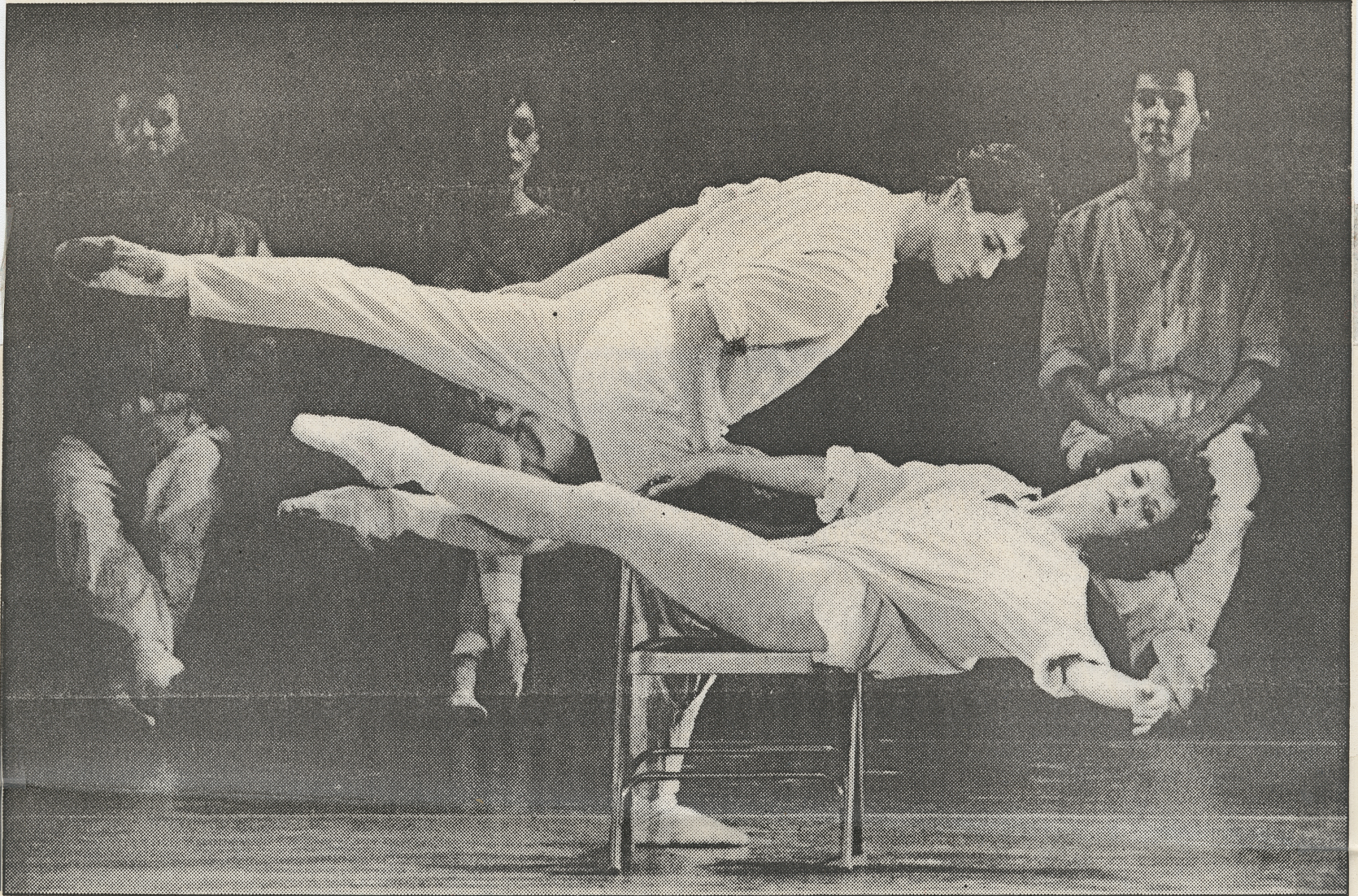


CALENDAR

TONY BARNARD / Los Angeles Times



Clark Tippet, Martine van Hamel and a folding chair dance pas de trois in David Gordon's irreverent "Field, Chair and Mountain."

DANCING WITH STARS, SMIRKS AND CHAIRS

By MARTIN BERNHEIMER,
Times Music/Dance Critic

In most respects it looked like the usual American Ballet Theatre buffet Tuesday night at Shrine Auditorium. To open its Los Angeles season, the company blessed with Mikhail Baryshnikov's leadership—but not with his dancing—offered grateful Angelinos a couple of competitive pas de deux, small doses of quasi-classical diversion and, to elate the masses before they faced the freeways, some Petipa pomp.

