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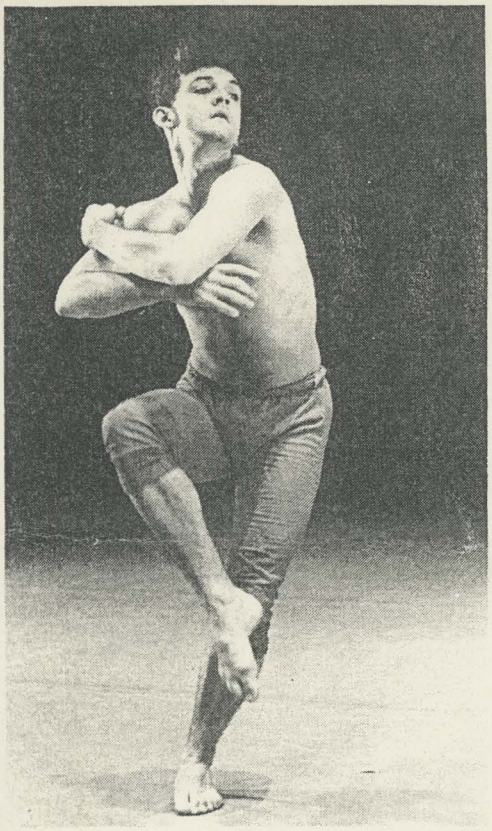

Umbrellosis

Karole Armitage, David Gordon, Mark Morris and then the rest

by
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Photographs by Dee Conway

"La Danse, c'est une question morale." (Balanchine). Odd the occasions when that line came to mind this Dance Umbrella.

More and more in the course of dance-going it becomes clear that what makes a great dance work coherent — what makes it great — is a structure of connections not merely formal but moral. To quote again: "To me, it seems enough that dancing is a spiritual exercise in physical form." (Merce Cunningham). I stress this at once because it's considered too little. Balanchine and Cunningham are the choreographers this century who have done most to refine and extend our understanding of classicism in dance. We should now be able to see how classical choreographers, ancient and modern, have embodied in their works codes of manners, visions of behaviour.

And the formalism, the style of such classical works is itself their morality. Balanchine and Cunningham are too often discussed in Britain *only* as formalists. Their works aren't exactly morality lessons — but nonetheless we can watch them and learn not about movement alone but about manners to boot.

Somewhere amid the permissive sixties and their aftermath such talk of morality started to sound dated and Leavisite. Prudish, even. Perhaps today it sounds just plain Thatcherite. But if I draw attention to the moral import of a dance work, I don't do so from a neo-Tory view of one morality by which to view and judge all things. Examples: *The Catherine Wheel, Doubles, La Fille mal gardée, Mozartiana* and *The Sleeping Beauty* all reflect or propound quite different ethics. But do we, if we love them all, then surrender our ethical principles? No — in fact we find our ethical sympathies are enlarged. In these works the sexual balance, the social order, man's dealings with his fellow-men, the relation of dance to music (which has real moral implications) are all very different. Yet, at the heart of each, human impulse is refined. Our own sense of activity and our view of the world are intensified.

All this as prelude. Certainly this autumn the characters of man and woman, their manners to each other, to objects, to music, to stage space were very differently proposed by David Gordon and by Karole Armitage. But either view was advanced with such disarming brilliance that these two were the great events of my Dance Umbrella. (Significantly maybe, they were not big audience hits. The public stayed away in droves from Gordon's four evenings at Sadler's Wells; and the full houses at Karole Armitage's two performances at Riverside Studios received brief and tepid applause from a sold-out auditorium, with quite a few walking out mid-show. Meanwhile at Covent Garden the Royal was performing *The Sleeping Beauty* to fairly contented audiences. Would that these different dance publics had more overlap. Although it's easy to see how some Royal Ballet fans might be bored by Gordon and offended by Armitage, I found my acquaintance with the old ballet helped me to love the work of these two Americans, and that theirs gave me more to look for in the old ballet.)

It was not hard to think that Karole Armitage was in fact dancing to the wrong audience and in the wrong setting. For all her Cunningham past she is now a ballerina, an odd one, but potent and ambiguous and disturbing as ballerinas are, with a dance power that projects formidably.

