

David Gordon: Exploring All Sides

by

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A thesis submitted to the Department of Dance of the College at Brockport, State
University of New York, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts.

December 12, 2018

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by

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2018

Dedication:

This work is dedicated to my parents, Eric Smith and Mary Kae Frazier-Smith,
and my wife, Julie Frazier-Smith.

Thank you for continually revealing, in your respective ways, the strength
acquired through continual movement and the abundant wisdom found through
stillness. You have made it easy to fall in love with a world so rich with
possibility.

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Abstract

Regarded as one of the founders of postmodern dance, David Gordon is a revolutionary choreographer, theater director, and performer. Gordon often blurs the perceived boundaries between theater, dance, and performance art by utilizing a subversive approach to art making, and his ability to produce and maintain ambiguity is at the heart of his work. Through an examination of interviews, scholarly analysis, performance reviews, and Gordon's repertory, this research highlights the inventive methodologies Gordon employs in order to generate ambiguity within various performative contexts.

The primary site of inquiry for investigating these methodologies is Gordon's *Dancing Henry Five* (2011). This dance demonstrates three of Gordon's primary techniques for producing ambiguity as a choreographer: exploring all sides of movement material and props in order to redefine their utilities and meanings; reframing relationships between various production elements to reveal a banquet of possible interpretations; and employing a neutral performance quality of the dancers to allow the perception of the content to remain mutable. These ground-breaking methods for producing and maintaining ambiguity are central to Gordon's iconoclastic repertory, and they allow for his work to breathe anew with each reinterpretation.

Introduction

David Gordon has been making performance works for nearly 60 years. As part of the well-documented Judson Dance Theater of the 1960s, which is often credited as the founding group of postmodern dance, Gordon was instrumental in introducing a new performative perspective which revolutionized how dances could be created and how audiences perceive performance. In this paper, I posit that the backbone of Gordon's iconoclastic body of work is his affinity for generating multiple meanings for a single phenomenon through a commitment to ambiguity. Furthermore, I argue Gordon's primary methods for producing ambiguity within his work are: exploring all sides of movement phrases, images, and props and redefining their meanings by placing them in different contexts; establishing then re-establishing a relationship between a variety of theatrical and production elements; and employing a neutral performance quality of the dancers.

My primary source for demonstrating Gordon's specific methods for generating and maintaining ambiguity in his works is my own analysis of one of Gordon's more recent works, *Dancing Henry Five* (2011). I chose this work because I have found that although much scholarly research has focused on Gordon's earlier works, there is a lack of scholarly analysis dedicated to his more recent works. I also feel *Dancing Henry Five* provides excellent examples of Gordon's affinity for imbuing his work with ambiguity. The piece reflects the evolution of Gordon's methods for exploring ambiguity and reinterpretation—methods which have become more complex over the course of his career.

In addition to my analysis of *Dancing Henry Five*, I examine interviews, reviews, and analyses of Gordon's past work, bringing these voices in conversation with each other and my own analysis, in order to demonstrate Gordon's commitment to ambiguity as his central artistic tenet.

To provide a bit of context for Gordon's artistic perspective, it is important to begin with some biographical information, with particular focus on the early part of his career. Gordon is a native New Yorker who grew up in Manhattan. He attended Brooklyn College, where he earned a fine arts degree and performed in the school's dance club.¹ According to Gordon, "guys were hard to find and it turned out I had presence and could stand on one leg."² Famously, Gordon was sitting on a park bench one day in 1956 when a man approached him and asked him to join his dance company. That man happened to be James Waring, a genre-bending iconoclastic choreographer who was instrumental in the development of postmodern dance as well as Gordon's perspective as an artist.³ Importantly, Valda Setterfield joined Waring's company not long after Gordon, and Waring created a duet for the two young dancers. This set Gordon and Setterfield off on a personal and creative journey that remains ongoing, and they were eventually married. Gordon cites Setterfield as his muse and as the reason why he kept dancing, and it is difficult to find any of Gordon's work in which Setterfield does not play a central role.⁴

¹ Sally Banes, "David Gordon: The Ambiguities." *Terpsichore in Sneakers*. (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1977), 98.

² Joyce Morgenroth, "David Gordon." *Speaking of Dance*. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 44.

³ Katy Matheson, "David Gordon." *50 Contemporary Choreographers*. (New York: Routledge, 1999), 118.

⁴ Morgenroth, 45.

After working with Waring, Gordon became a founding member of the Judson Dance Theater, which spawned from the dance composition classes taught by Robert and Judith Dunn in the early 1960s. Largely based on chance procedures, the young choreographers involved in these classes defied customary methods of creating performance work and rejected commonly-held definitions of dance. These classes are often characterized by dance writers and historians as extraordinarily permissive, as they directly impacted the deconstruction of traditional and modern dance-making. Conversely, and quite interestingly, Gordon viewed these classes as dogmatic and rigid.⁵ Gordon felt like an outsider, even within this band of creative misfits, and he claims to have made *Helen's Dance* (1962) to irritate the teachers of the class and disrupt the base of assumptions being made during these classes.⁶

In 1966, Gordon co-produced a concert with Steve Paxton and Yvonne Rainer at Judson Church. His controversially grotesque solo *Walks and Digressions* (1966) angered many audience members and they “booed mightily.”⁷ This experience was so unnerving for Gordon that he stopped choreographing dances until 1970. In the meantime, Yvonne Rainer initiated a movement collaboration entitled *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, which eventually morphed into *Grand Union*, a radical improvisatory group which became quite popular in the early 1970s. During the first few performances with *Grand Union*, Gordon was still scarred from his experience being booed during *Walks and Digressions* and refused to dance or perform any of his own material, only

⁵ Banes, 99.

⁶ Ibid., 100.

⁷ Morgenroth, 44.

agreeing to repeat Rainer's iconic dance *Trio A* (1966) in a corner of the space while his cohorts improvised. Eventually, however, the yearning to explore his creative voice returned, and Gordon started playing with the integration of text and movement, blending more traditional theatrical elements with more traditional dance elements.⁸

For twenty years, Gordon supported himself, his work, and Setterfield as a successful storefront designer in New York City. He claims this work had a profound effect on his choreographic eye, especially work within which he was also a performer.⁹ In an interview with Joyce Morgenroth, he states:

I taught myself early on not to have to jump out of the window, walk through the store, go out the door, step into the street, and stand in front of the window to see if the last thing I moved was okay. I taught myself to be able to visualize what it looked like out there without actually seeing it and then to check one or two times close to the end to see if everything looked the way I thought it did. Similarly, in making physical work, as you accumulate material, you know pretty well how things might fit together. But you may add one element and think "I don't really understand this in relation to what's already going on. I have to step out and look at this." Doing windows affected the process of working on a proscenium stage.¹⁰

In 1971, Gordon established the Pick Up Performance Co., which was incorporated in 1978. Since its inception, the Pick Up Performance Co., under Gordon's creative direction, has produced countless multidisciplinary productions with Valda Setterfield, Gordon's wife and muse, often in a leading role. The company was renamed Pick Up Performance Co(s) in 1992 once David's son, Ain Gordon, started sharing leadership. The decision to pluralize the title, from Co. to

⁸ Ibid., 47.

⁹ Ibid., 49.

¹⁰ Ibid., 49.

Co(s), was made to reflect the importance of the independent work which continues to be produced by both Ain and David Gordon.¹¹

Gordon's affinity for ambiguity and reinterpretation stems from this rich personal and artistic history. His work with Rainer, Waring, Setterfield, and the Judson Dance Theater helped Gordon develop a broad, iconoclastic artistic perspective based on exploring multiple interpretations of a single phenomenon. Throughout this paper, I will discuss the fascinating, creative ways Gordon embraces ambiguity and creates multiple meanings and possible interpretations within his work.

Chapter One: A Distaste for Labels

David Gordon claims that throughout his career, he has been fighting labels.¹² Often, he refers to labels and definitions as limiting. Gordon's distaste for definitive labels, or conversely his appreciation for ambiguity, is well-documented, and this quality is at the heart of his creative work.

In many interviews, Gordon discusses his aversion to strict definitions and labels. For example, in an interview with Jennifer Dunning, he describes, with "annoyance," what he feels is an audience's "insistence on labeling."¹³ Gordon also discusses an artistic argument he had with his son, Ain Gordon, where David was hesitant to label a character as a "Jew" within his script, fearing such a label was too limiting.¹⁴ In an interview with Michael Lupu, Gordon discusses his

¹¹ David Gordon, "Pick Up Performance Co(s)." www.Pickupperformance.org. (Accessed July 20th, 2018).

