

Everything in the World Can Be Folded

By Deborah Jowitt

DAVID GORDON/PICK UP CO. At the Joyce Theater (May 14 to 19). *Offenbach Suite*, *A Plain Romance Explained*, and *My Folks*.

MEREDITH MONK/THE HOUSE. At La Mama Annex (May 7 to 28). *Quarry*.

IN MEMORIAM: JOHN MARTIN.

David Gordon has made 10 dances this year, instead of one or two. I find the prospect of Gordon becoming a sort of postmodern Choo San Goh, with a ballet in almost every company in the world, both alarming and pleasing—alarming because the quality of his work might deteriorate, pleasing because... well, things can't be all bad when dance companies commission pieces that are bound to be intelligent, calm, sweet-tempered, and anti-virtuosic.

Perhaps it was because of Gordon's improbably busy schedule that his own concert with his Pick Up Company didn't seem as rich as usual, although this could be a result of Gordon's trying *not* to do everything he knows how to do in one piece. Too, his works are usually performed in spaces that hold audience and performers in a friendly embrace—like DTW or Gordon's own loft. A proscenium space—even a small one like the Joyce—fosters a different viewpoint. I'm not thinking just of technical aspects, like the difficulty of hearing the dancers when they speak, especially if music is playing; I'm thinking that I've never before found a work of Gordon's overlong, or noticed that "allegro" and "staccato" play almost no part in his style. In a theater, somehow, the expectations of contrast and well-monitored time run high.

Usually Gordon builds contrast into an evening-long work by the skillful alternation and juxtaposition of speech/music/dancing/prop manipulation/slides (at least four of these). But he's trying something new (for him) in this latest concert: three separate dances, of which the first, *Offenbach Suite*, is all dancing and music; the second, *A Plain Romance Explained*, is dancing, music, and talking; and the third, *My Folks* is music, dancing, and almost constant prop manipulation. And somewhere in the middle of *A Plain Romance Explained* and later, a short way into *My Folks*, I began to experience waning interest—such a novel feeling to strike during a David Gordon event that it shocked me.

Why? The three dances are subtly different from each other, even though, typically, Gordon reprises a snatch of a duet from *Offenbach Suite* in the beginning of *A Plain Romance Explained* (to delightful effect) and inserts a quiet, twisting walk decked with nose-wipes and brow-mops that we met in the latter into *My Folks*. How do they differ? Well, the first piece, which I liked immensely, has gorgeous Offenbach music—almost all adagio. Seven dancers (Gordon appears late), wearing various intriguing Gordon-assembled outfits in blues and grays, build tranquil chains of simple movement, unlink them, build others. The featured step seems to be a pose with one bent leg lifted in back (I'd say "attitude" only it's not at all balletic), and what comes next shapes the dance. A person in this watchful pose may simply walk out of it; another may come to lift and turn him or her; this person in turn may strike the pose and be helped out of it in yet another way. The casual counterpoint, the complicated permutations of calm activity, the tender coming together and separating of people create a beautiful and clever expression of one of Gordon's favorite patterns, which I can only describe as having the dynamics of imaginative sheet folding—with partners walking toward each other, then opening out in new directions and perhaps coming toward other partners. You begin to see all

the dancers as participants in a peaceful communal task that lays garlands of plain activity over the stage.

The heart of the piece is a duet for Gordon and Valda Setterfield. Over and over, he lifts her in the same pose; she's laying back in his arms, one hand cocked behind her head like a pin-up girl. But the slowness, the stillness make coyness impossible. Each time he puts her down, he tries something a little different—a slow lunge away from her perhaps—so that his homecomings change in nature, but never in intent. It's as if picking her up and turning her around and putting her down were the only sure thing in life.

This quite long piece slides right into *A Plain Romance Explained*, which begins with a very funny dance cum monologue by Keith Marshall, in which he runs through a turbulently dramatic trio he expects to perform ("Now I'm him." "Now I'm me."); rolling over himself on the floor and picking himself up are the

monumental "opera," *Quarry*, which was performed at La Mama in 1976 and is only now being revived. The character that Pekelis plays—stolid, grouchy, kind, a little giddy, on occasion speaking bits of exasperated Italian—is a kind of anchor. She alone sees (or half-sees) the characters from various worlds and time zones who inhabit the stage, as if she were infected by the fevered visions of the sick child (Monk) that she is keeping an eye on.

Looking at, listening to this astonishing work again, I'm struck anew by the poignant or alarming ways in which the small, apparently separate modules which compose the work overlap, echo, light each other up. *Quarry* recreates the process of dreaming and waking and dreaming again: real events, memories, pictures seen in a book, fantasies merge; logic is absent, but everything can be believed. For the sleeping child, tales of the Holocaust assume a reality equal to that

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David Gordon's Pick Up Company

least of it. In this dance, everyone (also Dean Moss, Janice Bourdage, Chuck Finlon, Kenneth Kirkland, Kay McCabe) wears black and white and talks about what the dance is supposed to be, while the John Field piano music is bubbling along. Some deep lunges are a new item, so is the nose-wiping walk. There's more sheet-folding or swinging-door-pass-throughs and some wonderful, slyly ram-bunctious ways of pushing each other to create swings and falls and changes of place. It begins to seem very long.

