

Choreographer steps spryly into television

By SALLY BANES
Special to The Courant

David Gordon is a New York choreographer who shuttles between avant-garde loft performances and opera house ballets. In 1986, Gordon made the ballet "Murder," his second commission by Mikhail Baryshnikov for the American Ballet Theatre.

Now Gordon has made television his territory, too. An hourlong program, "David Gordon's Made in U.S.A.," featuring "Murder" and two other works by Gordon, will be shown tonight at 10 on "Great Performances" on Connecticut Public Television (Channel 24 in the Hartford area).

"Made in U.S.A." is a showcase not just for Baryshnikov — whose dramatic gifts Gordon sets like a jewel in his own wittily sparkling structures — and the ABT cast, but also for Gordon's own Pick-Up Company, featuring his wife, the elegant Valda Setterfield, formerly a dancer with Merce Cunningham.

Taking advantage of television's intimacy as well as its capacity for visual magic, and mixing dancers from two quite different companies who wouldn't ordinarily share a stage, "Made in U.S.A." is a dance event that couldn't happen live.

The first segment of the show, "Valda and Misha," is a variation on an earlier live duet Gordon made, in which Setterfield and another woman dance while reminiscing about their mothers. Here Setterfield and Baryshnikov perform a quiet pas de

Dance review

deux in a cartoon dance studio while discussing the pros and cons of life in America.

He moved from Russia; she from England — both, as their stories make clear, to find a place for themselves as idiosyncratic dancers. They discuss their families, favorite movies and beloved theaters, as the music quotes movie music and ballet music, from Disney sound tracks to "Swan Lake," and as animated illustrations float by.

As they agree, gently disagree, and help one another excavate memories and traits, their dancing similarly shapes its own conversation. They dance side by side, move apart, show off a little, offer one another a hand for support.

Deceptively effortless

It all looks so simple, until you remember that dancing is difficult. The dancers' effortless chatter belies their physical exertion, so the dancing and the conversation achieve a disarmingly unpretentious grace.

It is not only Valda and Misha who, in learning about one another, are becoming friends; as the title itself suggests, we are becoming friends with them, too.

Gordon's wit partly comes from the way, even in the dances without texts, he plays with movements as if they were words. He loves puns and double entendres. He delights in showing how meanings change with

new contexts, and this carries over from dance to dance.

In "TV Nine Lives," some of the same movements appear again, but the scene is entirely different. Baryshnikov and Setterfield are no longer a genteel man and woman getting acquainted, but cowboys (she with a fake mustache) with Pick-Up Company members Keith Marshall, Dean Moss, Chuck Finlon, Robert Wood and Scott Cunningham.

In this vaudevillian salute to the myth of the Wild West, set to a music collage of country-western songs from the past and present, barroom brawls are as stylized as a grand pas de deux.

People step on, over and through a folding chair (now a signature that crops up in many of Gordon's pieces. The chair phrase was originally a quote from an earlier long duet danced by Gordon and Setterfield). They knock one another over, sock each other in the jaw, get shot, somersault and pick themselves and one another up — fluently, in time to the music.

"TV Nine Lives" constantly surprises — not just because, as in Western movies, these clown cowboys are indestructible. The movements themselves begin by looking quite abstract. Much of their pugnaciousness comes from the context — the cowboy costumes, Western music and (well, almost) all-male cast.

Gordon's use of a well-defined, repeatable but flexible vocabulary — though it is not at all classical — is well-suited to the requirements of

the ballet. He is a master of variation and repetition, two of ballet's cherished devices.

"Murder," to music by Louis-Hector Berlioz, adds the detail of period costumes and the specificity of narrative to the dancing, but still partakes of the dry humor — this time in a macabre vein — one could call the Gordonian knot.

With sets and costumes by the grim humorist Edward Gorey, the ballet is a spoof on murder mysteries. Baryshnikov as quick-change artist plays a number of comic roles in stories both historical and fictional, told in words as well as dancing. He is a butler named Smith in a murder case, narrated by Setterfield, where all the other suspects also are named Smith. He is Dr. Jekyll, Anna Pavlova dancing a coughing Camille, and Mata Hari's accomplice who is shot in a duel. The cast for "Murder" includes 23 members of the American Ballet Theatre.

As one narrative rolls seamlessly into another and Baryshnikov reappears instantly in a new disguise, his ubiquitousness itself becomes funny.

In "Murder," the narrative wanders, only to wind up neatly where it began. Suddenly all the stories can be seen as nested, one within the others. And just so, in "Made in U.S.A.," we end up watching Valda and Misha watching themselves in the theater, then hailing a boat home.

"Made in U.S.A." will be broadcast on "Great Performances" today at 10 p.m. on CPTV (Channel 24 in the Hartford area).



Mikhail Baryshnikov dances in David Gordon's "Murder," part of "David Gordon's Made in U.S.A." on CPTV, Channel 24 in Hartford tonight at 10.

GAMES

Bridge

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Neither vulnerable. East deals.

NORTH

♥ 7 2

♠ 4

♦ Q 9

jump to four hearts was a good stab and put pressure on South, though why he chose to bid four spades without support from partner, instead of doubling, is a mystery to us.

Wordplay

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IF

YOU
EAT

Women say men rarely help at home

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everyone pitch in. My husband and the kids always have to be reminded

It's Garry Shandling's Show

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