¹² Morgenroth, 56.

¹³ Jennifer Dunning. "David Gordon's Dance Ironies." (*The New York Times*, 1982), 1.

¹⁴ Morgenroth, 55.

aversion to creating a signature piece. Whereas many artists seek the creation of a defining piece or an opus, Gordon sees this as limiting and seeks ways to escape definitions, stating, “I didn’t want a signature piece. I didn’t even want a signature!”¹⁵ He explored this directly with a dance called *Trying Times* (1982), where his dancers put him on trial for not having a signature piece. In one section, a performer asks “how can he have a signature piece if we can’t even read his handwriting?”¹⁶ There is a fun moment in an interview with Michael Lupu where Lupu suggests that Gordon, based on his choreographic methodologies, is a Brechtian. Gordon laughs, nods, and says “I suppose so...” Then, as if he cannot help it, adds “...or not.”¹⁷ Instead of feeling empowered by signature pieces or strict definitions, Gordon finds comfort in confusion.

Gordon has attempted to redefine his work throughout his career, and this distaste for labels is perhaps why his work has been performed and framed as theater, dance, and even visual art. His tendency to stray from strict definitions, or, conversely, his interest in ambiguity and creating a variety of interpretations, is the driving force behind his work. Gordon states, “Part of my training was that when something seemed to be clearly moving in some obvious direction, the best thing was to find something to immediately undercut it.”¹⁸ Put more bluntly, Gordon suggests that he “present(s) situations which are calculatedly ambiguous.”¹⁹

¹⁵ Walker Arts Center, “Talking Dance: Michael Lupu and David Gordon,” YouTube video, 54:40, June 28, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qz4Vl30dWQ8>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Dunning, 1.

¹⁹ Ibid., 1.

Gordon's "fighting of labels" and "calculatedly ambiguous" ambition manifests within his artistic work in a multitude of ways. He is able to mine multiple meanings from the same entity by exploring all sides of a particular concept, dancer, moment, image, or object. He may expertly craft a moment which contains layered meanings then place the moment in a different context to flip the interpretation on its head. He playfully manipulates an audience's perception of a piece, humorously changing the framework just as it begins to crystallize. At the heart of all of these artistic maneuvers is this affinity for ambiguity and flexibility of content. With this quality as a backdrop, in the remaining chapters, I will discuss specific methods Gordon utilizes to obtain this slippery sense of ambiguity, citing specific examples from *Dancing Henry Five* (2011).

Chapter Two: Exploring All Sides

There is an interesting moment in an interview between Michael Lupu and Gordon when Lupu asks if Gordon "digs deeper" to find new material. Gordon responds, "Digging deeper implies that I imagine that there is some motherload *down there*. I'm not sure I dig deeper. I look over here, I look over here..." Gordon then picks up a water bottle and turns it upside down to examine its new position. "I look at it that way. I just keep looking at it to see what it is the next time."²⁰ Gordon has a unique interest in and ability to recycle and re-contextualize a movement phrase, an image, or an object, and this re-contextualization often results in poignant, comedic, and theatrical moments. Once a movement, an

²⁰ Walker Arts Center, "Talking Dance: Michael Lupu and David Gordon," YouTube video, 54:40, June 28, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qz4V130dWQ8>.

object, a moment, or a word is defined, Gordon often seeks ways to immediately re-define it. I will discuss several ways in which Gordon employs this trait within his choreography, as I feel his affinity for exploring all sides of his material is one method Gordon uses for producing ambiguity within his work.

When first creating dances at Judson, Gordon “went to see every replacement in *Hello Dolly* on Broadway.”²¹ This interest in interpretation and reinterpretation—and the resulting reinvention—remains critical to Gordon’s process. Throughout his career, Gordon has sought ways to reinvent himself and his artistry. “No, I am not a comedic artist,” he states, “No, I am not an improvisational artist. No, I am not a Jewish artist. I am an artist reinventing himself every time out of the gate if he is lucky.”²² He also suggests that he feels as though his job is “to do something that was not recognizable to what I did last time.”²³ He has indeed continued to reinvent himself and his work, and he has often done so—perhaps counterintuitively—by recycling much of the same material. Dance critic Andy Solway suggests, “although he rarely keeps a piece in the repertoire for more than a year, Gordon works with the same themes and concerns for much longer, reexamining and altering the material constantly.”²⁴

Gordon explores all sides of his material by taking movement from old dances and placing it in new dances to see how this change of context can support or influence the original material. Many critics and reviewers, especially in regards to his earlier works, discuss this strategy for producing ambiguity. Dance

²¹ Morgenroth, 45.

²² Morgenroth, 56.

²³ Walker Arts Center, “Talking Dance: Michael Lupu and David Gordon,” YouTube video, 54:40, June 28, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qz4V130dWQ8>.

²⁴ Andy Solway, “David Gordon Pick-Up Company.” (*New Dance*, January, 1986), 21.

critic Amanda Smith writes, “the recombining of materials to see how they bump into one another and resonate anew is a favorite way of working for Gordon.”²⁵ Reviewer Deborah Jowitt notes this quality in her description of *Profile* (1980), beautifully pointing out how Gordon “places old material next to new stuff as if to take stock of the glints one casts on the other.”²⁶ Gordon himself even states claim to this trait by explaining “every little movement does not have a meaning all its own. And I am clearly attempting to show that all over the place by placing the same movement under different circumstances and altering its meaning.”²⁷ By placing recycled movement phrases or images in a different context, Gordon is able to keep his artistic work mutable and ambiguous. This method of producing ambiguity is utilized not only in his early work, but also in his more recent work.

In *Dancing Henry Five* (2011) there is an image of dancers standing, embodying a sense of unflappable nobility, atop pieces of fabric which are slowly being dragged by the other dancers across the stage. Alastair Macaulay described the moment in his *New York Times* review in 2011, stating “One dancer stands on a length of fabric and is pulled across the stage by another: this suggests any number of historical images, but as a second and third couple do it, with poles held as masts, you see a navy, and its slow, inexorable and awe-inspiring progress becomes strangely moving.”²⁸ This solemn image is certainly memorable, and it is nestled so perfectly within the specific context of this piece, one might think it

²⁵ Amanda Smith, “David Gordon: Keeping the Options Open.” (*Dance Magazine*, February, 1981), 75.

²⁶ Deborah Jowitt, “To Drip, Perchance To Steam.” *The Village Voice* (February 18-24th, 1981), 76.

²⁷ Smith, 75.

²⁸ Alastair Macaulay, “Ships, Steeds, and Kings, on Two Legs.” (*The New York Times*: 2011), 2.

was tailor-made to fit this particular production. Interestingly, however, Andy Solway notes a particularly “marvelous section” from a 1986 production of *My Folks* (1984) “where dancers posed on the ends of long lengths of cloth were being drawn slowly across the stage.”²⁹ Though nearly thirty years separate *My Folks* and *Dancing Henry Five*, and the content of these two dances are far from similar, Gordon manages to reinvent this old image by setting it against a new backdrop.

This tactic, which serves to keep his work ambiguous, extends beyond images and movement material in Gordon’s work. Often, Gordon recycles literal materials to maintain ambiguity. Gordon has utilized various physical props over the course of 60 years of creative work which continue to appear in several pieces he has created. These include a folding chair, a door frame, a ladder, rubber balls, and pieces of striped fabric. Gordon states, “I use some objects over and over...and continue to be surprised by what they can do.”³⁰ Joyce Morgenroth suggests he uses props “rather like dancers, choreographing them into his work in an almost mathematical permutation of locations and actions.”³¹ One review of *My Folks* (1984) highlights what is termed a “trio” between Gordon, Valda Setterfield, and a folding chair.³² Gordon’s repetitive use of objects is another example of his exploration of ambiguity. He often seeks opportunities to redefine the meaning of a particular object, and its use, within his work.

For instance, in 1995, Gordon mounted a production of Max Frisch’s *The Firebugs* (1958). The Greek Chorus for this show was a gang of firemen who

²⁹ Solway, 21.

³⁰ Morgenroth, 56.

³¹ Morgenroth, 41.

³² Solway, 21.

