

They Call It Post-Modern

BY DEE DEE HOOKER

After the kiss which ends Senta Driver's "Sudden Death," and which also ended the four nights of the Post Modern Dance Festival at Stewart Theatre, I walked away with some lines from "Alice's Restaurant" going round in my head. Something about "and if you get 20 people together and you all walk into the draft board, they'll think it's a movement."

Marcia Plevin, Mimi Garrard, Senta Driver and David Gordon were the four choreographers represented at this festival called Post Modern. But it is hardly appropriate to call them a "movement," as Gordon indicated in a remark earlier that day:

"What we ('post modernists') share is having come into existence in the eye of the public at about the same time. It (PM) could have been called 'Ethel' for that matter. If you want to know about post modernism, understand that rules change, people make new rules. Maybe it means whatever you're doing now."

Which is to say that certainly there were similarities among these four companies: they all used highly trained dancers; music as a cueing or timing device was often replaced by words, conversations, or noises. Some of them danced barefoot, some in sneakers, some on roller skates; all displayed a non-committal ease in their performances. And they all commented on a dance process within their dances. But it is their dissimilarities that continue to distinguish them, not only from modernists such as Martha Graham, but also from their contemporaries.

Mimi Garrard's works occur as little loops of movement, unrolling softly humorous episodes. She practices a distinctive form of clowning and elevates props — beer cans, rubber gloves, bulky coats and eggs — as prominent metaphors for how her dances work.

In "Gloves," Joanne Edelmans does little more than shift her weight from foot to foot while trying on heavy, rubber work gloves which are "standing" in four spotlights. When she slides her bare arms, from behind, into the gloves of a male companion, the movement is both a theft and an invitation, and the gloves begin to acquire a symbolic quality, the properties of, say, a ring. Is the dance becoming a little "heavy-handed?" To counter this, two slightly menacing futuristic police-types roller-skate in carrying pincers on sticks to pick up some of the spare gloves (like the little men who spear errant garbage). The heaviness of the gloves numbs the movement possibilities of the one couple; the roller-skates and pincers put the "police" at an entirely different advantage/disadvantage in terms of speed and balance. Invariably, there is a gentle sense of play.

Senta Driver, on the other hand, strikes me as letting nothing undercut the force of her classical-research scholar's mind. Fascinated with communicating ideas about dance history, Driver asks her dancers to execute any technique — from that of Graham to that of Sumo wrestlers — if it provides that sense of history, of continuum, which carries along "Missing Persons," "Second Generation," and "Memorandum." Her movements dealing with emotion are inevitably clumsy and hard. In "Sudden



David Gordon and Company.

Death," Nicole Riché and Larry Hahn hurl their own bodies to the floor in violent, thudding drops like wrestling throws. (Driver admitted earlier to an interest in "extending the notion of virtuosity, of what the body can do.")

In a Graham advanced class by age 12, Marcia Plevin is a dancer, pure and simple. Her dances are total environment pieces, and one gets the feeling that she sometimes has to restrain the sounds or lights or props from taking over altogether. Plevin seems especially adept at getting her dancers to behave, even breathe in just the way she

needs. In the futuristic "Fish Kill" it is the effort of breathing, of taking in air that is most easily remembered. She exaggerates mannerisms or harnesses them in a repetitive loop to define a character or a role.

In the last moments of her "Jestures," Plevin broke into some really happy movement that, as far as I could tell, was only remotely connected to the rest of the piece. High tight spins breaking into long, full extensions. It was wonderful to watch her move. Seeing her in that place made me realize that we don't very often see such

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Spectator

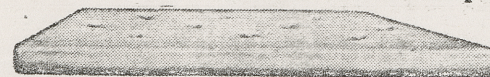
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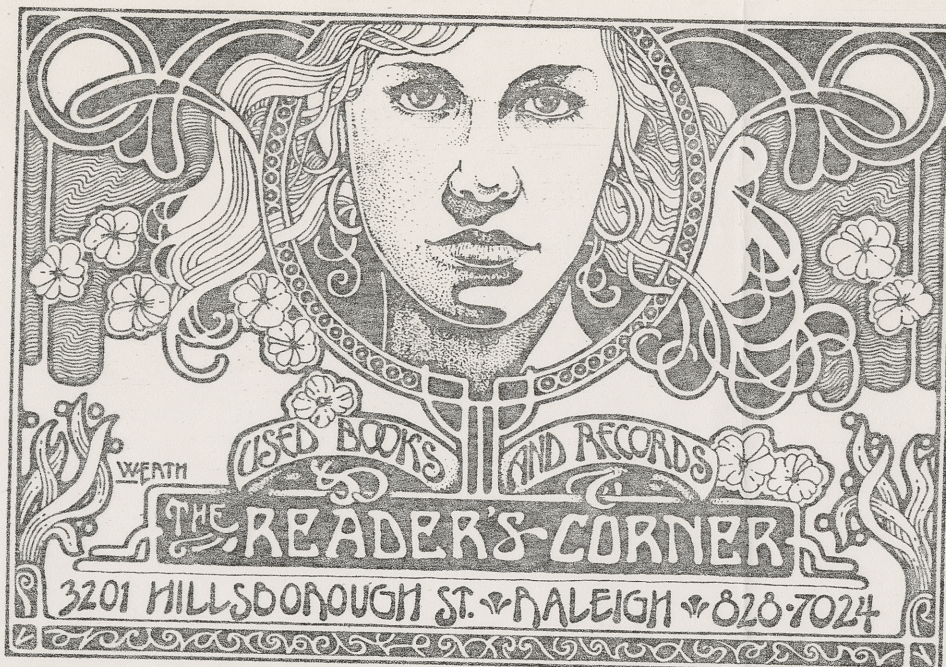


