is intermittently growing a design. Sometimes his camera is slyly astute—peering at Lucinda Childs's hands arranging the papers on her table into neatly spaced and lined-up piles, while she gives directions to her dancers on how to perform her neatly spaced and lined-up dance. But what's most illuminating about *Making Dances* is seeing the various ways in which these choreographers tackle a particular stage of a particular work in rehearsal: here are Dunn and Deborah Riley painstakingly fixing details of a duet by checking themselves in a mirror, watching a video; here is Rudner working out a supported fall with another dancer, over and over, unsparing of herself; here's Monk, sitting in a circle with her singer/dancers, creating music on them; here's King rehearsing cheerfully in the park because it's free.

Although I prefer Blackwood's approach, I don't mean to suggest that Brockway's camera work is insensitive. He has attempted in many cases to emphasize or parallel a choreographer's formal concerns: closeups bring out the intimacy of Paxton's *Contact Improvisation*; once, some subtle camera movement mildly suggests vertigo during a fairly long sequence from Laura Dean's *Dance*. Yvonne Rainer's seminal solo *Trio A* is subjected to some very skillful and questionable manipulation. Brockway has filmed Sara Rudner, Frank Conversano, and the

NYCB's Bart Cook doing it, individually, and precisely dissolved these into each other and into Babette Mangolte's film of Rainer performing the solo. Cook lifts a leg, and Rainer puts it down; Rudner falls to the floor, but it's pudgy Conversano who gets up again. The dissolves create their own uninflected flow to reinforce the smooth dynamic of the dance, yet what we miss is one of the vital elements of the dance as originally conceived: we can never see the dancers do the same movements at the same time.

The television documentary has really perfected the collage-anthology approach to history, and the longer ago it all happened, the more willing we seem to be to accept snippets and not cry for more.