

Does He Mean You Know What?

By Deborah Jowitt

DAVID GORDON/PICK UP CO. At Dance Theater Workshop (December 3 to 20). *Trying Times*.

At the start of David Gordon's *Trying Times*, Nina Martin delivers to the audience a short, clipped speech so peppered with "I mean" and "you know" that content goes into hiding. The gist of it is, I think, "Who does he think he is?" At the end of David Gordon's *Trying Times*, members of Gordon's Pick Up Co. bring on some of the reversible screens Power Boothe designed for the performances, turn DTW's Bessie Schönberg Theater into a courtroom, and put Gordon on trial for obscurity and betrayal of the "post-modern you-know-what."

Who does he think he is? Defense attorney Valda Setterfield asks how he can betray a group he possibly never was part of and offers as his only undeniable family connections his father and his son. Prosecutor Paul Thompson produces witnesses Susan Eschelbach and Keith Marshall. Yes he's got guts going his own way. Yes, but what the hell is his own way? Judge Margaret Hoeffel bids the jury consider, and they're still muttering to each other when the lights dim.

Does Gordon really feel guilt for the brilliant, unclassifiable assembling and layering and recycling of conundrums that he's loathe to call dances? I mean, does he think he's betraying some '60s aesthetic if his timing is pin-sharp and bright? Or does he, you know, think that we might think so, and resent that? Certainly his colleagues in the now-defunct Grand Union—Trisha Brown, Steve Paxton, Nancy Lewis, Barbara Dilley, Douglas Dunn—were not above drawing yucks and guffaws from audiences. Or do I not mean what he means to mean?

I think that more issues than this fundamental one of to-pigeonhole-or-not-to-pigeonhole are being put on trial, tried, found to be trying. The role of lucidity in art, of technique in dance, of comprehension—or the lack of it—between men and women. "You know," we say to avoid explaining; "I mean," we say, to remedy speaking without thought.

Ingeniously Gordon intercuts material or lets one idea wash over another in such a way that both are transformed. The pace is brisk, matter-of-fact, but the performing often has a gentle, almost questioning quality. People walk to a spot, hoist a colleague, walk to another spot, speak, fold a screen, watch and wait, leave the performing area. There's no rushing or scurrying. In the very preciseness of action, a kind of tenderness appears.

One of the critical elements of the piece is references to *Apollo*: Igor Stravinsky's music, George Balanchine's choreography. Both paradoxical and revealing when juxtaposed to Gordon's style. *Apollo* is an affirmation of classical technique as a base; it's pristine, legible, and its "message" is that pure dance beats mime and the spoken word all hollow. Not much like *Trying Times*, or any of Gordon's work. On the other hand, *Apollo* (1928) can be considered as an exercise in autobiography-in-art—a first chapter titled "George Hits on His Credo"; and Balanchine keeps altering it to accord with his current views. That's like Gordon.

When we first hear Stravinsky's music, near the beginning of *Trying Times*, we have to reconcile the deliberate beauty and air of accomplishment Balanchine's

dancers project with the vision of Gordon—looking, as always, slightly sleepy—carefully leading by the hand his three "muses." He helps them to modestly low arabesques, then walks in back of them, so they can tilt back onto him and swing their legs to the front. The jokes are subtle and good, the references many. Moves here and there recall *Apollo*, like the deep lunges people keep stretching into, or daisy chains. A grave line of four dancers in various stages of a kneebend might refer to the famous low-higher-highest "sunburst" arabesques made by Balanchine's muses as they hang upon their noble *Apollo*. But of course, in *Trying Times*, nobility is a matter of decent, considerate everyday behavior; "technique" means being able to do the job, without frills.

In the second half of the evening, Gordon's dancers are joined by David Capps, Melissa Matson, Rhonda Moore, Lucy Sexton, and David Wolfe. These and the others, usually in groups of sixes or fours, pull and twist in neat, mundane chains to Stravinsky's music for the solos of Polyhymnia, Calliope, and Terpsichore, but to the music associated with the duet for *Apollo* and Terpsichore Gordon sets two dissimilar, simultaneous duets that recall Balanchine's duet in their air of tender exploration and helpfulness. Gordon and Valda Setterfield are less adventurous than Nina Martin and Paul Thompson. Where Setterfield might drape herself delicately over the back of Gordon as he crouches, Martin will slide-vault over Thompson.

The theme of love between people—and misunderstandings—here stitched onto *Apollo*, appears in other guises elsewhere. Thompson and Margaret Hoeffel perform a beautiful, gently erotic duet on a laid-down screen; sitting, he reaches up to cup her buttock, with one hand, stretches the other arm between her legs to hold her hand, and helps her to lower herself slowly down beside him. Love as a series of tender stratagems. And many of these moves are later dropped casually into the workings of groups of couples where they acquire a more comradely cast.

The pitfalls of love emerge only through words. For example, while the Pick Up Co. people dexterously tilt and swivel a screen, diving and dodging around it, Susan Eschelbach relates, in chunks, a tale of a guy who . . . "He goes, 'I'm going.' I go, 'So go.'" "And then what happened?" chorus her friends. (The "I

go" is a motif embroidered onto the material like "you know" and "I mean," with results equally bewildering, trenchant, and delightful.)

Chains of people, words, props looping ceaselessly. Keith Marshall delivers a rapid complaint about a "she" again and again sliding the emphasis one word over each time until so many possible meanings emerge we're dazzled. The performers climb in pairs over a low, accordioning wall which they can keep rearranging to present new vistas and obstacles. They tilt it up and, sitting in the arches they've made, chain a conversation down, dropping out until only Gordon remains: "Who do you think you are?" A dexterous dance for three, each person manipulating a screen (Hoeffel's is just a frame) is practically Balanchinian in its precision compared to a sextet in which three red and black striped sheets are fumbled and dropped so many times that, although the manipulators never lose patience, the effect is maddening. Trying, I mean.

"How can we tell it's his signature piece when we can't read his handwriting?" queries the prosecutor. Gordon considers everything so mordantly in the light of every other thing, that we may think we don't know what he means to illumine. When really we do.

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