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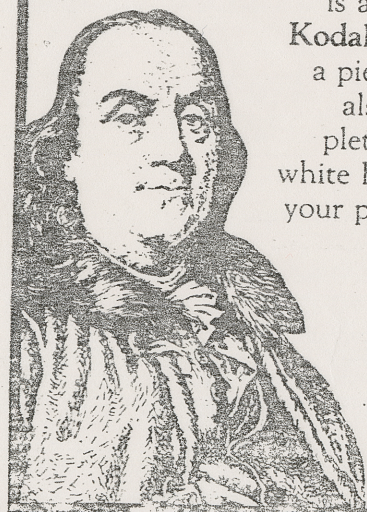
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happiness in a performance. We see thoughtfulness, effort. This was something of a different order.

In all but Driver's dances, the sort of emotive gesturing we have come to know as modern dance didn't occur. Or, if it did, such as momentarily in Garrard's ritualized "Step on a Crack," it provided comic relief from the scrutinizing mood of the piece. Or, as in Plevin's "Fish Kill," the contractions, the undulations became a near transparent wash on which the concrete images and sounds of the dance floated.

Movement rooted in behavior, gestures (walking, pushing, holding) was the norm, and David Gordon's use of film clips for the background of "Close-Up 1979" further dissected movements that seemed already basic.

Gordon and his wife, Valda Setterfield, enter and routinely embrace. A pause. One partner slips out, disengages from the embrace leaving the other, undisturbed — arms, legs, neck and face just as they had been in the coupling — on the floor, shoulder to shoulder, face to face. One partner is left and the other sits for a moment and looks, with us, upon the one left. The together/alone, support/unsupported images occur over and over. In the background, images flash on the screen: close-ups of the face and head as they lean off of a shoulder; the hands placed where they are; the restfulness of the encircling arms; the eyes of the gazer.

When Gordon leaves a coupling, his gazes are those of wonder and intense examination. Watching the performance is, finally, akin to seeing the last scene in a movie, the last crucial close-up of someone's face, time and time again. But it loses none of its impact. Stewart Theatre was so, so quiet during this dance.

What I began to notice was that when one person left the coupling, the other one made no shifts of weight to compensate for the lost support. The one left never moves. Was the

embrace, the support, an illusion in the first place? All that restfulness, not restfulness at all?

The same questions about what you are seeing arise in the back-and-forth intricacies of "Not Necessarily Recognizable Objectives." They are all the more unsettling because the energy of his dance is very child-like — spontaneous, "can't sit still energy." The direction of the movement here has each of six persons trying to get to the head of a line which, by virtue of the struggle to get there, is more often than not a seething mass; people are taken down by wrestling holds, up-ended by someone crawling through their legs. Flickers of indecision or fatigue or boredom cross a face. Are they there because they've been rehearsed and internalized or do they arise out of some never-before-touched point in time? The distinctions blur. Gordon's dances are friendly, non-threatening reminders of all that we necessarily take on faith.

Undercutting, creating multiple images out of any one word or situation is something Gordon must (currently) swear by/at. Another inscrutable reply followed a question about his dance philosophy during a Saturday panel: "I begin to understand that there are things I do that could be called a philosophy; they could be called an obsession; they could be called 'he had nothing else to do.'"

I begin to understand that this is a typical Gordon response, whether to a movement or question. And it seems more truthful and more specific than evasive. It is his way of exposing a process.

In his "Chairs," Gordon and two others perform a movement routine in, around, on top of a folding chair: getting on and off the chair, returning to the chair, folding oneself up in the chair, getting a foot caught in the chair. A chair, (a dance) is something you can do all those things to/with. As in Gordon's other works, a very specific focus breeds a great deal of room for the single image to become itself many times over. ■

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