FOR OPENERS

David Gordon: trying to make a fast dance

Pick Up game

"What I'm describing," choreographer David Gordon says in order to make an analogy between his dances and his life, "is sort of like going to a funeral. You're sad. But the person you care so deeply about is dressed, you know, in a preposterous outfit that he never would have worn while alive. A laugh wells up in you even as you cry. There's a kind of absurdist logic to it." So Gordon is chary of wielding too heavy an ax or too big an eraser. He's not after distillation in his dances; he's making observations, coming up with intrigues, insidious ideas, looking for the delicious, the ridiculous, the sublime. It's not just the inclusion of circumstantial elements that creates intrigue, it's their arrangement. Picture ballerinas in oversized, man-tailored shirts side-saddle on folding chairs (even a ballerina en pointe atop one), or two dancers carrying on a conversation from cue cards that the audience sees, or dancers lining up so that the single words printed on their T-shirts form humorous sentences. There's casual movement with classical inflections, objects functioning as decor, delectable combinations of items close up and far away.

Gordon, who in the early '60s created performance pieces for New York's experimental Judson Dance Theater and danced with the James Waring and Yvonne Rainer companies, went on to perform in the improvisational Grand Union, a collective of artists whose varied and sometimes contradictory attitudes were the key to their success and later their demise. In 1978 he formed his Pick Up Company, which includes Valda Setterfield (his wife of 25 years), a stable core of dancers, and visiting artists. This month he'll be at the Harvard Summer Dance Center to present a "first performance" (he considers the phrase "world premiere" to be "ridiculous and self-important") called *Transparent Means for Traveling Light*, which is set to three pieces by John Cage.

In this new work, Gordon is "trying to make a fast dance." And he's figuring out how the dancing functions in relation to the three periods of the music — '40s, '60s, '80s. In the beginning he eschewed music, or else he simply gave it airspace alongside the action. In his "middle period," he used any amount of any music as atmosphere, color. Now he sees the relationship between dance and music as like that between lovers, or best friends: "The two of you don't move together like the Wrigley Chewing Gum twins, but you correspond as equal but independent partners." And Cage's music raises an issue with which Gordon grapples as an artist: order versus chaos. The desire to sew up motivic loose ends weighs against the aim of keeping the themes loosely woven enough so that they can be responsive and adaptive to what Gordon calls the "paraphernalia of the theater."

There's also the issue of creativity in a new work. Gordon's goal in choreographing *Transparent Means* was "to make something that is not like what you made last time." If he's willing to draw on the experience of previous works to fix a sticky passage, still, he doesn't want to make trademarks of his eccentricities, mannerisms, or even virtues — he's not interested in the exploitation of known crowd pleasers. Besides, as he's fond of saying to interviewers, he doesn't know who's in the crowd. His audiences vary from the lofty (Opera House stages) to the loft (Dance Theatre Workshop and studio spaces farther downtown in Manhattan); just this past year he choreographed two pieces for ballet companies — *Informal Mix* for Dance Theatre of Harlem and *Field, Chair and Mountain* for American Ballet Theatre — that called for larger theaters and more dancers than the eight in his own company.

One thing that distinguishes Gordon's work, no matter how abstract, is the kind of attention the dancers give one another. He strives for a correspondence, an attunement, a sense of joint venture rather than the manipulation of one body by an inhumanly disengaged other; this is unusual in a choreographer who is not interested in narrative or specific images. Then there are the nuances of silliness within beauty in his creations, or humor within sadness. Finally, though, it's his exploring nature you remember. David Gordon is like a man reaching for what he can't see on the shelf above his head.

David Gordon/Pick Up Company will appear at the Loeb Drama Center, 64 Brattle Street, Cambridge, at 8 p.m. on July 24, 25, and 26 as part of the Harvard Summer Dance Series. Tickets are $6, $8, and $10. For more information, call 495-5905 or 495-5535.

— Lisa F. Hillyer