

TheLAMP

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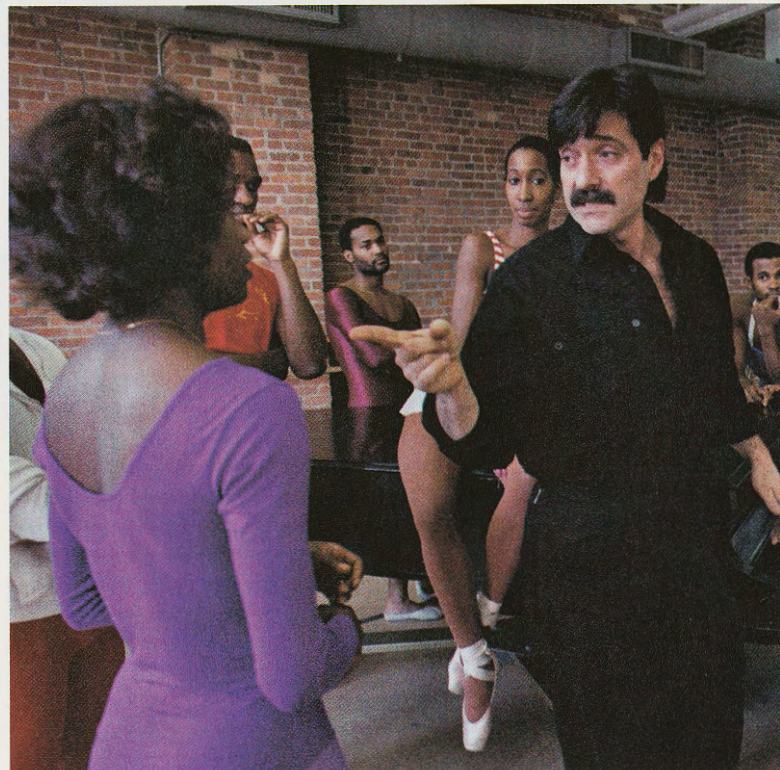


For most of his adult life, 48-year-old David Gordon has been creating dances that reflect his wry, witty outlook on life. Working outside the classical ballet tradition, Gordon first made a name for himself in the 1960s in New York's modern dance circles. As his reputation grew, he created works that one critic described as bristling with "humor, irony and social comment." This year, Gordon teamed up with the classically trained Dance Theatre of Harlem (DTH). He spent several weeks working with members of DTH, and creating a new dance piece for them, called "Piano Movers." The experiment reached gratifying fruition in June when it received its first public performance during Dance Theatre's two-week premiere engagement at New York's Metropolitan Opera.

This joint creative endeavor was made possible with funding provided as part of a new program—called the National Choreography Project—sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and Exxon Corporation. The project provides grants to dance companies to develop new pieces by choreographers with whom they have not previously worked. It was initiated last year as a pilot program.

"The National Choreography Project is the result of a long-standing concern in dance circles about a thinning in the ranks of talented ballet choreographers and a corresponding lack of exciting new additions to dance company repertoires," says Nigel Redden, NEA's dance program director. To help remedy this situation, the National Choreography Project has a twofold aim: to give choreographers a chance to stretch their creative powers and to expand the artistic horizons of dance companies with new works.

In May, 1984, the first-year grants totalling \$250,000 were made. In addition to Gordon and Dance Theatre of Harlem, the other choreographers and companies participating in the program were: Elisa Monte with the Boston Ballet; Ze'eva Cohen with the Chicago Repertory Dance



In "Piano Movers," the 11-member Dance Theatre of Harlem cast (right) uses a piano as "home base." The dancers push the piano on stage, then move it around before the audience during the 25-minute piece. Choreographer David Gordon (above) gives instructions to one of the dancers.