To mega-loud and sometimes stinging percussion and guitar music by David Linton (played live by composer and Conrad Kinard, marvellously raffish both in white tie), dancing without corps de ballet, coryphées, or soloists, this ballerina and her partner, Joseph Lennon, presented an extended duet in several scenes. It's called *The Watteau Duet* — formerly $-p = dH/dq$ (double duo). (What else.) The structure was odd, the flames tailing away in a few brief sparks and splutterings. But she had plunged at once into a dance exploration of certain issues in ballet. What's a 1980s ballerina? What validity has pointework today? Where does ballet go after Balanchine? What's a 1980s male-female ballet relationship? So much was obvious — though she was providing no obvious answers. Spec-

The photograph above is of Mark Morris in his solo *Jealousy*. On the right, Ashley Page and Gaby Agis in *It Was, What, Where?* at The Place.

ifically she recalls Balanchine's duet work, especially for Suzanne Farrell (her dancing and stage manners evoke Farrell too), and, far away, the long Petipa-Ivanov tradition of supported adagio. A frequent drama of what support the ballerina needs or assumes, a blazing display of unquestioning authority, mighty legwork thundering calmly through.

Armitage is new but she's new less in inventing fresh movements than in building connections and in the ideas these suggest. Abrasive, yielding, demure, implacable, demanding, self-glamorising, violent, sweet — she was that multi-faceted, that elusive, above all in the ways she used or addressed her partner. In the first passage she and Lennon are warriors in black, he with breastplate, she with mitten-gauntlets, harsh earmuffs and ankle-boot pointeshoes. Right away they draw us into the strange rite of supported adagio. It's a conflict of dependance and independance and it's only heightened by the large amount of supported dancing that both Armitage and Lennon do, she galvanic in steps like grands fouettés sautés, he, dancing with attack and plasticity, macho, loyal and ardent, her swain and antagonist.

Another scene develops the erotic tension between this 1985 couple. She's in orange tunic, he in white trousers and waistcoat over black shirt. He lies on the floor and raises a stretched leg, flexing and pointing the foot, again and again raising it towards her. It's a gesture half-coarse and half-mysterious, both aspects of which Armitage acknowledges as she dances around him. It's as sexy as the great encounter in *Agon* but, as there, sex isn't the subject.

In a later scene she dances in five-inch stillettoes. Amusing how like and unlike pointeshoes these great black pincers are as she dances. Shoes on Armitage are truly an extension of her personality — they are a finishing touch to her aloofness, her attack, and they underline her dissimilarity to Lennon. A violent, potent, challenging spirit.

By comparison, David Gordon's work for the Pick-Up Co was mild, pedestrian, tidy — Gordon by any standards is tidy — but for me it was an even more enchanting event. His *Offenbach Suite* has two halves. In the first, Valda Setterfield dances with the other six members of the company, in the second those six dance with Gordon. In between there's what I would call an interlude — but really it's the calm summit of the piece. Gordon and Setterfield meet, alone now and together for the only time in this work. He bends, lifts her. She lies horizontally in his arms as he turns, turns, turns slowly; we admire the pose she holds, one curved arm and one leg offsetting the central line. When he has turned a slow circle, he lowers her to the floor. The whole sequence is slow, lunar, mysterious, and has so steady a flow that it can be repeated four times without palling. At the first Sadler's Wells performance a friend said in the interval: "It's like walking around sculpture." It really is — and at the same time it has great beauty of manners. The no-nonsense way the couple go through it makes it uncannily moving. Setterfield is a dancer who here becomes motionless sculpture, a wife who in her husband's arms becomes a tranquil moment. Is she submissive or dominant? The ambiguity is crucial to Gordon's composition. Seemingly passive bodies turned or lifted by other dancers have already been a theme in *Offenbach Suite* — yet it feels as if nothing has prepared us for this duet with those audaciously slow, repeated lifts.

In *Nine Lives* and *My Folks* Gordon uses props. Uses them? He is to chairs in the former, to fabric in the latter what Ashton is to ribbons in *La Fille mal gardée* — their poet. And in his solo at the beginning of *Nine Lives* he makes a partner out of a folding chair, as Astaire could do with a hatstand or a cane. What's most remarkable about this number is not the changes Gordon rings upon the premise of almost constant contact with the chair, as that he makes it seem a rational activity. It's partly because he puts the chair through the same principles of tipping off-balance and of pivoting it in counterbalance to himself as he applies to dancers. And it's partly because he does it all in one single current of motion like an unbroken chain of thought. But it's also because he treats the chair as interesting in itself, shows you that he finds an inexhaustible fund of ideas in it, and he treats it with unfailing good manners. It's often funny and never foolish. He teases us with how much he can do with the chair in this solo/duet, then folds it up and departs.

