

## DANCE REVIEW

## David Gordon: intensifying the ordinary

BY JANICE ROSS

**DAVID GORDON/PICK UP COMPANY** with Valda Setterfield and guest performers, Margaret Jenkins Dance Studio, SF, Dec. 28 and 29.

David Gordon once said that he meant not so much to preserve the ordinary as to intensify it. Gordon, a pivotal figure in post-modern dance, recently concluded a week of workshop activities at the Jenkins Studio with two concerts of excerpts from some of his previous works. Valda Setterfield, a former dancer with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company and Gordon's wife and performing partner, is an important component in Gordon's work, her aristocratic bearing lending an edge of elegance to the "ordinary" that Gordon seeks to "intensify."

Gordon's style of unembellished gestural movement derives directly from the Judson Dance Theatre aesthetic of dancers like Yvonne Rainer. While pointedly disavowing any deliberate emphasis on virtuosity or showiness, Rainer and, later Gordon, stumbled upon a new kind of dance "virtuosity." Superficially at least, most of the works Gordon performed at the Jenkins Studio would appear to be simple dances-as-ordinary-activity pieces.

In a work like his "Mannequin" (1962), the oldest work he performed, Gordon appears to do little more than slowly revolve in place and lie down. However, as he turns with mechanical precision, he continues to perform two distinctly paced but rhythmically unique activities. Affecting a heavy Yiddish accent he sings an unaccompanied version of "Second Hand Rose" while waving his fingers like the floating tentacles of a sea anemone. While a philistine might dismiss this as merely pointless, it conceals a rigorous and highly theatrical or-

der. In effect Gordon, is juggling three dances at once—a dance of the feet, one of the fingers and another of the vocal cords. In its own way, this kind of divided movement is just as difficult as trying to unite the entire body in response to one rhythmic impulse. "It was slow, tedious, concentrated, theatrical, virtuosic and long," wrote Gordon about this work. It was also choreographed in his bathtub—a spacial limitation that is readily apparent in "Mannequin's" use of a confined space.

Valda Setterfield's performance of "One Part of the Matter," an excerpt of a much longer work, revealed a similar concern with unusual tempi and limited space. The piece doesn't use any recognizably "dancy" movements. Wearing black knit shorts and a tank top (a reference perhaps to an

Each of the four works Gordon presented in his concert contains both subtle and overt plays on words and movement. In "One Part of the Matter," the rehearsal tape and the images we see before us never fall into synch. We are always hearing Setterfield practicing a pattern before or after we see it. Hearing Gordon and Setterfield discuss the specifics of each pose as they presumably copy it from the Muybridge photo also reinforces the static quality of each posture, insuring that we will see them as frozen actions rather than just as parts of an extraordinarily odd dance.

Gordon's "An Audience with the Pope" continues his concern with syntax and language. This piece begins with a series of slide projections of David Vaughan dressed as a Pope. The first dozen or so slides are all concerned with the various adjustments he must go through to sit down. His seat is a simple white cube and the setting is a loft-studio. A tape of Vaughan reciting a hypothetical history of Popes and their "audiences" is played in conjunction with the latter part of this slide show. Eventually, Gordon appears. Dressed in a dark warm-up suit and soft-soled shoes, he performs a highly rhythmic sequence of actions. He throws one leg out

dinariness of their motions coupled with the suggestion that they are "performing" for the slide image of the Pope who watches from the rear wall, suggests a typically Gordanesque wry type of humor.

As the piece wears on, one discovers that the "audience" referred to in the title is both papal and theatrical. Gordon and Setterfield are in fact performing for both a real dance audience (us) and a Pope (the photographic image of Vaughan dressed up as a Pope). The virtuosity in "An Audience with the Pope" is hidden in the same way that the focus on the various "audiences" is. Setterfield's feat of talking in conversational tones while performing at an entirely different pace is an extremely difficult thing to do. In one sense it parallels our own situation in trying to intuit the two streams of information that come at us on verbal and visual levels.

Just how important Setterfield's and Gordon's presence is to their work was demonstrated in "Solo Score," a work that is the result of five dancers reading the same score of photos, verbal images and instructions. Three of the performers, Frini Nadel, Andrea Hicks and Colleen Mulvihill are local dancers and the other two are Christina Svane and Setterfield. The viewing process in "Solo Score" is the reverse of that in Gordon's other works. Instead of working with the words and then images as we do in "An Audience with the Pope," and "One Part of the Matter," "Solo Score" presents us with silent motions and poses that we then trace back to the instructions and verbal images that inspired them. For example, one notices Svane press her palms on her breasts, her buttocks, her thighs and her ankles, and moments later we glimpse Setterfield slipping through these same touching motions.

Because the performers in "Solo Score" shape the dance material rather than the other way around, the result is not nearly as interesting as in the other Gordon works where he absolutely controls the outcome. "Solo Score" doesn't work as theater because its contents extend no further than the dancers' understanding of their material. In contrast, one of the things that is so compelling about Gordon's other works is their ability to engage the viewer on an aesthetic and intellectual level. One may not always know what the various levels of meaning and reference in Gordon's works are, but they have about them a sense of purpose, intent and vision that suggests something much more than just an assemblage of actions. And the distinctness of each of his dances indicates the richness of the territory he has marked out for himself in the province of a spoken and danced text. ■



David Gordon and Valda Setterfield in Gordon's "Not Necessarily Recognizable Objectives."

old-fashioned swim costume?) Setterfield moves through a series of frozen action poses taken from Eadweard Muybridge's photographs of the human figure in motion. Setterfield's shifts from one position into another are accompanied by a tape recording of Gordon rehearsing Setterfield in these various poses.

By hearing the tape at the same time that we see Setterfield performing the finished work, we get a simultaneous vision of the "becoming" and the "being" of the dance. We also glimpse something of the dynamic of Setterfield and Gordon's relationship—he is evidently dogmatic about what he wants, and she is the ideal and sympathetic medium for his movement ideas.

away from the other, squiggles his feet in place and squats down on the floor. All the while Vaughan keeps talking, inventing Pope-derived terms like "popepourri" and "popecorn."

Eventually Setterfield enters. She is dressed in white walking shorts, a white shirt, white leg warmers and white soft shoes and she is chatting nonstop about the Pope. Her conversation is much more anecdotal than Gordon's, and it is delivered at a volume level midway between a whisper and a public voice so that one has to listen closely in order to hear. As she talks, Setterfield moves through the same sequence of movements that Gordon is now doing for the twentieth-odd time. The unadorned or-