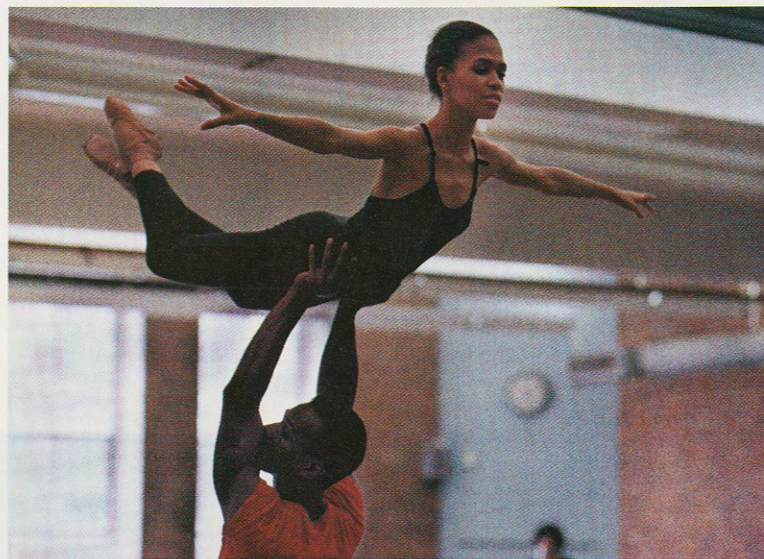
A new perspective on dance

A new program, funded in part by Exxon, seeks to encourage talented choreographers and to expand the repertoires of major dance companies.

by Juliet A. McGhie



Photographs by Bruce Davidson



David Gordon spent long hours working with the troupe at Dance Theatre of Harlem's West 152nd Street studio in Manhattan. He was impressed with the dancers' willingness to push their talents to the limit, to try anything. "It seems to be part of what they do in the world," says Gordon.

Ensemble; Heinz Poll with Jose Limon Dance Company; Lynn Taylor-Corbett with the Louisville Ballet; Nina Wiener with the North Carolina Dance Theater; Tandy Beal with the Oakland Ballet Company; and Merce Cunningham with the Pennsylvania Ballet.

The eight choreographers and dance companies chosen for the project were selected from among 26 entrants by a seven-member panel of dance experts formed by Pentacle, a New York-based organization which administers the project. Of these first-year awards, seven involved collaborations between modern dance choreographers and traditional ballet companies. Though this kind of pairing was not a stated goal in the project guidelines, the interchange, or "crossover," between different dance idioms was encouraged.

For Gordon, such a crossover was not as dramatic a transition as some people believed. He says many people's questions implied that "someone from one planet had gone to deal with someone from another planet. The fact is that somebody who works with dancers had gone to deal with dancers and that language, whatever way it's slanted, is not far removed. It's not as though you need to get an interpreter."

Gordon does admit that differences between modern and traditional dance do exist. The most obvious one, he says, is that ballerinas go up on their toes (*en pointe*) and contemporary dancers do not. But the benefits of this exchange of techniques works to everyone's benefit. Gordon likes to tell about returning to his own studio after working with the DTH group, then trying out physical and stylistic innovations with his own dancers—the David Gordon/Pick Up Company—that he might otherwise not have touched on.

Gordon emphasizes that no matter what technique they study, dancers have different individual skills and his job is to find out what each does best, then help them develop those talents. "There are people who turn to the

left better than they turn to the right, and there are people who are not turners at all but are jumpers, so you use all of that," he points out.

When Gordon arrived at Dance Theatre of Harlem's studios, he says he had no preconceived notions of how his piece would evolve. "I wanted to see who was there and what they could do."

ments in his head so all the parts would fall into place when he could have a full rehearsal.

As the work progressed, Gordon says an important "give and take of physical information" began taking place. While he explored what could be done *en pointe*, the dancers learned about movements outside the classical conventions. Says Karen Brown, a DTH member: "We were working off each other."

