

# The Night They Booed the Ballet

By Lloyd Grove  
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First George Bush had lunch with Geraldine Ferraro. Then the temperature hit 72 degrees in the middle of December.

And now—perhaps strangest of all—people are booing at the ballet.

Thursday night at the Kennedy Center, American Ballet Theatre presented the world premiere of choreographer David Gordon's avant-garde work, "Field, Chair and Mountain." And when it ended, an unmistakable noise came ringing out of \$35 orchestra seats.

## Dance

### Gordon's Bold Steps

ABT Premieres  
'Field, Chair & Mountain'

By Alan M. Kriegsman  
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When you get boos from a Kennedy Center Opera House audience—as David Gordon's "Field, Chair and Mountain" did Thursday night at its world premiere by American Ballet Theatre—you know you've got something going for you.

Gordon's new work, in truth, drew many more cheers than boos, but the boos were conspicuous for their volume, and because they're so rare in this place. If it were merely a bad or mediocre ballet, it would have provoked yawns, or snores at the worst. Nobody slept through this one. It takes something as auda-

Yesterday, ABT artistic director Mikhail Baryshnikov, who was in the Opera House for the performance, attempted to brush it off.

"I am booed all the time—every second day," he said. "I didn't hear personally the booing. But if people boo, I think it's a sign of originality. I think it's an extremely important, wonderful piece. I have to run to rehearsal now."

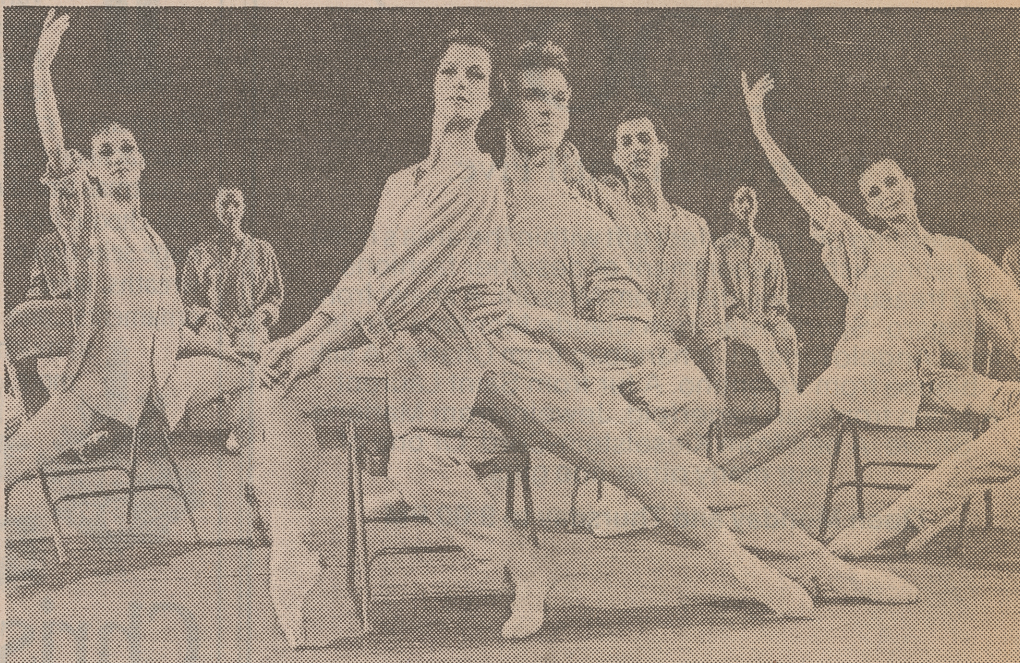
Prima ballerina Martine van Hamel did hear the boos, however. She was on stage, taking her bows with partner Clark Tippet. "They were clear, loud boos," she said. "They came in at the beginning, right before the applause.

People who have the intention to boo must make sure that they do it before everyone else starts making noise."

Van Hamel said there may have been only a single boomer and that the noise was quickly drowned out by cheers. "It wasn't a serious booing situation." She added that if she could speak to the boomer, "I would ask him what he didn't like about it. I'm waiting for his next move. I must admit, it doesn't happen very often."

Indeed, booing at the ballet is an offbeat pastime. The most famous case—the May

See BOOING, F4, Col. 5



BY RAY LUSTIG—THE WASHINGTON POST

Martine van Hamel and Clark Tippet, center, in "Field, Chair and Mountain."

ciously dotty and deliciously unconventional as Gordon's opus to actually move balletomanes to audible protest.

Not that "Field, Chair and Mountain" declares itself instantly a masterpiece at first viewing, though it certainly had its champions among the spectators. It is, in fact, rather hard to know what to make of it all, from one

exposure. This is certain—it's madly unlike anything ever seen on a ballet stage before, and given the staleness of so much that's purportedly "new" in today's ballet repertoire, that's a definite plus.

In a way, the title tells the whole story. Gordon—one of the brightest, most contrary and

See DANCE, F7, Col. 1



# Booing the Ballet

BOOING, From F1

1913 premiere of the Stravinsky-Nijinsky ballet, "The Rite of Spring," in which the audience nearly tore apart the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris—is also the least typical.

Booing of any sort is practically unheard of at the Kennedy Center, where audiences are much more apt to hand out standing ovations, almost out of politeness. Laura Longley, the Kennedy Center's director of communications, said nobody there has measured the boo frequency at performances. "We don't keep a record of the standing ovations, any more than we record the responses that are less than that," she said.

