

Sometimes the Picture Frames the Frame

LOIS GREENFIELD



Douglas Dunn's *Pulcinella*

By Deborah Jowitt

DAVID GORDON/PICK UP CO. At Dance Theater Workshop (May 16 to 27). *Framework*. DOUGLAS DUNN AND DANCERS. At the Joyce Theater (May 23 to 27). Premiere of *Elbow Room*, New York premieres of *Pulcinella: A Ballet in One Act*, *View*, *Skid*, and *Hitch*.

Heading home down Seventh Avenue after seeing David Gordon's *Framework* at DTW's Bessie Schönberg Theater, I passed a traffic signal that was flashing WALK and DON'T WALK simultaneously. It struck me then that the perilous closeness of opposites is something Gordon thinks about.

Of all the brainy assemblages of conversation, dancing, and other acts that Gordon has made, *Framework* is probably the most all-of-a-piece: events echo, shadow, illumine earlier events so as to suggest not just formal correspondences but patterns of living.

The splendid evening-long work (short intermission) poses, it seems to me, a series of fleeting queries about the boundary between public and private, the distinction between how we perceive things on our own and how we see facts that have been selected, "framed" for us. From an earlier Gordon work comes a group phone conversation between Valda Setterfield and everyone, except Gordon. Quietly working out at a barre to sweet piano music (Chopin, I think) while the lights are gradually switched on (one of Robert Seder's many fine effects), Setterfield answers the taped "ring!" with a quiet, slightly apprehensive "Hello." The dancers throng in to answer in person her "Who's this?" with an eager cacophony: "Susan" (Eschelbach), "Margaret" (Hoeffel), "Keith" (Marshall), "Paul" (Evans), "Dean" (Moss), "Teddy" (Fogarty). When her collective caller hangs up, Setterfield discourses quietly to the audience about the difficulty of handling telephone calls and other invasions of privacy, about good manners, crowds, and shyness. Her droll yet touching speech comes back to us when the shrill ring of the phone occasionally interrupts the action. Once, no one answers, which is more discomfiting, she says, than anything. And in the long agonizing ending of the piece, Setterfield, weary den mother to this convivial, demanding horde of young dancers, attempts to concentrate on her warmup, while they stride around her, touch her, tell her what they need to have her know. She begins to lean her head on the barre more and more often; Gordon, distant from all this, crosses in

front of the hubbub in pensive slow motion. Suddenly, in an ending almost shocking in its artificiality, all the dancers are sitting, neatly posed within one of the empty frames we've seen earlier.

Frames, a blue-and-black reversible painting, a portion of what might be a room wall (all by Power Boothe), reveal and disclose the action in a number of provocative ways. They can be the windows and doors people step through, peer through, or be the inspiration for the windows and doors the dancers make for each other with their bodies, as they swing rapidly through the physical and vocal configurations of an uneasy, constantly shifting social gathering: "Won't you come in?" "I see." "See what?" In a long, grave, patient duet, Gordon and Hoeffel slide the blue-and-black painting into endless new relationships with a frame—neither arguing nor stopping to survey the results. In another duet, he slowly adjusts a large frame to enclose parts of Setterfield's body as she dances along, "her" piano music now blending with the harsh popping rock music we've heard before. Somewhere along the way, the two exchange roles—so smoothly I don't at first notice that now she is framing him. Frames roll across the playing area, framing nothing, framing something. Moving a flat with the dexterity of conjurers, the dancers reveal unexpected new relationships behind them; the framer becomes the framed in the turn of a rectangle. It becomes, for a second, a tilting conference table, a bed. The empty frames can be dived through in a picture-making process more acrobatic and less contained than Gordon and Setterfield's earlier one.

A lot of the full, blurry-edged dancing also seems to relate to the public-private, permanent-temporary issues. While Eschelbach and Evans perform a warm, almost intimate duet, everyone else watches. A sextet keeps changing personnel, the new arrival fitting, without interruption, into the symmetrical, rectangular floor patterns that swing and shift just the way the frames do. I think that what I like best about the dancers is their watchfulness; an unquestioning acceptance of each other that amounts to tenderness.

Some of the sections of *Framework* move with the speed of polished comedy; others are long, slow, subtly shifting currents, during which what you could hardly pick up during the fast parts revolves again in your mind, and you wonder why what seemed so funny before makes you

sad now. Walkdontwalk.

I remember that back in 1972, Gordon and Douglas Dunn, colleagues in the Grand Union, shared an eccentric concert in which they thought up hard things to do together. Now the differences between the kinds of hard things they like are clearer. Dunn has become a dance-man of prodigal invention. In his 1978 *Coquina* and the five never-before-seen-in-the-U.S. (or seen at all) dances he showed during his company's season at the Joyce, I felt that almost every movement was unlike every other one and all were unlike anything I'd ever seen.

