

Man in Demand

by Susan Reiter

On a chilly February morning, the David Gordon/Pick Up Co. is rehearsing two new works in the choreographer's SoHo loft.

Fresh, engagingly clear movement and fleeting gestures weave an enchanting spell during the run-through of *A Plain Romance Explained*. Valda Setterfield, the company's acknowledged leading lady and Gordon's wife of nearly twenty-five years, radiates girlish delight in a trio with Gordon and Keith Marshall in which the men, always ready to follow her every whim, offer support whenever she tilts or falls. When the piece ends, the dancers barely catch their breath before starting the other work, its earthy Klezmer music providing quite a change of pace after the lilting, meditative piano music of John Field. This second work, *My Folks*, fea-

tures visual devices by Power Boothe, with whom Gordon collaborated so successfully on last year's *Framework* and several earlier pieces.

A few days later and 150 blocks further uptown, Gordon is again at work in a dance studio, but the setting is very different. He is carefully watching a run-through of his just completed *Informal Mix*, a work for eleven dancers that enters Dance Theatre of Harlem's repertory in June and was made possible by one of the eight National Choreography Project grants. This also uses music by Field—the Dublin-born early nineteenth-century inventor of the nocturne—only this time it alternates with selections by jazz giant Thelonius Monk. The DTH dancers are still feeling their way into the piece, but they have already keyed into its unaf-

fect, companionable flavor.

Gordon has been busy in many different studios in recent months. Once his *Field, Chair and Mountain* had entered American Ballet Theatre's repertory in December—it received a friendly reception on tour and arrives at the Metropolitan Opera this month—Gordon spent January creating a new work for the Paris Opera's Groupe de Recherche Chorégraphique. Then he headed back to New York to work on the two new Pick Up Co. works that are to be performed during the troupe's stay at the Joyce Theater, May 14-19, and to complete the DTH work before that company left on tour. *Informal Mix* will have its premiere during DTH's City Center season, June 18-July 7.

The creation of five major new works in such a concentrated period of time makes



Post-modernist David Gordon is currently on a creative binge—not only with his own Pick Up Co. but also for major ballet troupes

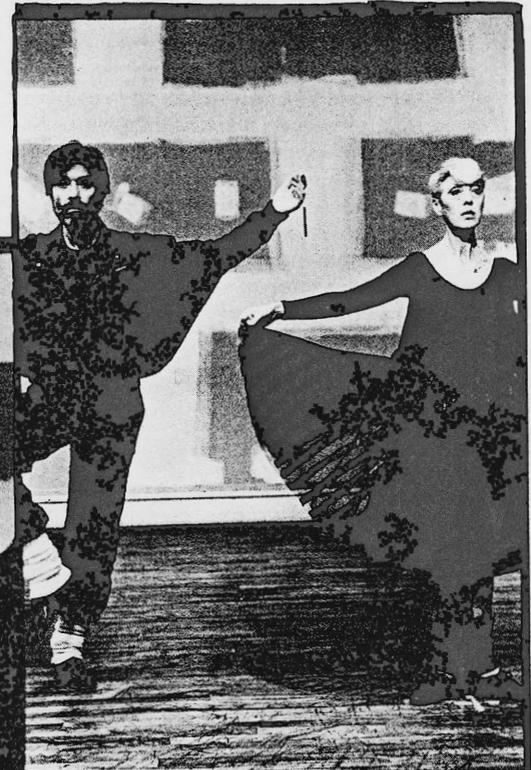
this a banner year for Gordon, but he is taking it all in stride. Anyone who has seen such uptown eminences as Peter Martins and Robert Joffrey at recent Pick Up performances could have sensed that interest in his work had reached a new level. These performances have been attracting overflow crowds to Dance Theater Workshop, which has presented most of Gordon's recent work, or his even smaller loft space, where *TV Reel* (1982) and other works have had their first showings. Gordon's movement-cum-dialogue works, with their pristine formal beauty undercut by verbal gamesmanship and wry, sensitive observations on contemporary personal and professional lives, have become major downtown events.

After Mikhail Baryshnikov saw *Framework* last May, he invited Gordon to create

a work for ABT. At nearly the same time, Arthur Mitchell, who had known Gordon for years and had previously mentioned his interest in having Gordon work with Dance Theatre of Harlem, found the means to make such a project a reality when the National Choreography Project (which makes it possible for companies to broaden their repertoires through working with new and stylistically challenging choreographers) was inaugurated.

