

BACKSTAGE^{east}

THE ACTOR'S RESOURCE 160+ Casting Notices

DANCE/MOVEMENT

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Reinventions and Experiments

I felt it appropriate, this first month of the new year, to attend performances by movement artists who are taking new approaches to time-honored works or making fresh, experimental choreography. I witnessed a novel, dance-theatre reinvention of Aristophanes' classical Greek comedy *The Birds*, Peter Martins' pared-down version of *Swan Lake*, and an engrossing postmodern dance piece by an avant-garde company from the Netherlands.

'Aristophanes in Birdonia'

My biggest complaints about *Aristophanes in Birdonia* (rewritten, directed, choreographed, and designed by David Gordon) are that it's too funny, too fast, and too thought-provoking.

Presented the past two weekends by Danspace Project at St. Mark's Church, this highly politicized dance-theatre adaptation of the revered Greek play is chock-full of Gordon's signature verbal wit, pedestrian-style use of classical dance vocabulary, and keen narrative restructuring. Performed by Gordon's Pick Up Performance Co., the production crams so much worthy entertainment into an event that lasts a little over an hour that I came away feeling as though I'd missed more than I'd garnered.

Putting a contemporary context around Aristophanes' themes of political corruption, war, greed, and utopianism, the show brilliantly comments on some of today's most divisive sociopolitical issues, particularly the debate over "intelligent design." Gordon's tightly written, rapidly delivered text is driven by crafty wordplay of the sort that uses a single word (or syllable) to shift from one subject to another so swiftly that you barely have time to digest the profundity of the connection between the two, often disparate ideas. Sometimes the writing is so funny that you find yourself laughing, which is ill-advised, because it will cause you to miss even more funny stuff.



GRAPHIC ART: DAVID GORDON

David Gordon's *Aristophanes in Birdonia*.

While the show contains some good-looking pure dance passages, for the most part the performers move hurriedly about the stage—sitting, standing, crossing, climbing, and bending—as they speak. Sometimes things get a little too busy, and just as we'd like to have more time to process the dialogue, we could also benefit from more moments of inactivity in order to focus our visual "thoughts." However, dancer-actor Valda Setterfield, in a fabulous turn as Aristophanes, explains to us that the director told her she must keep dancing as she talks, because this show is being done in a "dance space." When she gets a job in a theatre, she is told, she can stand still. Well, that certainly puts an end to those tedious arguments about how to classify and critique these confounding postmodern dance-theatre concoctions.