I'd better qualify that a lot. Dunn does recognize repetition as useful (but not very); he does run things past you more than once (a flat tilt to the side with one leg curved in the air over the stage like an eyebrow is a favorite). Nor does he appear to be striving for outlandish originality. The never-quite-seen-before look is the result of not limiting the body's possibilities. I'm not just speaking of how he may make an elegant stride, a shaking head, an oddly cocked wrist into companions, but how angle, direction, sequence, attack are seldom what you expect them to be.

But Dunn presents his inventiveness offhandedly, calmly, never underscoring the cleverness or the beauty or the oddity of a move. He presents the dancing he's made for himself, his five-member company, and assorted guests as if it were a series of discoveries instead of a fabrication. You can imagine that a decision or an accident has set a dancer off, and exceedingly complex dancing that ensues is the product of a series of sensitive responses and reassessments.

Of all the dances shown, *Pulcinella: A Ballet in One Act* is the most unusual for Dunn. Because it's set to Stravinsky's famous and dazzling take on Pergolesi. Because it was made for the Paris Opera. Because 15 dancers perform it. There's no story to Dunn's version of *Pulcinella*, as there was in Léonide Massine's or the one made jointly in 1972 by George Balanchine and Jerome Robbins, but everywhere in it are hints of narrative and commedia dell'arte shenanigans, as clear as is the front curtain view of ancient Naples painted by Mimi Gross, or Gross's white costumes that turn the dancers into assorted Harlequins and Columbines and so on. It's a marvelous dance. I'd like to see the New York City Ballet do it.

As is usual in a Dunn dance, the stage is a bustle of comings and goings, of di-

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verse activity, of projects begun and abandoned juxtaposed next to long, patient explorations. In this, though, motifs repeat, and a hasty, spectacular spot of unison dancing occurs by way of a penultimate climax. (I can always stand a little more unison than Dunn allows.) In the rollicking stew of activity, we see for a second a fellow (male or female, it doesn't matter much) held up by comrades as if in a funeral procession (one episode in *Pulcinella* lore). There are a lot of waggish athletic stunts and primitive tricks and dance-pretty-for-the-people stuff woven into the bustle of dancing. Dunn has made a wonderful hapless solo for himself in which everything he does appears subtly wrong. I thought he had patterned his air of aghast alertness, his busyness, his fumble-footed nimbleness on someone he had seen. Something about his face reminded me of Merce Cunningham in his droll moments; then I thought that years ago when Edwin Denby danced, he might have danced like this. While guest artist Karole Armitage makes all the eccentric steps look elegant and rather dramatic, Dunn rushes about, one step behind her all the time, trying to copy her while regarding her as if she were an incomprehensible apparition.

All of Dunn's dances are dense with activity, full of variety, only occasionally developing. They're like big lively paintings shaped by the stage space, occurring in time but unpressured by it. Yet each has a distinctive atmosphere. *View* is performed to composer John Driscoll's sophisticated mix of nature sounds, wild and domesticated (crickets and hens, for example), which emanates from speakers at the rear of the theater as well as from two revolving ones on stage. The sounds, the speakers rotating now slow, now fast, Patrick O'Rourke's changing lighting, Charles Atlas's variously green costumes influence me to read the dancing as happening outdoors. Fleeting I see birds in an odd wrist-cocked hop, symmetrical leaf patterns in a duet for Dunn and John McLaughlin, an image of man in nature when McLaughlin sits pensively observing while Diane Frank, Susan Blankensop, and Grazia Della-Terza dance about.

On the other hand, *Hitch* seems more citified, more pent-up. Is it because of the traffic noises in Linda Fisher's score? Is it because of a part in which the dancers, isolated from each other, prance slowly in one spot, turning this way and that, as if prevented from proceeding? Is it a harshness in the movement? The fashionable look of Dunn and Blankensop in matching two-toned jumpsuits as they come together for an extremely beautiful duet? And *Elbow Room* seems, as its title promises, to give its dancers more space around them, less congestion to deal with. You feel a more leisurely approach to solos, duets, trios, the notion of a soloist and a chorus. In *Skid*, on the other hand, the dancers throng the stage frequently. Dancing to Driscoll's *Fish's Eddy*, wearing flaming costumes by Gross that include bathing caps of sorts, they engage in dry, knockabout behavior, framed by blackouts. Here they play the old "statues" game, transformed; now they fake-whack each other on the cheek. It's like a sophisticated take on a vaudeville beach number, but it's also a real dance.

The dancers (I haven't mentioned Deborah Riley yet, or David Kulick, who appeared in several pieces) are admirable, except for a slight, puzzling rigidity that many of them seem to have in their necks and upper backs. Dunn, never a polished technician, remains ineffable on stage. The image of the dancer as explorer of uncharted physical terrain comes as much from his performing as from the choreography he has made. I believe he could walk and not walk at the same time.

I just noticed that, weeks ago in this column, Muna Tseng's name appeared as Muna Cheng. The Machine apologizes. ■