

ABT opens season with humor, romance

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Herald Dance Critic

Post-modern choreographer David Gordon has given a whole new meaning to the expression "chair lift" with his new ballet, *Field, Chair and Mountain*, which made its Miami Beach premiere during American Ballet Theatre's opening night program Tuesday.

With deadpan humor and an obvious nostalgic affection for things romantic, Gordon adds a discordant element (in the form of the folding chair) to the simple orders of the neo-romantic ballet and comes up with something fresh, merry and as sweet/sour as a lemon sucker.

This arrives during the second movement of 19th Century Irish composer John Field's Seventh Piano Concerto (ably performed by pianist Paul Connelly); Field's lovely melodic music sets the context for the two-movement ballet.

The action unrolls from stage right to stage left: No matter when in the ballet, all the dancers enter from one side. They are led by principal couple Martine van Hamel and Clark Tippet (both of whom maintain soft romantic gestures and eye-to-eye contact with a delicate sweetness even as they try to edge each other off the chair). As a complement, there is a sextet of fine soloists and a dozen in support.

Structurally, the ballet does not reach its full level of impishness until after the long first movement — which is, quite simply, some lyrical dancing no more revolutionary than anything Jerome Robbins might produce.

Somehow, by slapping these romantic conventions with a sharp contemporary backhand, Gordon succeeds in making the viewer

reflect and laugh about the incongruity and continuity of emotion, affection and tradition in a world of objects a lot more hi-tech than a folding chair. Is it possible to swoon for love in Tribeca? Only with a smile.

The Gordon ballet was the brightest spot in an evening at the Miami Beach Theater of the Performing Arts that also included some superb dancing from ballerinas Cynthia Gregory and Cynthia Harvey (in *Grand Pas Classique* and George Balanchine's *Donizetti Variations*, respectively) and some uneven moments from the rest of the company in *Donizetti* and *Raymonda*.

Donizetti's oddly balanced corps de ballet — three boys and six girls — allows for all sorts of clever asymmetrical groupings, syncopations and juxtapositions of phrasing. Occasionally, though, slight differences in attack, execution and spacing made for some unintentional asymmetries in the corps.

Cynthia Harvey danced wittily, showing her full, sharp-shouldered Balanchine breeding. Her partner, Fernando Bujones, danced with his usual spectacular technique — but also with his occasional failure to comment on the complexities of his material.

Gregory, on the other hand, added all sorts of inflections and rhythmic grace to her performance with the noble and understated Ross Stretton in *Grand Pas Classique*, a grand-style pas de deux in the virtuoso mold. *Raymonda*, the evening's last ballet, looked a little lopsided after a last-minute evisceration due to injury to principal dancer Patrick Bissell.