But possibly the last such incident occurred a decade ago, when the premiere of a piece of Romanian 12-tone chamber music—it may have been Tiberiu Olah's "Memory Has No Time," but no one seems to remember—met with negative audience reaction. "Don't applaud, it'll only encourage him," someone said, according to a witness, after the composer mounted the stage.

Thursday night, there was more enthusiasm than opprobrium for "Field, Chair and Mountain," a work that involves 20 metal folding chairs, a mountain range, a quirky duet by van Hamel and Tippet and a lot of lounging around on stage by the corps de ballet.

"To me, it sounded like one very vociferous person sitting somewhere up behind me," said choreographer Gordon, who was ensconced in Row Q with his manager, Bonnie Brooks, and his 22-year-old son, Ain. "I remember my manager said 'Oh, no!' and my son said 'Oh, yes!' I thought it was wonderful. I'm grateful that somebody's passion exerted itself. I think passionate response is quite healthy."

Van Hamel agreed. "It means they weren't yawning," she said.

"There have been times when I have booed," she added. "You just get angry sometimes, you don't agree with what's going on, you feel it's bad and that it should never have happened. My boo is not a loud boo that people could hear. But one of these days, I might get it together."

## 'Field'

DANCE, From F1

dance—has a penchant for wordplay, often manifested in works for his own company in the form of brisk, quizzical dialogue. He decided before making "Field"—his first work for a classical ballet company—that speech wouldn't carry in an opera house, but he got in his punning anyway, as he often does, in naming the ballet. "Field" is at once the name of the composer—John Field, whose Seventh Piano Concerto is the musical backdrop—and a reference to playing arenas, or open space in general. "Chair" alludes to the props—20 folding metal chairs—which are an obsession with Gordon and a key element, both physical and conceptual, in this ballet. As for "Mountain," well, there are mountains in it too, but we'll come to that.

When the curtain opens, we get the field—the bare stage, that is—with a blue drop at rear, over a low, pine-colored ledge extending horizontally across the stage. The music begins, with a portentous drum roll, and Martine van Hamel scurries out from the wings, on point, in profile, moving laterally across the floor parallel to the ledge. The orchestra begins its exposition—it's as if Gordon chose the silliest old-fashioned music he could find, so he could proceed to pay almost no attention to it. It's corny mostly, but also melodramatic or wispy in places, with the piano dribbling along in mindlessly frilly ornamentation that rarely ceases. At any rate, with the orchestra come three couples, who enter in swift lines, again along the lateral. There are rapid exchanges of partners, a quick lineup in a row that swiftly folds over on itself—one of the several recurring motifs of the ballet. Then van Hamel and partner Clark Tippet have an extended duet, with a swooning backward dip of the ballerina into the man's waiting arms that is another repeated "theme."

In the middle of Field's first movement (of two), there suddenly intrudes one of the composer's Nocturnes—he's usually identified as the inventor of the genre. The music turns dreamy and squishy, and it signals a change of costume from the neutral slate blue-grays of the start, to orange and pink chiffon (Santo Loquasto designed both costumes and set). As the three couples drift back in this new garb, the mountain makes its first appearance—actually, a mountain range, depicted on a large folding screen that slowly traverses the stage, above the ledge. Van Hamel and Tippet, now also in orange and pink, have another, more florid duet, and principals and ensemble alternate

thereafter to the end of the movement, the leads and the group echoing each other's moves. It's as if everything were seen through a fun-house array of mirrors.

The second movement—a frisky rondo—starts after a brief pause, and now a new ensemble of six men and six women enters, toting chairs. First the women rotate, pose, stand, bend over and otherwise make sport with the chairs while the men watch, sitting, and then they switch, the women watching. Now the dress is collarless blue shirts with rolled sleeves. The three couples from the first movement return, also with chairs, and all swing an arc to the rear. While the music—chaotically episodic throughout—turns to a recitative passage, van Hamel and Tippet return, and do a you-sit-I-stand-no-I-sit-you-stand cadenza while everyone else sits and watches. Then the density of the chair gags spreads throughout the stage. A semicircle is formed of seven chairs, and a game of odd-man-out ensues, as the rear drop starts slowly to rise, revealing the final pictorial ingredient—a backcloth in triptych, depicting a humongous mountain range (above the one on the screens), with chairs all over it. The acrobatics with the chairs grows more complex still, and the piece ends on a frozen tableau with all 20 dancers and chairs.

Gordon had said he'd wanted to make a ballet that would be both his and the company's, and it certainly is that. The steps are largely theirs, from the standard classical vocabulary; but the syntax is pure Gordon, along with the chairs and the whole crazy combination. It's not easy to say whether the fusion works—it'll take more performances and viewings to establish that. There's a daffy, ferocious incongruity between Gordon and the language of ballet, which he's speaking for the first time—just as there is between toe shoes and mountains with chairs on them. Maybe incongruity is the key to the work. One thing to keep in mind is that chairs are no strangers to ballet—consider the opening of "La Sylphide," with hero James sleeping in the armchair, or the bench duet in "Giselle," or "Swan Lake's" throne. It's the same with mountains when you stop to think about it. And if nothing else, Gordon has assuredly given us something to think about. And smile over. And puzzle out. And something to yearn to see again.

Also on the program were a revival of Lichine's facetious "Graduation Ball," seen Thursday night in a rather disheveled performance, and a repeat of Balanchine's winning "Donizetti Variations," with Marianna Tcherkassky and Danilo Radojevic leading a rendition at once less brilliant but also less mannered than Tuesday night's company premiere.