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# PERFORMING ARTS

## MAGAZINE

VOLUME FOUR NUMBER FOUR APRIL 1986



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**DAVID GORDON**  
A NEW BREED OF  
DANCE HERO

The small, but nationally acclaimed, modern dance Pick Up Company was formed as a home for David Gordon's ingenious choreography. The man and his dancers will perform in Houston this month.

by Elizabeth Elam

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*A magazine for and about the performing arts in Houston, incorporating the official programs of The Alley Theatre, Houston Ballet, Houston Grand Opera, Pace Theatrical, Society for the Performing Arts, Theatre Under The Stars, The Gilbert & Sullivan Society of Houston and Houston Shakespeare Festival.*

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Gordon's popular appeal comes, in part, from letting the audience in on the creation itself. It's rather like having an audience seat that affords you a glimpse of the wings, as well as a good view of the stage.



Photo: Martha Swope

*Described variously as a post-modern choreographer, a performance artist, an avant-garde comedian, a satirist and critic, among other things, David Gordon (pictured with his dancer/wife Valda Setterfield) has won both popular and critical acclaim for his work.*

## DAVID GORDON

### NEW BREED OF DANCE HERO

*by Elizabeth Elam*

David Gordon is a new breed of dance hero, a conqueror who's managed to prosper creatively by systematically silencing his deadliest enemy: self-indulgence. Since his departure in the mid-sixties from the Judson Church Dance Theater, which incubated the introspective post-modern dance movement, Gordon has made ingenious, off-beat works distilled from his own sensitivity and intelligence. It's the steady balance of harmony and invention Gordon imposes on these works that puts him leagues ahead of other post-Judsonites. Gordon has attained the authority of a choreographer, says critic Elizabeth Kendall, "the most difficult thing for his anti-formalist, anti-hierarchal generation to accept."

Recently the demand for Gordon's choreography has gained a full head of steam. Within only the last year and a half, he's made new works for two of New York's largest companies and given his own David Gordon Pick Up Co. enough dancing to keep them

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**For years, his dancers talked on stage (a ploy to forestall stock actions and reactions), but it became so frequently copied that he vowed to "shut up."**

## DANCE HERO (from p. 15)

going both in his SoHo loft and at the Joyce Theater. The Society for the Performing Arts will present the company (which has toured abroad and in the U.S.) in Houston, April 18 and 19 at Tower Theater.

Because Gordon was as willing to explore the world of mainstream dance as he was to refine his notion of experimentalism, he accepted an offer in 1984 from American Ballet Theatre (ABT) director Mikhail Baryshnikov, to create something new for them. The result was *Field, Chair and Mountain*, a title reflecting the tableau of the piece itself. Music by 19-century Romantic composer John Field and a mountainous backdrop by *Cinderella* designer Santo Loquasto, set the scene for a dance featuring 20 performers—and their 20 folding chairs.

Curious and willing, members of ABT were no more cautious about dancing with and all over the metal chairs, than Gordon was about working with a large orchestral score. For years he had turned his back on

music and, instead, given his dancers license to talk on stage, a ploy to forestall stock actions and reactions. But as a convention, says Gordon, it became so frequently copied that even *he* got bored with it and vowed to “shut up.”

“I just got very tired of walking in to someone else’s performance, the curtain going up, and somebody opening their mouth,” he explained to *Chicago Sun-Times* critic Wynee Delacoma. “I had seen a fair amount of work in which I felt I could watch the diminishing enthusiasm of the choreographer in relation to a piece of music. All hot and interested at the beginning, workmanlike in the middle, and frequently losing its momentum before the end.”

Trying to avoid that trap, Gordon approached with excess care a company like ABT, so closely associated with classicism, and a piece of music as far-ranging as Field’s *Piano Concerto No. 7*. In the past, Gordon has preferred—if he worked with music at all—to deal with short, linear pieces he could arrange according to his own notion of how and where they effectively inter-

acted with the dance. The resultant vignettes allowed him to install silent spaces between passages of sound.

