

David's

The Matter: A Description

David Gordon's The Matter was performed on April 1st and 2nd, 1972, in a large white room at the Merce Cunningham dance studio in New York City. Spectators and performers, indistinguishable from one another except for an occasional nude body, were let in together about twenty minutes before the dance was to begin. The room was empty: Mirrors spanned a wall at one end; a stage with steps jut a little into the space at the other end. The floor was vast and well-lighted.

The distinction between performers and non-performers was noticeable only as individuals found places to sit: Spectators sat at what could be considered the front of the performing area on and around church pews facing the dance floor, and along the opposite (back) wall on window ledges; performers, most carrying unobtrusive bundles of clothing and shoes, settled along the mirrored wall on the dance floor. A man sat next to a tape recorder in one corner. Another brought a chair, a stool and blocks of wood to the center of the floor and began making slight adjustments in their relative positions or using them--beginning to sit on the chair or examine the wood--but freezing for a few seconds in the middle of the attempt and then beginning to do something else. For most, the quiet activity in the center could not compete with the flow of people entering.

People sitting by the mirrored wall crossed the floor alone or in pairs to leave their bundles on the steps, returned, resumed talking. Eventually there were about forty men and women, more of the latter, sitting along that wall. Most wore street clothes; a few women and a man were

nude. David Gordon and Douglas Dunn in army-green jumpsuits, and Valda Setterfield, nude, were among them.

Six of the women, some nude, walked to the back third of the performing area along the windows and stood facing the church pews. With simple, precise adjustments of the head and arms, each moved randomly in and out of a common pose, called by Gordon "bathing beauty," a two-dimensional exaggeration of a person gazing arrogantly into an imaginary mirror--an open hand.

They continued, while Gordon found a place between the man in the center and the group sitting by the mirrors to do "oh yes," in which he ambled halfway around an imagined circle looking at the floor with his hands in his pockets, stopped, was still, tapped a foot for awhile, turned a little and breathed deeply, looked up, relaxed and stood still, turned further, looked down again and rocked gently back and forth at the hips. The women making and remaking the pose began to leave singly, in random order. Gordon stopped rocking and walked across his circle, scuffing the ground and looking down, stopped and turned slowly until he faced in the opposite direction, tapped the heel of the foot extended behind him for awhile, and joined the group at the mirrors.

The man doing small things in the center abruptly walked to the edge of the group talking at the mirrors and asked rather loudly, "What's the matter?" Everyone there froze at once. Spectators and performers were for the first time silent and directed. No one moved. The man who spoke scratched his head as if puzzled, turned and walked away from the group. They began to follow, but froze again with him, remained motionless for a few seconds, and quickly crossed the floor to the stage, taking the objects with them.

Everyone began to cross again and froze, a foot caught just as it dropped to the ground for the next step, a head stopped as it turned, a body left slightly contorted in an effort, now stopped, to avoid collision with another. After about a minute, they walked to the side, one or two at a time. As the last walked off, they began to cross again, froze after a few steps, remained still for some time, moved singly three steps further and froze.

Independent of each other and spread out over the floor, they began "oh yes" as Gordon had done earlier, now to a tape recording of the bridal chorus from Lohengrin. The music ended after about five minutes and the last person finished and left the space.

Everyone returned, some carrying objects that had been in the center, and froze at once, all engaged in different activities: Examining a piece of wood, reaching into a pocket, opening a paper bag. They remained still for almost a minute, left separately, and returned immediately, again beginning to deal with objects, themselves or each other. Randomly, after a few seconds, ^athe hand moved toward the pocket and stopped, a stool was lowered slightly, a head tilted down to look into a box on the floor, a flap of the box was pulled up a few inches by another bending over it. Brief progressions of the activities swept through the still people as if caused by an erratic breeze, and then they all were still again. After a few seconds, the stool was lowered still more, but stopped before it reached the floor, the hand almost reached the pocket. Each activity was allowed to progress slightly twice before it was stopped each time. They walked singly off to the side, taking the objects with them.

