

## VOICE

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By Deborah Jowitt

**Ain Gordon &  
David Gordon***The Family Business*  
At Dance Theater Workshop  
February 23 through March 6

In the pieces that David Gordon began to make in the post-Judson 1970s, "dance" was a matter of people with pedestrian demeanor spooling out skeins of movement that few pedestrians would consider doing. As witty and dazzling wordplay entered his works, walking carried it like a train looping around the curve, through the tunnel, up the mountain and back down, exposing it to different scenery. With *Framework* (1983-84), flat pieces of wheelable scenery (by Power Boothe) extended motion and rhythm, as well as creating rapidly shifting playing areas. Gordon elaborated on the device in *The Mysteries and What's So Funny?*

The works of Gordon's son Ain, performer and playwright, have shown that he and his father think along the same stylistic lines—repetition, variation, and deadpan humor winding smoothly along. This is made overwhelmingly evident now that Ain Gordon and David Gordon (credited in that order) have collaborated on a play, *The Family Business*, starring the two of them and mother-in-law Valda Setterfield. The subject, which also figured in *The Mysteries*, is Jewish family life, viewed with regret, anger, humor, and love.

Phil wanted to be a songwriter, but he's a plumber. His son Paul wants to be a playwright, but he's a plumber too, as the company's calm, offhandedly efficient Mrs. Wonder reminds him (A. Gordon

plays both men, donning a fake nose and specs as Phil; Setterfield is Mrs. Wonder, Phil's mother, scenery mover, ambulance siren, and every put-upon female in the piece). As the play begins, Phil's away, leaving Paul to cope—or not cope—with the business and his aged great aunt, Annie Kinsman, who's just had a nasty fall. Annie, a loving, raging kvetch, is played by D. Gordon. The thick mustache is only surprising at first on this bulky, stooped figure in a house-dress, with barrettes in her graying hair, scolding nurse after nurse.

The characters are wonderfully drawn. Paul is not just immature, frustrated, and slightly defensive about being gay; he really loves this cranky old woman, even when she seems to be biting off small pieces of his body and hoarding them. Annie is not just bossy and demanding; she's a woman alone whose husband Manny could not (would not?) give her children. The performances are splendid. A. Gordon is brash as Paul, terminally weary as Phil. Setterfield can be a foul-mouthed shopkeeper, patient Mrs. Wonder, and a warm, gracious narrator with equal ease. D. Gordon can break us up, lying on the floor drenched in blood, making remarks like "I love the *T1 Guide*; it's my Bible," and break our hearts, as Annie slowly crosses the stage pushing a chair that doubles as a walker.

Paul the playwright is writing the play we are seeing, and characters interrupt it, often at inopportune times, to give asides and background. When a phone rings, they say, "The phone rings," until Mrs. Wonder tells Paul this is stupid. The plot is not action filled; it's about coming to terms with your background and what you

make of your life. (The richest speech is one by Setterfield about the Jewish wife who dries up helping her husband do what he never wanted to do in the first place.) The play, however, almost never

## Dance

stops moving. Each of the variously sized iron coatracks on wheels is decked with several possible shower curtains (like a clear plastic one that says "Phil & Son, Plumbers," like a black one that creates a funeral home). As Setterfield and A. Gordon talk, they swoop these and the furniture around to create or reveal locale. Talk and action fall into crisp rhythmic patterns. Paul and Phil pop out in turn from behind a curtain to confront each other at last. A brisk hospital-admittance questionnaire that Setterfield is rattling off runs concurrently with the following: Annie needs to "pish"; nurse hands plastic pan to Paul; Paul asks Annie to lift up; pan is pushed in the vicinity of backside; "I'm finished," says Annie; pan is passed back and behind a screen. All this proceeds as if on counts of one, and is repeated several times, as the nurse drones on. Phones slip all over the place, onto the desk, in and out of Mrs. Wonder's pocketbook, and the characters' pursuit of one another along the telephone lines is a kind of aural dance. In fact, this terrific play moves in more vital rhythms than many dances I've seen.