

# DANCE

The dance is a paradigm of Gordon's concerns: How do we look at movement and how do we assign it meaning?



David Gordon and Valda Setterfield in Gordon's newest dance, *An Audience with the Pope*

## Cutting the Gordon Knot

Sally Banes

David Gordon/PickUp Co.  
*An Audience with the Pope* and  
*What Happened*  
541 Broadway (April 12-29)

The concert begins with a taped conversation between David Gordon and Valda Setterfield. They are earnestly discussing positions of people's body parts. The meaning of their strange talk comes clearer when Setterfield enters, dressed in a black outfit that looks like a 19th-century bathing suit, and strikes a series of poses. As she systematically revolves, facing in different directions and very deliberately arranging her body in precise configurations — her face sometimes crinkling up just so, her hand held at a particular angle from her hip, or her knees meeting gently in a knock-kneed stance — certain aspects of the sound track make sense in retrospect. The solo, *One Part of The Matter* (1972), is a string of poses taken from Eadweard Muybridge's *The Human Figure in Motion*.

You start to notice how each position is structured and associate it to the situations the conversation had explicated. You watch for the place where the position is impossible to hold because, as Setterfield's voice had complained, clearly the photo caught the man in action just as he was about to land from a jump. You watch for the place where the arm is held so strangely because it just completed a throwing action. At one point the talking stops and David Vaughan's voice sings "Every little movement has a meaning all its own..." You take it as a clue, and you start looking at the postures in an entirely new way.

The dance is a paradigm of Gordon's

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concerns: How do we look at movement and how do we assign it meaning? Here the strategy is to freeze movement and fragment it until movement itself is erased. What is ordinarily the content of a dance — motion — is evident only in the physical traces (poses) and the verbal explanations that may or may not correspond to the action.

In his newest dance, *An Audience with the Pope*, or *This Is Where I Came In*, Gordon obstinately repeats and dissects a dance phrase constructed partly from older works (I recognized, for instance, movements from "Mixed Solo" in *Not Necessarily Recognizable Objectives*, a limping variation of the slow-motion group run in *NNRO*, and gestures from *What Happened*). The dance is a process of analyzing that phrase, through a wide range of familiar Gordon strategies: freezing movement, speeding it up, slowing it down, getting stuck on one movement like a broken record, splitting up the phrase and branching from it with different combinations of dancers.

The dance material itself has many similar movements in it, and is made even more homogeneous by its unvarying rhythm. The challenge is to recognize where the dancer is in the sequence and to figure out whether this moment constitutes a continuation or a repetition. At the same time, the dance becomes more and more austere. It starts out with a slide sequence of stop-frame motion, in which David Vaughan, dressed as the Pope, enters from off-screen and sits down. On tape, his proper, British voice tells a nonsensical account, in tour guide tones, of how audiences for, with, and by the Pope began because the first Pope, Peter, had been a commedia dell'arte mime in a past life. As the voice offers hilarious and absurd etymologies of words like the Pope's dance, popular entertainment, the Pope's nose, potpourri, and so on, Gordon enters, dressed in vaguely clerical black shirt and pants and white collar, and in half-darkness states the dance phrase before the enormous projected image of the Pope on the back wall.

The phrase is then repeated four more times. The second time, the lights are on and the slide imagery is gone; Gordon and Setterfield perform the dance slightly out of synch, with her mumbling, non-stop, a half-heard free-associative speculation on the Pope's interests, feelings and habits. Next, three women perform it and vary it

in silence; next two women and two men break it down and recombine it; finally, the whole company of seven, all dressed alike, perform it in a way that looks totally random, as if each has started at a different point in the series of movements.

I love repetition and for me *An Audience* is exciting in its alteration of suspense and satisfaction. I kept wondering whether and when my favorite movements — a slide and twisting fall with legs crossing, a swivel of the lower half of the body, a squatting bow with ass directly facing the audience — would show up again. The dance, which seems so slip-

perry, casual, almost unintentional when Gordon first performs it, becomes more crystallized, more formalized, with each iteration on each additional body. The dance uses time in a relaxed way, allowing contemplation of the movement construction and context.