Then we realise the solo was merely the theme. Variations follow, orchestrated for all the company — and for more chairs. The dancers balance on those chairs, get tipped off them, throw them, play *Let's K-nock K-nees* on them, fall every which way off them, do cabrioles on them, twirl them, slide them, lift them, squeeze through them, drag them, catch them . . . And some people didn't enjoy *Nine Lives* simply because it was too chairbound. (An old groan: "Are they *never* gonna dance?") But here and in parts of *My Folks* I'm happily amazed to find that, often when furthest from what we conventionally recognise as dancing, Gordon reminds me of much of what I value in great choreography. Absolute clarity for one thing; connectedness, for another; contrasts and variety too. The language may be simple but the suggestiveness isn't. Chairs as broncos, chairs as parlour chairs as guns. Astaire gave us a shooting gallery in *Top Hat;* Gordon gives us a Godalmighty shootup here. But it's the women who now mow down the menfolk, slamming chairs down to the floor to fire on them; at the close the three women return to their sitting, crossing their legs in unison this way and that, there amid the field of corpses.

My favourite work is *My Folks*. This uses Klezmer music, of which Gordon had said in interview: "I don't know if it's actually Jewish music, but it's European music that just got wiped out in the 1930s. Young groups used to be formed to play it. And to me it's the music

Karole Armitage and Joseph Lennon in *The Watteau Duet* at Riverside Studios.

Julyen Hamilton and Kirstie Simson in *Agatha and Jimmy* at the ICA.

for family functions." Well, at times it's very *Fiddler on the Roof* to hear, but the feeling behind the piece is not specifically Jewish but of wider ethnic nostalgia. Item: the opening passage, where Setterfield stands centre stage like a totem — or, as Gordon softly treads a dance towards her, a collective memory.

And the work uses fabric. Fabric as walls, drapes, curtains, rugs, cloaks, skipping rope, scene, sails, corridors, wings. I saw too Balanchine's Apollo in his swaddling-clothes, Cleopatra in her carpet, the Sugar Plum pulled on a veil by her Cavalier, the canopy veil of Doris Humphrey's *Soaring* . . . Clement Crisp wrote that he saw less choreography than window dressing. Well, Gordon was a successful window dresser for years and still doesn't call himself a choreographer. At the end Gordon and Setterfield stand while the dancers swathe them in fabric. It's a window display *and* it's a coronation.

There's a funny number without fabric where the five dancers make a vernacular of gestures and habits, including a nosewipe. It becomes a dance by virtue of its gathering rhythm. And then Valda Setterfield enters and recalls, in a vivid solo, that most wonderfully absurd essay in nostalgia — *Raymonda* — where a Provençal heroine turns Hungarian. The solo has a czardas's accelerandi and sudden drops in tempo, its retirés passés and arms akimbo. Gordon doesn't label the solo *Raymonda:* there are no handclaps. But Setterfield gives you *Raymonda* essence.

Gordon's company had not been to Britain for five years. Armitage had not appeared in her own choreography here for four years. (Both have choreographed in the interim for Extemporary Dance Theatre; and in 1982 Armitage danced at Riverside in Michael Clark's choreography). Returning after last year's appearance was the Mark Morris Dance Group. That's to say, Morris (who appears in the States sometimes with fourteen co-dancers) could bring with him two colleagues last year, this year four. He also brought a programme of six pieces new to Britain. The man's prolific — he brought six others last year and there have been several more shown in the States in-between. And I find that I'm enchanted by some numbers and left cold by others.

Above all I'm enchanted by Morris as a soloist. This year he was even finer, particularly in *Deck of Cards* (where he, broad man that he is, dances without camp and real feminity in earrings and orange frock) and in *Jealousy*, when his hands writhing in rococo flourishes to the surrounding vehemence of the Handel music build up the bitter coils of the green-eyed monster. There's a sinuous beauty in all his movement that's riveting; where to me he finds real greatness as a dancer is in being a superlative actor. He projects a fantasy of himself with such conviction that it's awesome to behold.

