

The Patriot Ledger, Sat., July 30, 1988

Gordon's dance full of style and wit

By Diane C. Grant
For The Patriot Ledger

The David Gordon/Pick Up Company performed their world premiere of the 'New England' section of Gordon's "United States" Thursday night at the Loeb Drama Center. "United States" is a two and a half year-long work-in-progress which will culminate in a week of performances in Washington, D.C., in September 1989.

The concept is unusual: The pieces in "United States" consist of personal and anecdotal material by Gordon and collaborators (including a dramaturg responsible for culling historical, literary and popular sources). Gordon has described the work as: "words, music and movement communicating experiences of the unique qualities of places and people throughout the country."

Yet it is not meant to be either comprehensive or formulaic — Gordon isn't interested in developing a particular structure or format for his dances. Instead, he relies on his own associations with a place, working as he likes with what strikes him. Nor does Gordon finalize these pieces — he thinks of his work as an ongoing process and frequently re-examines, alters and reuses material.

But does it work? Absolutely. These are dances with wit, style and cadence; all are provocative, and the best of them is superb.

"Minnesota," the weakest of the three, is opened by Valda Setterfield, Gordon's partner and wife for over 25 years. She executes idiosyncratic but easy movements, repeating them as if to make a chain of hops, small lunges and balances, constantly changing weight.

She is joined, then supplanted, by a group of dancers who perform the same casual movements but also swing their legs into high extensions, turning and circling each other, pairing off and then coming together as a group. Their movement is repetitive, their swinging legs and arabesques slightly hypnotic, their groupings seemingly random. The soundtrack includes readings on various rural experiences, and its multiple characters contrast with and overpower the movement.

The soundtrack to the humorous piece "San Francisco" is a campy collage of San Francisco ballads, from Carmen McRae's "I'm Always Drunk in San Francisco" to Jean-



From left, Valda Setterfield, Dean Moss and Chuck Finlon.

nette MacDonald's "San Francisco, Open Your Golden Gate" and of course, Tony Bennett's "I Left My Heart in San Francisco." The dancers loll, clown, mime and poke fun at the music. They support each other in apparently effortless lifts over and tumbles under each other and trade off each other's weight in wrapping, falling and leaning phrases.

As Jeannette MacDonald is panned by voices on the soundtrack, Setterfield appears in a hot pink dress festooned with large flowers. She repeatedly flits across the stage in exaggerated balletic moves, supported by another dancer in comic semiclassical poses, as if oblivious to her ridiculousness. This dance is a piece of simple fun.

"New England" is presented in three parts — after "Minnesota" and before and after "San Francisco." There is no break between dances, the dancers do not change from the shirts and pants or skirts used in the immediately previous pieces, and the stage is bare throughout the program. As a result, the transitions are a bit difficult for the audience.

But "New England" is very different from the other two pieces. The only soundtrack is a recording of a lecture/discussion by Robert Frost which is immediately engaging and entertaining. The dancers move easily between interpretive movements — again swinging legs high and wrapping loose arms, as if responding

to the musicality of Frost's voice and the rhythm with which he speaks — and literal movements, such as putting a hand to the head when Frost refers to confusion, or raising a finger at the word "first."

The most memorable section is the last one, when six dancers moving primarily in unison execute clear, slicing phrases that extend into space then turn back inward, as if etching shapes, as Frost repeats and shapes a line of verse.

Dance with verbal accompaniment is most effective when the words and the movement inform each other — when the audience remembers a movement by its association with a spoken phrase, remembers a phrase by its illustration through movement. The words and the dance in "New England" not only meld together in this way; their synergism is exciting.

David Gordon has held on to some of the vision of his first collaborators — the Grand Union improvisatory collective and Judson Dance Theater. In the '60s and '70s, these people took very seriously the beliefs that random movement could be dance and that behavior could be choreography. In recent years, Gordon has bridged the gap between dance "technique" and natural, "unskilled" movement with remarkable style and balance. "United States" promises to continue to be an intriguing project.

DAVID GORDON/PICK UP COMPANY, performing sections of "United States," at the Loeb Drama Center, 64 Brattle St., Cambridge. Final performance tonight at 8.