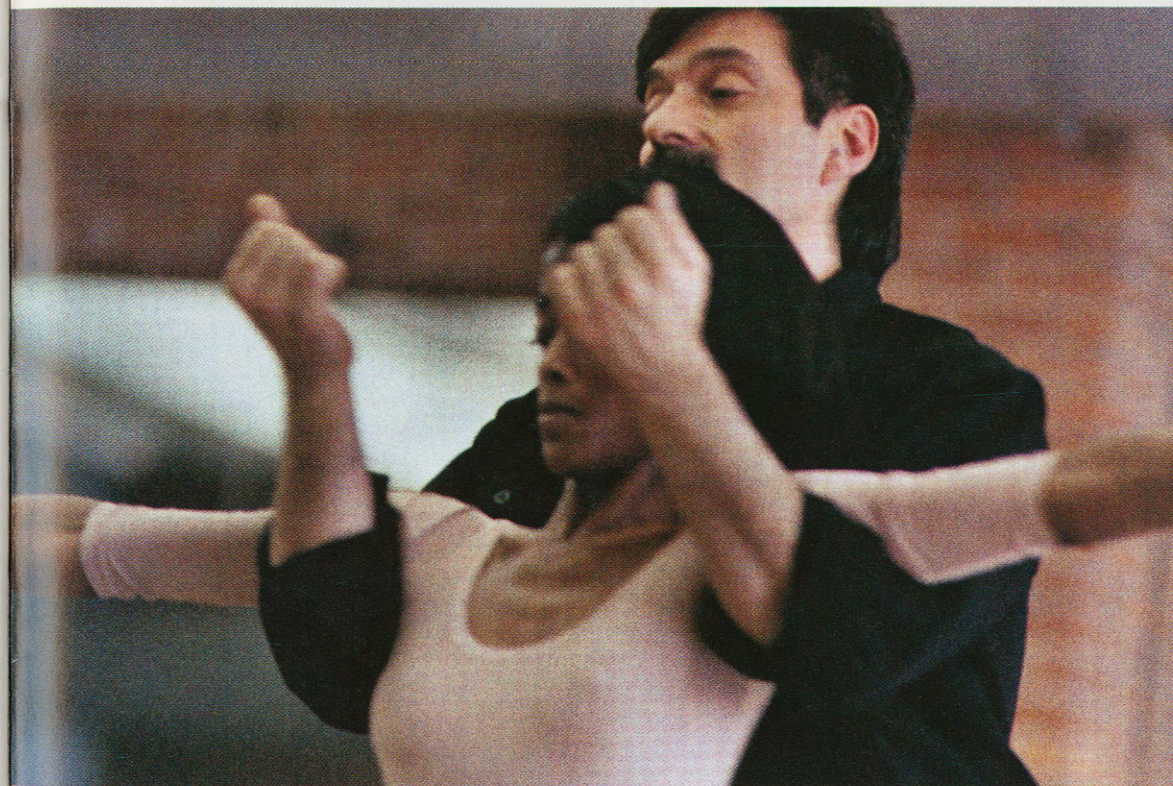
For Brown, the experience with Gordon was unlike any other in her ballet career. "I have been accustomed to learning a work with music and with counts. This way, when you hear the music, the steps come to you," she says, adding that she was astonished when Gordon walked in and began rehearsing with no musical accompaniment. "I learned later that at that point he was still listening to various possibilities."

Directed by Gordon simply to do the piece "in the timing that you did it yesterday" (in contrast to a conventional ballet instructor's direction, "Do this to this particular piece of music"), the dancers gradually discovered reference points in the movements of the other dancers. Later, they were able to pick up audio cues when Gordon introduced music by Irish composer John Field and American jazz great, Thelonius Monk.

Meanwhile, Brown learned how to respond to Gordon's direction to "give up being a classical dancer and become a 'natural' person on stage." The process, she says, taught her that, "you don't always have to be classical to be performing."

