

David Gordon's 'United States'

By Debra Cash
Special to the Globe

David Gordon is either going to reinvent the United States or die an expert on the quirkiest and most obscure trivia of American history and geography. Gordon, whose "permanently temporary" Pick Up Company performs at the Loeb through the auspices of the Harvard Summer Dance Center, Thursday through Saturday, has embarked on a project the likes of which postmodern American dance has rarely seen — a 2½-year project of free association and high art in which native Manhattanite Gordon will turn his sardonic and witty attention on the rest of the country.

At last count, 27 commissioning presenters from 16 states (including Massachusetts) have chipped in to make this project happen, although it's not clear what will happen to the half-million-dollar budget in the unlikely event that Gordon decides, for instance, to forego Iowa. In Cambridge, audiences will see the Minnesota and San Francisco dances created in the first six months of the project, plus the premiere of Gordon's look at New England. Ultimately "United States" will be shown in two parts — one evening-length program at the Brooklyn Academy of Music this winter and the complete, two-evening version at the Kennedy Center in September 1989.

But Gordon insists on truth in packaging. "I didn't conceive it as one giant project," he explains. Producer Alyce Dissette just built a funding structure that would let him work at one theme as long as it interested him, although Gordon grins wickedly as he notes, "If everything I've done on 'United States' is kept intact, I will have turned into Robert Wilson. But I'll be able to cut."

"United States" began with Minnesota. Gordon paired texts by 85-year-old Meridel LeSueur with some Mozart "I had around

the house. Then, it was magical really, I found another piece of writing by Carol Bly about the difficulty of a rural Minnesota child learning to play Mozart on the piano. I was off and running.

"Step by step, I've thought about a place and my associations with that place." Roger Oliver, who serves as the project's dramaturge, supervises a small army of researchers from NYU who provide Gordon with source material. "It isn't interesting to establish a formula and just play that out," Gordon says. "I may find something wonderful about growing up in New England, but sorry, I already grew up in Minnesota in a poignant way."

David Gordon found the New England he was looking for in Robert Frost. You wouldn't think Frost and Gordon would have all that much in common. But Gordon's face softens in the hazy light outside the Harvard Science Center as he swats mosquitoes and talks about the audio tape of Frost

lecturing some students Oliver dug up. "Frost was talking about making things in ways that were not dissimilar to the way I think about making things. And the way he spoke was astonishingly musical, its phrasings, hesitations, the way his voice would go full speed ahead when he was onto something and he'd quote poetry — his own, and others' — in the middle of what he was saying.

"Frost says after you've made something you should keep it around for a year and by the time you come back to it you'll be able to see if it's gone empty or gone ridiculous." Gordon's own timetable for assessing fresh work is more abbreviated — all he needs, he says, is to see the work in performance once to know what works and what doesn't. "Sometimes it is ridiculous of course, but if it's the kind of ridiculous I could look at for a while I may leave it alone. It's empty I don't like."

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