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AMERICA'S FASTEST-GROWING NEWSPAPER

It's Caspar Milquetoast at the ballet

By CLIVE BARNES

DAVID GORDON, who has just choreographed a new ballet, *Field, Chair, and Mountain*, for American Ballet Theater at the Metropolitan Opera House, doesn't care for the term choreographer, preferring to call himself a "constructor."

I am not sure whether this is understandable modesty or ruthless accuracy and self-assessment. I am not sure that this *Field, Chair, and Mountain* — "Constructed by David Gordon," as the Playbill informs us — does have have choreography in any strict or reasonable sense.

Come to that, I am not sure that it has much in the way of "construction."

Gordon possesses a carefully cultivated cult reputation as a modern-dance avant-gardeist, but here, on

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his first excursion with a major classic ballet company, he appears to be on his best behavior.

Presumably commissioned as an exercise in the "daring" post-modern styles Gordon has made his speciality, it is almost shockingly unshocking — a perfect example of the bland leading the bland.

Set to John Field's *Seventh Piano Concerto* — the 19th-Century Field is best remembered as the inventor of the piano Nocturne — it is constructed, loosely, for two principals (Martine Van Hamel and Clark Tippet), six soloists, and an ensemble of 12.

The two-movement concerto supports simple classroom exercises — the ballet opens with Miss Van Hamel tripping across stage on point — and throughout Mr. Gordon cautiously splashes technique like a kid who doesn't want to make a mess with a new paintbox he doesn't want to spoil.

The banality of the piece is harmless, its repetitiveness painless, its presentation in a major repertory pointless. It is an experiment in nothing more than milquetoast effrontery.

The title? *Field* comes from the luckless, yet deservingly mediocre and happily dead composer, *Chair* refers to the interminable game of unmusical chairs the dancers indulge in during the latter part of the ballet, while the *Mountain* is provided by Santo Loquasto's ornately Surrealistic setting, comparatively speaking the best part of a poor ballet.

Mr. Gordon's classic choreography lacks purpose, musicality, and most of all talent. A moderately damning combination. Miss Van Hamel, Mr. Tippet, and their supporting cohorts are charmingly unruffled. So is the audience.

This poor harmless, little ballet is merely another indication that American Ballet Theater under the artistic direction of Mikhail Baryshnikov and Charles France has no discernible artistic policy. It floats.

Field, Chair, and Mountain is the only creation for the company's current year. All the other new productions are revivals.

One major revival, just given its New York baptism, is Balanchine's *Donizetti Variations*. Ballet Theater seems to be making a habit of picking up Balanchine ballets that New York City Ballet has, at least temporarily, discarded.

It is a cheerful little divertissement, sunny in mood, well-crafted in choreography, the latter having been neatly reconstructed by a hand unannounced.

It was well danced at the performance I caught, by a delicately dazzling Amanda McKerrow and, particularly, by Peter Fonseca, with majestic control and brilliance.

Another new revival is the bedroom duet from Sir Kenneth MacMillan's *Manon*, for Manon and her aristocratic but penniless lover, Des Grieux. The *pas de deux* loses a great deal out of its dramatic context, and does not have that great deal to lose. (One prays that this is not the precursor of a revival of the complete ballet, one of the more tedious of Sir Kenneth's epics, a distinction not lightly won.)

It was danced with great spirit by Natalia Makarova and Kevin McKenzie, previously seen to better effect on the same program in Fokine's *Les Sylphides*.

But Makarova is a rare spirit and could dance a Kalamazoo telephone directory with finesse and wit. Another rare spirit, and another of that endangered species, the prima ballerina, Cynthia Gregory, gave a delightfully verby performance of Balanchine's *Theme and Variations*, stolidly partnered by Ross Stretton.