



A FAMILY AFFAIR: David Gordon, left, plays an aging aunt in 'The Family Business.' Ain Gordon and Valda Setterfield also star in the production.

Actor breaks new ground in a dress

PREVIEW: For a talented trio, this new play is all in the family.

By **PAUL HODGINS**
The Orange County Register

Think "middle-age guy in a dress," and a wealth of comic images comes to mind: Monty Python's chorus of lower-class English fishwives, perhaps, or Milton Berle in pumps and lipstick.

Overwhelmingly in modern culture, a male character dressed as a woman is treated as an excuse for low comedy. Even the recent movies "To Wong Foo" and "Priscilla, Queen of the Desert," two in-depth looks at the psychology of cross-dressing, were essentially modern burlesque. The men-in-hose thing invariably is milked for laughs.

It's not surprising that it would take an artist such as David Gordon to break new ground in a dress. In his latest work, "The Family Business," he plays Annie, an ailing, kvetching 78-year-old Jewish woman whose sole purpose in her fading life is to make the lives of her loved ones miserable. A surprising success in New York, the play makes its West Coast debut Sunday at the Mark Taper Forum.

Cultural pigeon-holders have a tough time dealing with Gordon. Like many choreographers who

'The Family Business'

- **What:** A young plumber and his father try to take care of a crochety, ailing great-aunt.
- **Where:** Mark Taper Forum, 135 N. Grand Ave., Los Angeles
- **When:** Through Dec. 24. Previews end Saturday; regular performances begin Sunday. 8 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, 2:30 and 8 p.m. Saturday, 2:30 and 7:30 p.m. Sunday
- **How much:** \$28-\$35
- **Availability:** Good
- **Call:** (714) 740-2000

bloomed during postmodern dance's seminal Judson era in the early '60s, Gordon's body of work incorporates a wide variety of nondance elements, notably text and a strong narrative line. He even prefers to call his work process "constructing" to "choreographing."

In the past few years, Gordon's work has moved more firmly into the realm of theater. His "The Mysteries, and What's So Funny" (1991), an elaborate collaboration with composer Philip Glass and artist Red Groom, caused many critics to ponder whether it was a dance or a play. "Punch and Judy Get Divorced" (1992) caused similar puzzlement.

"We knew we'd crossed the line when we stopped getting reviewed by dance critics and started getting reviewed by theater critics," Gordon said of "The Family Business," which, as its title implies, is a family

effort that also stars his wife, dancer Valda Setterfield, and their son, writer/actor Ain Gordon. Father and son co-wrote the script, and all three worked out the details in rehearsal.

The involvement of the entire Gordon family made sense, Ain Gordon said, because the story has autobiographical origins.

"It happened because of an aged aunt of my father's who had suffered a fall. I took her to the hospital."

The woman had no children, and his father was out of town, so he felt compelled to keep her company, Ain Gordon explained.

"While I was visiting her, I was struck at how she and the other (old people) were the victims of a system that didn't take care of them."

Ain Gordon felt compelled to write about his experiences.

"When he read some of his stuff to me, I thought it was quite amazing that he'd gotten as involved with (his great-aunt) as he was," David Gordon remembered. "I asked him did he think it possible we could work on this together, and he said we could try."

Father and son gave a staged reading of an early version of the work — an experience that David Gordon, despite his multidisciplinary background, found extremely nerve-racking.

"We just stood up and read it, and it was a kind of performance I'd never been involved in," David Gordon said. "I'd stepped off the stage about eight years before that, stopped performing al-

together. Suddenly, here was a situation in which there seemed to me something I could possibly do — it was just standing and reading.

"So we agreed to work on it some more, and it just evolved naturally into a very complicated, physical production — despite my original intentions."

Although Setterfield became involved at that point, David Gordon remained in the female role — a seemingly mystifying decision that actually makes some sense, the family said.

"Well, I did it at the reading, and I enjoyed playing the role," David Gordon said. "I knew the real aunt, so I figured, 'I'm probably the one who could pull it off.'"

"I think we all knew that David understood deep from his insides more about that woman than perhaps I did," Setterfield agreed.

"If it had been an 80-year-old woman playing an 80-year-old woman, some of the things she said would have seemed so sentimental," Ain Gordon said. "The fact that this sturdy man was playing her allowed certain things to have an ironic side to them."

In the play, Annie can be mad-deningly difficult to deal with. She puts her son and grandson (both played by Ain Gordon) through some trying times as she complains about everything and everyone around her. And her family gives as good as it gets.

But, underlying all this rancor, David Gordon said, is the mes-

sage that many of us will find ourselves in the same situation, experiencing the same feelings of frustration, some day.

"Nobody warns you that you are going to become the parent of your parent at some point in time," he said. "It makes you realize that sometimes you can hate the person you love."

"And you are not (caregiving) any more willingly than they are willingly letting you become the 'parent,'" Ain Gordon added. "It's a two-way battle all the time. They're angry at you because you're helping them, and because they need your help. But they're desperate for it, so they love you because you're the only one who would do it. There's a constant struggle the whole time: anger-love-hate, anger-love-hate. Sometimes you think you'll never find your way. But somehow, you do."

► HOT THEATER

Give yourself an early Christmas present this year: Zip down to La Jolla to catch Penn & Teller's show. After 20 years, their brand of iconoclastic comedy and magic seems as fresh and inventive as ever.

Through Dec. 10. 8 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, 2, 6:30 and 9:30 p.m. Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday. La Jolla Playhouse, La Jolla. Tickets: \$29-\$34. (619) 550-1010.

By **PAUL HODGINS**
The Register