“scrambled and tumbled out of a mini fire truck in a sawdust-covered ring like a circus act.”³³ For this show, he utilized ladders “but there was no wall, so the actors and dancers had to support each other and balance the ladder as best they could as they climbed.”³⁴ We see this metaphor return in *Dancing Henry Five*, a decade later, but in an entirely different context. This time, the performers climb the ladders in solemn preparation for the Battle of Agincourt. Again there is no wall, and the performers are tasked with supporting the ladder not as clowns in a circus, but in an act of ceremonious, militaristic camaraderie. Gordon’s unapologetic recycling of this image is indicative of his interest in exploring the many sides and theatrical capabilities of props. Much like his recycling of movement material, utilizing the same props throughout his career has allowed Gordon to avoid labels and redefine the purpose and meaning of each object based on the performative context or, sometimes, the specific function of the prop itself.

I am struck by the range of actions, purposes, and images Gordon creates with these objects (as dancers), in addition to the range of time he has continued to use them. A notable example is the humble rubber ball, akin to a child’s toy. In one of Gordon’s works from 1960 entitled *Mama Goes Where Papa Goes*, Gordon enters the stage carrying many rubber balls and stands still. He releases the balls and waits for them to stop bouncing or rolling, then he walks offstage.³⁵ It is worth noting that the timing of his final action (walking offstage) is dictated by the movement of the rubber balls. It is also worth noting that the rubber balls do most of the movement within the piece, acting as the dancers as Gordon stands

³³ Morgenroth, 56.

³⁴ Morgenroth, 56.

³⁵ Banes, 99.

and waits. Fifty years later, in *Dancing Henry Five*, Gordon is still using rubber balls—representing the tennis balls sent by Dauphin of France in Shakespeare’s *Henry V*—only this time, they are being utilized as a more conventional prop, as they are tossed around playfully by the dancers. These two examples demonstrate the amount of time Gordon explored the myriad uses of rubber balls as well as the range of functions these props can serve within a given piece.

Gordon takes this further when he repurposes objects as well as his own movement material, re-defining context and meaning and, thus, maintaining ambiguity within his work. This tactic for maintaining ambiguity within a particular piece is evident throughout his career, as Gordon constantly seeks ways to define, then immediately redefine an object, phrase, or image. “He can make us believe that anything is something else,”³⁶ Jowitt wrote of Gordon in 1981, and he continues this by creatively repurposing the same materials in his more recent works. Fabric is a favorite of Gordon’s, which he transforms to represent countless objects, ideas, symbols and figures throughout *Dancing Henry Five*.

When the piece begins, six lengths of fabric are onstage, tangled up with all of the other props used in the show and piled onto a rolling cart. Gordon introduces these objects in their ordinary state; convention dictates what they are used for in everyday life. The effect is like that of a magician presenting an ordinary folded napkin before transforming it into a dove.

The pile of fabric is taken offstage and reappears after the prologue, carried on by a performer as if serving a fine dinner platter for a king, then delicately placed on the ground. Six performers pick up and unfold one piece of

³⁶ Jowitt, 76.

fabric each, keeping one side for themselves and handing the other side to the performer playing King Henry V (Robert La Fosse), who stands center stage. The six performers create a perimeter around the new king, stretching out the length of the rectangular fabric, about five feet in length, and walking ceremoniously around the king. The music is celebratory, and the moment is reminiscent of a joyous maypole dance. The dancers circle Henry V as he rotates his body while raising his arms, and the lengths of fabric begin to connect each dancer to Henry V as he stands proudly in the middle, the sun of this universe, with each dancer orbiting around him. The fabric, outstretched, fills the space, functioning as a decorative flourish for a royal celebration, helping to establish dignified, royal England with newly crowned King Henry V at its center. By transforming these ordinary swaths of fabric into a royal spectacle, Gordon frames these objects as mutable and ambiguous, capable of being reimagined and reinterpreted based on their context and use.

Next, the fabric is again taken offstage by the performers. One piece of fabric is carried back on as Falstaff (played by Valda Setterfield) prepares to sit on his deathbed. One performer carries one folded piece of cloth carefully and attentively from stage left. The performer stands by the bed, with the cloth, awaiting Falstaff's final words, blank and numb as an experienced executioner. As Falstaff says his final words and sits on the bed, the fabric-bearer kneels down and offers Falstaff the folded fabric. Falstaff slowly begins pulling the fabric toward his body. As he does so, the fabric begins to unravel in an impossible angularity, extending the length of the bed, covering Falstaff's entire body, and transforming into Falstaff's final resting place: a coffin. After the music resolves, everything is

still. The fabric covers the head of dead Falstaff when Setterfield abruptly pops up, removing the fabric from her face and shouting “Ooooookay,” interrupting the dramatic tension. The fabric is no longer a coffin, the illusion is broken, and the fabric has been reset to its ordinary state.

In the next scene, the fabric is once again transformed. As a soloist performs a moving interpretation of Mistress Quickly’s verbal description of Falstaff’s final moments, the pillow on which Falstaff was lying is quickly, yet particularly and with care, wrapped in the fabric. Afterward, the performer stands with the fabric-wrapped pillow resting on his forearms, looking out to the audience with a strong, quiet dignity. The fabric has become a folded flag, commemorating the life of Falstaff, a fallen knight. By continually redefining the fabric, Gordon is imbuing his work with ambiguity and urging his audience to react, reimagine, and reinterpret what they once thought they knew well.

Gordon’s altering of the purpose and definition of the fabric becomes bolder throughout the remainder of the show. In Act Three of Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, the chorus asks the audience to use their imaginations to envision the English Navy departing and sailing on rough seas “with silken streamers the young Phoebus fanning.”³⁷ Shakespeare asks the audience to imagine “threaden sails, borne with th’ invisible and creeping wind, draw the huge bottoms through the furrowed sea, breasting the lofty surge.”³⁸ As we hear a recording of this monologue, many pieces of the fabric are rolled on stage, draped over a costume rack. We begin to see those “silken streamers” and “threaden sails” as the performers remove the lengths of fabric from the rack, unfold them, and whirl

³⁷ William Shakespeare, *Henry V*. Act 3 Prologue. 1599.

³⁸ Ibid.

them through the air, catching the air and creating a parachute bubble, as the fabric becomes a sail. The monologue continues: “Oh but think you stand upon the rivage and behold a city on th’inconstant billows dancing, for so appears this fleet majestic, holding due course.”³⁹ The city Shakespeare is referencing refers to the ship itself, and the “billows” are the waves. As the audience hears this monologue playing over the speakers, the fabric is folded in half, lengthwise, with one dancer at either end, each pulling the fabric to create tension. A trio is formed between two dancers and a piece of fabric, which has now become the rivage. One dancer leans back, maintaining the tension in the cloth as the other stands tall. Then the momentum switches, like a see-saw, and they change roles. They shift weight back in forth in this manner all the while circling each other with the center of the cloth as their fulcrum. The fabric has shifted from representing sails to representing the hull of the ship, rocking back and forth on “th’inconstant billows dancing.” Immediately after, each ship hull is slowly placed side by side to create a navy, a recycled image described earlier, which sails solemnly across calm water.

The fabric is continuously transformed throughout the remainder of the show. It becomes skirts for Alice (played by Setterfield) and Catherine (played by Karen Graham) as they perform a pas de deux representing their gentle connection while Catherine seeks to learn English. At the very end of the play, we see the fabric joyously laid out in front of Henry V and Catherine, now betrothed, as a red-carpet as they walk delicately ahead. Each swath of fabric is laid carefully out, one next to the other, with regal precision.

³⁹ Ibid.

After Catherine and Henry move beyond their red-carpet and exit, a fourth-wall-breaking monologue plays, thanking the audience for their attention and summarizing all of the illusions and moments which were played out over the course of the evening. As this is happening, each piece of fabric is folded by the performers, in plain sight, as they simply pack up their show and take us back to the opening image, where every prop was exactly how it was on the cart. Gordon brings the use of props full-circle, reflecting on everything we believed this fabric to be—maypole streamers, a wooden coffin, rocking ships, billowing sails, fancy skirts, and royal carpets—and confirming that they were, in fact, merely ordinary objects. The dove has been transformed back into the napkin. By pointing the audience back to the matter-of-fact presentation of the fabric, Gordon is accenting the role of ambiguity in his work. In the final moments of the show, Gordon chooses to remind the audience of how they imagined and reimagined these simple props, demonstrating the power of keeping each item onstage open to a variety of interpretations.

