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A marriage of two like minds

Art and the sentiments of real life

By Allan Ulrich
EXAMINER DANCE CRITIC

DAVID GORDON and Valda Setterfield might be the Fred and Ginger of postmodern dance, except for two things.

They're married offstage, as well as on, and in their work, at least in the past, words have often spoken as loud as actions. Gordon and Setterfield part from tradition in another way: After 25 years of connubial togetherness, they have not grown to look alike, the way married couples are supposed to.

He is American, tall, dark, bearish, sometimes mustachioed, occasionally bearded. She is British, reedy, cool, precise of speech, white and cropped of hair, and effortlessly *soignee*, even at her most hassled.

Setterfield does not, in her own terminology, "make work." Yet she has enjoyed a career that has ranged from touring with one of the enduring legends of British ballet to appearing in an early, low-budget Brian De Palma movie.

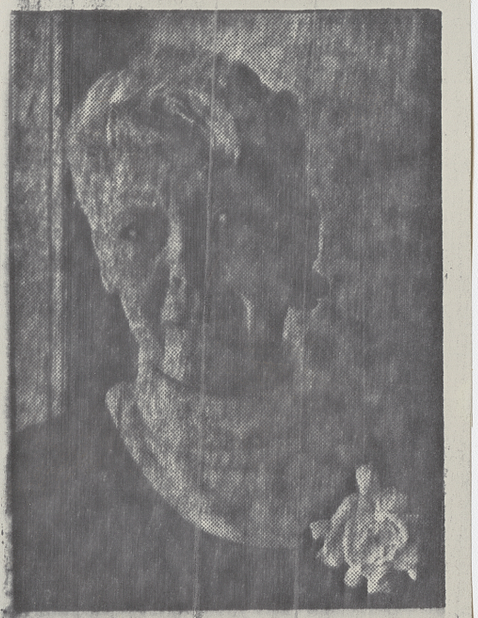
She does not perform exclusively with her husband, but ever since she met Gordon in choreographer James Waring's class in 1958, their relationship has been one of the most fertile in the contemporary arts scene. When the action in one of Gordon's pieces screeches to a halt and he takes Setterfield in his arms for a typically saucy and fluid duet, who can say where the creative urge ends and the sentiments of real life begin?

Such a moment of blissful union will occur in the second movement of "Offenbach Suite," one of the three pieces the David Gordon Pick Up Company will import to the Herbst Theatre Friday and Saturday, the group's first appearance in the Bay Area in a couple of years. The company currently consists of the Gordons and seven additional dancers, and none of the works on the program will feature the talking episodes for which Gordon won fame and a host of imitators in the past.

David Gordon and Valda Setterfield in Gordon's 'A Plain Romance Explained'

However, since the troupe last visited, Gordon and Setterfield have not been absent from local stages. American Ballet Theatre artistic director Mikhail Baryshnikov invited Gordon to set a work for the company last season. It emerged as "Field, Chair and Mountain," a gentle sendup of ballet and proscenium conventions that posed the great Martine van Hamel in arabesque on a folding chair.

One ABT hit led to another. "Murder," the whodunit spoof which received its world premiere here in February with Baryshnikov playing everything from Camille



'We tend to zero in on some professional topic, via shorthand'

—Valda Setterfield

to an uppity butler, with Setterfield providing a crisp, hilarious narration on tape.

It was on the morning after the "Murder" premiere that the much relieved Setterfield sat down to chat about her remarkably varied career.

Greasepaint ran in her family's veins. In the seaside town where she grew up, her stagestruck grandfather used to play bridge with visiting actors, and she recalls him putting these wobbly thespians on the train to London in the morning.

"My father," she remembers, "used to take me to music halls, always, of course, the 6:20 performance. They were full of tatty conjurers, but there always used to be one good act on the bill. Once, I even saw Laurel and Hardy live.

"That may have been one of the main differences between David and me," Setter-

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id notes. "He grew up going to vies. I grew up seeing live the- r. I studied at my local dancing iool, and we were asked to dance things like the mayor's reception.

"So, in a way, I had an amazing iount of theatrical experience. cause of the war, my training is intermittent and bad. And en, at the age of 16, when I decid- I wanted to dance — it was no eat revelation, it just seemed the xt step to take — I was tall and ge-thighed and all those things."

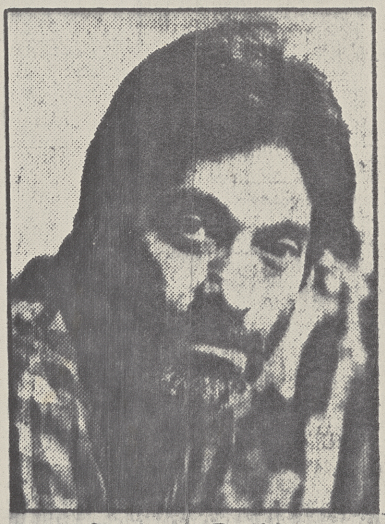
In 1952 Setterfield managed to ter the Ballet Rambert, the com- ny run by Marie (or "Mim") Ram- rt, the expatriate Polish dancer ho performed in the corps of the llet Russe at the time of the 1913 emiere of "Le Sacre du prin- mps," and later settled in En- and, lending tremendous purpose d vitality to the professional bal- t movement in that country.