When the floor was clear, they walked to positions in a scene: Twelve

people in the center front were arranged in diminishing rows of 5, 4 and 3. A woman was stepping up on a chair behind them. Others were stopped on the way toward groups scattered around the space. They were still for about thirty seconds and then took positions which advanced the scene in time: A man boosted the woman part way up on the backs of the shortest row to make a human pyramid; a few "observers" looked appalled; some began to interfere. They all were still. Half a minute passed. They walked off to the side.

Everyone crossed, using all the space, and froze. Alternating between head and hand movements, each person revised the original position twenty times: A head turned sideways transformed a star-gazer into one curious or suspicious of something behind him; a hand moved from the chin to the hip turned a contemplative-looking pose into one more jaunty. The pauses between movements gave a doll-like appearance to the performers, as if each were made of plastic with moveable arms and neck. When finished, each walked back to the side.

They returned in five parallel lines of about six or seven people each, walking from the steps toward the mirrors. All lines went through the same pattern of movements, but each line worked autonomously; people within lines moved in unison. Lines began rocking back and forth smoothly, each person in line simultaneously turning slowly in a circle, using one leg as a pivot, and sliding one hand and then the other across and off the shoulders of the person in front, as the turn carried him away and around to another. All lines rocked and turned continuously. Facing the audience at the church pews, the front line stopped, linked arms at the waist and looked at their feet, which they moved forward and backward with very small steps. They stopped, strode to the side, returned, began to lie down but froze in unison, all in random stages

of the attempt. The line behind them, facing front, began the foot movements. After a few seconds, the first line continued lying down, immediately began getting up and froze again, continued up, walked off to the side; the second line walked off with them, and both returned at once. The process was repeated until each line had ~~was~~ successively been removed by the previous one and all lines had walked off and returned a few times, lines always freezing in the same positions as they had the first time, over and over, until on one exit, instead of leaving the floor empty, Valda Setterfield was left there, nude, quietly assuming poses, and the lines remained at the steps.

A tape recording of Gordon working with Setterfield on movements and poses was turned on. Setterfield made each pose carefully, taking time to get into a position, holding it for a few seconds, relaxing and moving out of it and into another. Some were silly-looking, some sporty, most exquisite. They were taken from Eadweard Muybridge's photographs in The Human Figure in Motion. The process of walking into poses was as carefully done as were the poses themselves.

The group of six women walked across the back of the floor and froze. A giggle started them off; they laughed sporadically for awhile, and walked to the side. Setterfield's poses were unaffected; she used all of the space and turned to face different areas of the room. A piano played on the tape and someone sang, "Every little movement has a meaning all its own,/Every thought and feeling by some posture can be shown,/And every love thought that comes a stealing/O'er your being must be revealing/All its sweetness in some appealing little gesture all, all its own," after which the talking resumed. Valda walked out

of a pose and off toward the mirrors; everyone on the steps got up to follow, and froze not far into the space.

About six people left the mass, walked together to a far corner, faced the front audience and assumed in relative unison the "bathing beauty" pose--weight thrown onto the right hip, head turned to gaze chin up into the open hand extended to the left, right hand at the back of the head, primping, chest inflated. A second group assumed the pose together in another corner, and someone from the first joined them. Groups continued to form and dissolve until there were about five scattered over the floor, posed and facing the audience at the church pews. Those remaining on the side crossed the floor and, as they reached each group, swept those people off with them and stopped at the opposite side. The process was repeated. In the third repetition, new groups joined a larger one in back, until almost everyone was posing across the back third of the space, facing the front audience. The floor was cleared.

Half the performers, Gordon and Dunn among them, walked together toward the center of the floor and froze. The half left on the side walked through them, carefully moving arms and torsos out of the way so that initial positions were modified by the passing, and froze together on the opposite side of the first group. The first wove through the second in the same way, and walked off. The second followed, leaving Gordon and Dunn alone, standing together.

They began to move in perfect unison, relaxed, always joined--sometimes by one hand, at other times, the length of their bodies touched--bending together, rolling over, stopping, walking, tromping. (A tape of them talking was played during this section for the first performance only.)

They went fluidly from still positions into graceful and heavy movements, Douglas appearing almost careless, David more formal. The precision required for moving and working together so closely transformed their simple, unstylized movements into quite intricate ones. They spent some of that time simply looking at different sections of the audience.

