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## DANCE

JANICE ROSS

# Minimal dance with a flair: a talk with David Gordon and Valda Setterfield

## DAVID GORDON IN PERFORMANCE WITH VALDA SETTERFIELD.

Friday and  
Saturday, Aug. 4-5, 8:30 pm, Margaret Jenkins  
Dance Studio, 1590 15th St., SF, \$3.50 or PAS,  
863-7580.

One continuing pleasure and frustration of the so-called avant-garde in the arts is its contemporary invisibility. Especially in a performing art like dance, new work has often already become recent history by the time it finally reaches the West Coast.

This weekend marks an exception, however. David Gordon, currently one of the most influential post-Cunningham choreographers, will give two performances at the Margaret Jenkins Dance Studio. Gordon and his wife and partner, Valda Setterfield, will perform excerpts from two of his recent works, "Wordsworth and the Motor" and "Not Necessarily Recognizable Objectives." Their visit to San Francisco comes in conjunction with a two-week workshop they are currently teaching at the Jenkins studio.

A founding member of both the Judson Dance Theatre (1962) and the Grand Union (1970), Gordon received his early performing experience with James Waring's Company and Yvonne Rainer. This background is evident in many of his works, which are curious blends of theatricalism and movement austerity. Gordon's choreographic style incorporates certain minimal dance qualities, like repetition of unadorned patterns, with a flair for parody and theatricality. He has created works as diverse as "Chair," an accumulation dance for two performers and two folding chairs, and "Random Breakfast," a work one critic described as "the apotheosis of Gordon's fascination with show biz . . . in which performance styles and conventions ranging from striptease to Milton Berle's imitations of Carmen Miranda were presented and pulled apart."

Today Gordon heads his own "permanently temporary" David Gordon/Pick Up Company in New York and is also a member of the dance panel of the National Endowment for the Arts. Not surprisingly, he is an outspoken and articulate observer with the same penchant for exactness and wit in conversation that he displays in choreography.

I spoke with Gordon and Setterfield one afternoon recently between rehearsals in Jenkins's new second-floor studio. Eschewing the traditional arrangement of a dance company, Gordon has established the David Gordon/Pick Up Company as an alternative. This situation allows him to work with a group of dancers of

that befalls the family in *Summer Paradise* is too amorphously defined to become the social tragedy that it seems meant to represent.

his choice whenever he has a specific work in mind.

"It's a project-oriented situation," he explained. "This format has been used for as long as I've been involved in dance. At the time of Judson, nobody had a company, everyone used everybody. The only reason anyone needs to make rules about the number of people who should be in a company and how long they have been together is because of funding. Dancers don't need those rules. They know who they are working with."

In the 18 years Gordon has been choreographing, he has done works that range from solos for himself to "Sleepwalking," a work that has included up to 40 dancers and nondancers. By his own admission he is a dictator when it comes to choreography. "What I'd really like is to be Hitler and tell everybody exactly what to do just the way I want it," he said. "Most people, when given a great many options [in performance], choose to perform all the options that are given them. If I give you a lot of options, I want you to choose one, and even as you explore it and all its options, throw away half of them and really concentrate on what is the minimal amount you can do and remain involved in what you are doing and have others involved. People under ordinary circumstances just make too many decisions for me."

One dancer Gordon has found especially amenable to his choreographic ideas is Valda Setterfield. Setterfield, who for nine years was a dancer with the Merce Cunningham Company and has also performed with James Waring, the Grand Union and Yvonne Rainer, is now Gordon's most frequent performer.

Gordon: "I think the collaboration between the two of us is the same as the collaboration between any choreographer and any company. The work is organized and conceived and put together by me, but the reality is that it couldn't be the same work without Valda. When you know somebody and work with them, you take advantage of the things that they do well. And then some perversity also makes you take advantage of all the things they don't do well. Partly it's because you have this strong godlike feeling that you can teach them to do those things they don't do well. And then the other thing is because doing something not so well in the midst of what they do do well is so interesting."

Setterfield: "It's also very interesting for a performer to be put in that position. It's very tedious to be always doing things you can do."

Gordon: "Valda is an exceedingly brave performer—more so than me, more so than almost anybody I know. And she is not at all vain about performance. Most dancers are very vain and want to be seen at their best. Valda allows me to do things in my work in which she is not necessarily seen at her best. That's a collaboration, when somebody says 'Yes! Let's go!'"

Setterfield: "Another aspect that I bring to it is that I seem to be able to render as faithfully as I am physically able what I am given, and I don't need to change it to glamorize myself or decorate it or make it physically comfortable for myself. I've always been interested in doing this, and I've never been interested in making work."





The dictator and the "brave performer": David Gordon and Valda Setterfield.

Question: What do you say to critics like Arlene Croce who contend that this type of dance you and others are involved in never grows because dancers today do not build on one another's accomplishments?

Gordon: "Amongst some people things *don't* grow, and amongst some people things never *appear* to grow because they don't understand what the rules of the growth process that they are watching are. The rules are not the same for all people and all forms of dance. I think that growth for Arlene implies directional growth and achievements of theater. But in many instances the people she is dealing with are not interested in achievements of theater. They are interested in the opposite—the unachieving."

"But whatever growth or change there is must appear in the performance. There isn't a point in a whole lot going on in my mind that you can't see. I have to make apparent where I am. I can't make apparent where I'm going, because I don't know where I'm going. If I knew where I was going, I wouldn't have to go there. I can only show you where I am at the moment. The next time you come back, if I am someplace else it's your decision, if I went someplace or if I didn't go someplace—whether I slid backwards, moved sideways or moved ahead. I can't be interested in that. I mean, I'm not evaluating myself as if there is some road to walk that I have to keep up with other people on, or that I have to gain a certain distance before I'm 87. I must intuitively believe in my own intelligence and my talent to translate that intelligence into a performance situation. Other than that, what guidelines do I have for growing?"

Question: What about your method of choreography?

Gordon: "The way I deal with material is finding other ways of repeating it so that I'm milking it. I don't have that many ideas so that I can afford to just throw them around. Margie [Margaret Jenkins] has ten zillion ideas, and they're all in one piece. That amount of ideas would last me my lifetime, and so I have to carefully rework material in order to find out what all the possibilities are in it. I tend to hold on to material and reorganize it in some fashion and see, 'Have I really wrung this out? Is there some other way to look at it, and what does it mean?'"

Question: Do you intentionally work for the humor in your dances?

Gordon: "No. When I start to put together a piece of work I have no intention to make a funny piece as opposed to a serious piece or any other piece. I just begin working. In the course of making a work, what I assume is my sense of humor about myself in the world and about serious art in the world appears in the work. As a matter of fact, the only time I rule them out is when they are too funny and disruptive to a quality of the work. For the most part, I allow them to exist in the work in the same way I can sit here and have a serious conversation with you and make a joke once in a while. I don't make a piece where you start laughing at the beginning and stop laughing at the end."

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