Gordon's relentless reimagining of this single, everyday prop throughout *Dancing Henry Five* is a perfect example of his interest in producing ambiguity and challenging his audience's perceptions through the constant mutation of materials. The material is a microcosm of his artistic aim to "support changes in context, the freedom to re-examine, to alter, to abandon materials, to re-use them...keeping the options open extends the lifespan of a work and my interest in it"⁴⁰ Gordon continues to use the same objects in his work because he is continually stimulated by material which can be reimagined and transformed into

⁴⁰ Smith, 78.

anything else. “Keeping the options open” is central to his work as a choreographer, and, beyond exploring all sides of movement and literal materials, Gordon explores other methods for producing ambiguity.

Chapter Three: Re-framing Relationships

Generally speaking, Gordon plays with a contrast of status throughout *Dancing Henry Five*. For example, the dancers perform balletic movement while wearing what can be best described as rugby uniforms. This contrast between ballet, which connotes precision, lightness, and grace, and rugby, which connotes forceful abandon, weight, and grit, creates a tension within the work as one tries to reconcile these two counterpoints. Similarly, Shakespeare’s work is often regarded as high-art, praised for its complexity, beauty, and refinement. In contrast, Gordon’s objects begin the show in a sloppy dogpile in the middle of the stage. This deliberately amateur aspect of the production is utilized throughout. The use of objects, as well as the simplicity of the objects themselves, is often more reminiscent of cringeworthy, low-budget children’s theater than a lofty Shakespearean production, another example of Gordon’s love of juxtaposition. In this section of the analysis, I discuss what I am terming the “refined” elements of the show—which include the orchestral music, the Shakespearean text, and the balletic movement vocabulary—and the “unrefined” elements of the show, which include the deliberately simplistic props/costumes and the pedestrian movement vocabulary. Gordon plays with the relationship between these two elements of the production, and he utilizes this relationship, between the “unrefined” and “refined” elements, as a site of ambiguity and reinterpretation. Much like the

fabric is transformed throughout *Dancing Henry Five*, Gordon transforms the relationship between the refined and the unrefined in order to both frame these production elements and further explore ambiguity. At the beginning of the *Dancing Henry Five*, the simple, thrown-together use and re-use of objects in this production serve to create tension, clashing with the prestige embedded within the content (Shakespeare); the courtly, balletic movement vocabulary; and the music, which provides a backdrop of majesty and pomp. Gordon is able to play with and layer two opposing ideas: one of polished, performative prestige, and one of amateur disregard for proper etiquette. Gordon frames the relationship between these two elements as one of opposition, which creates an underlying comedic tension as the unrefined elements of the show undercut the refined elements of the show.

One example of a refined element in *Dancing Henry Five* is the music, which was composed by William Walton for the 1944 version of Shakespeare's *Henry V*, directed by Sir Laurence Olivier. The music draws from the Baroque period and includes an adaptation of Bach's *Sheep May Safely Graze* (1713). The composition is rich and contains a broad range of expression. Stringed instruments softly grieve the loss of Falstaff; woodwinds brightly announce the arrival of a new day; brass instruments warn and intimidate with majestic, trumpeting swells. The complex, rich, and expressive score often creates an expectation of refinement which is contrasted by Gordon's use of movement. There are several moments of choreography which seek to juxtapose the music by accenting the rag-tag amateurism of Gordon's group and their disregard for prestigious expectation.

The show opens with light, sweeping sounds of a recorded orchestra, which bring to mind frolicking sheep in a vast English pasture. A flute whistles brightly like a bird chirping at dawn. Trumpets awaken and proclaim their presence, accompanied by a military snare drum. The combination of these instruments creates the expectation of a royal announcement or decree. By contrast, the dancers enter holding makeshift, hand-drawn signs. Some of them say “Dancing,” some “Henry,” and some “Five.” On some of the signs, the writers presumably ran out of room on the top line, so they finished writing on the second line. Therefore the sign reads “Hen” on the top line and “ry” on the bottom line. The pile of props and scenery sits plainly on the stage. Setterfield enters and stands atop a ladder centerstage.

The dancers exit during Setterfield’s monologue and return with signs with their own names written on them, a continuation of the “credits.” They hold up the signs proudly as they strut across the stage. Then trumpets begin to swell, indicating the occurrence of something epic, urgently and rigorously demanding action on the stage. The dancers, on the contrary, seem unaware of the auditory demands, as they very simply begin picking up the props, one by one, and taking them offstage for the beginning of the show. Their commitment to this task is not robust. They walk as if they were doing something as unremarkable as picking up the mail.

The contrast between the visual information and the audible information is palpable and humorous, as the epic, urgent music creates an expectation which is defied by the behavior of the performers. The dancers, taking one prop off at a time, seem either oblivious or apathetic to these audible demands. The contrast is

highlighted by how sloppily the props are piled up, the fact that the performers are doing a job normally reserved for a set-crew, and the duration of the activity—which lasts long enough to build a great deal of tension, then a bit longer, creating a release of this tension resulting in a laugh from the audience. Setterfield's character adds to this tension by creating a sense of urgency which is ignored by the other dancers, who casually bring each piece offstage. She stands atop the ladder with a hand on her hip, like a supervisor, waiting for all of the props to be removed before she continues speaking.

Gordon undercuts the epic music by, at the very height of its expressive crescendo, visually filling the stage with the mundane labor of setting props backstage. He is establishing a backdrop for how to consider these opposing elements, teaching the audience how to reconcile the co-existence of the more refined elements of the show (in this case, the music and the Shakespearean backdrop) and the more deliberately unrefined elements of the show (in this case, the props themselves, the use of props, the pedestrian movement) through tongue-in-cheek humor.

Gordon's use of rubber balls in the show is another good example of how the use of props serves to undercut the inherent "refinement" of the music and, in this case, some of the dance vocabulary, to create humor. Setterfield introduces the section as a "short court rubber-ball dance," and dance lives up to the title's explanation. The dancers enter in two straight, horizontal lines, facing each other with courtly formality. We hear a hammered dulcimer, often used in medieval court dances, with an oboe playing a light-hearted, bouncing, Baroque melody. The dancers move from formation to formation. Two horizontal lines become a

circle. The circle becomes two vertical lines. The dancers efficiently move the lines together, pass through the spaces, and end up exchanging sides of the stage. The choreography, specifically the spatial relationship between dancers, is clearly imitating a Baroque social dance, drawing from contredanse and minuet forms. As a counterpoint to this courtly formality, Gordon introduces a red, rubber ball which is thrown around by the dancers casually during the dance. A second ball is introduced, the spatial pattern between dancers is repeated, and each dancer, when it is their turn dutifully bounces each ball twice. Much like the opening images outlined above, the clashing of these two opposing ideas—the refinement of the movement vocabulary and the music, combined with the playful, juvenile, unrefined tossing of rubber balls—creates a relationship filled with tension. Gordon is reinforcing the nature of this relationship between refinement and unrefinement as one of tongue-in-cheek humor. When these two elements collide, as in the moments outlined above, they deflect off of one another in an intentional discord which builds tension, and that tension finds its release through humor.

There are other moments in *Dancing Henry Five* which subvert this relationship, allowing the two elements, refinement and unrefinement, to seamlessly congeal upon contact, rather than deflect, and support one another to build sincere, even haunting moments. Similar to how Gordon transforms and redefines the fabric throughout the production, he also transforms the *relationship* between refinement and unrefinement. After being taught to see this relationship as one of humorous discord, the audience is surprised by the compatibility of the deliberately amateurish props with the more refined elements of the show. Gordon is able to employ ambiguity through a more complex method: by redefining the

relationship between refinement and unrefinement from one of humorous discord to one of sobering compatibility.

One example of the compatibility of these two elements occurs during and after the Battle of Agincourt. The dancers use wooden staffs, folding chairs, a rolling ladder, a table, and three dummies to create an active, even violent, battlefield. As the tension is building for battle, the dancers thrust their wooden staffs onto the stage floor in unison, creating a bone-chilling thump. This thumping is markedly out of sync with the music, which once again sets the refined complexity of the music against the amateurish simplicity of the use of props. This time, however, the effect is not humorous, it is almost haunting. Here, Gordon is not exploring this relationship through tongue-in-cheek humor, but through sincerity. The simplicity of their thumping rhythm juxtaposed by the complexity of the orchestra highlights their tribal aggression. Gordon is creating more ambiguity within his work, but this time through a different methodology. Instead of reimagining or transforming a prop, he is reframing the relationship between the complex orchestral music and the amateur props. After first establishing this relationship as humorously dissonant, Gordon challenges our imaginations and demonstrates how these two elements can mesh together to create sobering, sincere theatrical moments.