Making further inroads into establishment dance, Gordon and Dance Theatre of Harlem were brought together a year or so ago by the National Choreography Project. By making funds available, the Project helps dance companies add innovative, often unrecognized, choreography to their existing repertoires—and, of course, makes creation profitable for artists such as Gordon.

*Field, Chair and Mountain* (ABT) and *Piano Movers* (Harlem) were both greeted with popular and critical approval, which had to have pleased Gordon, a man more at home making small chamber pieces than large concert works.

Their success also brings to mind the question of why Gordon’s choreography settles with an audience while that made by others of his breed fails. Probably it is because Gordon has learned, often hit and miss, along the way to balance innovation with order and to present his view of things in an abstract but clear manner. If through intimation, gesture, or, for Gordon, declamation, a choreographer even hints that his work might have a plot—be *about* something besides pure dancing—then he also needs to let his audience in on what that might be. Abstract clues work, but they must contain archetypal symbols or even sounds that are immediately and universally recognizable.

From critical accounts of Gordon’s work, it seems he has discovered a way to assume the trappings of spontaneity by painting that veneer “over a more controlled subtext by reaching into the logic of the imagination,” as critic Kendall points out. What appears improvisatory is actually a formulaic sequence of events manipulated by an artist who dares take responsibility for the choreographic master plan.

Further to his credit, the man whose work is called “companionable and unaffected” hasn’t tampered with the often slow but steady course he has set for himself or the level at which his own company has entered the dance world’s Great Chain of

*continued on p. 18*



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## DANCE HERO (from p. 17)

Being. They are a small ensemble founded in 1978, a core of four dancers including Gordon and his wife of more than 25 years, Valda Setterfield, and a more transient group of four additional dancers. Choreography for his company and others which have commissioned Gordon, is "Beowulfian" in nature, claims Arlene Croce. It's not exactly classical ballet but dance that seems "one stage lower on the evolutionary scale."

Yet it is complex, and Gordon achieves this by showing the audience both the act of creation and the final, finished product. Existing on the stage at one time will be the work itself and, peripherally, Gordon's consciousness of it. As in *Not Necessarily Recognizable Objectives* and *A Plain Romance Explained*, the dancers will verbally respond to what's going on or comment on the dancing. This "now you see it here, no there," type of deconstruction allows Gordon to rearrange even older works of his and present aspects of their familiarity in a new light.

Early in his career, Gordon caught on to this, one of the oldest methods of capturing an audience's favor, that is, letting them in on the creation itself. It's rather like having an audience seat that affords you a glimpse of the wings, as well as a good view of the stage. You are privy to the prepara-



*The David Gordon Pick Up Co. will perform in Houston at the Tower Theater April 18 and 19. They will present Four Man Nine Lives, Offenbach Suite and My Folks.*

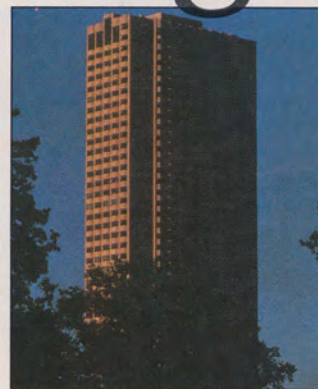
tion and the product, and therefore, have an omniscient overview.

It's comforting, being on the inside. Perhaps this is a creative element that doesn't show up as much as it should in abstract, post-modern works, which by their nature tend to baffle an audience with their musical iconoclasm and lack of predictability. And perhaps Gordon has hit upon at least one of the values that separates his works from that which never makes it past a first performance.

Now that the Pick Up Co. is eight years old and Gordon (nearly 50) has been making dances continually since its birth, their future looks rosy. Even the fact that four members of the company are new doesn't bother Gordon, who is constantly in the process of making new works and adapting them to the personalities and characteristics of each individual dancer. Gordon told Susan Reiter of *Ballet News* he has no interest in keeping his older works on view, and so "he's not faced (because of company member changes) with having to fit new people into roles created by others."

