

Dean Moss (in air), Karen Graham and Scott Cunningham couldn't get off the ground.

# 'United States' dance falls flat, cold

By Janice Ross  
The Tribune

The United States came to Theatre Artaud Tuesday night — David Gordon's "United States," that is. Gordon, an irreverent, witty, punning dancemaker who prefers the word "construction" to "choreography," has been making the rounds the last two years, creating dances in and about 17 states all over America with his New York troupe, the Pick Up Company.

This mammoth in-progress work is on view tonight through Sunday at Theatre Artaud. The references to different locations in the piece come primarily through the texts, songs and costumes that accompany the dancing. Gordon was a window dresser briefly before he became a dance constructor, and this focus on the packaging of a product and the highlighting of its visual appeal is particularly apparent in this work.

There is little in the way of real emotion or affection in "Pounding The Beat and Slaughter" and "Sang and Sang and the Final Frost," the New York, San Francisco and a bit of the New England components of "United States" which Gordon presented Tuesday.

"Pounding the Beat and Slaughter" is a crass literalization of all the show-biz myths about New York. Using, among other things, musical selections from Richard Rodgers' "Slaughter on Tenth Avenue" and monologues about muggings and an old alcoholic, Gordon gives a portrait of New York steeped in heavy cynicism. The women are all whores, the men either street punks or uniformed disciplinarians, and the dancing spunky, athletic and passionless.

"Sang and Sang," which Gordon showed in a longer version on his visit here last year, gives San Francisco the same treatment. The differ-

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ence is that here the visualized myths have to do with a free-and-easy lifestyle, with several versions of legends miming "I Left My Heart in San Francisco."

It's all very clever, very smart and very cold. The highlight of Tuesday's opening program was the great technical beauty and plasticity of Gordon's present company of dancers. Aside from Gordon and his classically genteel wife, Valda Setterfield, none of the present Pick Up Company has been with the troupe more than three or four years, and none have the gutsy rough-and-tumble manner of his earlier dancers.

Gordon's present dancers, however, do have a lyric ballet edge. They are finely tuned performers, dancers with character and panache who look eager to be pushed out of the comfortable middle ground of movement possibility that much of Gordon's "United States" choreography traffics in.

Setterfield and Gordon have a couple of brief spins, literally, in "Pounding The Beat and Slaughter," where they appear as black-clad figures (a perfect counterpart to the pure white figures they presented last year in "The Seasons") who waltz past the menacing street thugs until Gordon is felled by a stray bullet.

The further Gordon strays from his initial posture as one of the most provocative post-modern choreographers around, the more he seems to lose the edge of brainy humor that so enlivened his early dances. The real pathos of "United States" is the work's aura of irascibility.

"United States" repeats today through Sunday at 8:30 p.m., Theatre Artaud, 450 Florida St., S.F. Tickets \$14-\$16. 642-9988.