

**David Gordon's *Field, Chair and Mountain* for American Ballet Theatre and Peter Martins' *Valse Triste* and *Eight More* for the New York City Ballet**  
by Otis Stuart

David Gordon's first ballet for American Ballet Theatre has an almost mathematical purity to it — and, because its satire is almost equally as pure, it can still make you laugh. *Field, Chair and Mountain*, set to John Field's 1832 *Seventh Piano Concerto*, is about visual perspectives, about the different angles from which an absolute can be viewed and remain an absolute. Ballet is an absolute and Gordon uses his dancers to measure varying planes of movements as they diverge from the great central axis of his ballerina. Gordon's perspective is respectful and good spirited. And *Field, Chair and Mountain* is definitely a ballet. Movement is the measure of everything. Even his humor is relative to our response to the variety of angles from which those movements can be seen and still look like themselves. The laughter is soft and subtly defensive; the angles may be fresh, but they are also unfamiliar.

The ballet opens as the ballerina bourrées onto the stage to begin a straight across, left to right transit. Her arms are stretched flat out along the lines of her trajectory and her upper body faces downstage at a slightly more than three-quarter perspective. Upstage behind her, a brick-colored incline stretches across the stage on the same parallel, its own tilt complementing the tilt in the ballerina's body. Her bourrées break into great kicks forward. The progress of her transit stutters slightly as she kicks herself off her balance before regaining balance for her exit. The momentum is inexorable, and, as she exits to the right, three pairs of dancers scramble, swing, swirl out from the left in her wake. At the beginning of each of the subsequent sections of the ballet, the dancers pour out from the left, spread out across the stage, and then flow off to the right. The process is never reversed. For the final movement, however, the dancers have carried portable chairs on stage with them and, after a series of dances performed with, around, over, and under the chairs, both company and chairs remain firmly seated on the stage for the finale. Gordon's larger theatrical perspectives have some interesting angles of their own. After all, what are chairs for?

The dances in the ballet's three sections are built around the pas de deux. The implicit symmetry is crucial to the ballet's characteristic clarity. Concentric circles of activity emanating from the central couple incorporate, at different distances, three pairs of soloists and six pairs of demi-soloists. The couples become increasingly less defined as they ripple out from the centre.

Pairs overlap and exchange — boys and girls, and boys and boys, and girls and boys in an eddying counterpoint of alternatives. Alternatingly static and mobile as either participants or point of leverage, the folding chairs in the final movement multiply the number of factors (evenly). The final images — centered on the ballerina, tongue firmly in cheek, in majestic arabesque promenade balanced on full point on the seat of her otherwise pedestrian folding chair — are simultaneously exact and exuberant.

The dancers, alternately led by Martine van Hamel and Clark Tippet and Elaine Kudo and Johan Renvall as the lead couple, were as enjoyably exuberant as the ballet itself. Van Hamel is, of course, some form of absolute herself. Ably and easily partnered by Tippet, she adapted herself to the droll deliberateness of Gordon's choreography and her deliberate distance was exactly right. Soloists and corps, particularly the men, were very nearly as satisfying in the exuberance with which they met the challenge of, if not necessarily an alien style, then certainly an alien sensibility. Dancers like Wes Chapman, Craig Wright, Lawrence Pech, John Gardner, and, particularly, Ethan Brown suggest that ABT's center of real strength may be shifting out of its traditionally celebrated roster of principal dancers and down into its currently admirable ranks.

Peter Martins has crafted two new miniatures for the New York City Ballet. *Valse Triste* is a melancholic adagio for Patricia McBride (in black) and Ib Andersen (in white), and it is set to Sibelius' *Valse Triste* and the Scene with Cranes from *Kuolema*. *Eight More* (the title is a reference to an earlier Martins work, *Eight Easy Pieces*) is a sweep of dances from three boys — Peter Boal, Michael Byars, and Gen Horiuchi — to the first and second Stravinsky Suites for Small Orchestra.

The immediate contrasts between the two ballets could hardly be more striking. They are so far from being companion pieces that not even their contrasts are relative. The two works are mutually exclusive. *Valse Triste* has characters. The three dancers in *Eight More* are never anything other than three dancers. *Valse Triste* illustrates (quite effectively) the associative emotional weight of pure movement. *Eight More* illustrates (quite effectively) the musculature of movements; its single narrative complication is the competition so often coyly concealed in ballet. *Valse Triste* flows. *Eight More* rebounds.

*Valse Triste* begins with McBride reclining far upstage resting against her elbow with her back to her audience. Her own undefined conflict gradually draws her out of her repose. Her arms stretch out and away and she pulls herself up onto her toes. Her dark hair is loose about her shoulders and the deep neckline of her



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