

Edited by SHIRLEY DESPOJA

Stepping out in New York

Dance is booming in America and the New York spring season is alive with experimental groups in Soho and Brooklyn, big companies in downtown theatres and the Lincoln Centre, and plenty of others in places around town.

The technical standard of dancing is almost always high but all too often it is not matched by the choreography, and this is as true of the grand classical companies as it is of the small modern groups such as Gordon's Pick-up Co., which I saw in his studio-loft way down on lower Broadway.

Gordon is vitally concerned with meaning. A keen sense of the absurd is fundamental to his work, which is satirical, infallibly rhythmic and intellectually challenging. He uses words, gesture, movement, sometimes music, sometimes props, sound effects, film.

Repetition is a keynote of his work: a movement or sound will go on and on until you think you can bear it no longer, then a

• The first of two articles by "The Advertiser's" Dance Critic ALAN BRISSENDEN, who has been looking at dance in the US.

change, large or infinitesimal, will suddenly make a vast difference to your perception of what is happening before you and perhaps of your own awareness.

The new work on the program, "An Audience with the Pope, or This Is Where I Came In," opens with black and white slides of a figure in Papal robes entering a room and sitting on a box, to hold audience. A rich BBC voice relates how the tradition of such audiences arose and gradually the commentary becomes a spoof involving words such as "poppycock."

David Gordon, as first dancer, enters and begins a series of movements based on diagonal marching, shoulder rolls and arm

swings from the elbow. Variations on these are repeated in the duet, trio, quartet and septet which make up the suite. In the duo, Gordon's wife, Valda Setterfield, speaks as she moves, quietly and incessantly.

There is no music. In the trio three girls move in unison, most of the time; the patterns of the other sections are more often individually different. The whole piece has an immaculate performance, but the point that Papal audiences are pointless is hammered too relentlessly. In this work the repetition is self-defeating because it becomes boring instead of a comment on boredom.

"Something Happened" (1977-78) succeeds better. The sound of a horrific motor crash is heard and seven people tell their versions of the accident. Speaking, moving, gesturing independently, they mime the words, sometimes with puns ("which" is a dive, an ugly face-pull and a maniacal cackle). The counterpoint of movement and sound builds up until it gradually becomes "To be or not to be," the dancing stills and finally there is a unison



David Gordon in "An Audience with the Pope" and design for ballet "Cleopatre" by Leon Bakst in 1909, on show at Metropolitan Museum of Art.

declaration, "I had other things to do. So I turned and went away."

We haven't heard the full story of what happened; but then would we ever, if we asked seven people about such an accident?

How far would they agree? And if we were among the seven, would we, too, have "other things to do"?

The program opened with Valda Setterfield's "One Part of the Matter" (1972) which began with

a tape of Gordon telling Setterfield just how to place her elbow, her arm, her leg . . .

She then appeared, in a black 1930s bathing suit, and took up a series of poses while his voice continued. Sometimes she was one jump ahead of his directions; sometimes entirely dissociated from them; it all seemed to be summed up when he began singing, very badly, "Every Little Movement." Quirky, amusing, and, like everything else, very well done.

Setterfield teaches at the studio of Merce Cunningham (who was here for the 1976 Adelaide Festival), and three of the dancers study there, but Gordon's style is distinctive, particularly in his polyphonic use of words and movement and in the impression he gives that the movement phrase and rhythm come from within the dancers, and are not induced from outside them.

Across the river at the Brooklyn Academy Andy deGroat's ballet, "Red Notes" put action to words by Gertrude Stein and music, sometimes weirdly ethereal in its sound, by Philip Glass. The dancers, each projecting an individual personality, moved in and along the lines of a white grid painted in a diminishing perspective leading to an altar at the back of the stage.

Every now and then one or other would slip into a dervish spin, arms outflung. A few puffed cigarettes occasionally; more surprisingly, several shoes were flung on from the wings.

A good deal of stylish movement, interesting interplay of pattern, words and sound made for an intriguing but rather lightweight hour of the avant garde.

The esoteric is not the concern of Joyce Trisler, whose Danscompany is young, enthusiastic and at its best in a middle-of-the-road Broadway musical piece like her "Red Riding Hood," the tale of a country girl lured into big city vice but saved by the boy from back home. The dancers have fun with characters, the choreography is adequate for the job and the pace matches the Duke Ellington music the piece is danced to.

Trisler's choreography works less well when she tries to be abstract to Bach or rapturous to Chopin. And in giving her barefoot dancers classical movements, especially consecutive turns, more easily done in ballet shoes, she is working against her chosen technique.

These three groups were a fair sample of modern dance in a New York week — and it is a week that included the opening of the American Ballet Theatre at the Met and Paul Taylor at the City Centre, of which more another time.

Meanwhile, down at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, I managed to catch the last days of "Diaghilev," an exhibition of costumes, graphics and other art connected with the companies which brought Russian ballet to the West early this century. It was a second meeting for me with many of the items, as in

1968 I had been at London's Scala Theatre when Sothebys held the first of three auctions of costumes, scenery, front cloths and act drops. More than 80 costumes were on show in New York, along with posters, photographs, portraits and a life mask of Pavlova.

It was slightly unnerving to be within centimetres of the costumes Nijinsky wore as Petrouchka. Riabouchinska's Golden Cockerel costume was there, too — well lit and on a free standing dummy so that you could walk around it, unlike all too many of the clothes which, although arranged on figures in balletic poses, were often so dimly lit that the colors and detail one so much wanted to see were just not available to the eager eye.

As well, it was disconcerting and irritating to have muzak from a dozen ballets — snippets of "Swan Lake," snatches of "Sylphides" — sounding off continuously.

Upstairs, the "Treasures of Tutankhamen" was showing how it should be done: 55 exquisite objects, most of them in individual island cases, with room for people to move and flow, to see and study. The Diaghilev exhibition would have been better served with fewer items better displayed. Even so, it was a glamorous addition to the New York dance scene.