My Folks is danced to the Klezmer Conservatory Band's rendition of Yiddish tunes and begins with a fine slow exposition of the all-Balkan grapevine step by Gordon and Setterfield. Most of the dance amplifies "sheet-folding" into manipulations—comic, lovely, or contrived—of handsome zebra-striped pieces of fabric by Power Boothe. Beverly Emmons works subtle miracles with red light. The high spot of the piece is some surprise allegro work by Setterfield. Black skirt swinging, silver hair shining, hands on hips, she patters through non-stop little running steps, fraught with heel-and-toe complications, looking both delighted and self-deprecating. Clearly the heroine of a thought-provoking evening.

I walked through the door of La Mama, and Coco Pekelis swished her broom down on an imaginary ball of dust right in front of me, and nine years rolled away. Pekelis plays (brilliantly) the maid/Greek chorus in Meredith Monk's

of her mother busy in the next room, and, what's more frightening, their outlines blur together because of the way they're juxtaposed.

The four little worlds that ray out from the child's pallet (like a mandala, Monk has said) only seem islanded. The gray-haired scholarly European couple (Pablo Vela and Micki Wesson), who remain calm as they speak obliquely of subtle, but increasing persecution of Jews, are distant in space/time from the Biblical couple (Tone Blevins and Daniel Ira Sverdluk) kneeling on straw mats to work; yet both women slowly fold pieces of fabric at the same time. The latter couple's terrified flight is repeated later by the same performers in modern-clothes. And later they, and the gray-haired couple, in their own distinct ways, turn the smoking of a cigarette into a last rite. Yet, the gray-haired man, a continent away and perhaps 10 years in the past (Monk wasn't born until 1943), enters Monk's bedroom as a kindly grandfather, stops her up when she's galloping wildly around and carries her back to bed.

Three women in '40s clothes (Gail Turner, Monica Moseley, and Mary Schultz) who have a humble birthday party around a table can seem like an American family whose men are at war, or European Jews in hiding, like Anne Frank's family. At one point, they also stand in a line, wearing goggles, and pantomime assembly line work: you think of the war effort in American factories, but also of forced labor—an idea that resonates through the eerie film of people

picking their way among the boulders of a vast quarry and then floating, like so much driftwood, in the black water. And, at the very end of the piece, these three appear in pajamas like Monk's and reiterate her flailing in nightmare.

A flamboyantly theatrical woman (Lanny Harrison) who sits at a dressing table before a photo of a man in uniform is clearly the child's mother, but at one point we see her high up in a glass booth, gesticulating and mouthing the wordless song that comes over the child's beside radio. It sounds like a lullaby, but she is anything but soothing. Distant, inaccessible, she might be the prisoner of the still, evil "dictator" (Ping Chong) watching her from the platform way at the other end of the room. Yet later, when he launches into a terrifying, hysterical, unintelligible, Hitleresque monologue and follows it with a disjointed dance, we remember the entertainer's gestures and her power over a crowd.

The parade of dictators that march down a red carpet and one by one are murdered or bump each other off are absurd caricatures. Intergalactic maniac, female executive, capricious tyrant in wheelchair, military dictator, dowager empress—they might all have sprung from a merger between the dopey children's show that comes over the radio and the daily papers. And they are impersonated by people from the four zones.

The "Wash Chorus" of serene dancing and stinging beautiful contrapuntal singing by 29 people in white is like a living vision of the white clouds that are carried through on sticks. Perhaps most brilliant and stirring of all, the people who interminably perform the exhausting calisthenics and harsh chant in the last few minutes of the piece seem at first like Hitler youth at a monstrous rally, but, as suitcases are handed out to them from a cart, they collapse on the floor, against each other, and suddenly they are the victims.

Miraculously, almost all of the original cast are performing in this splendid revival, even five members of the original chorus. Gaynor Coté is back as the kind/hostile visitor who brings the three women food, and Steve Clorfeine as the sinister accomplice of the dictator. Of the principals, only Lee Nagrin is missing, and Micki Wesson gives an excellent performance in her role. Nurit Tilles and Bradley Sowash are the organists.

These performances fall close to the 30th anniversary of the end of World War II. *Quarry*—a personal, partly autobiographical work, elegiac, often comic in tone—reminds us more clearly than propaganda might how cruel people can be to one another, how dangerous their rulers. In 1976, *Quarry* was profoundly moving; in 1985, how much closer to the bone it cuts.

With an unmanageable backlog of concerts to write about, I want to dedicate this small remaining space to John Martin, who died on May 19 at the age of 91. Martin himself knew how to use space wisely. When *The New York Times* hired him in 1927 to be its first full-time critic, he understood the weight of that responsibility, the need to please his editors. Yet he boldly supported the not-too-popular emerging modern dance—writing a brilliant sort of advocacy criticism. He tacitly admonished audiences who preferred ballet and not-so-tacitly admonished the likes of Graham and Humphrey for failing to live up to standards he discerned in their work. Because he was so highly opinionated, his mistakes stand out: in 1935, he thought Balanchine was irremediably European and should go back there. Still, he was not afraid to change his mind. Later, he became disenchanted with the state of modern dance and an admirer of Balanchine. His reviews, his books, his lectures, his classes enlightened America about dance at a time when to editors all dancers were "kickers" and, to a segment of the God-fearing public, whores with acrobatic talent. Dance and dance critics are greatly in his debt.