Deck of Cards is an odd piece, set to three songs whose words aren't always easy to follow. One third is a truck song, with just a toy truck onstage. One third is Morris's beautiful airs-graces-and-cigarette-smoke lady. The last third is to the well known *Deck of Cards* and has the soldier of the song not only miming what each card makes him think of (as the words have suggested) but also listing the ideas raised by every previous card. This becomes a frantic twelve-days-of-Christmas act, gesture piled upon gesture in an increasingly rapid house-that-Jack-built, making the soldier look more and more of a tall-story crook. (Morris, as smart and as entertaining in his *Meet the Choreographer* session as last year, said of this solo "Oh, that's my Trisha Brown *Accumulation* rip-off. I'm a real structure queen.") How Morris's shopping-lists of gestures here become dances in their evolutions is his secret: he showed it last year in *Songs That Tell A Story*. His talent for mime also characterises the impressively horrid *Lovey*, danced by the other four dancers. This is set to songs by The Violent Femmes. (Again, I found the words hard to follow). It asks the other four dancers to give their most committed dance acting of the evening, each as loathsome loners who cannot communicate, but who carry naked dolls like sexual fetishes.

Both *Deck of Cards* and *Lovey* strike me as unique pieces of Americana in music and subject matter which didn't, however, immediately cross the Atlantic for this London viewer. I was glad therefore to see them twice. I don't know that I'll ever get *Minuet and Allegro in G*, which strikes me as utterly unappealing Beethoven Mickeymousery. Morris, when asked about traditions that influenced him, said "Denishawn." Well, this may be Denishawn music visualisation but no thank you.

Retreat From Madrid might be called music visualisation too. It sets its four dancers moving in neatly schematic patterns to Boccherini music, but with just enough brio to get under the music's skin and mine. I think *I Love You Dearly* gets under its Rumanian music's skin too, but not for long enough to win me over; and here Morris's fondness for making dancers circuit the stage (also seen in *Deck of Cards*) wears thin in the piece's basic repetitions. But seeing how many pieces Morris is producing and how good some of them are, I want him to return to London, and soon.

It's not automatically true that American modern dance is superior to the British counterpart — witness, for example, Risa Jaroslaw and her company, visiting for the first time this year. But most of the time in 1985 it felt that way. I couldn't catch all the Umbrella participants and I should say that of those I missed I heard some good things of Julyen Hamilton and Kirstie Simson, Dansproduktie and, particularly, L'Esquisse. Of the three multiple bills at the Place most of the work struck me as being at the level of student choreography at best and the dancing little better. (In one case I had seen much better student work by the same choreographer four years ago. The work Gregory Nash has been doing these last two years, more flip and dull and popular all the time, would appal me even from a student. Ashley Page stuck out as a genuinely accomplished choreographer, but I thought his three pieces were dislikeable — heartless pastiche efforts made without conviction, if danced with flair.

In fact the best new choreography I saw all autumn by a British choreographer was *La Chatte métamorphosée en femme* by Frederick Ashton (a local première). True, it's a trifle, as has been said. Furthermore, it's a great dollop of camp. But Ashton is a past master at camp confectionery, and the sheer panache and fun of Merle Park's performance made it a singularly lively little number.

There isn't much point in talking long of the other British choreographers this autumn. Rosemary Butcher's work keeps seeming less and less tedious to me with the passing of the years. But my admiration, never warm, rarely gets beyond the stage of academic approval. Amid her company, only she and Yolande Snaith, in quite separate ways, suggested that there might be a Butcher dance style — in which dancers can become absorbed and demonstrate authoritative dance personality: the other performers kept at a tepid good-pupil stage of rectitude — which is surely precisely what Butcher's work isn't about. (At least Butcher gets her dancers running this year – backwards even — a welcome change amid the lower-than-merely-low energy that emanates from Dartington, threatens to swamp British new dance and already characterises far too much of it. Slugs demonstrate more attack and performance verve than Miranda Tufnell and Dennis Greenwood.)

In its double bill of new works, *Cutter* by Richard Alston and *On The Breadline* by Katie Duck, Extemporary split its soul into two camps — Extemporary Dance and Extemporary Theatre. Neither was exactly hot stuff.

