

ENTERTAINMENT

Gordon's dance is witty and verbal

By Janice Ross
Tribune Dance Critic

This past weekend the Bay Area discovered David Gordon. This uncompromising post-modern dancemaker has been creating dance works for more than 20 years, during which time he has performed locally on three occasions in various studios.

But it wasn't until this weekend's two sold-out performances in U.C. Berkeley's Zellerbach Playhouse that Gordon finally received the kind of acclaim he is accustomed to in New York, his home base.

Gordon's brand of dancing is witty, verbal and dense. It defies being looked at in the traditionally passive "entertain me" mode of most established dance. A work like "What Happened," performed as part of a continuous stream of four works on Saturday's program, appears as little more than chaotic cacophony if one approaches it as another "Swan Lake," that is, by looking for conventionally beautiful gestures and an easy-to-read story line.

The meaning is neither in the movement or the message here, but in a complex interweaving of the two, in which verbal synonyms become physical gestures and simple actions are made to assume the associative power of words. Each of the seven dancers in "What Happened" (Gordon's original notion of using a pick-up group of dancers for each performance has now developed into a more stable company-like arrangement, called the Pick-Up Company) describes and acts out the same bizarre tale about an accident, while punctuating their description with charade-like gestures whenever a word with two meanings pops up.

Along the way tapes of popular, classical and corny music, as well as a bit of an eerie movie sound track accompany the most mundane of falling, hugging and leaning gestures, investing their deliberate banality with an edge of drama. As the contents of Gordon's dances have gotten

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more ambitious over the years, so, unfortunately, have their length.

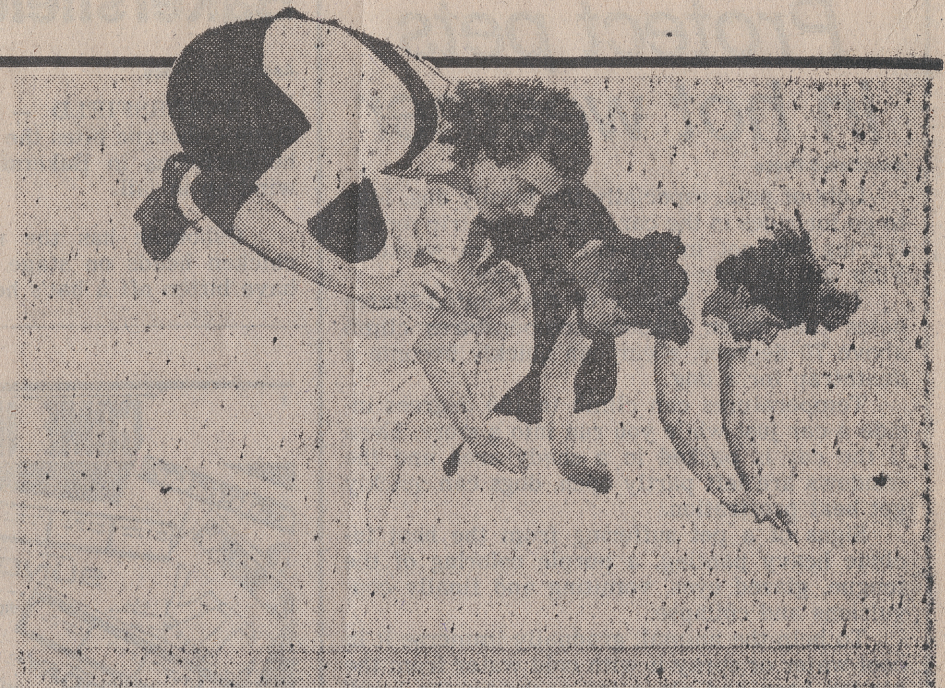
Preceding and following "What Happened" were three other Gordon pieces: "New Untitled Work" (1981-82), "Soft Broil" (1980), a typically punning Gordon title, and "Chair," a duet from 1974 expanded into a suite for seven dancers and six chairs. Performed by six dancers with one always acting as the odd man out, "Chair," doesn't have a fraction of the charm it did when Gordon and Valda Setterfield, his wife and long-time colleague, used to do it as an Americana duet.

"New Untitled Work," which predictably was neither new or untitled, sequesters verbal counting games into visual ones as the dancers stack up and peel off in obedience to their shouts of their own "numbers."

The second half of the program was given over to "TV Reel," a weaving 50-minute work that presents the dancers bear-hugging to a square dance reel. If square dancing is about couples getting together, then Gordon has simply done away with the squares and the dancing, presenting boy-girl, boy-boy and girl-girl partnerships that keep melting out of focus as the dancers switch partners, moods and quips. When Gordon did this dance in New York earlier this year it apparently included several video sequences inexplicably not shown here.

There were a few in Saturday's audience who slipped away early in the evening, apparently put off by Gordon's wordy dance intellectualism. Those who stuck around, however, greeted the dancers with appreciative hoots. Both reactions are positive proof that Gordon's work still packs the welcome wallop of the new.

Dancers Keith Marshall, Susan Eschelbach and Margaret Hoeffel, members of David Gordon's Pickup Company, make a mid-air movement in unison.



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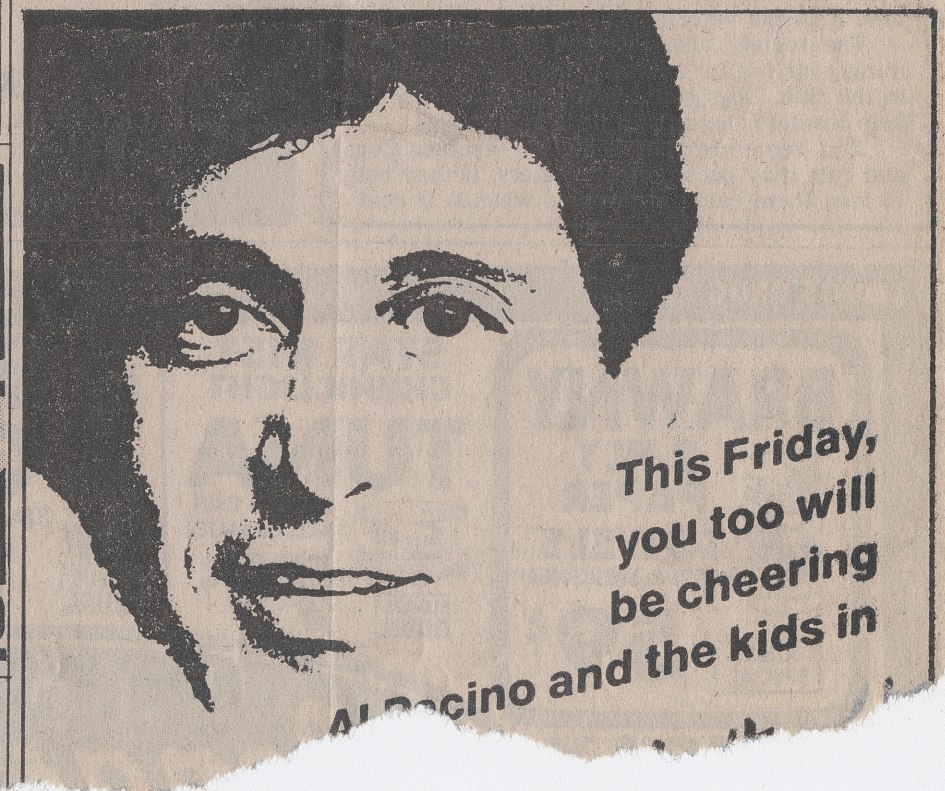
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