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## All in the Family

*Completing a shift from dance to theater, the Gordon/Setterfield family produces a witty play about life and death.*

BY JOAN ACOCCELLA

As Ain and David Gordon's play *The Family Business* opens, we see an old woman lying on the floor. "Oh my God," she says, "what is all this—wet?" The wet is blood. She's covered with it. This is Mrs. Annie Kinsman, a widow, 78 years old, from Brooklyn, and she has fallen down and hurt herself. The play will follow her and the people who look after her—her nephew and great-nephew and their office assistant—from the time of her accident until her death some months later. Annie is a grouch, a tyrant, a pest. She calls continually, always needing help. And whatever help is offered, it's wrong. ("Not the towel," she says to her great-nephew as he tries to staunch her wounds. "You'll ruin the towel. Paper napkins.") She goes through housekeepers like paper napkins—in they come, out they go. But Annie's main problem is simply that she is old and dying. She gets all the best lines, and we like her better than any of the other people in the play. They like her too, and they wish she would die. Finally she does, and then they all miss her. She returns in a vision, and they beg her to go away. She obliges ("Being dead is not so bad," she says, exiting), and they miss her again, and continue with their lives.

So this is an *echt* Jewish comedy, the joke being ambivalence: love and hatred, pleasure and pain, life as a slow death. David Gordon started his career a long way away from such material. He began as a member of the anti-narrative, anti-theatrical dance avant-garde of the '60s and '70s—Judson Dance Theater, the Grand Union—but he didn't really belong there. As he said in a 1988 interview, "I admired the people who were really able to make abstract work, because it was the coolest, most elegant thing I could think of. But I am not that thing called an abstract artist. I never was it." Eventually, he stopped trying to be. Until the late '80s his works were still classifiable as dance, but they often used text as well as dancing. And increasingly, they had clear subjects—often, the family. Indeed, they featured his family, or at least his wife, Valda Setterfield, a tall, beautiful English dancer with a knack for deadpan delivery, both verbal and kinetic.

As time passed, the families Gordon dealt with started to look suspiciously Brooklyn-Jewish, like the family he came from. At the same time he always included some critique of that well-worn subject matter. His 1992 *Mysteries* was about the marriage of a Brooklyn couple named Sam and Rose, but the piece had three Sams, three Roses. It also had a character named Marcel Duchamp—played by Setterfield—who kept walking through, saying discouraging things about the place of subject matter in art. As attracted as Gordon was to stories, and family stories, he clearly had his doubts about them, too.

Meanwhile, another career was starting up, that of Ain Gordon, David Gordon and Valda Setterfield's son, who began writing and directing in 1984. Ain, who is now 32, was clearly his father's son, and he didn't try to hide it. His plays, too, were often about family, and like David's works, they were a sort of cross between talking and moving, with the talking as elegantly constructed—as much a dance—as the moving. But Ain's shows were more drama than dance. He got actors to move, whereas David got dancers to talk. Ain's work was also more direct emotionally. (Will this man and this woman get

together? Will this family take off on their Sunday outing without killing each other first?) And these qualities, Ain's departures from David's influence, seem to have turned around and influenced David. There was also the fact that David's—and Setterfield's—dancing careers were coming to an end. They were now in their 50s. In any case, around the end of the '80s, David started making pieces to which newspapers would send their drama reviewers, not their dance reviewers. Last year, he directed and choreographed a musical comedy, *Shlemiel the First*, based on a story by Isaac Bashevis Singer. (It opens in New York this month.) Next year, he will direct Max Frisch's *The Firebugs* at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis.

For a long time, David and Ain advised each other on their work. Finally, with *The Family Business*, which premiered last year at New York's Dance Theater Workshop and reopened in the East Village in late March, they formally collaborated. The play is "written and directed by Ain Gordon and David Gordon." Setterfield is there too: she, Ain and David are the cast. So *The Family Business* is truly a family business, produced by a family business, and it is, with no apologies, about a family.

