

# Red in the Face—or Just Blue?

BY DEBORAH JOWITT

First David Gordon has us all sit on the floor of the Paula Cooper Gallery and listen to "The Stars and Stripes Forever." It isn't a bad thing to have to do. Then he and Valda Setterfield walk in, all layered over with shirts and sweatpants and things, and stand in very small taped squares and let us pin a few imaginary dances on them while we listen to David Gordon's voice coming out of a speaker. The voice—tired, but finicky about enunciation—describes the history of the genesis of the work we've so far seen one minute of (a long look that passes between the participants, a slow turn that spirals down to the floor and up again, a trimming of stillness). In this case, inspiration is like a bad trip: Gordon is beset by color. He speaks of blacking out, admits he's yellow, tells how Valda turned purple in the face while trying to learn the dance, and tries to decipher a cryptic phone call from Nancy Green. And so on.

Gordon and Setterfield repeat their little dance-germ and walk to two blue folding chairs. Gordon's voice, brisker now, begins to describe his choreographic approach to the piece we are now either seeing or waiting to see. It seems he chalked a grid on the hall floor of his apartment building, assigned values to lines or squares traversed or erased by people entering the building, and then derived rules for his dance from the messages the grid revealed to him. I've forgotten how he deter-

**David Gordon**  
New work with Valda Setterfield  
**The Rush Company**  
**Gail August Dancers**  
An Evening with Scott Joplin

mined what part of the dancers' bodies were to be in contact with the chairs; I've also forgotten whether lines erased by sleeping bums resulted in movement on the floor, or what effect skipping children had. Anyway, Gordon spent a lot of time in the hall, nurturing and charting this dance.

The dance. Its relationship to lines, charts, passersby, or Gordon lurking in his hallway recedes. It's a dance about two people and two chairs. They perform the same actions, but their individual pulses make one lag behind or edge ahead of the other. Each is preoccupied with his/her own task, but they take note of each other. Two amicable workers assigned the same shift. The movement looks complicated to remember and hard to do, but the precision is the low-keyed kind you devote to a task. They perform, but they don't PERFORM!

The blue chairs—turned, stood on, folded and unfolded—assume the status of vaguely malevolent partners. Their metal legs clang and scrape against the floor; they trap the pelvises of the dancers, look

ready to guillotine them. Gordon and Setterfield begin the dance again. This time, each studs the movement with repeats, beginning a move, withdrawing from it, beginning it, withdrawing—as many as eight times. The "repeats" are like stammered embellishments. A needle momentarily stuck in the groove of a record.

Again, they do the dance. The ordeal. Now they're humming "The Stars and Stripes Forever"—pressing the tune upward when they rise onto a chair, squashing it under their falling bodies, bending it as they squirm between seat and chairback. When Gordon and Setterfield finally stand in their squares again and we listen—again—to the recording of "Stars and Stripes Forever", everything's different. Their clothes are grubby, their faces red; their eyes blink away sweat; their chests pump in and out. We all have plenty of time to think. About the discrepancies between the demonic nature of the creative urge and the logistics with which it must be worked out; about the immense distance between the battle plan and the exhausted soldiers. I expect G. and S. to topple when the music ends, but they just smile tiredly and nod, "okay, thanks," and walk away. I feel like bursting into tears of relief; perhaps they do too.

Intermission rejuvenates us all. Gordon begins his in-progress "One



David Gordon and Valda Setterfield at Paula Cooper Gallery

Act Play" with another taped lecture. This one is about making words out of other words, and the process becomes increasingly ludicrous. Changing the "d" in dance to "ch" gives you chance with relatively little trouble (my paraphrase); but, say, taking everything away from dance but the "n" and then adding motion in front of it... well, you get the point.

Then Gordon and Setterfield twin up and stand close together; each together, each with one foot forward and one foot back. They progress gradually across the gallery by shifting their weight and turning back and forth. Facing away from us they become an aggressive, prying person; facing us, they are a shy, polite one. Since they both speak all the dialogue, seldom overlapping, we hear each line of the street-corner encounter twice, in two different voices. "Where have you been?" "Where have you been?" "Hiding." "Hiding." "Hiding?!" "Hiding?!"

"Hiding." "Hiding." "From whom?" "From whom?" "From you." "From you." The pointless and rude curiosity of the questioner, the patience of the answering victim pluck our familiar anger. Cities are great places for getting cornered and buttonholed.

Part 3, "The Confession." Gordon stands facing Setterfield. She begins the story of her morning, the reason for her tardiness, delivering each word with equal emphasis, making measured pauses between words. Gordon listens, nodding his head slightly or shaking it. The story is one of those that keep requiring backtracking or further elaboration to explain each tiny forward step. She can't get in the subway because she only has a \$20 bill because she had to cash a check at the liquor store and didn't dare ask for specific denominations because, after all, they're doing her a favor. She doesn't buy a lot of liquor anyway, only wine when they're having com-

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pany. So she has this \$20 bill . . .  
Amazing the way she's able to keep life moving through her voice, to keep color shading the words in this stylized recitation. Sometimes when she dances, I've found her tense and drawn as if the proper execution of someone's choreography were a grim and exacting task; at this performance, especially when she spoke, she revealed a rare and lovely gentleness. Gordon, loose and versatile, capable of projecting many moods, characters, accents, kept himself simple and let his ideas glow through him. Wryly.  
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