Alston's *Cutter* is interestingly planned in collaboration with a commissioned score by Jean-Marc Gowans and set off by a lighting plan that changes markedly — overhead grid patterns, side lighting — for different sections. In the solos, duets and ensembles that compose this work Alston has made plenty of fine material. The first half is varied with soft and sharp edges, passages of repeated jazzy rhythms, and a wide variety of tempi but all very white, very pure: it needs lively, textured execution and crisp dynamics to give it a bloodstream. Needs them but doesn't get them, except from Lindsay Butcher, so anonymous until she has real choreography like this to feed off, and Jonathan Smart, even if he did have an injury the night I went. I could cheerfully watch him, dance the telephone book. Maybe not Oberon or *Le Corsaire*, but the telephone book certainly. Halfway through the work Alston introduces a note of drama with a striking, terse duet for Annelies Stoffel and Edgar Newman: gestures, relationships, understated, but a welcome injection of chiaroscuro.

In *On The Breadline* Katie Duck proves my point by giving the dancers the telephone book: Jon Smart, riveting, especially when having a fit, is its saving grace. He has an assurance, a composure and — that old word — grace that single him out. But what a waste. The piece is a messy anything-went collage of speech and movement and neurotic overspill. I felt like a spectator at a particularly unvaried Sixties happening. What is Extemporary doing with such a Jekyll-and-Hyde double bill? Or with the like of Charlotte Hacker beside the likes of Smart and Butcher? The company no longer looks like a company at all but like a collection of dissimilar individuals who've been pulled together at too short notice and haven't got their act together.

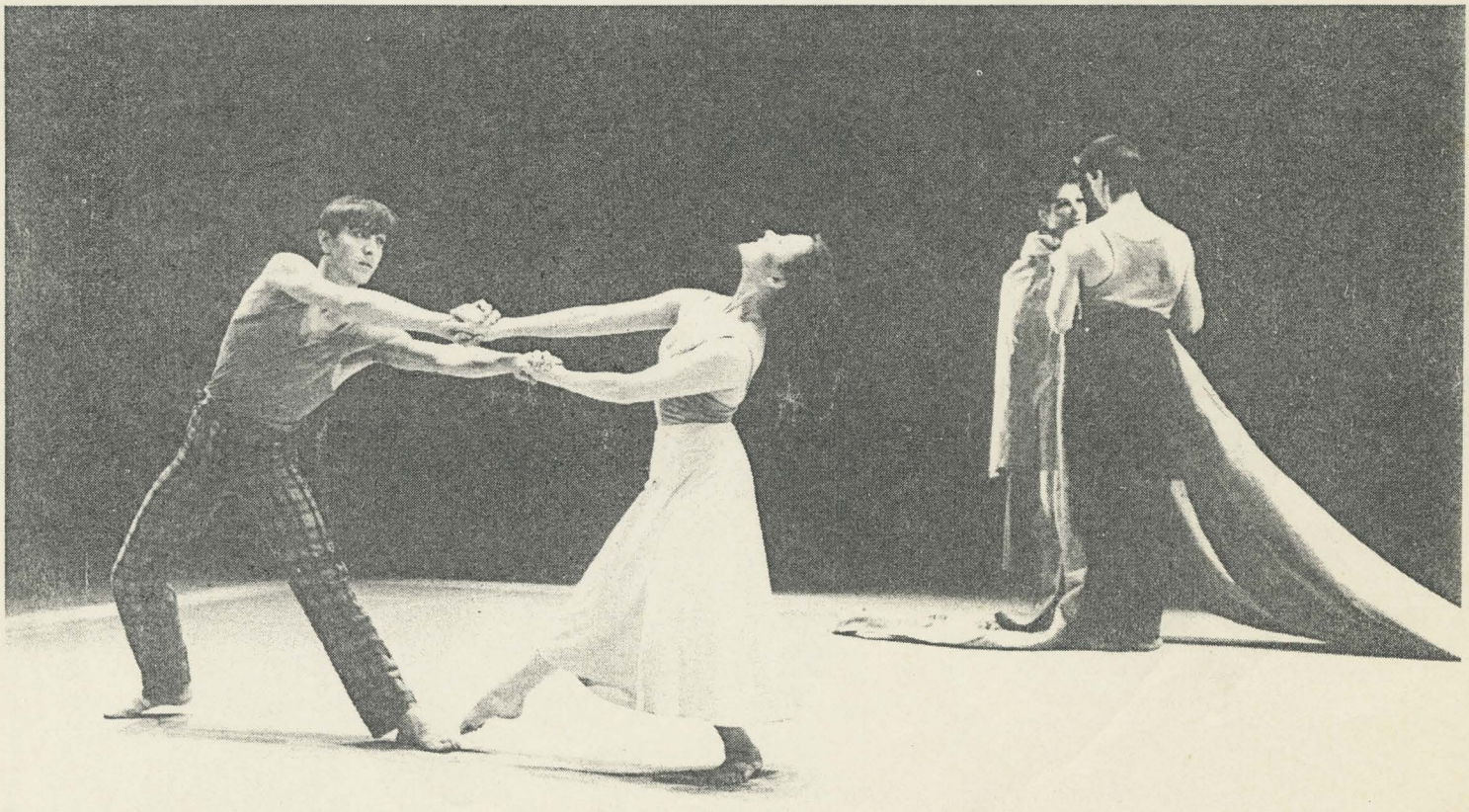
There is worse. Second Stride in a double bill of Siobhan Davies choreography has never danced worse. I omit from this judgement Catherine Burge and Philippe Giraddeau, but they can do little to lift the encompassing grey of the evening. Listless, milky, pious, sentimental work. *Silent Partners* worked last year (and this year on television) because the dancers "just did the steps." The emotions in the piece disclosed themselves slowly and austerely. This year it was all tender and sorrowing gazes and over-relished gestures: and quickly disclosed a heart of sheer pulp.

