

# CONCEPTS

## IN PERFORMANCE

Gordon probes the correspondences between language and dance.



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## Formal Dancing

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Since the late Sixties the idea of structure has been an animating metaphor of the artworld, spawning not only a mixed lot of structuralist criticism but also unrelated enterprises like structuralist theater and structural film. Perhaps this obsession with the systematic is an aesthetic analogue to the growth of the computer, both as an image and as an implement, over the last two decades.

For the most part, in the hands of American artists, the notion of structure really amounts to "recognizable structure," i.e., simple forms are employed that are readily grasped by the spectator and which indeed become the focus of audience attention by virtue of their clarity.

In post-Cunningham dance, many choreographers have converged on a basic set of strategies for accentuating structure. These include repetition, highly geometric floor plans and simple systems of generative rules for determining the sequential arrangement of gestures. But though choreographers like Lucinda Childs, Laura Dean, Trisha Brown, etc., share a manifest preoccupation with structure, each exploits it for very different reasons. At times, Dean uses it to engender an almost hypnotic state in the audience, while for Brown a repetitive structure may function to help the spectator notice each discreet gesture in the dance.

In David Gordon's work, the stress on structure is somewhat similar to Brown's but also quite different. For whereas Brown uses structure to make the specificity of each gesture shine forth, Gordon wants to sensitize the spectator to a shifting dialectic between the individual gesture and the larger choreographic structure in which it is embedded. Rather than highlighting the individual gesture as such, Gordon playfully investigates the ways in which a discreet movement in a dance phrase will change in terms of how we perceive it as a result of the position it occupies in systematically varied choreographic complexes.

Gordon's inveterate fascination with the power of changes in structure to completely transform and reorient the spectator's experience of a movement has reached an apotheosis in his newest piece, *What*

*Happened*, which premiered at the American Theater Laboratory on Sept. 26. The dance begins with seven women facing the audience; they are dressed in hospital white. We hear a tape of a car crash followed by an ambulance siren. Suddenly, the motionless women burst into pandemonium. Some jog, others wave their arms; some shake hands with imaginary companions, turn, and point at themselves with their thumbs; others cackle and then take huge, dropping side-steps as one might in mumbledyeps. This wild assortment of movement is accompanied by an eruption of seemingly unrelated words and phrases like "running," "grandfather's" and "stop."

Initially the movement is experienced as chaos and the sound as cacophony. But as the women continue, you start to realize that despite the variations due to their very different bodies, they are all repetitively performing the same basic set of gestures. Gordon helps this discovery along by intermittently pacing two dancers so that for a moment their actions are roughly synchronized. Likewise, certain words become more distinct as two or more performers shout them simultaneously or like arpeggios. So what begins as a confusing assault of activity gradually appears more articulated; it is still not experienced as absolutely coherent, but it suggests a nascent form, an organization at least in terms of repetitions of a restricted verbal and movement vocabulary.

The redundancies produce a budding feeling of determinateness where minutes before audio-visual noise prevailed. Slowly, the words become familiar. At first sporadically and then in unison, the group merges in a recital of Hamlet's soliloquy, each phrase matched by an abstract gesture, e.g., three steps forward or a bend.

The trajectory of the first part, involving a movement from a perplexing overload of information to an inductive sense of order to outright familiarity, is further refined in the succeeding segments of the dance. The performers break into smaller groupings, each of which sequentially dominates the stage. Also, the dancers speak and move more slowly and often in closer synchronization than in part one. With leisurely deliberateness, these variations reveal that the apparent lawlessness of the first part was actually the epitome of coherence, a narrative. Each of the women was intoning a story about a very

similar automobile accident; and each of those wayward gestures was really an example of the most legible type of dance movement, viz., pantomime. A kind of punning charade, the cackle and side-step stood for "which;" the handshake for "friend;" a downward hand-movement in front of the face for "avail." Each structural variation distills the meaning of what earlier seemed like hopeless, frenetic nonsense. In a very wide manner of speaking, Gordon is underscoring the role of syntax rather than semantics in the production of significance. At the same time, though, the relation between meaning and structure is a reciprocal one since it is through our emerging understanding of the verbal phrases that we are able to isolate different gestures as parts of separate movement phrases.