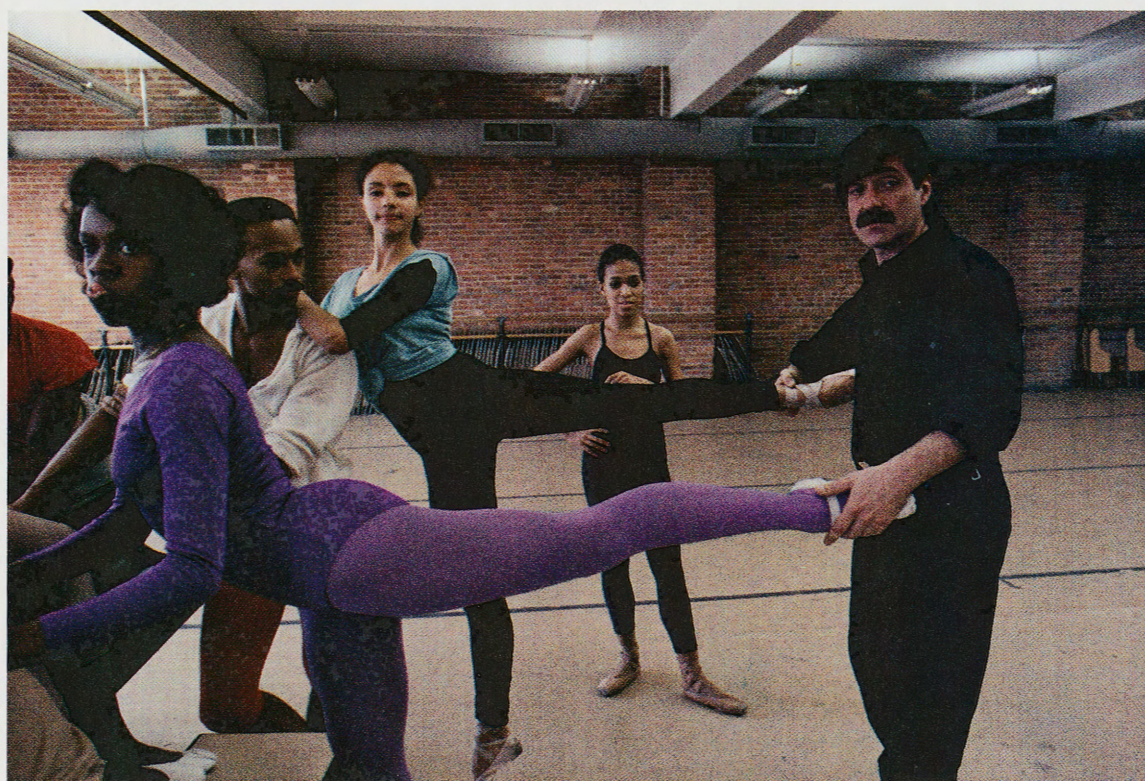
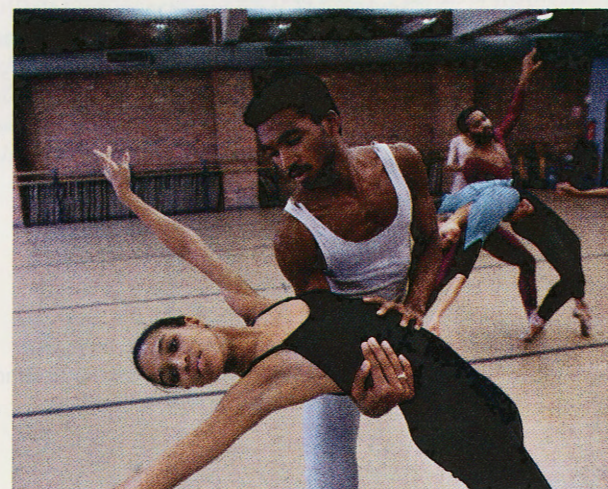
After several weeks of rehearsing, with the dancers becoming more familiar and comfortable with Gordon's approach, the sessions were interrupted when Dance Theatre of Harlem went on tour. On their return, they discovered that Gordon had decided to use only Thelonius Monk's music. The parts that had formerly been performed to John Field's scores remained the same but had to be realigned to Monk's music.

