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Staff Photo by Mike Zerby

David Gordon at dance practice: "My works don't always have dialogue."

People may talk about (but not in) Gordon's new work

By Mike Steele
Staff Writer

David Gordon's newest work, choreographed for the New Dance Ensemble and premiering Tuesday, will be 25 minutes long, profligate with movement and (Gordon can't resist a grin here) "it will have no talking."

This will come as a surprise to those of us who have neatly pigeonholed Gordon as "that New York postmodern choreographer who uses spoken dialogue in his works."

"When people who write try to get a handle on people who make works," he said wryly, "they pick the most characteristic thing, in my case talking, to define them. But my works don't always have dialogue. Categorizing has its pitfalls."

What's more, Gordon adamantly refuses membership in the postmodern dance category. Although he was right there in the front lines when the notion of postmodern was born, he swears he doesn't know what postmodern means and is quite certain he isn't. Our definitions die hard. Last year he choreographed a work called "Trying Times" for his dance troupe, the Pick-Up company (which will share the bill with the New Dance Ensemble Tuesday at 8 p.m. in the Children's Theatre). The first half was the familiar blend of components people have come to expect from Gordon, the use of large objects, a lot of witty dialogue and some movement. The second half, however, was all movement set to the entire Stravinsky score for "Apollo." (Dare we say traditional dance? No. Not quite. But a departure, surely.)

Just as the piece seemed to be ending,

GORDON:

He never fit 'postmodern' label

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however, the dancers brought the amorphous objects back on stage and lined them up across the space like a panel of jurors, and a mock trial began. Gordon's wife, the elegant dancer Valda Setterfield, played the defense attorney. The charge? Failing to adhere to postmodern standards or, as someone said, being insufficiently obscure.

"Did you do it?" asked Satterfield.

"Yes and no," replied Gordon.

"Will you do it again?" she asked.

"Not if I can help it," he said.

"Will you toe the mark?" she asked.

"Not if I can find it," he concluded.

The verdict was left in the hands of the audience, which thought it was funny. Gordon was pleased. As is often the case, he was being half humorous, half serious. His two sides collide — just as language and movement often collide in his dances and just as preconceptions of his work collide with the reality, which is often quite likable and unexpectedly jolly.

Gordon, you see, had the fortune (or misfortune) of being involved with the first Judson Memorial Church concerts in New York in 1962 along with Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, Steve Paxton and others, that first generation of avant-gardists who came out of Merce Cunningham's fold. They were brainy, brash, iconoclastic and they created an artistic movement that looks now like it will equal the impact of the early days of Martha Graham, or even Cunningham himself, on dance history.

Most dance historians trace the genesis of postmodern dance to that heady bunch — dance that eschews spectacle, illusion, virtuosity and emotion, dance that went back to fundamentals in an attempt to break down the form and rediscover its essential nature. It made for a nice, neat, easily categorized package.

Only Gordon never really fit it. He did dance with its leading theorist, Yvonne Rainer, for five years — during which time he didn't create any dances — and then performed with the improvisatory Grand Union company, which had a huge theoretical impact on younger modern choreographers and some theater directors. He had studied with Cunningham and James Waring and Robert Dunn, the leading experimental theorists. His avant garde credentials are impeccable.

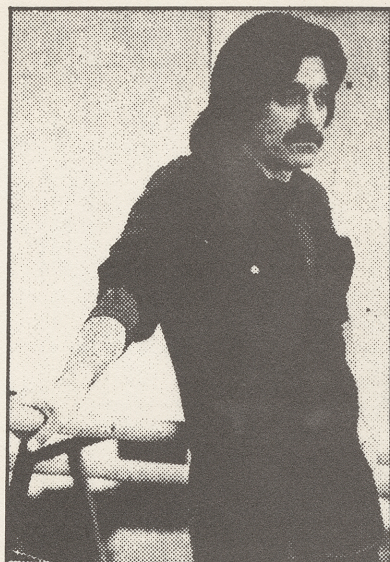
He filters the material through an intuitive process and then relies on taste to mold it into a form that seems to have had its effect. He is being noticed. He was the subject of a long profile in New Yorker magazine. He was chairman of the dance panel at the National Endowment for the Arts. He has become increasingly popular, and impending success worries him.

