

DANCE

April 1989

**David Gordon/Pick Up Co.
Brooklyn Academy of Music
December 14-17, 1988**

David Gordon's showmanship is the power that drives *United States*, his series of dances incorporating site-specific texts and music that was given its New York premiere as part of the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival. To date, four sections of this evolving work have been finished: "Minnesota," "New England," "New York," and "San Francisco." Planned, ultimately, to be performed over two evenings and to have its full debut at Kennedy Center in the fall, this coast-to-coast epic has been commissioned by twenty-seven sponsors in seventeen states and includes collaborative contributions by more than thirty artists.

Gordon's savvy postmodern aesthetic has always been braced with wit. Here, he piles on craft, nostalgia, and theatricality to capture regional essences and transform them into a captivating show that celebrates a national gallery of characters.

Robert Frost, fittingly, is our guide to *United States*. His excerpted discussions stitch together the three main geographic sections with quick bursts of New England candor. At the outset, he also establishes the relationship between words, movement, and music: While Valda Setterfield executes a solo to strains from a Mozart piano concerto, Frost tells us, "I'm like a dancer. I'm like Mozart. Everything I think about turns into meter."

Members of the Pick Up Co. enter with a homespun lilt in passages redolent with rural charm and heartland contentment. High-tech lifts fold into running sets, stars, and patterns that could have come off a patchwork quilt. A contemporary sequence features Cynthia Oliver, thrust repeatedly in arabesque over the heads of her chums and reciting a baton-twirling tale of her mother's dream for her to become "a black Shirley Temple from the ghetto." Because it reveals Gordon's kinetic sensitivity, the cynosure of "Minnesota" is the section based on octogenarian Meridel Le Sueur's memory of attending her first dance. Set in counterpoint against the whirling euphoria of Le Sueur's description, the dancers move in easy, gentle phrases, almost in slow motion—the women preening softly in denim and unpressed lace.

The pace speeds up for "New York," which opens with the story of Walter and Jane, a homeless woman with nothing left but her compassion. Cops and corner freaks rap and rumble. A pair of tarts hustle. As Richard Rodgers's "Slaughter on Tenth Avenue" mellows out into a full-blown statement of the musical theme, Gordon—the dance world's reigning smoothie—appears partnering Setterfield in a streetwise turn, with overtones from movie musicals. This urban satire mingles dance with police commands like "Don't move and you won't get hurt." A body-hit to Gordon leaves Setterfield in widow's weeds. By the end, only the cops survive. Quotes from Balanchine and spins on one leg demonstrate the technical polish of this ensemble, especially Dean Moss. They slip from wholesome to hellish at the drop of Mark W. Stanley's subtle lighting cues.

Edited from a lengthier previous version, "San Francisco" is more picture postcard than pithy comment. Here again, Gordon's showmanship dominates. The shape of *United States* up to this point wants a fast, upbeat finish. So, "San Francisco" is a rainbow of pretty glides, slides, catches that pivot to melodies sung by Judy Garland, Jeanette MacDonald, and other legends. Setterfield dusts it all with star power, epitomized by an exit in which she scampers backward, waving wide-eyed to the fans.

Gordon's choreography is too tough-minded ever to be sentimental. But there is sweetness in these dances, along with edgy insights into the process of making work and irony in the fact that postmodernism is finding a popular audience. Scheduled to be completed in the fall of 1989, *United States* can already be acclaimed as a rare theatrical entity. High Art has never been more Entertaining.

Camille Hardy

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