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The poker-face approach to the absurd

David Gordon and Valda Setterfield bring a new approach to the Riverside tonight. Dale Harris reports on their New York background

IF IN New York, dance is the most exciting of the performing arts (or even of the arts in general) that owes much of its unceasing innovativeness. Practically every new piece by Balanchine and Merce Cunningham, whose works have decisively influenced how everybody in America looks at dance, contributes new understanding about the physical being of the human in space and time. Now younger choreographers are effecting more radical changes in our perception of movement.

Douglas Dunn, Lucinda Childs, Simone Forti, Steve Paxton, David Gordon and the rest of the post-moderns, as they are called, are all very different in style and sensibility. Yet they all share the belief that the choreographer should subvert an audience's familiar notions of casuality, decorum and meaning.

In Sally Barnes's new book on post-modern dance, called *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, David Gordon says: "(As a student) I was looking for trouble. I still am. I thought that one of the things about making art was looking for trouble." That doesn't mean, however, dadaist outrage or sensationalism. Gordon's work exemplifies no rage for

disorder, only an originality that enables us to see human behaviour in new ways.

Gordon is profoundly non-classical in outlook. He shows no interest in stylistic propriety, in nobility of manner, in the self-sufficiency of dance technique. In his work he employs elements that more traditional choreographers would doubtless consider extraneous to dance, such as speech, song, film, an assortment of props, usually of the household variety. He uses music infrequently, and

then more as a commentary than as an accompaniment.

In one of his solos, *An Audience With the Pope*, which he will perform at Riverside, Gordon, wearing more or less clerical black, performs a kind of movement analysis, a dance in which certain phrases are repeated over and over in different ways, and he does so to the taped accompaniment of a cod lecture, *Pope Dance*, read by David Vaughan. Sometimes there is also a slide show in which David

Vaughan is seen, dressed in pontifical robes.

In the duet, *Chair*, also to be seen at Riverside, Sousa's *Stars and Stripes* is played before and after the dance. Sometimes Gordon and his partner Valda Setterfield sing the tune while performing. What they perform is a set of parallel movements in which each demonstrates the astounding number of things that can be done with a single folding chair — balancing, straddling, kneeling, opening and closing it,

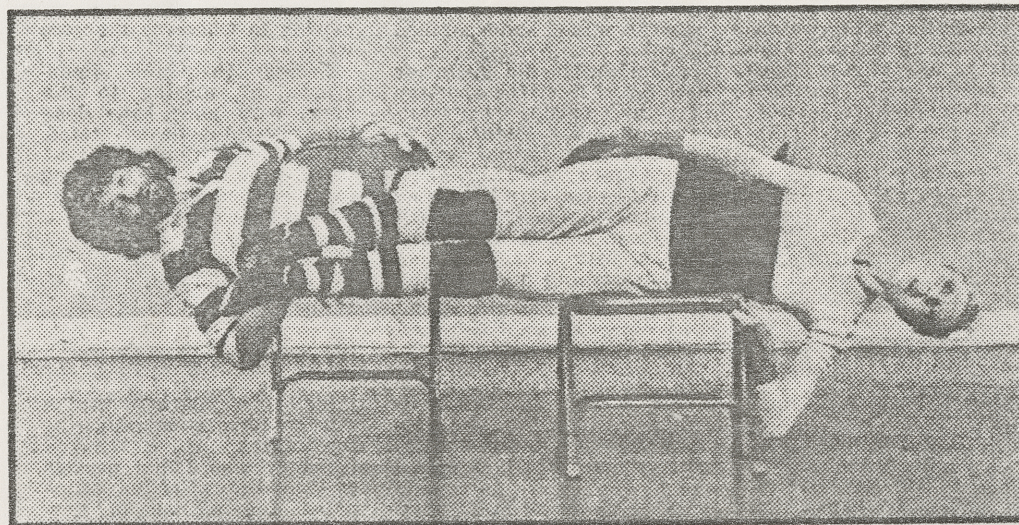
crawling through the space between the seat and the back, whirling it around in the air, sitting on it.

Chair, a witty, deadpan, absurdist work, reveals many interesting things: the physical and psychological differences between male and female, the ingenuity of the human mind, the pliancy of the human body, the not necessarily admirable doggedness of the human will, and, what is in some ways the most illuminating revelation of all, the invincibility

of physical matter. From beginning to end the chairs remain absolutely impervious to anything the dancers.

In *One Part of the Matter*, also to be seen at Riverside, Valda Setterfield inverts the achievement of Eadweard Muybridge, the nineteenth-century British-born photographer from San Francisco, whose sequences of figures and animals in motion uncovered the process of movement.

By giving Setterfield a series of Muybridge-like-



Chair — David Gordon and Valda Setterfield

poses—a kick, a defensive gesture, a smile, a grimace—and having her hold each one for what seems an inordinate length of time, Gordon underlines the psychological basis of physical movement as if to heighten the absurdity implicit in human behaviour. This absurdity is emphasised in the accompaniment—a perfectly serious tape of Gordon and Setterfield rehearsing, followed by David Vaughan singing *Every Little Movement has a Meaning All Its Own*.

Setterfield, British-born and trained, and a member of the Merce Cunningham company from 1965-74, is tall, slim, self-possessed, witty. Gordon, to whom she is married, is dark and hirsute, a large, resolute man of great perceptiveness, whom the *New Yorker's* dance critic Arlene Croce calls, admiringly, an avant-garde comedian.

In New York he and Setterfield are usually seen with a company whose size and composition change according to the demands of his work and hence is called *The Pick-Up Company*. If you see Gordon and Setterfield without other dancers and watch closely the way they respond to and play off each other, the humanity of Gordon's work is very clear.