As the music continues to swell and develop, eliciting a sense of adventure, bravery, and battle, the dancers create a steady pulse which is independent of the music, this time utilizing a folding chair to do so. In unison, they thrust their staffs against the stage floor; then they flip their staffs horizontally to hit the top of each folding chair. The effect is that the thud against

the stage floor is now supported by a sharp metallic clang of the folding chair. A third sound is added when they strike the middle of the folding chair with the end of their staffs. The sound created by the dancers becomes even more arhythmic and impossible to predict.

The *relationship* between Gordon's simple use of props, sticks and metal folding chairs, and the more 'refined' elements of the show, in this case, the music, has taken a sharp turn. Although all of the rhythmic sounds created by the dancers are in disharmony with the rhythm of the orchestrated music, they are in harmony in terms of building the tension and creating an environment of intense battle. The steady pulse of the staffs hitting the floor sounds like marching. The sound from the staffs hitting the folding chairs evokes armor being struck or two swords colliding. In this case, Gordon is able to mesh these two elements, and the relationship is alarming, intense, and disturbing. Unlike earlier in the show, tension is not released through humor. It is also not shown as a light-hearted wink, as it was with the short court rubber-ball dance. Here, the relationship between the refined elements of the show and the amateurish, simple elements of the show is presented as a sincere abstraction of war and brutality.

My favorite example of Gordon's exploration of this relationship occurs just after the Battle of Agincourt. The music is urgent, authoritative, aggressive, chaotic, and varied, utilizing a multitude of orchestral voices approaching full volume. The visual elements, specifically the simple props, coincide with this music description. As the battle progresses in intensity, chairs are tossed, and dancers invert while performing handstands on chairs. They suddenly kick their legs high in the air, one after another, imitating a startled horse. Two dancers are

lifted up in the folding chairs and thrown forward. Two poorly constructed, life-sized dummies—floppy human imitations made of quickly stitched cloth and foam stuffing—are placed in chairs, lifted high in the air, then thrown forward. The poor construction of these dummies is intentional, as this is in alignment with Gordon's deliberately amateur use of props throughout the show.

The music crescendos, as does the movement, and on the final crash of a symbol and a fading snare, the stage is still. The lighting is quite dim and austere, and the dancers are frozen, hunched over chairs or laying on the ground. The battle is over. One by one, they reluctantly stand and look around. One dancer places a tender hand on another's shoulder. The music repeats the remaining echoes of the melodic motifs heard during battle, only this time delicately and with care.

Two of the dummies lie lifeless on the stage floor. Now that the lighting has dimmed, one can barely see a difference between the dancers and their sloppily constructed imitations, as they are dressed similarly and are about the same size. The dancers slowly move to them and gently pick up the dummies, which are now fallen soldiers. They place the dummy-soldiers gently into folding chairs. The dancers lift the chairs high, walk the dummies-turned-soldiers toward downstage and slowly tilt the chairs forward. The dummies slide off of the chairs and plop to the earth, their burial ground. As they hit the hard stage floor, their bodies contort, almost sickeningly, in a way only a lifeless corpse can, and the audience is confronted with the tragedy of war as they see faceless, lifeless, spineless soldiers flopping to the earth, helpless, hopeless, anonymous, and unceremoniously dropped in a pile on the ground.

Gordon has effectively transformed these silly, inauthentically created props into corpses to create a very human moment. It is precisely the simple, deliberately amateur construction of these dummies which allows these inanimate objects to effortlessly support the music, lights, and movement to create such a compelling, sobering moment. Unlike the previous examples, where the amateurish props are used to clash against the more refined elements of the show to create humor, these floppy, faceless dummies work in harmony with the melancholic music and austere lighting to create a moment of cold, hard tragedy. The deliberately amateur design of these dummies is in fact what allows for this moment to be so effective. Their cartoonishly large feet, their jointless hips, and their floppy arms would seemingly be ripe for a vaudevillian comedy routine. At this moment, however, their feet look swollen from battle; their hips seem to be locked in rigor mortis; their floppy arms contain the weight and rubbery release of a corpse. These characteristics make these bodies look twisted and distorted. Working in harmony with the music and lights, each asymmetry in the frame of the dummies contributes to the grotesque nature of this moment, mimicking bodies which have been distorted by war.

The above examples demonstrate how Gordon reframes the relationship between the refined and unrefined elements of the show. The way he transforms the meaning of this relationship between production elements is similar to the way he transforms the meaning of a movement phrase, image, or object. After defining this relationship as one of humorous discord, Gordon playfully flips the relationship on its head and demonstrates how the two elements can work together

to produce a vastly different meaning. By creating multiple interpretations of this relationship, Gordon imbues his work with ambiguity.

Chapter Four: Performance Neutrality

Gordon explores countless avenues for maintaining flexibility and ambiguity within his work. A particularly interesting method is his use of neutrality as a tool to allow his audience to see a specific gesture, moment, or even an entire piece from a variety of angles. Rather than embellishing one aspect of a movement or narrative, Gordon lays a foundation of neutrality throughout his work so that the movement or narrative can simultaneously contain many different meanings. Gordon explores neutrality within his work in three ways: first, through a task-like or casual movement quality of the performers; second, by framing the characters and performers in his work as interchangeable; and third, by Gordon himself playing the role of “star,” “host,” or “manipulator,” therefore framing the performers as neutral agents, simply completing performance tasks. I will analyze how these methodologies are utilized in *Dancing Henry Five* and how they create more ambiguity within the content.

Gordon seeks out dancers who “trust the material, rather than embellishing it.”⁴¹ This lack of embellishment within the performance quality of the dancers in his work has led many dance reviewers, writers, and scholars to remark how Gordon’s dancers maintain a particularly neutral quality in many of his performance pieces. Although these writers often use different words to describe Gordon’s dancers, I feel they are all describing, or attempting to describe, what is

⁴¹ Smith, 76.

essentially the same quality: a task-oriented, neutral approach to the performance of movement material and phrasing.

Over the years, many reviewers have commented on Gordon's use of the mundane. Matheson describes the movements of Gordon's dancers as "deceptively casual, their difficulty masked by an uninflected flow."⁴² Dance writer Wendy Perron describes one dancer's movement quality as "distinctive for its effortless clean lines" and remarks on the "matter-of-fact way she drops into and out of movements."⁴³ In her description of Gordon's *Profile* (1981), dance reviewer Deborah Jowitt describes the movements as "workaday" and "one long, matter-of-fact phrase."⁴⁴ Reviewer Amanda Smith remarks on Gordon's "naturalistic movement phrases."⁴⁵ Dance critic Jennifer Dunning is impressed by the dancers' "exhibition of casual grace through the intricacies of everyday moves."⁴⁶ The quality these reviewers identify is not limited exclusively to the moves themselves. Gordon also maintains this neutral quality, even when using larger movements or when drawing from forms such as ballet. In *Profile*, the movements, though large and not so "everyday" or ordinary, are described as "big plain actions."⁴⁷ In *Nine Lives* (1985), Gordon "uses arabesques, turns, lifts, and lunges, but at the end of a phrase or section a dancer will just walk to his or her next starting position."⁴⁸

⁴² Matheson, 118.

⁴³ Wendy Perron, "Followable Dancing: Mary Overlie and David Gordon." *Soho Weekly News*. (March 4, 1976), 25.

⁴⁴ Jowitt, 76.

⁴⁵ Smith, 43.

⁴⁶ Dunning, 1.

⁴⁷ Jowitt, 76.

⁴⁸ Solway, 1.

It is worth noting here how Yvonne Rainer, and particularly her solo *Trio A*, may have been an influence on Gordon's affinity for performance neutrality. Gordon often credits Rainer as having a profound influence on his progression as an artist, stating "I was this person making dances, and nowhere along the way had I had to pay any dues to all of this. It was all so easy. Until the moment it was impossible. And it was impossible because there was no structure on which any of it had been built. That structure came from working with Yvonne."⁴⁹ When starting the first improvisational performances with the Grand Union, co-founded by Rainer, Gordon would simply perform Rainer's *Trio A* over and over again while others were improvising.⁵⁰

Trio A, a piece which helped spark the postmodern dance movement of the 1960s, was created as a rejection of many highly valued performance elements such as virtuosity, crescendo, and accent. The piece aims to value each body part as equal and the flow could be described as uninflected, casual, or, certainly, neutral—many of the same terms used to describe Gordon's movement affinities. Although Gordon utilizes this quality in vastly different ways than Rainer, her influence on this particular affinity should be noted.

