

DANCE

The original performance artist

By PAMELA ELLIS
Special writer, The Oregonian

If you want to make a good impression on David Gordon, don't call him a choreographer. Even though plenty of people do.

David Gordon/PickUp Company perform Friday and Saturday at Portland State's Lincoln Hall Auditorium. The concerts, presented by the Contemporary Dance Season, begin at 8 p.m., and tickets cost \$10 (\$8 for students and senior citizens; for reservations, call 229-4440).

This is a rare chance to see — up close and personal — one of the main people who have made modern dance so hard to categorize nowadays.

"David's uncomfortable with conventional terminology," said Alyce Dissette, managing director of Pick-Up Company, which is actually a permanent core group of Gordon-trained dancers. "In his earlier work, that really didn't describe what was happening. He was doing performance art before there was a name for it."

That early work was during the '60s, when a group of young dance rebels formed the Judson Dance Theater and began to ask questions: Is it dance when you walk across a room? Or stand still, or sit in a chair? Can you speak while dancing? Is "technique" necessary?

At the time, Gordon didn't call himself a choreographer (and still doesn't). He has said that he didn't even realize he was part of a movement whose influence would rock the dance boat, for keeps.

"I don't think he even thought about that," Dissette said. "I think he just likes to make his work, that's what I think."

Dissette was juggling phone calls in the company's New York offices this week while Gordon, in a whirlwind schedule, was off working with Mikhail Baryshnikov on a Public Broadcasting Service segment (to air next fall) that will feature Gordon's choreography.

But that doesn't mean the young rebel grew up to join the ballet establishment.

Take, for example, "Four Man Nine Lives," which Baryshnikov dances in the PBS show and which the PickUp Company will perform in Portland. One viewer described it as a sly parody of the Old West, another as "1001 Moves You Can Make . . . With a Folding Chair If You Really Put Your Mind to It and Have Three Other Guys to Help You."

It's also been called graceful and outright funny, and it shows why Gordon's work is commonly regarded as viewer-friendly.

"There's a thread of humanity in his work — it's about people and relationships," Dissette said. "People seem to be able to identify."

That human element, though, can be a booby trap. "My Folks" (also scheduled for Portland) is danced to klezmer music and contains tableaux that confident reviewers have pegged as family or wedding por-



Choreographer David Gordon in full flight.

traits — erroneously, Dissette said.

"It's dedicated to his father and the women in his family, and suddenly everyone was thinking it was about his childhood in the garment district of Lower East Side — which is absurd. All he meant was to give his family a present.

"It's the only program note he's

ever put in, and he's really regretted it."

Her advice, which Gordon no doubt endorses, is to forget labels. If you like, you don't even have to label what David Gordon/PickUp Company does as dance.

Though plenty of people just might.

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