

DATEBOOK

Wit and Daring From David Gordon

BY MARILYN TUCKER

Trust David Gordon to come up with something different. For many years his Pick Up Company dancers stood alone in being able to illuminate dances with the spoken word without making an audience want to cringe.

Now, according to the program that the company presented at Herbst Theater Friday and Saturday, Gordon, the choreographer who gave "Murder" to Mikhail Baryshnikov, has abandoned talking in dance, at least for the moment. What he hasn't abandoned, however, is the wit and spontaneity, flow and purpose, irony and downright likability that always have set his dances apart.

The former design consultant and window dresser who once could assemble dancers only on a project basis — hence the name of the company — now has a core group of eight splendid dancers. The five men and three women have each mastered Gordon's idiosyncratic style without apparent sacrifice of the rugged individualism that Gordon favors in his dancers.

There's Keith Marshall, for example, a former Palo Altoan and big guy made to wear a skirt in "Offenbach Suite," not for reasons of camp, unisex identification or gender change; merely to even up the sexes in this dance speculation about partnering and couple dancing.

There were a lot of "what if" questions posed in this dance in which the currently "hot" Gordon gets good mileage out of his recent experiences choreographing for classical ballet companies. What about the personnel of the couple changing by half in mid-phrase, he speculates. Or what about women partnering women, women partnering men, men partnering men. What about a leg that won't turn all the way. (Easy, you get help.)

The second movement featured a moving slow-motion duet of enormous gentleness between Gordon, a bear of a man, and Valda Setterfield, a slender, silvery reed who is also Gordon's wife. The point of the finale in this setting of a suite for cellos seemed only to be a general dispersal of joy, and effective, too.

With only a folding chair for a prop, Gordon took the four younger men of his company and sent them west for "Four Man Nine Lives," a reworking of an earlier piece. Set to such amiable and engaging western swing tunes as "Tumbling Tumbleweeds" and "Rambling Man," the dance was a sly and terribly funny parody of all the stereotyped situations in which a man of the old west could find himself, as identified by the movies and television.

Setting up drinks at the bar, riding horses, falling off, falling down drunk, fighting and general cussedness, going off into the sunset, Gordon's partners and var-

mints did it all. Mind you, none of it would have been possible without that miraculous chair.

One of the reasons I have such admiration for Gordon's dances is the thread of humanity that pervades them. "My Folks" is a joyous memoir of Gordon's Jewish heritage in New York's Lower East Side.

Set to folk music performed by a Klezmer band, "My Folks" was a stylized re-creation of the themes and celebrations that provide continuity and a sense of history to one's life and family.

At first the audience sees Setterfield, standing alone in a spotlight and posing in festival clothing. Gordon comes in to step out the territory surrounding her, not once but twice. From this initial meeting, the viewer is led through their courtship and eventual wedding picture, filled in by the characters and events that form the background of their lives.

"My Folks" is more tribute than rote narrative, and the movement, with its emphasis on competition and fellowship, is extremely physical. The elements of recollection are unified by Gordon's imaginative use of giant-sized draperies, which might be employed for anything as varied as barriers and fences to jump ropes and sleds. In the end they became transformed as the frame for the wedding portrait of the marrying couple and surrounding community.