Gordon has found the connections between himself and his performers and between the ultimate creation and his audience. The unity that he's evolved has stabilized the shifting values of time and space and makes a piece by him seem as at home in a SoHo loft as in the Metropolitan Opera house. ★

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This and other Society for the Performing Arts presentations are supported by the TEXAS COMMISSION ON THE ARTS; the NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS, a federal agency; and the City of Houston through the CULTURAL ARTS COUNCIL OF HOUSTON.

## PROGRAM

All works constructed by David Gordon

### FOUR MAN NINE LIVES (1985-86)

Music: Western Swing  
Lighting design by Robert Seder

Intermission

### OFFENBACH SUITE (1985)

Music: *Offenbach Suite for Violin Cellos*  
Lighting design by Beverly Emmons

Intermission

### MY FOLKS (1984-85)

Music: Klezmer  
Visual devices by Power Boothe  
Lighting design by Beverly Emmons

This piece is dedicated to the Wonderlich women: to Fanny and Rose (my grandmother and mother), to Pauline, Yetta, Irene and Ruth (my other mothers) and to Samuel Gordon, my only father.

*Offenbach Suite* and *My Folks* were created in part with support from the National Endowment for the Arts with additional support from Jerome Robbins Foundation, Morgan Guaranty Trust Company and the Samuel I. Newhouse Foundation.

*Four Man Nine Lives* was commissioned by the American Dance Festival in 1985. The *Four Man* version is a re-working of that material.

Program subject to change.

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## PROFILES

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**A**t its inception, the ensemble of performers in the Pick Up Co. was not fixed. Since then, although the number of dancers has varied on a project-by-project basis, a "core company" has emerged with whom I rehearse, perform and tour regularly.

I think of my work as an ongoing process in which the materials I work with reappear under new circumstances. I support changes in context, the freedom to re-examine, to alter, to abandon materials or to re-use them for a good laugh at myself and my world. Keeping the options open extends the life span of a work and my interest in it. —David Gordon

**DAVID GORDON** performed in the companies of James Waring and Yvonne Rainer in the 1960s. He showed early work at The Living Theater and in the first Judson Church performances. In the early 1970s he was a founding member of the improvisational ensemble, the Grand Union. In 1978 he formalized the process of making work for varying numbers of performers by establishing the Pick Up Co. as a legal entity. Between 1978 and 1984, he made work for companies in the United States and Europe, including American Ballet Theatre, Dance Theatre of Harlem, Groupe de Recherche Choreographique de l'Opera de Paris, Werkcentrum Dans and Extemporary Dance Theatre of London. Mr. Gordon is a Guggenheim Fellow (1981) and has served as a panelist and chairman for the Dance Program of the National Endowment for the Arts and as a panelist for the Dance Program of the New York State Council on the Arts. In September 1984, he received a New York Performance Award ("Bessie") for Sustained Choreographic Achievement. He is profiled in Sally Banes' book *Terpsichore in Sneakers* and by Arlene Croce in the November 29, 1982 issue of *The New Yorker*. 10 Minute T.V., video tapes produced by the Pick Up Co., have been acquired by Channel Four of Great Britain and aired in October 1985; they were also selected for the 1984 Olympic Arts Festival. In May 1980, David Gordon's work was included in the *Dance in America* broadcast *Beyond the Mainstream*. He is one of seven artists featured in Michael Blackwood's film *Making Dances*. He has taught at Harvard University, the American Dance Festival, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Center, the American Center in Paris and New York University.

**VALDA SETTERFIELD** performed in English pantomime, Italian revue, and with Ballet Rambert. Since coming to America she has performed with James Waring, Katherine Litz, Grand Union, Merce Cunningham (1965-74) and in the films of Yvonne Rainer. She has taught at Cunningham Studio and has taught Cunningham technique in the United States, Europe and Taiwan. She performed the work of David Gordon at Living Theater and Judson Church in the early 1960s, and has been a featured member of the Pick Up Co. since its inception.

