

## Contrast at Jacob's Pillow

By Alison Tracy

### BECKET

WHAT IS Liz Thompson's rationale for pairing the explosive, impetuous Loremil Machado with the controlled, self-contained David Gordon on the same program? There they are, big as life, at Jacob's Pillow this week, each man bringing his own company and confronting the audience with a glaring contrast.

Thompson said in her curtain speech that she is after contrasts — between the old and the new, the traditional and the modern. But that dimension, as it turns out, is not the one that ultimately makes this program work.

\* \* \* \*

When you watch David Gordon, you can feel the intensity of his perceptions to the back row of the theater. Machado's exuberance and unleashed animal spirits assert a similar kind of power. Gordon's works are explorations of identity. But they amount to probing the soft spots of our whole culture. Machado's re-creations of traditional Brazilian slave dances are explorations of a culture. But they lead inevitably to the strong place of one's identity as a black in the minority. Each man gets to a similar point using extremely different devices.

Yesterday Gordon offered a medley of his pieces to date, strung together without interruption. All of them are the works of a wordsmith: Games about the associations words generate. There is only one piece of pure movement, in which all the members of the company experiment with the jointedness of a folding chair as though it were another body, or clothing, or an extension of themselves rather than a stage prop.

Other than that all the movement is an adjunct to words like the signing of deaf mutes: illustrative, literal, and self-involving.

Gordon questions the terms of identity and finds them in the positions or relationships between objects. Altering those positions, while holding some constant, can effect identity change. It works like an algebraic equation. All sorts of perceptual games can be played on this

basis. Some depend on cultural clichés, which, in turn, can embody huge collective anxieties or smiles.

This makes its pithiest expression in "Dorothy and Eileen," in which two women support, fling, tip, push and trip up each other's bodies while holding to an unbroken seam of civilized conversation. It epitomizes the "manipulative" nature of women.

There is always a psychological edge to what Gordon is expressing. It even careens close to the cataclysmic, as when a staged dialogue between Gordon and his wife-colleague, Valda Setterfield, sputters periodically into arguments, then passes.

Gordon brings everyday events on stage in real and intimate ways, but his message is not heavy. It is relieved by the riotous stimulus-response quality of his associations, and the wonderfully random feel of the movement. This is truly the excitement of the Pillow program this week.

\* \* \* \*

The Loremil Machado Afro-Brazilian Dance Company looks almost like a nightclub act after Gordon. But it is the sort of fun that is so easy to get into that every audience I've ever seen falls under its spell. Despite a certain number of set figures, each show has a measure of spontaneity. As a result, some evenings they get going a little more slowly than others, depending on the music to get the wild, loose-jointed rhythms under way. This was the case last night. The selection of pieces also lacked the variety I've seen in other performances by this company.

Usually, the musicians do a certain amount of clowning around before the dancers come in with their flat-footed African struts, shoulder shimmies and pelvic thrusts. The dancing builds to a fever pitch with teasing competition, flirtation and frivolous antics. The well-muscled strength of these bodies is beautiful to see, and their acrobatic skill quite dazzling. The company draws the audience into the act with engaging charm. It always makes for a good show.