Not everything on the agenda was predictable, however. Mingling with the usual tippy-toe peasants, the pirouetting swans, the preening cavaliers, the steamy romantics *en pointe* and the abstracted Hungarians was a quirky little essay in dancing delirium involving a ballerina, her swain and a stage full of folding chairs.

The delirium, the work of a young terpsichorean Turk named David Gordon, gave a rather dutiful

David Gordon's quirky little essay in dancing delirium gave the American Ballet Theatre opening some much-needed flashes of energy and wit.

evening some much-needed flashes of energy and wit. "Field, Chair and Mountain," which entered the ABT repertory only two months ago, pushes Twyla Tharp here and shoves self-conscious classicism there.

Gordon thumbs his nose at all manner of manners, yet somehow makes the most of those manners at the same time. He obviously has a bright mind, a keen historical eye and a healthy penchant for irreverence. He also seems to like contradictions.

For his score, he chose a dreamy-swoony piano concerto, *anno 1832*, of John Field. This gives him a proper sonic framework for the traditional convolutions, and

gentle distortions thereof, that dominate the early portions of the ballet. Eventually, the quaintly old-fashioned music also serves as quizzical counterpoint for cheeky-mod choreography. In either case, the composer's name provides a metaphorical pun for the space in which the busy dancers move and tangle.

Before the ultimate knots are untangled, Gordon asks his whimsical designer, Santo Loquasto, to unfold a Japanese screen across the back of the stage. Mountains are painted on the screen. The formality turns casual, and the polite turns brazen.

While the music continues to simmer, the dancers exchange their

balletic-pretty get-ups for loose work shirts. At the same time, their once-prim balletic rituals give way to a neat yet frenzied network of maneuvers involving the chairs. For Gordon, the prop is more than a gimmick. Much more.

The dancers dance atop the chairs, around the chairs, with the chairs. He sits, she stands. She sits, he stands. The dancers swap roles, swap chairs, carry chairs, slide chairs, dance while sitting, dance while standing, dance on each other on the chairs. The action impels action—on the beat, doubling the beat—as the chairs become partners and symbols and spatial definitions.

"Field, Chair and Mountain" is silly but it isn't chaotic. And, in its daringly silly way, it is quite wonderful.

Martine van Hamel oozes suave and imperious glamour in the ballerina role, even when she executes contortions beyond the dignity of most ballerinas. Clark Tippet pro-

Please see AMERICAN, Page 6

AMERICAN BALLET THEATRE OPENS SEASON

Continued from Page 1

vides a soft yet gutsy counterforce. The supporting couples and corps weave in and out of the picture with a glib air of amusement. Field gets pretty rough treatment in the pit, however, at the hands of the conductor Alan Barker, the pianist Paul Connelly and a less-than-resplendent *ad hoc* orchestra.

The other novelty on the opening-night program—if it can be called a novelty—was Balanchine's "Donizetti Variations" of 1960, which received its Ballet Theatre premiere this season. It is a difficult work that wants to look easy, a faintly satirical invocation of Bournonville bravura in which the bucolic accents bear sophisticated implications.

At this juncture, the participants seem unsure whether they should dance for fun, for applause, for

laughs, for gasps or for the approval of the balletmaster. Sometimes they smile, sometimes they smirk.

Cynthia Harvey looks lovely and has technique to spare for the central role but capitalizes neither on charm nor on glitter. Danilo Radojevic makes much of his almost perverse spinning-and-flying duties, but never brings their conceptual impulses into focus.

This is a decent approximation of an elusive ballet. But it remains a performance without a perspective.

For the resident star-worshippers, the evening offered two moments of ecstasy. Cynthia Gregory and Fernando Bujones brought grandeur, polish, intensity and mutual sympathy to the inevitable

Black Swan pas de deux. Then a superseductive, lithe, willowy, subtle Natalia Makarova all but wiped nice Kevin McKenzie off the stage in the erotic little pas de deux from Kenneth MacMillan's "Manon."

Hand-me-down Petipa in the form of Baryshnikov's "Raymonda" suite ended the evening gingerly. Magali Messac and Patrick Bissell went through their prescribed motions with accuracy, dour savoir-faire and uncharacteristic blandness. The finale wasn't festive.

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