

## By Deborah Jowitt

DAVID GORDON/PICKUP CO. At David Gordon's studio (May 15 to 18).

"Art, A-R-T. To get smart, add S and M to art. . ." the husky male voice on the tape begins, and it goes on and on, eviscerating words to make new ones, discarding some of their letters, snipping them open and stuffing new letters into them. The operations become more and more elaborate and absurd until the process makes me think of illegal building renovations, in which, at some point, only one brick of the old structure remains to satisfy the authorities that this isn't in fact a whole new house.

The words are more than an overture to the last concert of David Gordon and his Pickup Co.; they're a model of the process by which Gordon's dances and his performances as a whole are built. For Gordon, it is a matter of endless fascination how parts of an old dance are embedded in a new dance, or familiar movements performed by different people in different places seem subtly changed by their new surroundings.

Gordon's delight in structural games seldom results in dryness. The more he rearranges and alters his material the more resonant it becomes, as if it were acquiring a life of its own. Part of the reason for this is that Gordon's manipulations are done with a thoroughness that is quizzical, even droll, rather than tight-lipped. But, even more important, he is interested in feelings, and, for me, it's the juxtaposition of potentially sloppy human problems and immaculate form that gives his work its wry wisdom.

His last concert was particularly heartening. He's onto us all—himself, his wife Valda Setterfield, the other dancers, the watchers—but his perspicacity doesn't diminish his warmth. He begins by dancing a nice old solo of his—soft and shamby. Sad-eyed in sneakers. Remember this solo; all the dancers have access to it, and bits of it'll make surprise appearances. Then as the dancers gradually, one by one feed into a line of dancing that stretches away from the audience, Gordon's taped voice talks about each of them, with knowing and affectionate wit.

As Setterfield, Susan Eschelbach, Margaret Hoeffel, Keith Marshall, and Christina Svane gravely swing and twist and tumble—each at a different point in a long phrase, each adding movement of his/her own, we focus on each in turn, being helped to consider that this dancing aggregate is made up of individuals who love or hate ice cream, do or don't wear hats, are quick or slow to anger.

Competition and cooperation seem to be topics this evening. After Svane, Hoeffel and Eschelbach have performed a trio (from *Not Necessarily Recognizable Objectives*) in which they must dance close together in a line, arms around each other, carefully collaborating so as not to trip each other or impede their progress, Setterfield and Gordon embark on a more argumentative duet, in the course of which, they read (from scripts on the wall) a wonderfully absurd dialogue about how to read a dialogue, and, once through it, they change roles and do it again. The dialogue escalates into a heated quarrel. Heated: but, subject to the requirements of form, it can be switched off, which is comforting. Other contentious old material: Setterfield assuming poses based on Eadward Muybridge's ancient action photos, while on tape, she and Gordon wrangle amicably about how these poses (the dialogue isn't synchronized with the moves) should be reproduced. Other loving material: the touching duet in which Gordon and Setterfield keep making embraces, which one of them always slips quietly out of, leaving the other holding air. Slides show them doing the same holds, several years ago, with other clothes and hair styles, and the other dancers pair up for a contrapuntal sequence of carries and supports, each one held for a long time.

The new material is called *Soft Broil*. The dancers throughout it try to get into a vertical line (like the one at the beginning of the evening), but now everyone wants to be in front, and the line is sabotaged every time. They push, sidle, make a dash for first place; they become amazingly inventive and persistent, looking for legs to crawl between, a low person to climb over. It's a log jam of ambitious people, and it's performed vigorously, but without animosity. Whenever anyone says "wait a minute" they stop shoving and walk to a new place. They talk many times about "finding the new mark," reminding us that this is a piece of art as formal as any we're likely to see. Several times they make a circle and remark on it. "The circle," says one. "The earth," says another. "A sphere." "Ha, ha," says Svane tonelessly, "The sun, the moon, ha ha." But they always go back to the fight for first place. "Isn't it my turn," someone often asks, "to be in front?" *Never*. "How do you graduate?" and they show us different ways of pyramiding. You begin to notice who's sly, who relies on brute force, who always gets shoved away. Ah, someone's thought of establishing her own line; for minutes at a time, the concept of 'front' loses its significance. The form creaks under the burden of human struggle as the dancers get sweatier and tired and wilder in their tactics. But it supports, indeed creates, revelations to do both with the act of performing and the fact of being alive.