As they worked, the performers at the side made a line along the steps and, reminiscent of a badly rehearsed Busby Berkeley arrangement, walked together toward the opposite wall, forming as they went a large "V" which extended two-thirds of the distance across the floor to where Dunn and Gordon continued, uninterrupted. (Christopher Peck, one of the performers, created this section. Gordon announced in one of the first rehearsals that if anyone had an idea to add to the piece, they could work together to put it in. Peck's was the only proposal.) The "V" people turned, walked back a few steps, stopped, walked off to the side and began re-forming the line. The "V" was made two more times, until Gordon and Dunn were using the space required for it, and it could not be repeated. At one point the two stood slightly apart, one with a hand on the other's shoulder. They shifted weight, turned around together exchanging hand and shoulder positions, looked for awhile to one side, looked to the other, turned, shifted weight, each time with a less distinguishable break until their movements evolved into the rocking and turning done by everyone in lines earlier. They continued quietly for some time, then linked arms and looked down at their feet, moving them slightly forward and backward.

The men at the steps brought shoes to different parts of the floor, carefully arranged them in small piles, and walked to the opposite side. The women gathered in clusters around the piles, frozen in

positions of kicking them, then left separately, clearing the floor of shoes.

Everyone returned, some bringing chairs and a table, and took positions in a breakfast scene: Three people sat on chairs around the table in the center, one yawning grandly, another sipping from an imaginary tea cup; a man was stopped a few inches above the seat of the fourth chair; a woman behind him was about to speak. Other groups were scattered around the space: A few people gathered around a man pointing out a cavity; some comforted a woman who looked sick. One woman was draped languorously on a chair a short distance from the party at the table, indifferent to everyone around her. The performers were motionless.

Two people left and walked to the steps, quickly removed their street clothes, changed into nightwear, returned to their original positions, and remained still for some time. Others followed at intervals: The group around the man with the cavity was left peering into nothing; tea was being accepted from no one. On the steps there was a vast amount of unzipping and discarding of clothing, and there was purposeful movement to and from the scene. The scene itself was maintained, as gradually all the street clothes were replaced by nightgowns, flannels, nude bodies, underwear.

Everyone had changed and returned, and for a moment no one moved. Then one by one they left to change back into street clothes, and the scene began to disintegrate. Those who finished changing first stood together in the front corner and watched the people changing with slight impatience, hands on hips, until everyone had changed and joined them. Together they crossed diagonally to the opposite

corner of the room and stopped, looking back to the corner they had left, paused, turned, still looking at that corner, to face across the length of the floor, paused, ran en masse across the back of the space, around the corner, down the width and almost off the edge of the dance floor and into the audience before freezing, wedged together, arms and legs caught in the rather violent motions of running.

They turned and walked to the center of the space, faced the windows in back and formed a four to five foot wide column of people extending from the front edge of the floor to the back. They adjusted their positions from various crouching ones to standing erect and reaching up, so that the height of the back of the column was low and gradually increased to those standing at its front. They were motionless. The audience behind them at the church pews could see the sweeping increase of height, directed up and away from them, and ending with those standing and reaching at the front of the column. The effect was of an unfolding of the initial crouching position, or of many single frames of a film of someone moving from the crouching to the standing one. They turned in ~~unison~~ ⁱⁿ unison ninety degrees to the right, holding their bodies in the original positions. Relative heights remained the same, but they now faced out from themselves, rather than up through the length of the column, and revealed a new set of positions to the audience, stair-stepped from one end up to the other. They paused there for a few seconds, then turned again in position to face the front audience, and stopped, revealing a new set of positions, and directed down to those crouching at the front. They paused, turned again, and moved backwards or forwards to find empty spaces and fill the performing area.

Everyone assumed the same angular stance, the body held erect, knees bent, feet apart, right leg slightly forward, upper arms held against the torso and forearms at right angles pointing ahead, eyes looking

ahead, fingertips wiggling constantly. Each sang softly. Independent of each other, they turned continuously and almost imperceptibly from that position around to the left, using their feet as pivots, holding their upper bodies in the original position, slowly extending their arms straight out to each side, as they turned, then drawing the right arm around parallel to the left, As they gradually twisted around to face diagonally across the room, With arms stretched out in front and fingertips moving, they carefully lowered themselves to the floor, disentangled and extended their legs, with the ankles crossed, and lowered their backs to the floor. Arms were held perpendicular to torsos and then pulled down slowly until upperarms rested alongside the body and forearms stuck straight up. The singing gradually stopped and the floor was covered with supine bodies, as, one by one, they completed "mannequin" under the bright lights, ended looking up into them, fingers waving gently like underwater grass, bodies as relaxed as sand. A peaceful time passed. A few people got up and bowed; others followed, bowed and left the space. The Matter ended.