"If Mim had a sense that you ally wanted to dance, she would ke you, no matter what you oked like. We toured enormous nounts, especially in small the- ers. I stayed in the corps, but after time, I was promoted from being a ourt lady to being a peasant. Peas- nts really danced. Court ladies just ood around."

Setterfield offers droll insights n her extraordinary employer:

"Mim was eager to learn any- ing and everything. London was eming with visiting ballet compa- ies when I was a student, and she ushed around and saw them, was uly impressed and tried to incor- orate their techniques. I remem- er when she saw Spanish dancers Rosario and Antonio, and she ushed back to the studio, exclaim- ng, 'Oh, they arch their backs so xtraordinarily, like you must rack a nut between your shoulder lades.' So, we would spend hours t the barre, arching our backs and racking nuts.

"Then, the de Cuevas company ame, and Mim said that they eaned forward in this extraordi- ary way, so we would spend the ext day leaning forward, arching ur backs *and* cracking nuts be- ween our shoulder blades. I sus- ect her enthusiasm was all to our



David Gordon — Fred to Setterfield's Ginger

physical detriment."

But Ballet Rambert didn't pay much, Setterfield was too tall for the corps and not strong enough to be a soloist, so, after three years, she went to work in the first espresso bar in London.

Her pal, David Vaughan, had been dancing in Broadway shows, and, on a return trip to London, he opened her eyes:

"David indicated I would find opportunities I never knew existed. So, I came to America in January 1958, and ended up in an Italian revue."

Setterfield had a scholarship to study with dancer-choreographer, Jose Limon. "I was very disconcerted with those classes. They didn't have a clear anatomical premise I understood."

Postmodernist Waring's classes were more to her liking, and he introduced her to Merce Cunningham. Although she never danced in his company, she later taught for him, and remains idolatrous of his artistry:

"I didn't have that tremendous extension or turn-out, and I found that it was as much of a handicap as in classical dancing. But although my limitations were the same, with Merce, the opportunities were enormous."

A month after arriving in New York, Setterfield met Gordon in one of Waring's classes, and, if the earth didn't move, maybe it trembled a bit:

"Jimmy got us into the same room and quite subtly started to make a duet. I thought David didn't know how to lift me at all, and he thought I was quite fat, which I was. We would go to Merce's classes and we would go to the automat; and being quite poor, we would sit there and talk for hours. And I was in the first piece he made for Jimmy, 'Mama Goes where Papa Goes,' which had me dancing on crutches."

Later, Setterfield appeared with the Living Theatre, did Frank O'Hara and Kenneth Koch plays, joined in the avant-garde dance movement that grew from the Judson Church, had a baby boy (Ain Gordon is now a promising playwright in New York), appeared in a couple of Yvonne Rainer's experimental films and even co-starred in Brian De Palma's "Wedding Party":

"I played the mother of the bride, who happened to be Jill Clayburgh, and it was made clear from the beginning that I was too young for the part. But Brian thought I had great style, so I wore a lot of hats."

Since 1978, when Gordon formed the Pick Up Company, Setterfield has continued to perform, rehearse and teach, while Gordon's busy schedule has taken him increasingly to create works for European troupes. This summer, they'll both be in residence at Harvard.

Setterfield just doesn't believe she can completely separate their personal and professional lives:

"We can wake up in the morning and say without any preamble, 'I think the thing that's wrong is the arm position,' and we both know what we're talking about. We tend to zero in on some professional topic, via shorthand. Sometimes, we fail each other, too.

"I don't make steps," Setterfield says, "but we talk a lot, and I probably fire his mind. There are also those peculiar misunderstandings which become interesting. David trusts my sensibilities. It's a process of knowing when to speak and when to shut up."

She discerns a continuity in his work over a quarter century:

"David tends to reuse material, so the early dances are in a sense preserved. His work has not so much changed as grown. Looking at 'Murder.' I realized that all the old tendencies are there. Details resurface after a long time, like those chairs in the first ABT commission."

If Setterfield still has unrealized ambitions, they may have to do with what the English call "straight" theater. "I've done all that performance art, where you assume different kinds of roles. Wouldn't it be nice to do Chekhov? I'd like to have a single role, even a small one."

If Setterfield feels an estrangement from a younger generation of performers, it may be a question of goals, ambitions and that almost forgotten quality called craft.

"Dancers want a better standard of living now. They want things they can afford, and they consider switching careers at 30, rather than 50.

"I wouldn't know. I can't do anything else. I can't type. I don't know how to drive. So, I'll mop the floor, I'll fetch coffee. I'll do it with great pleasure, because I love the theater. It's what I know. It's what I do."