

DANCE



David Gordon and Valda Setterfield rehearse *The Matter*

FRIEZE FRAME

Noel Carroll

David Gordon's Pick-Up Co. performs *The Matter (plus and minus)* at the Dance Umbrella this week. The piece was originally composed while Gordon was a member of the improvisatory group, The Grand Union. In 1972 that group was in residence at Oberlin College for three weeks. Part of their contract stipulated that the members of the troupe teach. But Gordon felt that "I didn't have anything to teach," so he decided to stage a performance with students in lieu of monitoring technique classes. The result was *The Matter*, a huge piece involving 40 students. Since Gordon's previous dance, *Sleep Walking* ('71), employed a great deal of motion and acceleration, he choreographed *The Matter* as a striking contrast: It is a work concerned with stopping and stillness, with arresting movement rather than propelling it.

Returning to New York, Gordon continued to be interested in the project. He staged it again, this time at the Cunningham studio, using volunteers enlisted at a Grand Union concert, students from a course he was teaching at NYU, and a handful of dancers — including himself, Douglas Dunn and Valda Setterfield. The range of body types and ages was wide, and the strong contrasts between the performers was a deliberate source of richness. In the present version of the piece, the age span is not as great as in the Cunningham studio rendition, but the cast is still a medley of sharply differentiated physiques.

In its current form, *The Matter* has lost some sections — for example, a duo between Dunn and Gordon called "Men's Dance" — and gained others — like a segment in which five women freely interpret a score Gordon invented by combining pictures of dance positions from cross-cultural and trans-historical documentation. Also, the nudity of the Cunningham performance has been clothed.

The dress rehearsal of *The Matter* begins with Gordon arranging objects — chairs, blankets, blocks of wood — in the center of the space. At times he freezes mid-action. This material originated in a performance during a Grand Union festival in which people gathered on 8th Street to watch Gordon decorate the display windows at Azuma. While Gordon works romantic music resounds and the corps walks from the west wall to the east side of the rehearsal room where some of them do what look like warm-up exercises for a ballet class. When the music stops, the ensemble crosses the space, halts midway and stares eerily at the audience. Gordon's penchant for an extremely legible choreographic logic is evident here. The first segment involves both static im-

ages and the corps traversing the space; the second section echoes these motifs, freezing the entire ensemble mid-march. The movement to and fro continues for some time, exhilarating us through the rush of the crowd and unsettling us when the corps is either immobilized, as if turned to stone, or idled, rocking on its feet in nervous anticipation.

This is followed by a duo with Gordon and Setterfield that approaches the theme of stasis from another direction. They hold poses gleaned from pop dances, or they clutch in torrid embraces out of Hollywood melodramas. But suddenly one of these statues will move and crawl over, around and through the other, accentuating the deathlike rigidity of the static posture.

Gordon performs a solo in silence that includes a wayward, unpredictable series of skips, turns and jumps. But when he finishes, other dancers arrive and repeat the solo to music. The multiplication of the movement gives it structure while the addition of music — like "Do the Locomotion" — makes some of the previously obscure phrases look like part of a popular dance. The dancers continue to move in the performance space during the intermission.

Part II begins with a solo by Setterfield in which she imitates selected photos from Eadweard Muybridge's *The Human Figure in Motion*. The theme of the frozen gesture resurfaces. But this solo also has an important relation to what immediately precedes it. That set of variations on Gordon's solo illustrates how the meaning of a gesture is relative to a context, while the Muybridge solo suggests that a gesture isolated from a context is bereft of significance. These themes continue throughout the rest of the dance. There are numerous alternations of stillness and motion, including a complex phrase in which dancers' bodies are used to construct, dissolve and reconstruct shapes that recall architectural friezes. At another juncture, Gordon counterpoints the major theme of stasis by integrating a section of constant movement in which dancers slowly rotate, wiggling their fingers, all the while singing "Second Hand Rose" and "Get Married Shirley." One is never in a position to predict what the next sequence will comprise. But once it begins, its formal and thematic relationship to what precedes it seems transparently appropriate and classically lucid.

