



David Gordon/Pick Up Performance
Company
Danspace Project at St. Mark's Church,
New York, NY
January 12-15, 19-22, 2006
Reviewed by Susan Yung

January 31, 2006

It seems fitting that David Gordon has excelled in recent years in interpreting enduring ancient and classic texts, since he himself has become a New York dance world figure at once timeless and au courant. With *Aristophanes in Birdonia*, Gordon has put together a roundly satisfying entertainment that manages to blend weighty political issues, vaudeville, a bit of rap, and dance in a stylish hour.

Birdonia is based on Aristophanes' *The Birds*, and the protagonists are now named Stan (Ken Marks) and Ollie (Derek Lucci). They leave Hysterica, seeking to construct a utopian paradise named Birdonia once they have the acquiescence of the Queen of the Birds (an engaging Norma Fire) and her flock. As always, Gordon's wife, Valda Setterfield, narrates with perfect pitch, floating about the sanctuary in wine-hued silks and silver Birkenstocks, tossing off the revved-up text with a wink and aplomb.

The birds (Karen Graham, Jonah Bokaer, Sam Johnson, and Kevin Williamson, all statuesque and poised) represent an ideal—innocent, peace loving, with a swanlike grace. Tattered madras castoffs make up their plumage; their beaks are billed Von Dutch trucker hats. The movement passages, in which the four shift formations like an orderly flock, are part court ritual, part square dance. In a particularly charming scene, the birds glide into elegant, linear tendus, tearing off strips of cotton to indicate molting. They sink into pliés to listen in earnest. In general, their behavior evokes the mannerisms of dancers, their situation echoing the profession's perpetual cycle of gentrification.

Throughout his estimable career, Gordon has shifted from performer to director and from dance to theater, with many stops in between. He clearly relishes juggling words as well as dance steps, which seem to reflexively snap into clean, balletic lines. He keeps the staging lively even during prose-dense recitations by rotating the performers, including the nondancers, around the theater's periphery, like a vertical conveyor belt. His verbal play is rapid fire and filled with humor and puns. It lightens the serious underlying message of political occupation and colonization, which is never far away. In the end, Ollie and Stan go home, a hopeful premonition for real-world events.