

Overnight Chicago

ABT opens with a witty new ballet

By Richard Christiansen

Entertainment editor

"Field, Chair and Mountain," the new dance by David Gordon, is the wittiest work to enter American Ballet Theatre's repertory since Twyla Tharp gave the company "Push Comes to Shove" in 1976.

Presented Tuesday night in the opening program of the troupe's two-week run in the Auditorium Theatre, this half-hour charmer didn't quite steal the show. It's a little too droll and laid back for that, and it doesn't have the bravura high jinks that Tharp fashioned for Mikhail Baryshnikov in "Push." But there's not a dull movement or a slack moment in it, and, as with "Push," it has an audaciousness that both pays homage to and thumbs its nose at the customs and traditions of a large classical company such as Ballet Theatre.

Like Tharp before him, Gordon has crossed over from the avant-garde with this ABT commission. He's an extremely inventive constructor of dances, and, with his own Pick Up Company, he creates works that are as much theater as they are pure dance.

Nevertheless, as "Field" demonstrates, Gordon is a lovely maker of dances. He exhibits this immediately in the first movement, which is set to the Seventh Piano Concerto by the 19th-Century Irish composer John Field.

American Ballet Theatre

In performance in the Auditorium Theatre, 70 E. Congress Pkwy. Opened Feb. 5 and runs through Feb. 16. Times and programs vary. Tickets are \$5 to \$32. Phone 922-2110.

Twenty dancers, led by Martine Van Hamel and Clark Tippet, repeatedly cross the stage from left to right in playful variations on classical movements. The women swoon into the men's arms, then the women partner men, and a trio of two women and a man perform the same steps as a corresponding trio of two men and a woman, etc. It's elegant, almost casual dance, designed so that the stage is alive with interesting, slightly offbeat lifts, jumps and swirls.

Santo Loquasto's semi-classical costumes change in midstream, from pale blue to burnt orange and bright pink; and gradually a Japanese screen decorated with mountains slides across the back of the stage.

The second movement of the concerto and ballet is devoted to a wickedly inventive game of musical chairs. The dancers, now dressed in loose modern garb of blue and white, each come out with a folding chair, and, in superb pokerface style, dance their variations and exercises on, over and around the chairs. It's an old modern-dance bit, done up in the grand manner with classical ballet and spun out with superb good

humor.

The dancers haven't yet got all the precise moves the ballet requires [the closing tableau on Tuesday night was a little off]; but they look great in it, even when they're sedately at rest with legs crossed in a sit-down chorus line, serenely watching Van Hamel rise up on point on the chair seat and then plump down onto Tippet's waiting lap in their pas de deux.

The ballet [which will have one more performance, next Monday] ends with the slow rise of a scenic curtain picturing a range of mountains strewn with folding chairs. Terrific.

Elsewhere, a little of the opening-night edge was taken off the closing ballet, "Raymonda," when Patrick Bisell, nursing an injury, did not perform the male variations. This was balanced, however, by the clean, classic grace of Magali Messac and by the excellence of the soloists and corps.

The general tightness and discipline of the corps also was evident in the evening's opening ballet, a revival of George Balanchine's "Donizetti Variations," a pink and blue puff of amazing virtuoso work for 11 dancers featuring Marianna Tcherkassky and Danilo Radojevic, simply sensational in the daring of his variations.