7. ELIZABETH ZIMMER

Just a few blocks east of Dance Theatre Workshop's Bessie Schönberg Theater, in Manhattan, is a children's-wear store called Space Kiddets. In it are miniature versions of the trendy clothing and fifties retro fashions worn by chic professionals in the neighborhood—jumpsuits, jogging wear, hand-knit sweaters, and other utilitarian status symbols.

I like the place. By miniaturizing the fetish objects of our fashion universe, it lets me distance myself from them, view them as cultural icons of this moment in time. I had similar feelings about **Werkcentrum Dans,** a nine-member Rotterdam-based troupe that visited the Schönberg in November with three programs, each featuring the work of an American choreographer.

The first program, which played November 10-14, was choreographed and co-performed with the David Gordon/Pick Up Co. The generally slight Werkcentrum dancers, ranged against the large men and women in Gordon's group, reminded me of those tiny icons. But more than a difference in size distinguishes the two companies. A certain arrogance and mode of attack, perhaps cultural, possibly choreographed, but familiar in Gordon's work, was missing in the Dutch performers.

Fully supported by the city of Rotterdam, Werkcentrum Dans has an active program of inviting seminal American dance artists to create pieces on the company. And one sees the accommodations the company has made in years of serving as *tabula rasa* (a clean slate) to visitors; it has mastered a kind of "international style" writ small, a fusion of ballet and Cunningham technique, combined with a willingness to talk, act, and adapt to props and film.

Program A, a one-hour composition by Gordon called *Big Eyes,* integrated his own company with the Dutch performers. The Werkcentrum team wore white; the Pick Ups donned black T-shirts with numerals on one side and the words for numbers on the other. In these, they became an animated arithmetic text. The piece featured bilingual slides, counting aloud in Dutch, and the reproduction by Werkcentrum Dans of various Pick Up sequences. It seemed to be about the encounter with another culture, with efforts to learn, share, and also assert dominance.

The big eyes of the title, slide-projections of greatly enlarged sections of Gordon's face, controlled the assembled dancers like a monarch or arbiter. The movement, especially in a men's quartet, grew violent, differing from a brawl only in its rhythmic precision. I was struck by the resemblance of the performers to fashion models, or to their close cousins in image-merchandising, sports heroes. Oompah-band and patriotic music, uncredited in the program, punctuated the dramatics, as did the use of freeze-frame techniques. Like politics cleaned up for television, *Big Eyes* projected its simplistic message. It's not vintage Gordon; working in and with a language he doesn't know, when language is so basic to his style, may have cramped that style.

Trying Times, which **David Gordon** made for Valda Setterfield and the **Pick Up Co.,** ran from December 3-20 at the Schönberg. One of Gordon's most ambitious efforts, it illustrates his uncanny ability to construct a seamless, serviceable art work from disparate elements—verbal clichés, dialogue verging on metrical verse, phrases of Balanchine underplayed, phrases of original movement performed with delicate offhandedness.

His fluent performers, the old guard and a new phalanx, look handsome in blousy, layered clothing. Their beauty is almost heroic; it magnifies, rather than glossing over, the matter-of-fact movement. They manipulate odd props with grace and intelligence; a collaboration with visual artist Power Boothe yielded frames, flats, folding screens, beds, tables, even ersatz bathroom walls from simple sheets of masonite.

The "trying times" refer to trials of courtship, self-discovery, of domestic routine, and finally to an actual courtroom in which Gordon stands accused of perversity and other crimes: abandoning post-modern moving around, changing his own appearance, making his dancers talk. As counsel for the defense, Setterfield asks plaintively, "Is he guilty of playing hide and seek when we all want. . .to play tag?" "Yes and no," replies the enigma in the dock.

Gordon takes chunks out of Balanchine's *Apollo;* to the Stravinsky score, he partners, simultaneously, his three chief muses. The piece offers some colloquial lectures, and an exquisitely observed duet by Susan Eschelbach and Keith Marshall, confused partners in a romance. All the props fall into place for the final courtroom sequence, a masterpiece of wordplay and acting by Margaret Hoeffel, Paul Thompson, Eschelbach, Setterfield, and the rest. As the lights fade, the jury is still out.

The week before their season opened, Gordon and Setterfield were the subjects of a profile in the *New Yorker* by the dance critic Arlene Croce. Probably as a direct result, the theater overflowed at each performance, often with patrons who arrived in taxis and limousines. Gordon's work asserts, and demonstrates, that thoroughly contemporary, intelligent movement can have as much appeal as good ballet or a Broadway blockbuster.

To learn, as I did from the profile, that Gordon used to earn his living dressing store windows, is to understand his skill at integrating powerful commercial art techniques into his productions. To watch him, a scruffy, tired-looking paterfamilias, move among his artists, is to be grateful that he blundered into dancing, and that he continues to fight its battles, and his own. □