

Dance

Gordon's
Casual CollageBy Alan M. Kriegsman
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I'm not sure David Gordon's "United States" tells us much that we didn't already know about the country, nor am I sure it's supposed to. What it does reveal are some beguiling new facets of Gordon's sly, vagabond and antic imagination, as reflected through the lore and mystique of places Gordon has performed in and visited.

"United States" is a unique and uniquely ambitious project. Two and a half years in the making, it was collaboratively commissioned by more than two dozen dance presenters transcontinentally, representing 15 states and the District of Columbia. In its now completed form—five sections spread across two evenings—it is receiving its world premiere at the Kennedy Center's Terrace Theater, where Gordon's troupe, the Pick-Up Company, performed the first three parts last night, to be followed tonight by the final two (with a full repeat scheduled for Thursday and Friday).

The occasion marked not only the Kennedy Center debut of David Gordon/Pick-Up Company, but also—appropriately enough, given the nature of the opus—the launching of a 10th anniversary season for the "Dance America" series, cosponsored by the Center and the Washington Performing Arts Society. A packed house gave the work and the 11-member troupe (including Gordon and his wife Valda Setterfield) an especially rousing reception.

"United States" is not a treatise. It's neither compendious nor symphonic in structure or content. Gordon's modes here are collage and pastiche. The tone is casual, almost conversational.

The components of "United States"—both the three sections seen last night and the dance material within them—hang loosely together, like Gordon's typical movements. Perhaps it's no accident that Gordon's favorite, recurring formations throughout the piece are lines or clusters that dissolve before one's eyes, reshaping themselves and permuting the arrangements of the dancers. The same thing happens with the textual and musical items Gordon invokes. Mozart and Minnesota and Robert Frost cozy up to one another in a seemingly unlikely but ultimately perfectly reasonable chain of associations.

Gordon's movement lexicon is similar in character, favoring easy, loping, swinging, off-balance motion in a spontaneous-looking spill of folds, lunges, spins and reachings.

The printed program declares "United States" to be a work "constructed" by David Gordon. Gordon's well-known aversion to the term "choreography" can be understood as a disavowal of intellectual pretension and academicism. All the same, "United States," like earlier Gordon work, displays his idiosyncratic flair for dance morphology. Toward the end of



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Valda Setterfield, right, and company.

the third section of "United States" we hear the voice of poet Frost telling us that he'd "as soon write free verse as play tennis with the net down," which is to say that as an artist he felt a need for the rigors of form. It's the same with Gordon. His dances have an innate sense of kinetic connection. The flow of movement seems uninhibited, but it is designed nevertheless within definite spatial boundaries and temporal measures. What Gordon does best is to devise serpentine unwindings of unhackneyed, unpredictable movement in shapes and rhythms that both respond to and make sport of their musical and verbal environment.

In fact, Frost's assertion about the need for order in poetry becomes a thematic concept that runs through the first three parts of "United States." In "Mozart, Memories, and the First Frost," it is set forth as a tension between discipline—the discipline, say, of learning to play Mozart—and freedom, mirrored in a Minnesotan girl's recollections of her first dance. The section begins with a recorded excerpt from Frost in which he compares the way he writes poetry both to dance and to Mozart—it's the springboard for the whole section of the dance. A particularly telling image, during the passage about the sensual liberation of dancing, has the dancers in a tight circle on the floor all rolling backward over their heads—it's like the opening of a blossom.

In the second section, "Pounding the Beat and Slaughter," the contrast is between the almost military order of the police—most of the dancers are in cop uniforms—and the subversive violence and vulgarity of New York City streets, echoed both in the "Slaughter on Tenth Avenue" excerpts and in the sirens, traffic din and profanities of the sound score. Setterfield and Gordon dance a duet in which they appear to be oblivious of the ambient mayhem, until it strikes one of them mortally.

The third section, "Sang and Sang and the Final Frost," plays upon San Francisco's self-intoxication, as amusingly mirrored in pop song excerpts, pitted against the crystalline elegance of Mozart, preserved even through a dizzying glaze of electronic manipulation.

The troupe's current dancers—Dean Moss, Chuck Finlon, Scott Cunningham, Karen Graham, Cynthia Oliver, Heidi Michel, Anglica Vaillancourt, Timothy Hadel and Jora Nelstein—are splendid and throw themselves wholeheartedly into the spirit of the work. Only Gordon and Setterfield, however, have that special, markedly personal rapport that was once the hallmark of the entire troupe.