David's

Comments

At a Grand Union performance in February, David Gordon sent a sign-up sheet through the audience to collect volunteers to begin work on new and old material for the eventual performance of The Matter in April. The twenty to forty-five of us who came to rehearsals were, collectively, non-dancers. We were to perform a substantial amount of the material, along with Gordon, Douglas Dunn and Valda Setterfield, and a group of New York University students taking a course from the Grand Union. The use of non-dancers was integral to the piece.

Theoretically, we rehearsed twice a week. In reality, those who came on one night generally did not come on the other, and until the last few rehearsals, Gordon taught and explained to two groups who were to perform as one. He worked separately with the New York University people on the parts they would do alone, with Dunn for the duet and with Setterfield for her solo. These sections were not rehearsed together with the larger group until the last two weeks of rehearsals. Dunn and Setterfield learned all the group sections at the last rehearsal.

What we were asked to do did not require special training, but it did require concentration--on the ordinary movements of walking, turning, moving an object, on standing motionless, and, in a sense, on oneself--to avoid being mechanical, to hold onto the energy inherent in action, even when momentarily suspended. Except in a few scenes, still positions were the result of abruptly halting ordinary movement, and were not planned in advance. The simple task of freezing while walking

across the floor involved a surprising amount of concentration to avoid arranging oneself stiffly in a position rather than catching oneself there. We, along with the audience, could examine how we moved, especially as revealed by the freezes. I was often surprised at positions I was caught in, whether created by unconscious or self-conscious movement. "M^{...}annequin," an uninterrupted movement and the most difficult to do, required incredible concentration on every part of the body at once to prevent one part from turning faster than the others.

Processes involved in moving were explicitly revealed by alternating between periods of motion and stillness to allow an action to progress in stages. Actions were attempted or just allowed to begin: The stool was lowered to the floor slightly, held, moved more toward the floor, held; at rehearsal, Gordon stopped us twice as we walked into what would have been the end-product of the pyramid scene, so that two stages, neither of them the final one, of its development were shown. The use of many people, and of non-dancers, offered many variations of a movement: When the lines exited and returned to lie down and get up, we were caught the first time in our attempts to do those things; the variety of methods used was obvious. But process was implicit in everything we did. One could examine stopped positions of walking during the freezes, but walking--whether ambling or directed toward the opposite side of the room--happened all through the piece and could also be examined carefully. Still positions and the movement required to change from one to another were equally important.

In an informal conversation about his work, Gordon said that he meant not so much to preserve the ordinary as to intensify it, to reveal and alter eccentricities inherent in human beings. To do this, he

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gave us a definite structure in which to walk, tap our feet, stand, and the structure in turn modified how we moved. The performance was itself a general structure, within which we were affected by being stopped in the middle of activities, given specific time limits for doing others (as in "oh yes" and "mannequin"), limited to specific kinds of movement (twenty head and hand alterations). Even the poses we did together reflected our private concepts of the poses and of ourselves doing them. Although uniformity was what Gordon worked toward in "bathing beauty" and "mannequin," the impossibility of perfect uniformity when using living people was as important as the uniformity attempted. Also, instead of disappearing backstage or behind curtains in between sections of the work, we were to use fast, directed walking (as opposed to the still positions and slower movements of the sections themselves), and only across the length of the floor, when moving into and out of the space. What each of us did while waiting on the sides and how we walked into and out of the space, as well as how we handled being there, were all part of the piece. Even timing was determined by specified numbers of our own breaths; individual metabolisms created the illusion of random movement out of the performing area. Emphasis was implicitly on the individual, not as a mechanical or even well-trained being, but as one who must function as naturally as possible within the artificially defined environment of the dance.

