

The Elastic Antics Of David Gordon

The Pick-Up Co.: Wily Words and Nimble Feet



David Gordon; by Nathaniel Tileston

By Pamela Sommers

FOR ALMOST 20 years, David Gordon toiled in the fields of the New York avant-garde, reworking and perfecting his now-satirical, now-poignant mixes of words, movement, slides and music. There was always an audience of sorts, but never a mainstream crowd; the more adventurous critics came to see him, but for the most part he was left alone.

Now, slowly, insidiously, success is stalking Gordon and his dance company, the nature of which he defines in its name: the David Gordon Pick-up Co. In the last two years, the group has appeared on public television's "Dance in America" series, in a documentary film and have even left the Big Apple to tour. Tomorrow and Tuesday evening at 8, the company will be making its Washington debut at Baird Auditorium, as the first offering of the second annual Ninth Street Crossings festival, a multimedia series featuring a number of celebrated experimental performers. This whirlwind of fame—grants, travel, requests for interviews, photo sessions—has left the shaggy, mustachioed, 46-year-old Gordon "suspicious."

Suspicious? Of what? "My work," he says. "What does it mean? Why is it accessible? Why are people interested in it now? Does it mean I'm going backwards? Does it mean I've stopped moving ahead?"

See GORDON, L5, Col. 1

Gordon

GORDON, From L1

Success, it seems, isn't any easier to deal with than lack of it was. "You have to understand that people of my age were trained to believe that we would never be popular, that we'd never have any money, that we'd always support ourselves outside the work we did in the studio. In those days, when I first started dancing with Jimmy Waring [the late choreographer and teacher who served as a guiding spirit for many of the '60s' most radical artists], he worked in the Time-Life mailroom every morning. We rehearsed once a week on Sundays for a year, and at the end of the year he had saved up enough money to rent the Henry Street Playhouse, or the Hunter Playhouse. We did a performance, and then we started rehearsing the next day for the next year."

Gordon has been described as a choreographer who "challenges the balance of our perceptions" by New Yorker dance critic Arlene Croce. "It's the correlation between what we see and what we hear that Gordon emphasizes in these tantalizing data-processing workouts of his." His pieces examine and parody human conversation, cinematic and theatrical conventions, even the pedestrian, non-virtuosic dancing that many of his colleagues take so seriously.

With his wife, Valda Setterfield, a former member of the Merce Cunningham Company who possesses a sly comic flair, and a core group of five of the most elastic and congenial performers around, Gordon has made audiences laugh at and really listen to the endless patterns and clichés that crop up in our daily verbal and physical exchanges. It's as if he's filmed and tape-recorded the minutiae we engage in and forget, and then rewind, frozen and manipulated it in a zillion outrageous ways.

The Pick-up Co.'s upcoming visit to Washington has made its members a trifle anxious; they've marked off the floor of Gordon's lower Manhattan loft in an attempt to replicate the notoriously shallow Baird Auditorium stage. "It's like dancing in a boat!" comments one frustrated dancer, coming perilously near to "falling off" the edge of the stage. Watching the company rehearse, one is struck by the camaraderie, the discipline, the endless criticism given and received.



David Gordon; by Lois Greenfield

"I'm interested in dancers who look like people," explains the choreographer, "in strong technical ability, strong stage presence and at the same time some kind of humanity."

Yes, these seven come off more as warm, nimble personalities than dancing bodies. There's Paul Thompson in his baseball cap, Nina Martin in her baggy knickers and red bandanna, Margaret Hoeffel wearing silky orange three-quarter-length Chinese trousers, curly-haired Keith Marshall, Gordon, tall, Susan Eschelbach in sweats and Setterfield, decked out in rolled-up warm-up pants, apricot leotard, turquoise jazz shoes and headband around her silvery locks. They fight, joke, imitate one another, address themselves by their first names, change partners. At first it seems like real life, but then they do it again in exactly the same way and—uh-oh—you realize it's a dance.

Take the "Where's Susan?" section of "T.V. Reel", a live-performance-and-video piece to be performed on the Washington program. Setterfield begins by instructing each dancer on where to stand

on stage. "Where's Susan?" someone asks. "In California," replies another. So ensues a lament about Susan's absence, a neatly wrought roundelay of hugs upon her return (the material for the piece stemmed from her real-life holiday in California; in performance she's only offstage in the wings), then a retrograde repeat of these embraces. Next we hear about Susan's "relationship" with Keith. "She loves him", announces oh-so-British Valda as the two connect. "They've been going around together." The dual meaning of this phrase comes clear as we watch Susan circle her sweetheart. Margaret enters, and hugs Keith. "Uh-oh!" exclaims Valda, deadpan. "She loves him, too?" So it goes, with words overlapping movements overlapping words.

Classic film images and techniques crop up often in Gordon's work. One piece is actually called "Close-up"; slow motion, stop-action, and rewinds figure prominently as structural devices. Hackneyed scenes ("It's over," Susan tells Paul. "Over my dead body," he answers, and bang, she has blown him away) are slipped in at various intervals. Performers croon snippets of "Night and Day" and a careful, intimate duet between Gordon and Setterfield—the walrus and giraffe of dance—seems oddly reminiscent of Vernon and Irene Castle.

"I love movies and I love extraordinary performers," the choreographer declares. "When I was going to school, they were teaching me about George Washington being the father of my country and the center of all nationwide activity being in Washington, D.C., and I really knew they were wrong. I knew that Buster Keaton was the father of my country, and all action centered around Hollywood. They tried to convince me, but . . . now that we've started electing movie stars to high office, I know I was right all along!"

It is Gordon's combined senses of control and play that make his work so hilarious, and yet so brilliantly clear.

"I'm lucky to be a grown-up, middle-aged person who is still allowed to play all the games of childhood with some of the world's best toys," he says, as a wicked smile lights his face. "My toys are responsive, they give me back a lot of information, and I don't even have to invent everything myself."