

DANCE

DANCE REVIEW

'Trying Times' revisited

David Gordon's piece is given a postmodern spin at REDCAT by members of the choreographer's company and CalArts students.

SARA WOLF

What defines a masterpiece? Originality? Or simply the passage of time?

This question is at the heart of David Gordon's "Trying Times (Remembered)," which opened Wednesday night at REDCAT. Performed by members of Gordon's New York-based Pick Up Performance Co (S.) and a clutch of dance students from California Institute of the Arts, the hourlong piece is an appropriately postmodern remounting of Gordon's 1982 "Trying Times," which in itself was a postmodern investigation of George Balanchine's 1928 "Apollo."

That ballet launched Balanchine's international reputation; if it were not recognized immediately, as it is today, as a masterpiece, it was certainly seen as a signature work. By 1982, Gordon had his own reputation well in hand after 20 years in the downtown Manhattan dance scene, as part of the founding tribe of postmodern dance at Judson Dance Theater in the 1960s and the highly successful improvisation troupe Grand Union in the 1970s.

Yet at its premiere, "Trying Times" revealed a resolute experimentalist, self-consciously questioning the boundaries of dance as it rubbed up against his more theatrical sensibilities. Hence the mock courtroom scene with which it ended, in which Gordon was taken to task for asking his troupe to talk while dancing and for the hubris of taking on a ballet classic — elements that soon came to define 1980s postmodernism.



LAWRENCE K. HO Los Angeles Times

HE SAID, SHE SAID: The dialogue in the piece, originally staged in 1982, was developed by David Gordon from an overheard subway conversation.

This scene similarly concludes "Trying Times" in its current incarnation. Although the inclinations that initially led Gordon to put himself on trial may seem de rigueur to present-day audiences, the lively banter flying between "prosecutor" Leslie Cuyjet and Valda Setterfield for the defense (both Gordon company members) was refreshing, with such lines as "How can we identify his signature piece if we can't read his handwriting?" preserved alongside new text that winks at the contemporary moment, such as, "He's not a true maverick, he's simply perverse."

The scene is a classic example of Gordon's keen wit, just as "Trying Times (Remembered)" provides a primer on his trademark style: the vivacious writing, sardonic humor, manipulation of objects, affectless performance style and layers of reference, which in this case became a hall of mirrors refracting the original version of "Trying Times" as well as "Apollo."

Gordon opened the show by paying tribute to the original cast, introduced on screen in a black-and-white film that then accompanied danced sections set to the original score for "Apollo," Igor Stravinsky's "Apollon Musagète."

In the opening sequence, a series of intertwining duets on

film was expertly echoed by Setterfield (Gordon's wife and longtime muse), Cuyjet, Karen Graham, Niall Jones and Marcus Phillips.

When members of this core group began to peel off and be replaced by young CalArts dancers in a continuous enchainment that would have made Balanchine proud, Gordon brilliantly introduced the current cast while tipping his hat to both the past and the future. A masterpiece, the choreographer seemed to be saying, is that which continues to live in the present.

The 1982 version continued to exert its presence over the course of the evening, most humorously in what might be considered a first act. Here the cast inventively transformed Power Boothe's original set design of large panels into urinal stall walls, a dinner table, a bed, a backyard fence and walls to peer or flip over, around or under, even as they lunged, leaned and arabesqued in precise Balanchinean arrays.

Through this rotating mise-en-scène, dancers both enacted original cast member Susan Eschelbach's voice-over narration, heard via a recording of the 1982 performance and complete with audience laughter, and created conversational groupings to listen to her woeful tale of a date gone comically wrong.

Developed by Gordon from an overheard subway exchange, the he said/she said dialogue culminated in a wordless duet between the he and she, performed with hesitant intimacy within the confines of the 4-by-8-foot panel that evoked an "Apollo"-ian pas de deux, albeit turned on a horizontal axis.

The evening waned in a lengthy dance constituting the second act. Here the film accompaniment added little to an already dragging section. After the lively preceding shenanigans, one was left to wonder whether Gordon's initial intent was to demonstrate his finesse at manipulating Balanchine's movement vocabulary, although this had already been well demonstrated.

More interesting was to let the layers settle slowly in one's mind while viewing the intricate couplings, accompanied by the sweetly romantic apotheosis of Stravinsky's score, with the more ribald love story informing how one read the ideality of male-female that the master had portrayed in his ballet of a young god and his devoted female muses.

A masterpiece, after all, is that which makes sense to the next generation.

The able CalArts dancers included Rachel Abrahams, Kelsey Boone, Melissa Bourkas, Nicholas Bruder, Cameron Evans, Shirel Hernandez, Erika Marosi and Jason Williams.

Wolf is a freelance writer. calendar@latimes.com

'Trying Times (Remembered)'

Where: REDCAT, Walt Disney Concert Hall complex, 631 W. 2nd St., L.A.

When: 8:30 p.m. today and Saturday, 3 p.m. Sunday

Price: \$20 and \$25

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