SWN: Your dances have very tightly worked-out structures. In this piece, the opening works as an overture, setting down many of the later movement themes, including that of stasis and the recurring movement across the width of the performance space. Each segment of the dance either repeats or sharply contrasts with earlier sections. When you start to

make a piece, does the whole structure come to you at once or do you discover it as you go along?

Gordon: More often than not I start somewhere in the middle and then I work from both ends to the core idea. As the material begins to accumulate, I come to recognize what the structure is. Then other ideas I have had stored away or other dances I've done can get incorporated. Suddenly they gain a relationship, in my mind, with what I'm doing now because what I'm doing now is getting clearer.

For example, the "Second Hand Rose" section in this piece grew out of a solo, *Mannequin Dance*, I did at Judson in 1962. It involves ceaseless motion. As I sing, I'm constantly turning and then lying down, and my fingers are always waving. When the core material was developed at Oberlin for *The Matter* I realized the earlier solo would fit perfectly with it as a strong contrast, since it was about never stopping, while much of the rest of the piece was about stopping and stillness.

SWN: The deepest impulse in your work seems toward intellectual clarity and architectonic structures. But once you achieve that clarity, you work against it, often through humor.

Gordon: Yeah. Well, I think parts of my work are amusing. Probably because at some point I get amused with the idea of what will happen when you attack these very clear structures with a clichéd idea or an inappropriate sound. I always find some way to screw up a fabulously straightforward structure. I can't seem to avoid that.

In Valda's Muybridge solo in *The Matter*, the physical material is pristine. But I try to undo some of that elegance by running the rehearsal tape of those movements, and I further confuse the issue by starting the tape before Valda starts the movement. This distracts the audience from the movement. And then I also try to undercut it by sending in a group of women who laugh in the background. So there is a kind of layering of purposes. In my mind this adds up to an idea about the material being both inviolate and violable.

When I see a piece of material that seems perfect and whole I then have the option to allow it to exist that way or to thicken it so its wholeness is not easy to see. Sometimes I want that clear image but sometimes I can't look at that and have to do something else to it.

SWN: As a spectator, I've always regarded that as your autobiographical signature, as a kind of structural expression of self-consciousness, of your striking some distance from the process of dancemaking.

Gordon: I have to personalize things and those additions to the structure are my means. I don't think of myself as an eccentric dancer, though I think that some of my peers do make personal/eccentric movement. But despite what the dancers who have to learn my movement think, I feel my stuff is very ordinary. So it's in the additional material that you find my personal choices.

SWN: Some of those choices seem personal in an autobiographical sense — the use of dialect, a certain kind of New York humor, and the use of poses that one suspects you discovered by watching people in the street.

Gordon: Very often I find that in my work. In this piece the music that runs through the intermission — during which the dancers are still performing — is songs that have amused me or that I've always wanted to do something with but would never make a dance to. So I put together a tape of those pieces and then I play it with a dance that was not made with any music in mind. The tape is a kind of history of my personal choices. It's music I've been emotionally attached to.

SWN: In parts of *The Matter* there are strong expressive, emotive effects. When the group stops, there is a sense of loneliness in the crowd. And the "Second Hand Rose" section is quite poignant. The background voices of the ensemble are ghostly

and incantatory, like Ligeti, and your singing — perhaps because it's so flat — has an air of desperation about it. Combined with the movement, which suggests everyone receding into the grave, it's quite sad. And there's Valda's death at the end.

Gordon: I sing it with a Jewish dialect because I learned it that way from a record by Fanny Brice, which Jimmy Waring used in *Dances Before the Wall*. It meant something special to me because it's in a dialect I knew from my childhood.

Though I didn't realize it when I first did it, now I see the drama and poignancy in those songs. Now I understand. But as soon as I understand something like that, you see, I get suspicious of my motive and I begin to drop it. But I'm going to hold onto this one. I want to try to perform it as objectively as I did before I recognized its poignancy. But I've begun to notice things creeping into my voice that I don't like. I may soon drop it.

