

LIFE OR SOMETHING LIKE IT

Writer and choreographer David Gordon tells it how it is

By LEAH CATALANO

David Gordon is something of a magician. Regarded as the founder of what is widely considered the advent of postmodernism in dance, Gordon — who wears the triple crown of writer, choreographer, and dancer — has lit up stages in cities and countries across the world since his early performances in the bohemian Greenwich Village of the 1960s.

But unlike most magicians, Gordon breaks the cardinal rule of the trade: he lets his audience in on the mechanism behind his tricks. And he does it, as critic Suzanne Carbonneau describes, by “inserting matter-of-factness into the most magical theatrical moments.” Rather than functioning as impenetrable, holier-than-thou creatures held at arm’s length from the audience, the performers who grace Gordon’s works have been removed from their pedestals and placed right within the line of vision of the audience, forging a bond between the two that cements them together from the start.

“The humanity of the performer is a subject that runs throughout all my work,” Gordon explains in a recent telephone interview from New York. “What I want people to understand is that the performer is not a person separate from the other people in the world. Performers have boyfriends or girlfriends, they go to the grocery store, they cook dinner just like the rest of us. Dancing is just another thing that they do. The ordi-

nariness of the performer is a subject that appears frequently in the work I do.”

And it’s a theme that permeates *Couples*, a suite of excerpts from three of Gordon’s most memorable works produced over the last several years — *Private Lives of Dancers*, *Dancing Henry Five*, and *Family\$Death@art.COMedy* — that is set to open on May 28 as part of Spoleto Festival USA’s dance theater program.

◀ DANCE ▶
SPOLETO FESTIVAL USA
COUPLES
MAY 28 – JUNE 1
\$25
EMMETT ROBINSON
THEATRE, ALBERT
SIMONS CENTER

Described by *Show Business* magazine as “an eclectic mix between a dance performance and a play, without trying too hard to be such,”

Private Lives of Dancers, with music by (the non-related) Michael Gordon has been likened to a particularly terrific episode — well, aren’t they all? — of *Seinfeld*, in which “an everyday nothing becomes a something.”

Dancing Henry Five, on the other hand, is what Gordon describes as “my collaboration with Shakespeare.” Using the bard’s *Henry V* as inspiration, the work is a danced digest of the play, which incorporates vintage recordings of the production and draws upon William Walton’s film score for the 1944 film version of *Henry V*, starring Laurence Olivier.

Completing this trio of unlikely juxtaposition is the fantastically-titled

Family\$Death@art.COMedy, with music by the almost-as-fantastically-titled Conlon Nancarrow and Michael Nyman. British newspaper *The Guardian* describes the work as “a sequence of scripted and danced vignettes about life behind closed doors, presenting low-key quarrels about being late for a party, wanting to get a pet dog, and falling asleep in front of the TV. The subjects aren’t as important as the ritual of domestic wrangling, the routine storyline of escalation, appeasement, and stalemate ... the dance segments are pieces of a jigsaw, slotting together to make a portrait of an enduring marriage.”

And Gordon knows something about marriage. His wife of 40 years, actor and dancer Valda Setterfield is also his consummate companion — in both his life and his work. But isn’t it hard, I ask, to separate your professional and personal lives, when you’re spending such a great deal of time together?

“Well, sometimes it’s very lovely and charming, and sometimes it’s a pain in the ass,” he laughs. “But then that’s like any relationship, isn’t it? When you’re spending 24 hours together, it’s sometimes harder to get rid of the day you’ve just had. But we’ve been working and living together for so long that we have this incredible bond.”

Part of Gordon’s charm — both on stage and off — is that he is refreshingly dismissive of his talent, despite the numerous accolades that have been heaped upon him for his contribution to dance theater. The term “post-modern choreography,” for example, is one he has been rumored to abhor, despite the fact that he is praised for being a founding member of the movement.

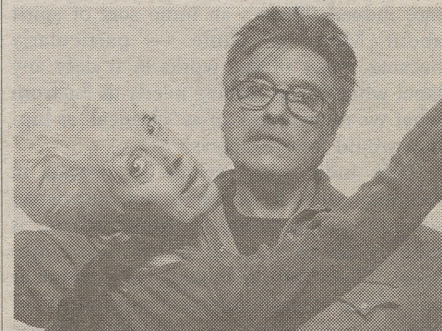
“It’s not that the phrase itself is bothersome,” he explains. “It’s labels in general —

they function like a framing device that gets tighter and tighter as you attempt to rethink your work. The world changes. To acknowledge that I was once part of a dance revolution is fine. But to insist that I’m still that person today is unreasonable.”

Couples, continues Gordon, doesn’t ask anything of its audience but that they watch with an open mind. And like all good performers, David Gordon recognizes that he can’t please all the people, all the time.

“You perform in Texas and New York and London, and none of your audiences are the same,” he says. “But you hope that what you’re doing has some relevance to someone other than yourself, and that you’ll find that person in the audience. No entire audience will love what I do, but some portion of it will. Not everyone loves Britney Spears, do they? But some people do.”

Unless you’re a 12-year-old girl with a borderline obsession for the midriff-baring songstress, your money will be better spent on a ticket to a David Gordon show than it will on a Britney Spears one. **CP**



David Gordon incorporates everyday nothings and the ordinariness of his dancers into his choreography