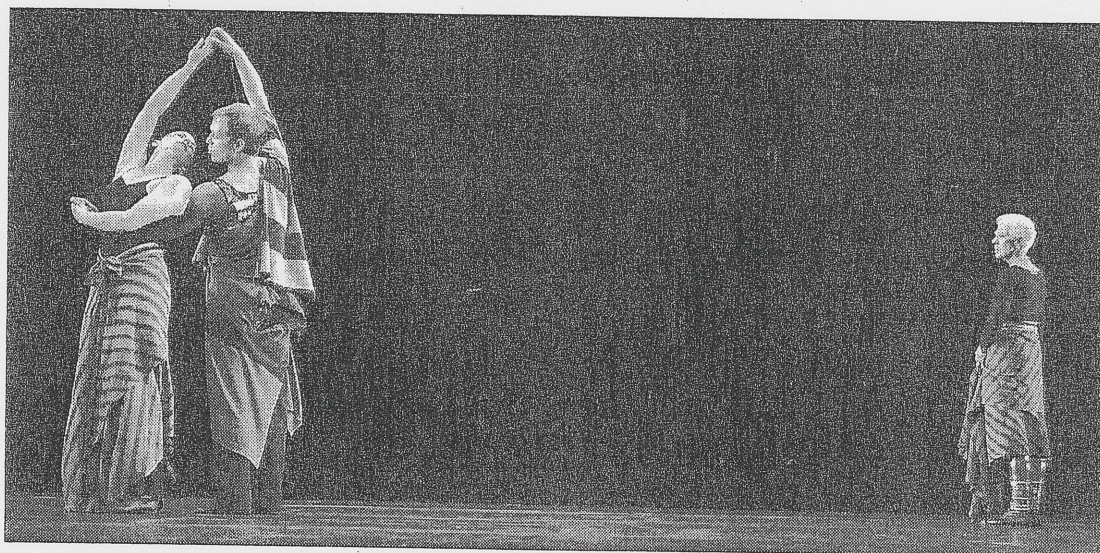


Saturday, May 29, 2004



WADE SPEEDS/STAFF

Karen Graham (left) and Tadej Brdnik dance during a rehearsal of the Pick Up Performance Company's production of 'Couples' in the Emmett Robinson Theatre at the College of Charleston.

'Couples' blends dance with theater

BY ELIZA INGLE
Post and Courier Reviewer

Since he began creating work in the 1960s, David Gordon has worked to blur lines between dance and theater.

After seeing his Pick Up Performance Company on opening night of the 2004 Spoleto Festival USA, it becomes clear that his work is an intriguing marriage between the two. Marriage, and other forms of relationships, are the main threads of "Couples," a suite of three dances assembled for the festival.

The audience arrives to see dancers warming up to a recording of artists talking about their work. A scruffy and stocky Gordon walks across the stage and prepares the space, pulling ordinary objects into some configuration. On a chalkboard he writes "No Chairs" so the audience will know that the program has changed from the originally advertised piece.

"Private Lives of Dancers" begins with a conversation between Gordon and Valda Setterfield, his wife and creative partner of 40-plus years. As they disassemble the array of objects, they banter in a familiar way. She describes her day, adding inquiries to which he replies by a brief "yes," "no" or "maybe." Soon the stage is clear and Setterfield asks "Are you

ready to do this?"

They begin a duet by walking together, changing directions, pausing and beginning again. The sound comes from recordings of couples who worked together, like Ted Shawn and Ruth St. Denis, Noel Coward and Gertrude Lawrence. Setterfield is petite and angular and moves with the grace and elegance of a dancer whose craft is essential to her life. Gordon moves almost begrudgingly, as if it is something to get out of the way.

The couple is soon joined by the rest of the group: Karen Graham, Scott Cunningham, and Tadej Brdnik. They move and talk about buying couches, having food poisoning and dancing. The familiar chatter shows the closeness of the group and one hardly notices that the house lights have finally dimmed and that we are not in a living room but at a performance. Dance phrases emerge and their text and steps are repeated, making it evident that this is not improvisation. More than one conversation occurs at the same time, making the moving dialogue intercept at times and run parallel at other times. This creates a delightful recurring cycle of visual and verbal patterns.

"Dancing Henry Five" begins with no delineation to the end of the previous piece. The charms of Setterfield unfold as she gives humorous introductions to various

scenes of the story, which are then danced. There is a lyrical duet between the two women to the sound of the French film. Then there is the wooing of Henry and Catherine, danced by Graham and Brdnik.

"Family\$Death@Art.COMedy" begins with an intimate duet between Setterfield and Gordon in which they create a shape. When one departs and moves into another shape, the other is left alone in the pose of support or embrace. The other dancers enter and read from a script. They describe a series of mundane situations and squabbles like one of a couple falling asleep watching the video the other partner has rented.

A trio forms among the three younger dancers with movement and sound that becomes edgier and antagonistic, giving the feel of a love triangle. The closing image shows Setterfield and Gordon inching forward side by side, moving almost imperceptibly to a driving score by Conlan Nancarrow, as if they were ignoring the speed of time. The movement was so slow, some audience members began to leave before the movement had completed, as if they were impatient with the powerful image of time in slow motion. The performance will be repeated May 30 at 6:00 and May 29 and 31 at 2 p.m. at the Emmett Robinson Theatre.