Instead of coming to an end, *An Audience* slides into a condensed version of *What Happened*, performed by the company of seven, which I reviewed in its solo form last week. And a correction: The dance ends when the dancers explain that they knew, but had no time, to tell the police what happened.

## Red Notes

Tobi Tobias

Andy deGroat and Dancers  
Brooklyn Academy of Music:  
Lepercq Space

Six long white lines, like highway-lane markers, stretch toward an imaginary point of convergence beyond the pale, gauzy drop that screens the far end of the Lepercq Space. Just behind the drop, which rises in the course of the performance, is a large Lucite rectangle, bar height, holding a clear pitcher of clear liquid and several transparent glasses. This is the cool, austere setting for *Red Notes*, given by Andy deGroat and Dancers at the Brooklyn Academy of Music on April 11 and 12. The nine performers, dressed in casual clothes dyed the bright color of the title, behave like animated particles that turn the space into a high-charged energy field.

For example, somewhere past the midpoint of the hour-long dance, a bulky-bodied man with raven hair and beard steps behind the Lucite counter — and jumps, arms and legs shooting out to make an X of his body, then runs a shallow half-circle through and out of the space, as if for his life. The explosive jump is the cue that sets a soft-bodied woman spinning in a downstage corner, the impetus draining very slowly out of her body until she comes gently to a standstill. In the course of this whirling monologue, a lithe black woman ekes out a segment of a cross-stage path; she looks like a runner slowed down to a degree just before stasis, or a

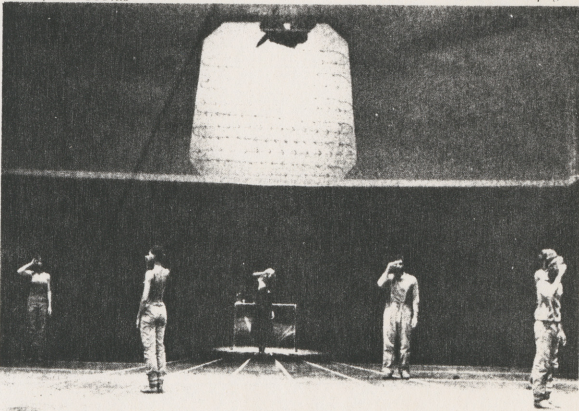
tightrope walker, testing the rope and then easing herself along it another few inches across the abyss. At the same time, a hard-faced young man paces the periphery of the space from corner to corner as if he were a guard, marching back and forth between designated posts. Each time this sequence is repeated, activated by the exclamatory jump, another dancer is added to the four original figures and each tracks through the space in a singular path and design. Most of what they do is fast and propulsive — a couple of the dancers look catapulted into and out of the arena; their speed and threatened collision is exciting.

Elsewhere, in shifting small groups that move in unison, the dancers play a brisk game of crossroads, bisecting each other's diagonal paths, or go gaily sashaying through a large circular pool of light that's spilled onto the floor, their arms stretched flat and wide. Elsewhere again they simply stride in cumulative marches, four steps forward, four back, then five, six, seven, and so on, looming alternately larger and smaller in your vision. At other times they move separately but simultaneously, in quick, windswept runs; arrowy, light-footed leaps with arms that look free-flung, but aren't; wheeling turns that eat up space. The vocabulary is satisfyingly circumscribed; nearly everything you see once you can count on seeing again, with just enough shift in context to have it familiar and yet newly intriguing. Similarly the form of the dance is very simple, clear and coherent. Part of your pleasure in it is recognizing its immaculate order.

There's an emotional undercurrent, though. Even what seems to be pure-movement material arouses certain feelings. A dancer's stretching out, supine, or the melting and collapsing of one figure in-

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Red Notes: Andy deGroat and Dancers at BAM