Interestingly, some writers have termed this quality as "deadpan." Don McDonagh lauds Gordon for his "deadpan humor."⁵¹ Critic Elizabeth Kendall claims Gordon's "work reproduces its vision of a seemingly random combination of dancing, clowning, recitation, and real-life 'scenes' played out in deadpan."⁵²

⁴⁹ Smith, 77.

⁵⁰ Morgenroth, 56.

⁵¹ Don McDonagh, "David Gordon." *The Complete Guide to Modern Dance*. (New York: Doubleday, 1976), 96.

⁵² Elizabeth Kendall, "Sophisticated Casual." (*Vogue*, December 1984), 1.

In a review of *TV Reel* (1982), Allen Robertson adoringly comments on “Setterfield’s dry, magnificently deadpan”⁵³ performance quality.

Gordon, interestingly, takes exception to the description of this quality as “deadpan,” stating “all I need from them is not what is referred to often in the papers as a deadpan performance—I work my ass off not to have anything called a deadpan performance.”⁵⁴ Instead, Gordon explains that he seeks associations which are “inherent in the action” so that he does not need the dancers to dramatize it.⁵⁵ These associations and interpretations by an audience are allowed precisely because Gordon does not seek to define a certain action through an over-embellished performance quality. Instead, the dancers allow the movement to speak for itself, and the movement is, therefore, able to say multiple things at once.

Dance scholar Sally Banes suggests Gordon “uses movements that look more like behavior than choreography,” with gestures which are “specific and deliberate, yet performed with a casual demeanor.”⁵⁶ Gordon admits his deliberate insertion of this quality into his work, stating “one of the things I work very hard on is that the performance of that material have about it the character of ordinariness.”⁵⁷ He is also quoted as saying “if anything is pedestrian or ordinary, it is a very calculated attempt to perform the movement as if it is something not special.”⁵⁸ There is indeed a casual performance quality inherent within Gordon’s work and this allows for some excellent opportunities for contrast and

⁵³ Allen Robertson, “Reviews.” (*Ballet News*, July, 1982), 30.

⁵⁴ Smith, 76.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 76.

⁵⁶ Banes, 105.

⁵⁷ Smith, 76.

⁵⁸ Smith, 76.

juxtaposition. Examining the Banes quote above, one can imagine how specific and deliberate movements create an interesting contrast when performed with a casual demeanor, as casual behaviors are typically performed with a distinct lack of specificity. In addition to breeding interest simply by being inherently paradoxical, this deliberate yet casual movement vocabulary allows Gordon to explore opportunities to juxtapose the movement with other performance elements, such as music, lighting, and the formality of a proscenium stage itself. The contrast of the movement quality with other performance aspects spawns a third layer of meaning, which is the contradictory relationship between how the dancers are moving and how, based on orchestral arrangement, for example, the audience *expects* the dancers to move.

It is this “casualness” or neutrality which provides the performative foundation through which Gordon is able to layer multiple meanings and interpretations. The quality itself already contains two somewhat contradictory ideas—specificity and neutrality—and this clash of performative intent tends to spawn multiple meanings within one movement. Additionally, the neutral performance quality of the dancers often clashes with other performative elements, and this creates more layers of meaning and interpretation. Furthermore, because the dancers are not overimbellishing the meaning of a particular image or movement phrase, the meaning of that image or phrase is much more flexible. This malleability of content allows for labels and definitions to be manipulated much more easily once they are placed in a different context.

This casualness is even inherent within Gordon’s company name, the Pick-up Performance Co. A pick-up game of basketball, for example, does not

resemble a professional game. It requires no referee, happens spontaneously, the players are rarely any good, and there are usually no spectators. Some players may know one another, but typically all of the players are not well acquainted. Although there are inevitably a few players who take the game entirely too seriously, most understand they are not playing in a highly competitive environment, and they are simply there to get some exercise and have a good time. A pick-up game is a *casual, ordinary* game between friends or acquaintances, and nobody is expected to be a world-class athlete. By titling his company a pick-up company, Gordon is deliberately suggesting that his company is comprised of a rag-tag group of casual performers who enter and exit the company on a whim. Of course, this is a façade, and the performers are seasoned professionals. However, this title suits Gordon's approach to dance making and mirrors the effect of his casual dance vocabulary. Just as Gordon's "Pick-Up Performance Co." is comprised of professionals, casual dancing requires a great deal of technical skill.

As demonstrated by the wide range of descriptions by critics and reviewers, this particular quality, with which many of Gordon's dances are performed, can be difficult to articulate in certain terms. This is precisely why Gordon utilizes this neutral quality. The ambiguity set forth by this choreographic/performative choice serves Gordon's work quite well. By refusing to define, broadcast, or indicate the specific content of a given moment, Gordon leaves room for his audience to play along and see many things at once.

In an article from *The Village Voice* in 1981, Jowitt suggests Gordon can "make us believe that anything is something else, that perhaps it's only our

perspective that makes events what they seem to be.”⁵⁹ Gordon consistently uses this casual, uninflected, neutral, matter-of-fact performance quality as a tool to embrace ambiguity and, as a result, embrace his audience and its role in defining the content of a given piece. This ambiguity afforded by the dancers’ neutral quality allows the interpretation of a performance to be more nimble and flexible. The content is able to contain multiple meanings at once as well as morph and transform into something else entirely with calculated subtlety.

Gordon also explores this neutrality of the dancers in a different way. Critics and dance scholars often comment on how Gordon’s dancers seem interchangeable, in terms of how they relate to the content. A specific character or role in a given piece is not owned by one performer. Rather, a character or role is often passed around and inhabited by a number of performers throughout a production. Deborah Jowitt describes this quality as “dancerly anonymity.”⁶⁰ Here is her description of *Profile* (1981):

Susan Eschelbach, Margaret Hoeffel, and Keith Marshall stand in a line facing us to announce, one by one, “Susan as Susan,” “Keith as Keith,” “Margaret as Margaret.” Gradually, they move into dancerly anonymity: Susan standing in Keith’s place is, for all practical purposes, “Keith.” Margaret may eventually say, “Margaret as Susan as Keith as Margaret as Susan as Keith.” Where you stand determines who you are, what you do announces your role. Pretty soon, Margaret, with a hand on each of the other’s backs, is saying “Margaret as Mother, as Terra Firma...” Then it’s: Susan as victim” (and other anonymous objects) slung around by Margaret and Keith.⁶¹

In *Not Necessarily Recognizable Objects* (1978), Gordon and Setterfield engage in a seemingly spontaneous conversation about which direction in which

⁵⁹ Jowitt, 76.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 76.

⁶¹ Ibid., 56.

they should take the phrase. It is *seemingly* spontaneous because the words are soon after revealed to the audience, displaying a verbatim script of their argument. After their dialogue and a subsequent movement duet, they repeat the dialogue. However, this time Setterfield is playing Gordon's original role in the script and Gordon is playing Setterfield's. By allowing the roles to be fluid, the audience is exposed to a completely different version of the exchange, and the interpretation maintains its flexibility. This swapping of roles is not limited to text, however. Later in the same piece, Gordon performs a solo with his own recorded commentary remarking how he is engaging in the ultimate act of egocentrism by performing his own solo while the other dancers simply watch. This "solo" material does not belong to Gordon alone, however. After Gordon performs his solo and leaves the stage, each dancer performs the solo at their own speed, again allowing for re-interpretation of the material.⁶²

Gordon employs a similar artistic choice in *The Firebugs* (1995) when each character switches roles throughout the show. The performer playing the mother becomes a "gangster," and the performer playing the "gangster" becomes a mother. The victims in the show and the victimizers swap places.⁶³ By allowing the performers to be neutral in this way, lacking in ownership over a particular character, Gordon implores his audience to view the content from a variety of angles while presenting many different interpretations of each character.

Another way in which Gordon seeks to highlight the neutral quality of the dancers is often by embracing and exaggerating his role as the star, host, or

⁶² Amanda Smith, "Reviews." (*Dance Magazine*, September, 1978), 43, 44.

