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## New York

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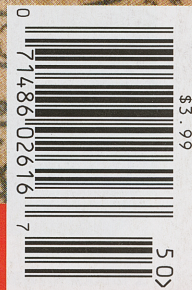
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# 609

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# Dance

Edited by Gia Kourlas  
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**FEET FIRST** Members of David Gordon's company lift off.

## The time is ripe

David Gordon stages a dance from the past.

By Gia Kourlas

David Gordon, an innovator since his Judson days, constructs. He doesn't reconstruct. But a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts series American Masterpieces: Dance changed all of that. In *Trying Times (remembered)*, at Dance Theater Workshop beginning Thursday 11, Gordon is attempting something he never imagined: He's bringing a production back to life. Of course, in his inimitable style, he's also modernizing it along the way.

A bit of history is in order: The original *Trying Times*, choreographed in 1982, was a career-changing "anti-signature" dance for Gordon. Set to music by Stravinsky, the work was inspired by an obsession with George Balanchine's *Apollo*, a ballet that Gordon watched on many occasions with his friend and champion, the critic Arlene Croce (they met while serving on the dance panel of the NEA).

"At one point she said, 'They want me to write more things at *The New Yorker*, and I'm thinking of writing a profile about you—so we have to talk more,'" Gordon recalls. They started attending performances of New York City Ballet because, as he puts it, that's

"where she wants to go more than anywhere. And we would go out afterward and talk about old movies and dances and aesthetics and everything." That relationship didn't make him popular with his peers. "At some point, [choreographer] Kenneth King writes a letter saying, 'Conflict of interest. These two are friends. She shouldn't be writing about him.' And there's a big fuss, and I say to her, 'If I have a choice in this matter I choose that you be my friend and stop writing about me,' and Arlene says, 'Mind your own business, I'll take care of this.'"

At the time, Gordon was presenting dances in his Broadway studio, where he still lives with his wife and muse, Valda Setterfield. "I can't get arrested in New York," he says of that era, laughing. "I go to David White at DTW, with my hat in my hand, and say, 'Would you allow me to show my work here?' David says, 'Yes, I would like to commission your next something.' And what I've been doing is going to NYCB, and what I've been listening to is the *Apollo* score over and over again, thinking that I just love that music and I would like to try to see if I could do something like that." In the work, he both incorporates the Stravinsky score and choreographs his own response to Balanchine's famous ballet.

He laughs at this image of himself,

adding, "I'm sure I also know that I'm about to do something relatively blasphemous and the whole world is going to do exactly what the whole world did, which is everybody showed up at DTW. People *never* came to see my work. The performances were sold-out because I was simultaneously a dance panelist on the NEA and using the music of Stravinsky that was Balanchine's property. Honest to God, Peter Martins came to Dance Theater

## "Honest to God, Peter Martins came to Dance Theater Workshop."

Workshop." After the performance, Gordon was commissioned to create ballets for Dance Theatre of Harlem and American Ballet Theatre.

At the time, Gordon found the music to be extremely gorgeous—he says it still gives him goose bumps—but just as moving was the ease of the choreography. "There were many Balanchine ballets in which the relationship to the music was sometimes more complicated than I could figure out." In *Apollo*, because of a small cast (nowadays four dancers),

Gordon found that he was able to connect with and study the music.

In the new *Trying Times*, Gordon reconstructs his deconstruction of *Apollo* using dancers from his own company and students from the CalArts Sharon Disney Lund School of Dance. The work is full of witty Gordon touches. In the original, Setterfield becomes the defense attorney for Gordon, who is on trial for abandoning his postmodern principles. At the conclusion of the trial, which Gordon wrote like a Marx Brothers sequence, Setterfield makes a plea for an artist to step outside the box. In the new production, Gordon will not appear; he's figured out way to rethink the scene under new conditions. As he sees it, his recent work, involving the playwright Bertolt Brecht, isn't so different from what he's doing with *Trying Times (remembered)*.

"I am looking at something and trying to understand the method behind it," he says. "What was the person who made this thinking of? Why is this following that? I can make adjustments and changes and everybody is willing to play with me." One such participant is Nicholas Bruder, one of the CalArts students who didn't know much about Gordon before his arrival. It's been an enlightening experience. "It's really interesting to hear him talk about this piece back when it was made, or to hear him talk about postmodernism," Bruder says. "I think of other postmodern choreographers—Steve Paxton, Trisha Brown and Yvonne Rainer—and, like David, they're not really postmodern anymore. They're legendary, but they change as well. It's good to know that you don't have to be stuck in one place. And it's interesting when you have to go back to the place that you're not in anymore."

Currently, Gordon is working with the cast in Los Angeles, where he can engage in a favorite pastime: exploring the enormous flea markets of Southern California. "I walk around and pick things up and say, 'So this must have been the way you originally sliced an egg until this other metal thing came into existence, until nobody sliced eggs in thin slices anymore,'" he muses. "And that's the same way I'm looking at my work: To discover what it meant to the person who made it. What did he think it meant to the people he showed it to 25 years ago? And what does it mean to him now? I'm finding answers that are interesting and unexpected."

*Trying Times (remembered)* is at Dance Theater Workshop Thu 11–Dec 20.

Dance