**KEITH MARSHALL** is from Palo Alto, California. After graduating with a BA in dance from UCLA, he toured the U.S. with Dance/L.A. and the Margalit Oved Dance Theatre. While a member of Dance/L.A., he danced in works by Matthew Diamond, Bill Evans, Spider Kedelsky and Kei Takei. Since relocating to New York City, he has performed with Mitchell Rose, Ruby Shang and Charles Moulton among others. Keith has been a member of the Pick Up Co. since the fall of 1979.

**DEAN MOSS** joined the Pick Up Co. during autumn 1983.

**CHUCK FINLON** studied biochemistry and linguistics before receiving a BFA with honors in dance. He has performed, choreographed and taught in Milwaukee, Chicago and Maine. In New York he has performed with Ken Rinker, Ann Rodiger, and others. He currently studies ballet with Janet Panetta and the Alexander Technique with Ms. Rodiger. Chuck joined the Pick Up Co. in 1984.

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## PROFILES

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**KAREN STOKES** graduated from the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts in Houston and has her BFA from Ohio State University. She has performed in *Candide* and *A Chorus Line*, as well as with various concert companies including the Roberta Stokes Dance Co. She joined the Pick Up Co. in the fall of 1985.

**SHONA WILSON** was born in Dunedin, New Zealand and attended the National School of Ballet before joining Limbs Dance Co. A QE II Arts Council grant enabled Shona to travel and study in the United States. Since arriving in New York, she has performed in works by Peter Healey, Ching Gonzalez, Douglas Wright, Susanna Hayman-Chaffey and in the companies of Hannah Kahn and June Anderson. She joined the Pick Up Co. in January 1986, and presently studies with Merce Cunningham and Cyndi Green.

**ROBERT WOOD** was born in Dunedin, New Zealand, and is a graduate of Wellington Teachers College, majoring in English, drama and music studies. He began his dance career with Dierdre Tarrant Dance theatre, Silk Cheeks Cabaret and Impulse Dance Theatre. Since arriving in the U.S., he has performed with Minnesota Dance Theatre, Dudek/Mann and Dancers, the Bill Cratty Dance Theatre, Peridance Ensemble and Donald Byrd Dance Foundation. Robert joined the Pick Up Co. in November 1985 and presently studies with Maggie Black and Benjamin Harkarvy.

**POWER BOOTHE** (*visual devices*) has designed the sets for two previous collaborations with David Gordon, *Trying Times* and *Framework*. Mr. Boothe has had eight one-man shows in New York City, and his work is represented in many permanent collections. He received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1985 for painting.

**BEVERLY EMMONS** (*lighting designer*) designed the lighting for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company from 1965 to 1968. She has also designed lighting for thea-

ter directors Joseph Chakin, Andre Serban, and for Meredith Monk's and Ping Chong's *The Games*. Ms. Emmons has numerous Broadway credits including Tony nominations for *The Elephant Man*, *A Day in Hollywood/A Night in the Ukraine* and *All's Well That Ends Well*. Her dance credits include designs for the companies of Martha Graham, Lucinda Childs, Trisha Brown, Lar Lubovitch, Dana Reitz, Viola Farber and Alvin Ailey. She has collaborated frequently with Robert Wilson, most recently on the Rome Opera section of *The Civil Wars* and *Einstein on the Beach*. In 1980 she received a *Village Voice* Obie, and in 1984 she was awarded a "Bessie" for distinguished lighting design.

**ROBERT SEDER** (*lighting designer*) has shed light upon many a dance company. He is also a playwright. He has picked up for David Gordon since 1983.

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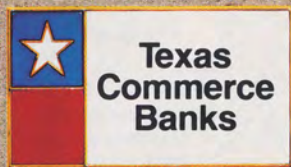


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