# David Gordon Makes His Past New

By Deborah Jowitt

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"He plays hide-and-seek rather than pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey," says Valda Setterfield near the end of *Trying Times 1982 (remembered)*. She's talking about David Gordon, her husband since 1960 and the creator of work as precise as calligraphy and as slippery as an eel. Earlier, she delivers a line whose double meaning gets us right down to the meat of the matter: "I mean, who does he think he was?"
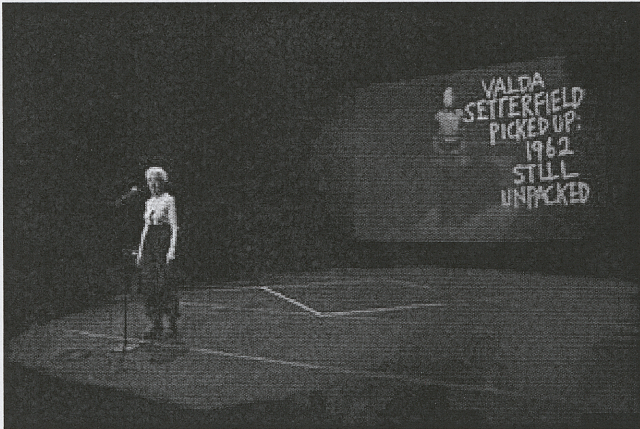
Valda Setterfield in David Gordon's *Trying Times 1982 (remembered)*.

Details:
Pick Up Co(S.)
Dance Theater Workshop
219 West 19th Street
212-924-0077
December 11 through 20

For one thing, the query sweetly jabs at Gordon for hubris. In the mock trial scene that finishes the re-considered 1982 work, Setterfield plays the choreographer's defense attorney, while prosecutor Leslie Cuyjet accuses him of betraying the stripped-down postmodernism that he—a founding member of the obstreperously radical Judson Dance Theater in the 1960s—was once in up to his neck. In addition, the "was" in that question of Setterfield's undermines the cliché remark; in the process of reviving and remaking *Trying Times*, Gordon must often have pondered who he was 26 years ago, and what he is now (beside older).

Back in 1982, the only justification for charging Gordon with stepping on postmodern toes would have been the expectation that viewers might laugh and have a hugely good time watching *Trying Times*, plus the heretical fact that Igor Stravinsky's music for George Balanchine's 1928 *Apollo* was heard on and off throughout the piece. The dancers' demeanor was appropriately neutral, their moves pedestrian, Gordon's structures task-like. Politically correct, no? But the intermittent passages of text—spoken at a fast clip and riddled with puns—made language and sense sputter into space and collide in bewitching, often hilarious ways.

Those words and stories still wreak mischievous havoc. Gordon went to town with the ubiquitous conversation-stuffer "I mean"—twisting it to explode meaning itself. "I go" as a substitute for "I said" is the verbal star of an account of an awkward bedroom scene. The botched affair and the verbal absurdity reach their apex hand-in-hand when the woman tells how she rejected the guy: "I go, 'Go!'"

This scene and others resonate strongly with their history. The above monologue, once spoken live by Susan Eschelbach, is now heard in part via her recorded voice, backed by a 1982 crowd's laughter, while longtime Pick Up Company member Karen Graham registers the appropriate annoyance and dismay. At times, a black-and-white video of the original cast in performance backs the action, so you can see that the Greek chorus that clusters around Graham and eggs her on with "Then what happened?" is larger than before. Setterfield, Graham, Cuyjet, Niall Jones, and Marcus Phillips are joined by students from CalArts (the Sharon Disney Lund School of Dance there is a co-producer). This time, the guy she's talking about (played by Jones) gets to

give his side of the story to two buddies as they stand before large, faux-tiled panels (held up by others from behind) that stand for urinals. Setterfield, the only member of the original cast (the others are acknowledged at the outset in projected photos giving the dates of their tenure in Gordon's Pick Up Performance Company), performs in front of a video of her 1982 video solo. She's slim and an elegant mover, although at 74, she no longer takes on all of her original parts, and her 2008 dance is subtly different from that of her slightly more limber self. It's lovely to watch their serene contrapuntal dialogue.

The dancers spend quite a lot of time moving Power Boothe's scenery around—in understated lighting by Philip W. Sandstrom that enhances the stage and the actions on it without dramatizing them. Boothe's objects are functional: four lightweight, four-by-eight panels (plain on one side; red, black, or white on the other); two black frames of the same size, and a long, low, multi-hinged "fence" (red on one side) that can be folded and unfolded to form a zigzag wall or adjoining square playpens. Mundane as they are, these space-framers promote fantasies as tricky as those generated in the text. Together, they and their movers create a choreography of swinging doors, walls, beds, and fences to lean on and peer over that is as intricately planned as Balanchine's patterns. Add to that the way squads of dancers run in and replace other squads mid-phrase, and you have something approaching a mutating corps de ballet, even though its members all wear various casual modes of white shirts and black pants.

If back in 1982, some of Gordon's colleagues thought he was abandoning stringency (whether he ever embraced it fully is another issue), *Trying Times* viewed from today's perspective looks more like a harbinger of contemporary choreographers' appropriation of a strategy favored by postmodern artists, designers, and writers: historical reference. Twenty-six years ago, I didn't realize the degree to which Gordon had embedded *Apollo* in *Trying Times*. Now I'm seeing not only iconic images—a twining group or a man holding the hands of three women as if their arms were the stems of a bouquet; I'm aware of the many deep lunges and what you could call tilted arabesques (although they're hardly balletic), and how women sink back against men (although gender roles are mostly flexible).

Stravinsky's epochal score adds poignant or enlivening dimensions to passages such as contrapuntal duets for Graham, Cuyjet, Jones, and Phillips, and a solo by Graham. Yet the intimate duet that alludes to Apollo's with Terpsichore takes place in silence in the small space of one of the panels laid on the floor. Graham and Jones move with the deliberate, considered calmness that's typical of Gordon's style. The ways they reposition themselves and touch each other are almost as matter-of-fact as the screen-moving jobs, yet the duet is ineffably tender. The relationship between these two performers that erupted with angry wit during their chatting with others suddenly becomes part of a story that—while hardly a literal narrative—says something about how the humdrum and the ideal shake hands in life and transcend themselves in art.

Gordon was reportedly embarrassed to apply for an NEA grant in the "American Masterpieces" category, but I'm happy he received one. At some point during the "trial," this objection is raised, "How can we identify his signature piece if we can't read his handwriting?"

How we read it—and we do—is half the fun. On another level, the experience gives our thoughts and perceptions about art a jolt, as masterpieces are wont to do.