We never get the whole story in *What Happened*; we are left with major causal gaps. But as one dancer goes through the motions stage right and three attack the same material stage left, the narrative vagueness seems less important since we know the meaning of each of their gestures. The act of correlating the movement to language provides such a powerful sense of order that the fractured nature of the language goes by almost unheeded. Various permutations of the state right/stage left deployments of performers are explored by Gordon until our eye can light almost anywhere with perfect confidence that we can pick up on what each dancer is "saying." Finally the performers begin to exit in sequence when they reach the point in their stories where they left the scene of the accident, an elegant device for sustaining the pantomime which Gordon has used to probe the correspondences between language and dance.

*What Happened* was followed by "Mixed Solo," a section of a larger work first performed last spring, entitled *Not Necessarily Recognizable Objectives*. This choice is an appropriate companion to *What Happened* for at least two reasons. First, like the new piece it moves from disorder to order, making random gestures later appear purposive through structural variation. But even more interestingly, it also provides a sharp contrast to *What Happened* for, whereas the new dance decomposes itself, analytically breaking down each of the initial movements until they are comprehensible, "Mixed Solo" composes itself, first introducing the gestural elements from which the choreography of the whole will be built.

"Mixed Solo" begins with a tape explaining that Gordon will do a solo and examining his motives for doing it. Gordon's disembodied voice humorously considers how, though the dance may seem unpretentious, it is desperately egomaniacal; the monologue is like a poem from *Knots*, only written by Woody Allen.

Gordon has ten members of the troupe on stage; they will comment on his solo as he performs it, supposedly to make the act of soloing less grandiose, though ironically they attempt, with comic ineptitude, to valorize its every gyration.

Gordon's movements are extremely difficult to follow—a macaronic line of steps made up of walking backwards, hip rotations, leaps, a sweep across the floor that reminds you of Groucho Marx's bended-knee-giant-steps, ass wiggles, etc. When Gordon strokes his beard, you're not sure whether that's part of the solo or whether he's wondering what to do next. As each gesture passes by it becomes very difficult to remember because it doesn't seem to

bear any relation to what precedes or follows it either in terms of expressive development or the repetition of movement qualities.

The other dancers greet these peripatetic peripities undaunted, mockingly imitating the rapid portentousness of dance criticism by, for instance, likening Gordon to Nijinsky. At one point, someone defensively ventures that the soloist is taking a big risk because *noncognoscente* may think Gordon doesn't know what he's doing. Indeed, the movement does seem merely satiric rather than intrinsically interesting choreography.

But when Gordon completes his solo, four dancers take it up in staggered sequence, each gesture echoed four times over progressively longer intervals. These two strategies radically alter the way we experience the movement; the repetition not only makes it more familiar but the sequence structure initiates a pattern of anticipation. Whereas the solo, though enlivened by the dialogue, felt interminable because it had no rhyme or reason, no way for us to assimilate it; when multiplied by four it almost flies by, the structure imbuing each phrase with a horizon of expectation so that in the reprise each gesture is literally seen differently.

The evening at ATL also included a performance of *Chair* (1974). First and foremost, this is a study in contrast between the two dancers. It opens with a recording of "Stars and Stripes Forever" followed by an outlandish explanation of how the dance was made that is really an affectionate parody of the use of chance procedures in composition. Then Gordon and Valda Setterfield approach two cerulean blue folding chairs and in four repeated eight-minute segments of movement they run through almost every possible relationship a human body can have with a folding chair. They sit on their chairs, kneel on them, do push-ups off them, balance them on their backs, turn them over with their feet, straddle them like hobbyhorses, pull them over their heads like shirts and snap them open while whipping them through the air. They handle the chairs with the dexterity and feeling for comic awkwardness of a silent comedian facing a Murphy bed.

The strange paces the chairs are put through make you pay attention to aspects of these objects that you usually ignore, e.g., the space between the backs of the chairs and their seats. Moreover, the fact that Gordon and Setterfield are repeating the same movements, often simultaneously, presents a system that spotlights the differences between their bodies. We notice that Gordon has a hard time pulling the chair over his broad shoulders while Setterfield meets the same difficulty around her hips. In the last section of the movement, both tackle the chairs while humming the Sousa. This gives us an interesting audible measure of how much energy this bizarre activity costs as well as how differently Gordon and Setterfield expend that energy. He works in spurts while she breathes evenly. At the same time, he turns the song into a joke, singing faster, for instance, while pratfalling to the floor. She, on the other hand, plays it straight, struggling to stay melodic as if both she and the audience were unaware of the thoroughly undignified antics she's engaged in. In this way the structure succeeds not only in making the differences between the two bodies salient, but develops a sense of two different psychologies as well.

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