As one of the performers, I sensed a distortion of time operating in parts of the work. Periods of absolute stillness in the midst of much movement back and forth are, physically, time lapses, but they also give the feeling of memory lapses, of staying for awhile in a twilight zone. When Christopher Peck asked "What's the matter?" we were all caught before we could respond; he walked away without an

answer, almost as if he were vaguely aware that something extraordinary had happened. From that point on, I felt I was in another time zone during those periods of stillness. That could perhaps help to explain the problem we had during rehearsals of moving too slowly into and out of the performing area: After interminable seconds spent engulfed by motionlessness, I had a hard time being a moving person again; holding still made me want to move afterwards in slow motion. Even when small ~~movements were called for, there was an eerie quality, created by many still people occasionally moving, as when motion is sensed in the corner of one's eye, but ceases before it can be affirmed.~~ movements were called for (as in twenty hand and head movements), there was an eerie quality, created by many still people occasionally moving, as when motion is sensed in the corner of one's eye, but ceases before it can be affirmed.

We and the audience could also catch glimpses of an occasional nude body among the clothed ones. Nudity and dress complemented one another by contrast and offered one more variation of the human body moving: Two people walked across the floor, one nude and the other not; two women were stopped bent over a box, one clothed, the other not. There was a humorous reversal of the change in the breakfast scene, in which performers removed their clothing and returned nude or in night clothes. One woman who had been performing nude returned dressed in a nightgown for the second part of that scene.

The large group moving back and forth across the floor was the parent of the sections involving fewer people. Setterfield and later Gordon and Dunn were left alone ^{to begin the solo and duet} by the group crossing to the opposite side of the floor. Setterfield's poses from The Human Figure in Motion emphasized what we had been doing all along--moving; Gordon and Dunn repeated the rocking and turning done earlier. The group of women forming ^{the} "bathing

beauty" pose, Gordon's "oh yes" and Peck's interrupted activities at the beginning of the piece anticipated almost haphazardly what we all did in extended form later.

Some of the material in The Matter had been done at Oberlin College in January 1972, and the inevitable comparison inspired a few comments from Gordon. At Oberlin, dancers performed on a stage, and spectators sat in front, at a distance. The room at Cunningham's altered the performance more than he anticipated: There, the audience sat on two sides, quite close; all of the floor and the people on it could not be taken in at one glance. The strength of "bathing beauty" and the breakfast scene in particular at Oberlin was that the audience could see the entire stage area: In the former scene, they could see groups break off from the mass of still people and assume the eccentric pose in small clusters over the floor; in the latter, they could see a scene formed, then slowly taken apart and put together again in pajamas. At Cunningham's spectators could look at a group of bathing beauties, and then look at another; they could see one or two parts of the breakfast scene at a time. And the proximity of the audience was unnerving: I felt awkward frozen for a full minute looking directly into a spectator's eyes only a few feet away; Gordon and Dunn spent much of their duet looking at different parts of the room--at walls during rehearsals, but at people for the performances--and Gordon said he was at first shocked by the confrontation.

The close quarters worked for the piece in some ways. Distinctions between performers and spectators became even more ambiguous at Merce Cunningham's. The dance floor there is flawless, and to keep it so spectators who overflowed to the opposite side of the floor were requested to remove their shoes to cross. Spectators and performers

were entering the room together; some were fully clothed, some wore no clothes and carried shoes, some were clothed and carried shoes.

Simply because the audience could not see the entire space at once, an attention to detail was allowed which would have been impossible with distance from the performing area. One person's changes could be observed carefully. We all changed ^{CLOTHES OR} on the steps and raised stage at one side for the breakfast scene (as opposed to the wings, visible only to a portion of the audience at Oberlin). Changing was made more important by its immediacy.

The three-dimensional quality of the space, which would be diminished by distance from it, was preserved: Spectators could peer through the limbs of performers close to them to examine a group of people in the opposite corner of the room. A position or movement changes with the angle from which it is seen. The proximity of audience to performers ~~required~~ created extreme angles of observation, whereas the audience at Oberlin looked straight on at the stage, seeing the space as if it were almost two-dimensional. The mirrors along one wall allowed some ~~few~~ people (including performers) to view the reflections of activities as well as the activities directly, and created new available angles for seeing what was going on in the center.

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