⁶³ Walker Arts Center, "Talking Dance: Michael Lupu and David Gordon," YouTube video, 54:40, June 28, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qz4V130dWQ8>.

manipulator of a particular performance or performative moment. By doing so, he becomes solely responsible for the content of the performance, and the dancers remain neutral. By flaunting his role of a “puppet-master”, Gordon contributes to the task-oriented perception of the movement. The dancers, in one sense, become pawns in Gordon’s game of chess, dutifully carrying out the tasks Gordon assigns. However, Gordon creates this illusion while providing the dancers with agency and individualism. He creates a false pretense of authority only to reframe it as self-deprecating buffoonery.

For example, in *Not Necessarily Recognizable Objects* (1978), Gordon performs a solo while the other dancers watch him. The speaker plays his voice, warning the audience that he will be performing a solo and that the recording is meant to undercut the egocentrism of such an act. He tells the audience of the choreographer’s (Gordon himself’s) nefarious intentions and warns them not to be fooled by the recording and its intention to undercut his egocentrism. The dancers, while observing, then begin discussing the solo, Gordon’s eccentricities and the choreography.⁶⁴ In this example, while Gordon has maintained his puppet-master persona, he undercuts the egocentrism of performing a solo. Rather than the focus being on the actual solo itself, the act is now more about the commentary surrounding the solo, which is delivered by both his voice recording and by the other dancers. The dancers’ criticisms serve both to undercut Gordon’s lofty status as choreographer (turned featured soloist), and provide them a certain amount of agency, turning the tables on the manipulator, Gordon, and humorously turning the dynamic on its head. Of course, the backdrop to all of this is the understanding

⁶⁴ Arlene Croce, “Arts and Sciences and David Gordon.” (*New Yorker*, May 15th, 1978), 128-129.

that Gordon is half-serious and half-joking about his role as the manipulator in this context. He essentially reverses the perception of the power dynamic between choreographer and dancer by bringing more attention to it, exaggerating it, then having the dancers undercut it. While Gordon does indeed make movement, phrasing, and structural decisions as the choreographer, the hyperbolic representation of this power dynamic is Gordon's humorous way of reconciling his status as the choreographer and his interest in neutralizing the political dynamic to open new avenues for interpretation.

There are several examples of this neutral quality appearing in Gordon's *Dancing Henry Five*. These examples include all three methods mentioned above: neutral or casual movement quality; an interchangeable quality of the dancers as characters in the production; and Gordon's framing of his role in the dance as the puppet-master. All of these methodologies serve to create ambiguity and maintain flexibility within the perception of the content.

The movement quality for much of the production can certainly be described as task-oriented or casual. The opening image of dancers dutifully carrying all of the props offstage for the start of the show, detailed above, epitomizes this trait. The epic, swelling, complex music heightens the fact they are moving casually and without a sense of urgency, which, against the backdrop of the glorious trumpets and strings, makes their pedestrian maneuvers seem even more steeped in forgettable, task-oriented routine.

Another example of this casual, neutral, task-oriented movement is revealed and highlighted through a different type of contrast throughout the show. The choreography in *Dancing Henry Five* often draws from ballet and court

dance. Though it is clear not all of the dancers are necessarily virtuosic experts in these forms, they perform this movement with authority and clarity. The movement, in and of itself, is not performed casually or with neutrality. Rather it is presented with formality and grace, and is, at times, quite expressive. In the prologue section of the performance, the dancers enter one by one, repeating several parts of the same movement phrase, adding on their own movement with each entrance. The first dancer sweeps across the stage and stands, pausing in fourth position relevé. The dancer then abruptly turns his legs out, sinks into a deep, second position plié facing the audience with the arms extended horizontally. He then sweeps his right leg around to step twice toward the upstage right diagonal, settling in fourth position to prepare for a turn. After quickly popping up to relevé once again, the dancer elegantly performs a pirouette en dehors with the left leg in a front attitude and the left toes pointed. Later, the third dancer enters by prancing across the stage and launching into a grand jeté. The ending image of the prologue has the dancers facing the audience with their arms in a balletic fourth position and their left feet reaching back in tendu.

All of these movements are distinctly balletic. Although this phrase, in its entirety, certainly draws from other forms and techniques and cannot be labeled as a purely balletic phrase, it contains many balletic moments throughout. This opening movement phrase also draws from the text, the opening prologue of Shakespeare's *Henry V*, which the audience hears during the dance. When the prologue urges the audience to “suppose within the girdle of these walls are now confined two mighty monarchies,”⁶⁵ two dancers separate themselves and move

⁶⁵ William Shakespeare, *Henry V*. Prologue.

towards stage right. Their hands are on their hips their focus is lifted, they turn magnificently in this pose and pause with their bodies facing the audience but their heads tilted up, almost snobbishly. Here, these dancers are briefly and fleetingly defined as manifestations of these two mighty monarchies. Later in the prologue, when the text states “think when we talk of horses that you see them, printing their proud hoofs i’ the receding earth,”⁶⁶ the dancers lunge back with one leg and stamp their hand onto the stage floor. They repeat this motion, quickly alternating each hand and leg, imitating these horses “printing their proud hoofs.”

All of these elements—the formal, balletic movements, the narrative alignment with the text, the precision of the steps, the expressivity, and the moments of physical accent—give us the sense that this phrase is anything but neutral. Rather, the movement is constructed and performed with intentionality and care, furthering the narrative by providing a physical expression of the text and establishing tone and environment by drawing from a traditional, European dance form (ballet).

All of this physical expressivity is contrasted by what precedes and follows the prologue. As previously mentioned, before the prologue begins, the dancers take everything offstage by simply walking, picking up an object, and walking offstage. This process is repeated with monotonous, task-like redundancy to the point of absurdity. By having the dancers set up their performance, in plain sight, by placing the props in their proper position, it is as if the dance which follows is simply part of the task of performing the work. By presenting this task as part of the performance, rather than hiding or embellishing the task, attention is

⁶⁶ Ibid.

brought toward the act of performance itself, and the audience is taught to view the beautiful, balletic dancing as another task instead of a well-guarded illusion soliciting the suspension of our disbelief. By spending so much time taking items offstage, we are made fully aware of the act of performance and the numerous mundane tasks which accompany such a pursuit. When the dancers enter for the prologue, the illusion has already been broken, and the expressivity demonstrated within the prologue is now seen as another task the performers must complete as part of their performance, akin to the act of placing props backstage. Although it is still easy to become wrapped up in the beauty, intricacy, and environment expressed within the prologue, Gordon frames all of this expression as a task in and of itself. This technique produces ambiguity and allows the audience to experience two co-existing perspectives: a poetic narrative (*Henry V*), which asks the audience to become enraptured by the poetry; and the neutral observation of a group of dancers simply making their way through a series of performative tasks.

After the final image of the prologue, when the dancers are standing with their arms in a balletic fourth position, the left foot en tendu, reaching toward the back wall, the text ends and a dancer enters with fabric, signaling the start of the next section. Instead of continuing with the expressive elements created within the physical manifestation of the prologue, the dancers immediately drop their upright, balletic poses and begin walking as pedestrians again around the stage. The fabric is placed center stage, and the dancers pick up one piece of cloth each and take the time to unfold the cloth while walking. Much like the opening removal of props from the stage, this activity is seen distinctly as “behavior” as opposed to “choreography.” Again, Gordon is freely demonstrating the tasks

involved in transitioning from one section to another as the performance itself. Rather than transitioning seamlessly from the balletic, formal expressivity in the prologue, Gordon shows us a stark contrast by diving into a pedestrian, casual, mundane transition into the next section. By doing so, he is reinforcing that the upcoming, formal, court dance (fabric outstretched in a maypole-like ritual, circling around Henry V), should also be viewed as one of these tasks.

This is a clear example of Gordon creating ambiguous content. Because he frames each section as a performative task, the audience is able to view the material from multiple perspectives and glean multiple meanings. While these sections throughout *Dancing Henry Five* may be visually stunning, central to the narrative, and presented with performative flare, one simultaneously has a contrasting sense that each section is simply a task to be completed with the dancers having no emotional stake in the show. On one hand, the audience is invited to become emotionally invested in the story of Shakespeare's *Henry V*, and on the other hand, the audience's perspective is guided toward a backdrop of performative tasks, neutral in quality and bereft of emotional involvement. These two conflicting lenses lead to flexible and ambiguous content.

In *Dancing Henry Five*, the dancers and characters are interchangeable cogs in the performative wheel, and this is yet another method Gordon utilizes to produce ambiguity throughout the show. Although specific characters are rarely played by different performers, one gets the sense that anyone can plug into any role at any time, as the performers play many different characters throughout the show. This interchangeable quality infuses the content with ambiguity and flexibility.