You mentioned the end. Valda dies and we come in to get her. There's a musical reference to the funeral march from Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*. As the music stops, we stop with Valda lifted aloft and the piece ends. This section contrasts with the one before. We had been dealing with material as individuals but we suddenly come together for a group act. There is another connection here as well. The piece was originally dedicated to Camilla Gray Prokofieva, the wife of the son of Prokofiev.

SWN: There also seem to be other connections. You begin with a parody of a ballet class and end with ballet music. And Valda's final pose at the end also corresponds with the sculptural and photographic allusions that seem to run through the piece.

Gordon: My work is often classically structured with ABA situations that not a lot of people tune into. It's a very formal, even old-fashioned way of dealing with material. I have a need to finish things off that way.

SWN: The themes of sculpture and photography dominate the dance. It's not just the pausing that gives me this feeling. It's that the pausing is so composed, designed frontally for the audience to see clearly, as one might find in a sculptural ensemble or a posed photograph.

Gordon: I achieved that effect in two stages. First I asked people to move in a crowd and then stopped them to catch them mid-action. The result was almost a sculptural arrangement. Then I tried to use what I got to set up a total pageant like a director arranging a scene. But I had discovered that the sculptural image was already there in the chance procedure of stopping those people mid-action in whatever they chose to do.

SWN: The emphasis on frozen moments has several effects. I've mentioned the sense of loneliness, but there are also formal ramifications because, though "hidden," the frozen moment is so important in classical ballet. You bring that image that functions as a punctuating device in ballet from the end of a phrase and make an entire phrase out of it.

Gordon: That's one way I recognize that image. Another is related to the way the device is used in theater, where things start in a frozen moment or where someone steps out of the frozen moment and delivers a monologue a la *Strange Interlude*. But for *The Matter* that kind of image, which conventionally sets off the action or culminates action, is the action.

Making static images — the freeze/frieze theme — the topic of the dance raised questions about how to organize the piece in time. I could have moved seamlessly from one "frieze" moment to the next. But I spread the movement between the freezes so that the ensemble moves across the space. The thundering feet of all those people underline the silence and stillness in between the movement. That couldn't happen if you jumped quickly from one static image to the next.

I worked hard to obliterate the word

“freeze” from the vocabulary of teaching this dance because I want the stillness to be a live moment of inactivity between two actions. I want it to be a moment in the midst of purpose. People look different when they do something called “freezing” than when you stop them from going from one place to another. I want them to appear alive. I want a live human being who is caught in motion and is still for a moment.

I came upon the idea of using the Muybridge material by accident. Someone gave me a copy of his photographic motion studies. I had never heard of him before. But it hit me that they would fit with the “sculptural” stillness I was working with in the large group sections.

SWN: A major theme of your work seems to be the way that gesture shifts meaning when it is framed in a different context. For example, after you finish your solo in *The Matter* and other dancers enter and repeat it, it changes completely because it is accompanied by music. Gestures — like a turn or stroking one’s hair — that look arbitrarily chosen when you perform them, appear to be deliberate dance steps when the Latin music is added and the other dancers imitate you.

Gordon: When I started dancing and the teacher in a class would say that such and such a step means x, I knew something was wrong. Movement is ambiguous until you place it against some background. In this performance, I play a recording of David Vaughan singing a ditty that says “every movement has a meaning of its own.” That’s exactly the opposite of what I believe. The rest of the performance refutes it. I use a great many repetitions with variations to make the ambiguities of movement apparent. Exploring the alternate possible meanings of gesture is one of my major concerns.

SWN: How do you envision your audience? That is, how do you want spectators to follow the dances you choreograph?

Gordon: Well, at one level I think that I make intelligent entertainments. A lot of material is humorous and if someone finds the dances droll and witty I’m satisfied with that as one kind of response. But ideally I would like a spectator who is involved with noticing the structural correspondences and cross references in the work — someone whose mind goes “bong” when he realizes that something going on now fits with something that happened earlier. ●