ABT gave its first performance of *Field, Chair and Mountain* last December 20 at the Kennedy Center. Many loyal Gordon friends and colleagues were in the audience, and those who had followed his career from its earliest days must have marveled at the idea that they were seeing his work on an opera house stage. After all, he began as a shaggy iconoclast, work-

ing far from the mainstream as part of James Waring's company and the group that formed the ground-breaking Judson Dance Theater. He began making his own dances in the late 1950s and performed with Yvonne Rainer's company and the Grand Union, an improvisational group whose members included Rainer, Steve Paxton, Douglas Dunn and Trisha Brown. His gift for humor emerged early on, as did his fascination with movies and show-biz traditions. He stopped present-



The Pick Up Co., gathered around the visual devices for My Folks designed by Power Boothe. Big picture, left to right: David Gordon; Janice Bourdage (standing at rear); Kay McCabe (sitting, foreground); Chuck Finlon; Dean Moss (in skirt); Gordon (repeated); Ken Kirkland (tugging). Above, Gordon and Valda Setterfield in the same work

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ing his own work for five years in the late 1960s but since 1971 has been consistently active and prolific.

He initiated the Pick Up Co. as a "permanently temporary" ongoing unit, "a bunch of people who came through an audition to work on a project. After the project was presented the people went away, and the next project had new people." With the arrival of Susan Eschelbach and Margaret Hoeffel in 1978 and Keith Marshall in 1979, the company gained a core that remained until 1984. "They didn't want to go away," Gordon laughs. The company has changed in the past two years, and while Gordon and Setterfield, along with Marshall and Dean Moss (who performed in last year's *Framework*) remain, the other four members are new.

Because Gordon draws so sensitively and intuitively on his dancers' abilities and personalities, changes in personnel have a strong influence on his work. At the same time, since he is constantly presenting new pieces, he is not faced with having to fit new people into roles created by others. He has no interest in keeping his older works on view. "I have not been involved in repertory in that way," he says. He takes



his newest work on tour but has found there is often a demand to see a previous work that he has already put behind him. "TV *Reel* got a lot of press, and everyone wanted to see it the year after I didn't want to do it anymore."

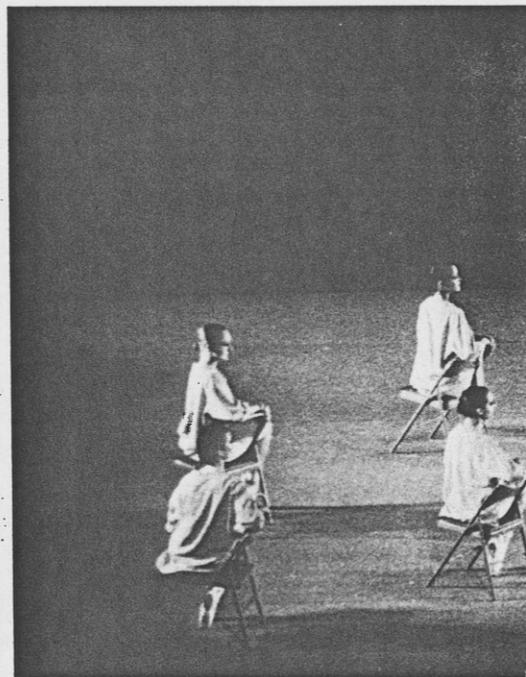
Gordon says that the new works he has made for the Pick Up's Joyce season "are not as obviously personal as last year's, and one reason is that I don't know half this company yet. I'm still finding out about them." The personal element in Gordon's recent work is part of its fascina-

tion. With the dancers calling each other by name and often performing in a very matter-of-fact, down-to-earth manner while presenting recognizable situations, the audience can begin to feel it is getting to know them. Gordon remarks that he may draw on actual events or characteristics or something he overheard on the street, "but it all becomes personal in some fashion because they and I make it personal together. We find the connection." The topic of performers' roles and identities spurs him to bring up old movies and television shows in which stars appear as themselves. What about that film in which Edgar Bergen plays himself and Lucille Ball his secretary—"What were we supposed to think about this?" he muses, as he wonders about the implications of Lucille Ball playing Lucy on her show.