For example, Setterfield begins the show as “Gordon’s Chorus.” She narrates and seeks to “fill up, fill in, fill out,” as she puts it, throughout the pared-down production. However, while she introduces the scene in which Falstaff dies, she becomes Falstaff himself. It is not only the act of changing characters which contributes to this overall interchangeable quality. It is also the flippant way through which this changing of characters occurs, which helps frame the rules for how the characters will be played throughout the show. Setterfield does not exit the stage to prepare for the new role. She does not undergo a costume change. Instead, she brushes her hair back with her hands and catches a pillow (thrown from offstage), which she places on her abdomen as an indicator of how “fat” Falstaff has become in old age.

Here, Gordon is demonstrating a lack of embellishment to the point of absurdity. By demonstrating how quickly and flippantly one character transforms into another, Gordon is establishing a framework for the remaining character transformations in the show. He is also contributing to the overall ambiguity of our perception as we now see Setterfield not only as the narrator (“Gordon’s Chorus”) and guide of the show but also as Falstaff. Much like the task-based movement quality, these elements—namely Setterfield’s flippant transformation, a pillow being tossed in from offstage as a costume—serve to provide the audience with a reminder of the performance itself, reinforcing both perspectives, theatrical and metatheatrical, the combination of which creates multiple meanings and invites various interpretations of single moments, images, and characters.

Later in the show, Setterfield, again playing the role of “Gordon’s Chorus,” sets up the next scene by breaking the “fourth wall” and speaking

directly to the audience. She explains the audience that Catherine will be taking English lessons from Alice, Catherine's lady in waiting. Setterfield ostensibly becomes Alice as she joins hands with the performer whom she introduced as Catherine, and they begin a movement duet as the audience hears the text of Catherine learning English from Alice. Setterfield is performing yet another character, this time with no costume change at all. She is once again playing two roles: the role of both "Gordon's Chorus" and "Alice." By having Setterfield, and not a different performer, play the role of Alice, Gordon seeks to blur the lines between the theatrical—the lovely duet itself—and the meta-theatrical. The audience sees Setterfield, who has been speaking directly to it, introducing this specific moment. Setterfield herself enters into the world she has introduced and becomes a player in a game from which she was previously removed. Again, Setterfield's role here is laced with ambiguity, as the audience is asked to see her as both an omniscient narrator and an actual character in the very piece she is narrating.

Another example of this interchangeable quality occurs after Falstaff dies. While the audience hears Mistress Quickly's monologue describing her last moments with Falstaff, a soloist steps downstage and begins moving along elegantly to the text. His long lines, wide lunges, direct pivots, quick-twitch contractions, and occasional gestures vaguely reflect the text and do not tell us who or what this solo represents. Is this movement solo a physical representation of Mistress Quickly herself as she emotionally details Falstaff's final moments? Does it represent Falstaff himself, as he withers away in old age, betrayed by a once loyal friend? Does it represent Quickly's *memory* of Falstaff in his dying

moments? Could it be an abstraction of all of these possibilities, and perhaps more? By not embellishing this moment by, say, adorning this dancer with a costume piece or introducing his specific role in the narrative, the solo is enigmatic. Furthermore, in case perception leads toward one particular narrative, the solo is then repeated by each of the dancers, as they join in one by one and the group begins receding upstage. By allowing the characters to be interchangeable, and not assigning roles to specific dancers, Gordon is able to maintain flexibility within the content and persist at creating layered, rich, ambiguous moments throughout the production.

Lastly, all of the characters in *Dancing Henry Five* generally wear the same costume pieces, regardless of what character they play at a given moment. Looking more like they are about to play a game of rugby than mount a Shakespearean production, the dancers wear horizontally striped polo shirts, a pair of shorts, high-ankle socks which match the shirt, black tennis shoes, and black beanies (which, when placed in context with the rest of the costume, look more like rugby scrum caps). These costume choices contribute to the interchangeability of the dancers within this piece, as they do not help distinguish one performer from another. Quite the opposite, it is quite easy to mistake one performer for another, especially when the lighting is particularly dim.

Gordon also plays the role of puppet-master in *Dancing Henry Five* in order to, once again, reinforce the perspective that the dancers are simply completing performative tasks which have been prescribed by Gordon himself. Like the performers walking casually to begin the next section, or tediously yet deliberately unfolding fabric to set up the next event, the exaggerated framing of

the dancers as simple pawns, part of Gordon's master plan helps establish a metatheatrical perspective which comments on the act of performance itself, as well as the power-dynamics which add yet another layer of meaning onto each moment of the performance.

At the beginning of *Dancing Henry Five*, Setterfield explains that Shakespeare's Chorus in *Henry V* encourages the audience to accept the limitations of the stage and use their imaginations help create a transformative experience. She goes on to say that this particular audience needs no such encouragement. Therefore, she, "as Gordon's Chorus, will not bother." Later in her prologue, Setterfield repeats her character's name, stating "I, as Gordon's chorus will provide summaries..." Here, Gordon is already setting himself up as an omniscient figure of high esteem and bravado, as he just replaces the role of "Shakespeare's Chorus" to "Gordon's Chorus." By doing so, he also establishes a sense of possession over the upcoming material, acknowledging his role in the making of the production and flaunting his hierarchical role as the creator of this show.

This framing of Gordon as the grand puppet-master continues when Setterfield, describing her role in the show, states "I will fill in, fill up, fill out, and every once in a while I will offer an opinion. Not *my* opinion. No. *Gordon's* opinion." Setterfield cracks this line with a sarcastic tone and a fake smile, exaggerating how ridiculous it would be for her to offer her own opinion. This gets a hearty laugh from the audience. Again, Gordon is exaggerating his role as puppet master in the show to help imbue each moment with a tinge of ambiguity, as he is framing the performers as neutral actors simple doing what they are told.

This metatheatrical device shifts the audience's focus away from the narrative content—*Henry V*— and toward the power dynamics potentially involved in the making of the show itself. By framing the production in this way and exaggerating the power-dynamics and potential conflicts within the rehearsal process (note Setterfield's sarcasm and fake smile), each narrative moment contains a behind-the-scenes lens through which the audience can view the work, adding another layer of interpretation.

Conclusion

David Gordon finds a plethora of methods for imbuing his work with an inherently ambiguous quality. He strives to keep all of his material open for reinterpretation, and his distaste for labels drives him to reach toward the constant redefinition of his artistry. By relentlessly exploring all sides of his material, Gordon creates the expectation that every aspect of a given show is eligible for redefinition. He recycles images and movement phrases to reveal the endless possibilities inherent within this material when placed in a different context. Gordon even recycles literal materials both throughout his career and within specific works. He transforms props to represent different objects or contribute to specific images which often contain rich, metaphorical meaning. He establishes relationships between various production elements—including props, music, and lighting—only to flip them in order to reveal the unending possibilities held within a single relationship.

Gordon's methods for imbuing his work with ambiguity extend to the performance quality. He asks dancers to perform with a neutral, task-like quality

and urges them to trust the material rather than embellish it. He allows the roles within a performance to be interchangeable and plays the role of puppet master to reinforce and exaggerate the neutrality of the performers. This neutral quality is utilized as a foundation on which he is able to layer a multitude of meanings.

Through these methodologies, Gordon has contributed a great deal of invention and genre-bending possibilities to the world of concert dance, theater, and postmodern art. This commitment to ambiguity is at the heart of his work, and it allows him to create delightfully surprising moments and transform perceptions in a given production or performative moment with expert sleight of hand. Gordon's work *The Matter* (1972) was recently shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City as part of the exhibition "Judson Dance Theater: The Work is Never Done." *New York Times* Dance writer Alastair MacCaulay stated in his review of the exhibition that, though these artists began making "radical" work together nearly 60 years ago, their work today "would seem arresting, provocative, important, witty, disquieting if it were offered today by choreographers in their 20s."⁶⁷ It is precisely Gordon's commitment to ambiguity which allows for this work to continue to be relevant and fresh. By allowing room for moments to shift and allowing the audience to interpret and reinterpret through ambiguity, the entire meaning of the work itself is capable of shifting based on the context within which it is shown. Gordon's deliberate commitment to ambiguity through his use of props, phrase material, images, and performance neutrality, results in art that defies convention and affirms his distinguished place among postmodern artists.

⁶⁷ Alastair MacCaulay, At MOMA, "Judson Artists Look Back With Anger and Toughness." (*The New York Times*, 2018), 1.

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