

PERFORMING ARTS

Wit, Ingenuity, and Magic



(Photo by Nathaniel Tileston.)

From David Gordon's *What Happened*, left to right Keith Marshall, Susan Eschelbacher, Margaret Hoeffel.

The insistent ring of a telephone fills the auditorium, informing the assembled audience that something is afoot. The very sound demands attention. Our thoughts turn reluctantly to one of the cardinal rules of today's helter-skelter world: ringing phones *must* be answered.

In a brief flurry of movement, six members of David Gordon's Pickup Company come together on a bare stage. The tall, elegant Valda Setterfield's very proper "Hello" is succeeded by a barrage of greetings, verbal courtesies, and other non-informative chatter. We can see the theater's backstage light panels, ropes, pulleys, a door—but no phone. We're hooked. The work is *Framework* and it has drawn us irresistibly into its magnificent maze of visual, verbal and kinetic activity.

In late January David Gordon brought his Pickup Company to Colorado Springs Dance Theater for the American premiere of *Framework*. "Will it play in Peoria?" was the show biz expression appropriated by the politicians during the rebel '60s. Apparently today's choreographers are asking similar questions. Despite feeling a little like provincial guinea pigs, the Colorado audience was treated to one of the wittiest, most ingenious works of theater in the land.

If the seed of a new American dance was planted at Judson Church in the early 1960s, the 1980s may well represent its harvest festival. The young, rebellious Judson choreographers—far from discreetly retiring from the public eye like a beloved Esther Williams or Grace Kelly—are in their 40s and still blooming. None have become smug about their accomplishments to date, and their work, which takes many different shapes, seems to get bigger and better all the time.

David Gordon, considered a maverick even in the context of the Judson iconoclasts, is one such artist. Dance watchers call Gordon a choreographer. But his domain isn't strictly dance, nor is it theater or music. It's the world at large, or perhaps a more circumscribed, everyday artist's world, toward which he extends an unusual measure of good humor.

With 20 years of "choreography" under his belt, Gordon has become the wizard of the short, cogent dance. *Framework* is part of his new scheme to use these little gems as the building blocks of a larger work. If *Framework*, is, in fact, a sophisticated exercise in recycling, it doesn't show. Experiencing this strong, seamless edifice, it's hard to believe it's a prefab.

Opening to the sound of the ringing phone, *Framework* proceeds with a dynamic sequence of physical, mental and verbal gymnastics. It's funny, accessible entertainment, but like the best scavenger hunt, its scheme and clues can be enjoyed on many levels. It's not until *Framework's* final poignant moment, with Setterfield conducting six simultaneous "confidential" telephone conversations with the dancers, that Gordon separates himself from the mayhem. He makes a solitary path across the front of the stage, appearing to be walking into a strong wind. Raising both hands to his

head, he betrays for the first time the idea that juggling all this incoming information can be oppressive.

Gordon's a master of the interplay of movement, words, and inference. Permutations of meaning are mirrored in permutation of movement.

Framework also revolves around a rectangular frame that moves on and off stage with as much authority as the dancers. In the opening moments, resting on its long side, it makes a serviceable ballet barre for Setterfield. And since every truth in Gordon's world has an inverse truth, it's only a matter of time before the inverse of the frame makes its appearance: a masonite sheet of identical shape and size that I'll call a plane. The roles played by Frame and Plane include an elegant doorway on a summer evening, a double bed in a bedroom drama, and a distinguished border to a family portrait.

Already known for his theatrical magic, Gordon, with the help of these simple props, takes on the attributes of a real life magician. In a fine mute duet with long-time company member Margaret Hoeffel, he is the magician, she the magician's proverbially lovely assistant. The props for this riveting study of geometry and the human form are nothing more than frame and plane. The dance is complicated and clever—for a moment we're convinced the assistant will be sawn in two. The magic concludes with the protagonists, center stage, hiding behind the plane.

Gordon is a dark, compact man with a disarmingly honest demeanor whose theatrical streak is accentuated by Setterfield, his wife of many years. Like Gordon's other works, *Framework* capitalizes on her aptitude for telling stories. In her opening monologue, alone downstage in a pool of light, her shoulders drooping, wearing a deadpan expression, Setterfield observes, "Phone calls are hard because you can't see the person you're speaking to. . . Conversations are hard because you can see the person you're speaking to." To every action there's a reaction, and for every word in Gordon's litany of playful puns, nimble non sequiturs and disarming double entendres, the inverse invariably holds true.

Mirroring their roles as the reigning hostess and host of *Framework*, Setterfield and Gordon are the indulgent adults of the eight-member ensemble. Accompanying them onstage are young dancers of a variety of shapes and sizes. Everyone performs in what Gordon would probably call a "contemporary mix"—layered, soft, everyday outfits, each carrying the stamp of their wearer. For some this means a functional denim shirt; for Setterfield, it means chic. Contemporary mix is the term Gordon uses to describe the sound of *Framework*: the hammering electronic pulse of the rock generation, a rock and roll ballad and (hopin). These, together with the ringing phone, are heard alone and in unison. Gordon knows that we know all about selective listening, selective vision and selective communication. And he's not about to let us take any of it for granted.

— Nicole Plett