The School For Lovers Danced, Davies's novelty for the company, I spend some space in discussing because it has occasioned much argument. It's a piece that, danced in other aural circumstances, would be cartoon dumbshow alternating with dances of a very meek and milk elegance. But Davies has made this to an odd selection of items from *Così fan tutte* — the old Karajan recording. Davies has since 1980 been investigating the area where mime and dance meet in several of her works. But here the two just don't amalgamate. The audience "gets" Philippe Giraudeau's gestures to *Non siate ritrosi* and laughs accordingly, but I have seen half a dozen Guglielmi in the opera house to be funnier and clearer: mime — "See my feet, eye, nose and these moustaches" — is part of the aria's point. Still, the rhythmic punch Giraudeau finds in it makes this the evening's highlight.

As in her *Bridge The Distance* for London Contemporary Dance Theatre, Davies's musicality leads away from the music. During such divine passages as the great trio *Soave sia il vento* — *sung* with matchless legato — I longed for the musicality that Balanchine showed in the final song of *Liebeslieder Walzer* and in parts of *Duo Concertant* — having the dancers stand and listen. Why did Davies choose the Karajan recording? None of the particularly urbane qualities of its cast — led by Schwarzkopf and Simoneau — are matched by the dancers. But Davies isn't after musicality, she's after Mickeymousery, a much more ruinous kind than Mark Morris's in *Minuet and Allegro*. The six dance characters are pinned 95% of the time to the vocal lines of their operatic counterparts, so that one's response to the brilliant orchestral accompaniment (where Mozart is so often adding ironic comment) is dimmed.

Davies is said to have made *The School For Lovers Danced* as an experiment in dance narrative. Have the piece's admirers stopped to consider what a silly, nasty story she has reduced it to? Lots of Act I men's wager (not very comprehensible), and lovers' farewells; very brisk seductions; Fiordiligi's great dilemma, giving the opera its most poignant scenes, omitted; omitted too, the scene when the women finally confess their infidelity and the men their trick. We're left with a narrative about some caddish men who play a dirty trick on their readily seducible fiancées and never disillusion them.

Davies is an accomplished choreographer and Second Stride is a company I have admired. I say all the above with obvious regret. But while there were many more inept performances this Umbrella, nothing infuriated me so much as *The School For Lovers Danced*. Enough. Mozart, of course, is immortal — but I'm certainly not.



Second Stride in *The School For Lovers Danced* with left to right Philippe Giraudeau, Rebecca Ham, Maedee Dupres, and Michael Popper.