

# DANCE

By Deborah Jowitt

The Judson Church dances of the early '60s taught us perhaps more than we remember to be grateful for. Because of them, I don't see **DAVID GORDON's** *Wordsworth and the motor + Times Four* as radical or minimal or "not dance"—although I'm aware that it might be considered all these things—but only as one of the most stylish and delicately brainy of recent dance events.

It begins when Bob Seder and Ain Gordon disconnect and remove a series of folding screens in the center of the studio to reveal . . . the other half of the audience, whom we laugh with across the empty space between us. Here come Valda Setterfield and David Gordon. The conglomerations of blue-gray sweaters, kneepads, bright socks they have on over their black leotards make him look like a burly poet/athlete and her—with that cap of silver hair—like a gracious official in a science-fiction Utopia. Wait, I forgot the taped excerpt from David Pye's *The Nature of Design*, read by Norma Fire in canon with her own deep, slowed-down voice. It's about the transfer of energy.

*Wordsworth* is three sections. First Setterfield and Gordon embark on a series of large quiet gestures—circles of the arm/arms, raising of the leg, nodding of the head, etc.—talking the movement: "arm, nod, lunge, hip, hip." Working very separately from each other on related but different material. Cataloguing for themselves and us. Then they do a grave little rhythmic canon together, accompanying loaded but neutrally delivered gestures with phrases like "it's hot," "you go." Finally each at the same time executes a fluid chain of hand and body motions on top of an advancing and retreating walk—she reciting, clearly and without drama, Portia's "quality of mercy" speech, he "to be or not to be." While we let the words color the wryly juxtaposed gestures. Or vice versa.

In *Times Four*, the two go side by side through a long sequence of phrases. They repeat each one four times—facing north, south, east, west, or the four diagonals. You notice how beautifully in unison they are—more than just together; in the silence their rhythm never falters. Most of the phrases travel; all are, loosely speaking, pedestrian, but within that restricted framework they vary remarkably in rhythm, weight, focus, intensity, level. I remember one I got very fond of which involved a suspended step and a fall of weight into a walk that grew lighter and slower as the impetus declined. It was possible to be torn between

thinking you'd die if it didn't end soon and thinking you'd never tire of it.

So (is this *and the motor*?) they return to the gesture patterns that accompanied their soliloquys, but this time without talking—very neatly and quickly. As they draw far apart and begin a canon, whose parts are as separated in time as they in space, and sing quiet signaling notes, Bob Seder and Ain Gordon erect the screens between them.

The plain material, concrete, yet ingeniously made and polished and deferentially executed, points to no meaning but itself and its process. And it glows with significance.

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THE sixties avant-gardists carry on. But the reason to go and see David Gordon and Valda Setterfield, who perform in the flat, uninflected tradition of Yvonne Rainer, is their unexemplified wit. Like other practitioners of the style, they use an elementary gestural sequence, but they add to it a robotlike performance; often, while moving, they speak tonelessly. In the first part of their latest piece, which they presented in their loft studio on lower Broadway, they suggested a mechanized Babbitt and Bromide, first announcing what they were doing ("Circle arm, step, turn"), then continuing to do it while intoning clichés ("Hi!" "Put it there!") or spouting whole Shakespearean soliloquies. The piece, which was called "*Wordsworth and the motor + Times Four*," dealt in synchronization. Much of it was asynchronous; the place seemed filled with echoes and instant replays. "*Times Four*," the centerpiece, was a long series of simple three-step phrases repeated to four sides; it was in immaculate unison. Toward the end, some of the early material was repeated, again asynchronously, while the sound of a motor pulsed through the room. When it comes to feats of memory or feats of absurdity, Gordon and Setterfield are not to be outdone. They are my favorite Off Broadway comedians, but they have a serious core. Among the absolutists and minimalists who continue to throng the downtown lofts, they are the non-performers who have the most to teach about performance.

—ARLENE CROCE