Which is not to say that it is realistic. Ain plays both Paul, Annie Kinsman's great-nephew, and Paul's father, Phil. (When he has to be Phil, he puts on a false nose.) Setterfield is Pearl Wonder, the woman who runs the office at Paul and Phil's plumbing business, but she also plays most of the other people in the play: Annie's doctor, her nurse, her myriad housekeepers, the salesman at the store where Phil buys Annie a housecoat, the counterman at the deli where Pearl buys her breakfast, and on and on—a whole chorus of New York characters, and each one different. One has a cold; one has a hat; one has bowlegs, and in each, from this tiny detail, Setterfield builds a little personality. As for David Gordon, he plays only one character, Aunt Annie, and he could not be more perfect. Even his moustache seems to belong on this old lady. (He has also, somehow, induced his ankles to swell.) But you never forget that you're looking at a man, and you're not asked to. You can still see his jeans under Annie's housecoat.

So *The Family Business* doesn't pretend that it's not a play. Indeed, Paul, in the play, is writing a play, and it's this play. (Pearl: "What is it you're writing, Paul?" Paul: "This. I'm writing this.") Blackouts and scene changes are signaled verbally: "Blackout" or "Scene three," somebody will say. The set is anti-illusionist—a few shower curtains, a few chairs, as if the play were being improvised in a living room. Much of the acting is stylized: very fast speeches, very slow speeches, speeches formally addressed to the audience. (Entering Annie's apartment to rescue her, Paul says, "Wait, I think I need to say more about the apartment." And he does, while Annie waits in a pool of blood.) The characters are generic: Pearl, Kinsman. There's also a Dr. Paymore. The housekeepers enter and exit in alphabetical order: Angela, Barbara, Candice, and so on. Not only is this a play, the Gordons are saying; it's *that* kind of play.

The only person who is always in character, and stable, is Annie. In the middle of these intersecting planes of time and space, she sits firm, like a boulder in a

house of mirrors. She is thus allowed her story, and it is not a story-about-a-story, but a regular story. She talks about her husband, Manny; she tells us how much rent she pays and what she reads (*TV Guide*, *National Enquirer*). She goes to the hospital, where she suffers doctors and nurses. She goes home, where she suffers housekeepers. In between, she dispenses Jewish wisdom in a voice that bespeaks long experience and a chronic sinus condition. She tells everyone what to do and drives everyone crazy until, one day, very quietly, while Henrietta is running the vacuum cleaner, Annie's head slumps forward and she is dead. To have kept her entirely in the sphere of realism was, I think, a mark of respect on the Gordons' part. At the same time, the compromised realism of the rest of the play hoists her out of her convention—out of the long tradition of Jewish tragicomedy, from Sholem Aleichem to Clifford Odets to Arthur Miller to Woody Allen—and enables us to be moved by this story once again. Finally, by making Annie real but packing her in artifice, the play turns her into a symbol. She is the pull, the undertow of life: the thing we can't get rid of. We make art; she is what we make it about.

Aside from the interplay of realism and stylization, what rescues this play from its convention is its sheer wit. Wit runs in the Gordon/Setterfield family; they all have it, like a shared nose. But in *The Family Business*, more than in any other Gordon production I have seen—or perhaps it just seems so, because in this production the subject matter is potentially so cloying—wit really triumphs, and not just as a matter of words, but as a knowledge of when to cut off the words. The Gordons often end a scene before the punch line. They are abstemious. And therefore the play does not break up into gags. It keeps pulling us forward, in a long arc, so that what we experience, in the end, is not just emotion, the old laughter-through-tears (though we experience that, too), but the action of intelligence on emotion. □

*The Family Business* reopened last month at the New York Theatre Workshop, 79 E. 4th St., New York City, and will play at least through Apr. 16. Shlemiel the First opens Apr. 21 at the Neil Simon Theater, 250 W. 52nd St., New York City.

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Scene from Ain and David Gordon's *The Family Business*, 1995. Photo Paul H. Taylor.