Then Gordon introduced a prop,



What proved to be a major challenge was coping with the hectic, frequently unpredictable schedules of a large company such as DTH, already committed to a packed rehearsal timetable.

By contrast, the David Gordon/Pick Up Company currently has eight dancers who spend about five uninterrupted hours each day working with him at his lower-Manhattan studio on whatever pieces are in progress. But when Gordon joined the Harlem group, he faced fragmented rehearsals because of the difficulty of assembling at any one time the six male and five female dancers his new piece features. He frequently had to work one hour with five dancers, another hour with two more, and so on. All the while, he says, he had to keep the different seg-





the piano, and changed the name of the work from "Informal Mix" to "Piano Movers." In this version, the dancers push the piano on stage where it serves as their "home base" throughout the 25-minute piece. At one point, the piano is moved to center stage and back by the dancers; at another time, a dancer is thrown from one person to another, "just like children at recess," says Brown, adding that they found it a challenge to see just how well they could adapt to the changes Gordon kept introducing.

From the outset, Arthur Mitchell, one of Dance Theatre's founders, remained in the background, confident of the end result, based on his years of familiarity with Gordon's works. Now 51 years old, Mitchell is a man with some impressive "firsts" to his name. He was the first black man to become a principal dancer with a U. S. ballet company—the New York City Ballet. The late George Balanchine choreographed the *Agon pas de deux* especially for Mitchell. Sixteen years ago, when it was a widely held view that blacks were more suited to modern dance than to classical ballet, Mitchell—along with the late Karel Shook—founded Dance Theatre of Harlem, the world's first permanently established black ballet company.

An articulate man, Mitchell speaks particularly eloquently on the subject of the National Choreography Project. He says its goals are similar to those he has been striving for with his company ever since its inception. Although the troupe is classically trained, Mitchell says it is called "Dance Theatre" instead of "Ballet Theatre" because within the classical framework Mitchell has always tried to work in other styles. "Without crossover, there is little room for new ideas to evolve and grow in today's dance world," he says. "When you always do things the same way, they get to be mediocre. It's only by taking seemingly disparate styles and putting them together that you lead to something really creative."

Mitchell is convinced the proj-

ect is also benefiting audiences. "It's opening people's eyes," he says, "by showing them a variety of styles. Gordon will get visibility with a broader public from having done 'Piano Movers' for Dance Theatre of Harlem. People who may not normally have gone to see him may be turned on by the work and go to see Gordon's own company perform."

Were there any risks to Dance Theatre in entering into this collaboration? "There's a risk in any new work," says Mitchell. "The minute you play it safe, you become ordinary. It's those who take the risk and accept it, whether it fails or succeeds, who progress." For Mitchell, one of the impressive characteristics of the project is that it provides the financial underpinnings to both choreographers and the dance companies to try something new, to innovate and to accept the risks involved.

NEA's Nigel Redden endorses this observation. He points out that in today's environment, before a company can stage a new production it must deal with the high costs of such things as rehearsal time, choreographer's fee, lights and costumes. Without a program such as the National Choreography Project, it is difficult to give dance artists much-needed research and development time, experimental time and, even, time to fail.

In May, the project's administrators announced its second-year grants. At the conclusion of the program's second year, its sponsors will examine the results and determine whether to continue the project.

For David Gordon and Arthur Mitchell, though, the National Choreography Project has enabled them to bring to fruition a collaboration they first discussed years ago when they both served on a dance panel at the National Endowment for the Arts. And Gordon's "Piano Movers," which might otherwise have amounted to no more than an idea, now has its place in DTH's repertoire. Says Mitchell, "We will tour this around the world...it will be used." ■



For both Gordon and the dancers, the collaboration was a valuable learning experience. While Gordon explored what he could do within traditional ballet conventions, the classically trained dancers learned modern dance techniques. Left, Gordon is pictured with Dance Theatre of Harlem's founding director, Arthur Mitchell.