Gordon's recent Pick Up works have revealed him as a humanist as well as an absurdist, a sly observer of foibles and a master of inventive ideas. They have incorporated phone conversations, lovers' quarrels, puns, a touching duet in which two women talk about their mothers and a dance set to Stravinsky's *Apollo*. Often, material from one piece is reworked into another. Gordon specializes in presenting something that seems the same as something else but changes because it is in a new context. The frames and boards that were such an integral part of *Framework* were introduced in *Trying Times*, and the use of a folding chair as a "partner" for the dancer to manipulate, brilliantly expanded in *Field, Chair and Mountain*, dates back to the seminal duet *Chair: Alternatives 1 through 5*, which Gordon and Setterfield first performed in 1974.

At times Gordon has mocked himself, with great charm and wit, in his works. In *Not Necessarily Recognizable Objectives*, he performed a solo and, so that the other performers would not feel excluded or upstaged, had them comment on what he did and why he did it, along the way delivering a send-up of overly analytical critics. *Trying Times* culminated in a trial with him as the defendant, accused of an array of sins including a tendency to confound expectations about what a "post-modern" choreographer does or does not do. "I'm a trained you-know-what, and he makes me talk," one plaintive witness told the jury. It was risky and hilarious.

The programs for his company's works never credit a choreographer. Instead, they include the line "written and constructed by David Gordon." ABT audiences have also been seeing the "constructed by" credit; even though



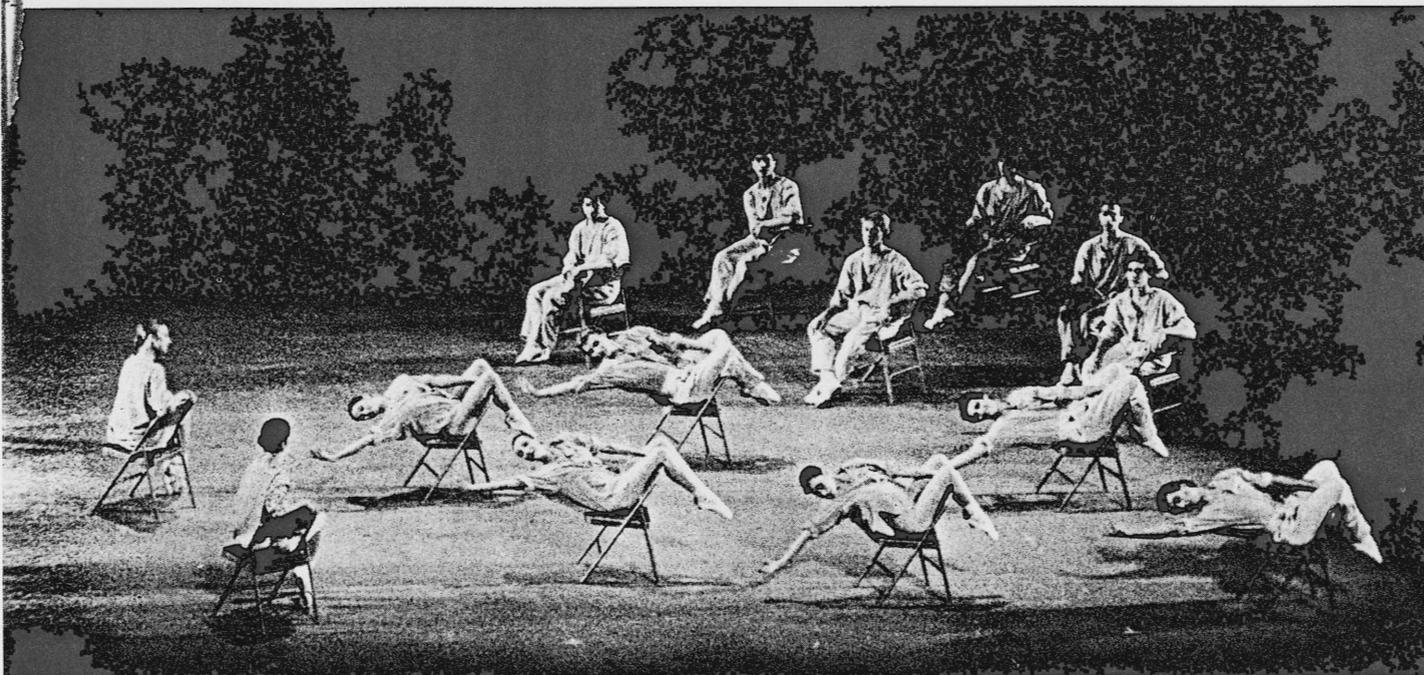
Field, Chair and Mountain is a full-fledged ballet, complete with hierarchical groupings and imaginative partnering, Gordon apparently still does not feel comfortable with the "choreographer" label. However he chooses to identify himself, he has made an ambitious, intriguing work, proving that he can communicate his ideas to ballet dancers despite the considerable differences between their backgrounds and his. As with the recent Pick Up works, the dancers in the ABT piece are almost never alone for long—someone is there to offer support. The first movement is distinguished by the consistent left-to-right flow of the movement; the second brings on the entire cast with folding chairs. The music is Field's seventh piano concerto, another manifestation of his interest in the composer's work.