"It's odd," he said, "but my generation was geared to failure. We were told that failure was success and success was selling out. It's hard to make the transition without some guilt feeling. But then we just had a season at Dance Theatre Workshop, which only has about 150 seats or so, and we had it right after the New Yorker piece came out. As a consequence, we sold out all 17 performances. But when I added it all up it only came to just over 2,000 people, not enough to fill Northrop. I don't think we'll ever have to wrestle with being really popular entertainment.

"But I can't tell. We're in the middle of an investigative process. Answers to questions are only today's answers and may be dropped by tomorrow. That's why I try to avoid teaching and definitive statements. I don't want to change people's lives. My God, when I was with the Grand Union, people used to leave school and follow us. I don't want that. I think whatever revolution came out of the Judson years was finally a lot of personal revolutions. We're all still working in eccentric mode and I don't think there's a very neat label for it."

The only problem was that Gordon did use illusion, emotion, intuition, an oddly askew form of virtuosity — and he even dared to be entertaining. Gordon also sensed what a lot of people were beginning to sense: that the end result of much early postmodern choreography was pretty mundane. There was a part of him that still wanted the result to be magic.

Still, Gordon did pick up a lot from those early experiments. He does make use of natural movement and gesture, although not in the sloppy, unformed way of the early years. He also breaks down the barriers between performers and performance. Many of his dances are about the dancers themselves; we become aware of what they're doing on stage, their lives and their relationships.



David Gordon

Like the early experimentalists, he also wants to impart ideas more than simple emotions. But he feels Rainer and many of that generation began with concepts and developed them into dance. Gordon begins intuitively with dance, and once he likes what he's created, he figures it out conceptually.

His first choreography actually dates back to 1961, although he admits it was a direct rip-off of James Waring's style. "After three or four pieces, I just stopped," he said. "I couldn't deal with the responsibility. If an audience didn't like the piece I felt betrayed and wounded."

It was only when he helped form the Grand Union that he began again, and that was thanks to a residency sponsored by the Walker Art Center (which is sponsoring Tuesday's concert, the finale of a six-week residency and Midwest tour).

"We were all supposed to teach," he explained, "and I had nothing to teach, so I used the time choreographing a piece. I was still working with the philosophy of Jimmy Waring, that anyone can make dances, anyone can be in them and, what's more, you never throw anything away because if you didn't like it you may get to like it and, if not, who says you have to like it?"

As his work grew, however, he began steering away from the Waring philosophy. "Above all I learned from Yvonne and Trisha (Brown) an enormous responsibility toward the work and the editing process. I learned not to leave everything in, but to take out what isn't useful to the overall dance. In fact, I'm at the point now where editing is one of the most exciting parts of the process.

"That's the enormous guessing game at the end of invention, to realize the character that has been building within the piece and respond to that character even if it finally means getting rid of favorite parts that don't fit it."

He doesn't keep an extensive repertoire of dances. Instead, he freely feeds off his past works, sometimes pulling out sections of past dances and using them complete in a new context, sometimes abstracting and changing them. In the second work on Tuesday's program, "TV Reel," there's one section he pulled from a dance done a couple of years ago that had been altered into another

dance; now it has been fitted into this one and could, with modification, go on to his next one. It points out the pragmatic eclecticism underlying his work.

"It used to make me uncomfortable," he said, "because the implication was that I had a limited talent. Now I've become fond of my relative consistency. But I still have to work these sections into the new structure. If I just transplanted whole sections of dances I could send a company member to choreograph them."

His new work for the New Dance Ensemble will be called "Limited Partnership," a play on words. He's choreographed it so that the Ensemble and his own company can do portions of it simultaneously on Tuesday's program. Then, when his company returns to New York, the Ensemble can dance it alone, which it will June 24 and 25 at Children's Theatre.

It also refers to the structure, which deals "with a lot of partnering with men and women frequently alternating so that women also partner women or partner men as well as being partnered in their traditional roles."

It will be set to three piano pieces. "The first is a little three-minute Gershwin piece that he wrote for a dog-walking scene in some Astaire movie, I forget which one. The second is a Stravinsky piano piece, and the third is written for player piano."

Gordon has resisted the laying down of a Gordon theory of dance. No manifestos here. He sees no reason not to use whatever information or material is available to him, from dance, theater, film or television (in fact, KTCA-TV will be doing a videotape documentary on the making of "Limited Partnership").