During his first week of ABT rehearsals, Gordon worked without music, "just to get people used to the idea that there were not going to be any counts." He explains that in working with music, he listens to it intently, then turns it off when he actually works out the movement and then goes back to the music to "find out how the two connect." Martine van Hamel, who specifically requested to be in Gordon's piece, says, "There are moments when I do feel that the music is dictating what you do, and times when it does not. I use the music as a support."

Gordon speaks with admiration of the ABT dancers. "They are astonishing, hard-working and exceedingly coopera-

Pick Up dancers Keith Marshall, Janice Bourdage and Dean Moss in *A Plain Romance Explained* (this page) and ABT in *Field, Chair and Mountain*

... lovers' quarrels and a duet in which two women talk about their mothers.



tive." He was similarly impressed by his DTH cast, whose commitment and willingness to take risks he praises. With both companies, he had to get used to rehearsing with only a small group of dancers available. This made for a different working process than the one he uses with the Pick Up Co., where everyone is always present.

Van Hamel remarks on Gordon's steady supply of interesting ideas: "He experimented a lot. As we went along, he changed a lot of things. If he didn't like something, he would keep changing it until he came up with something that he liked. The dancers had to realize that there was a lot that we had to contribute because of the gap between his knowledge of the technique and what he wanted."

Gordon began working on *Informal Mix* for Dance Theatre of Harlem with the idea of using Thelonius Monk's piano improvisations. He discovered a connection between the seemingly different music of Monk and Field, hearing in both "the exploration of the virtuosity of a pianist around a melody. The two things seemed to make some kind of sense to me, so I put them together." He describes the piece as having "the casual appearance of an open rehearsal—people who get up and dance for other people."

In working with these ballet companies, Gordon revels in what he describes as "the mystery of the differences between what they know and what I know." Similarly, he is challenged by the ways the Pick Up

dancers differ from each other and from his own way of doing things. He chooses them for "some kind of look or magic that makes me want to be a little in love with each of them—because that's how the exploration of material comes about."

His explorations have led in many fruitful directions, including the recent collaboration with Power Boothe's visual devices. A pattern of full-evening continuous works had been evolving, but Gordon decided after *Framework* that he now wanted "to make the kind of piece I've been saying all along I never wanted to make" and set about trying to make two unrelated pieces that would be totally different from one another. Also adding a different flavor to the performances will be the setting: the Joyce Theater is considerably larger than the performance venues in which the Pick Up Co. has been seen in New York. "I have said all along that I don't want to spend enormous amounts of money producing a New York season," he remarks. This month's performances are being produced by the Joyce Theater Foundation; until now, except for one appearance at the 1979 Dance Umbrella season, Dance Theater Workshop's David White has been the only New York producer to present the Pick Up Co. "David White is a miraculous downtown person who has managed to make an enormous number of things happen in a very small space, and I was really pleased to be at DTW." Gordon had been encouraged to perform at the Joyce by

"various factions" prior to this year's offer but did not feel the company could afford the expenses that renting the theater would involve.

Last September at the Joyce, he and Trisha Brown received Bessie Awards for sustained achievement in choreography, while Setterfield received an award for her unique abilities as a performer. The evening had a warm, almost sentimental feeling to it, but a special emotional fervor greeted these particular awards. People were grateful for the opportunity to honor those who have contributed so much and worked for so long in a field without glamorous rewards. To those familiar with the Pick Up Co. for many years, Gordon is a well-known figure, but in the segmented dance world, his work has been far less known to others unfamiliar with the smaller adventurous work which the Bessies honor. With his work entering the repertoires of two major ballet companies, that will be changing. Gordon glances rather casually at the eventful premieres and increased attention. He is more concerned with the next day in the studio and the momentum of the Pick Up Co.'s touring schedule (the troupe goes to France in June and appears at the American Dance Festival July 1 and 2). "Five or ten years ago, my fantasies did not even include having a company performing regularly," he reflects. "Little by little, I began to figure out what, in fact, I wanted to do. My ambition now is basically to keep working." □