

# danceviewtimes

writers on dancing

## Nimble Wordplay

**"Aristophanes in Birdonia"**

rewritten/designed/directed/choreographed by David Gordon

Danspace Project

St. Mark's Church

New York, NY

January 14, 2006 [Performances continue Jan. 19 – 22]

by Susan Reiter

copyright ©2006 by Susan Reiter

Admirers of Valda Setterfield (and is there anyone who is not?) have a new addition to the treasure trove of her memorable, distinctive performances this one-of-a-kind dancer/actress has given over the decades. In David Gordon's nimble, updated version of Aristophanes' comedy from 414 B.C., Setterfield oversees the proceedings in a homespun version of Greek robes, a grey wig that looks like someone tossed a mop over her head, and plastic silver sandals. The ever-willing muse and co-conspirator of Gordon in his free-wheeling yet sharply targeted amalgams of movement and speech, she manages here to be both commonsensical and daffy—both a measured voice of reason and the epitome of eccentricity.

I will long savor the deft little bursts of soft-shoe she performs in those wonderfully silly sandals, explaining somewhat exasperatedly that "the director," who has made Aristophanes part of the action and deemed that a woman should portray him, insists that she should "keep dancing as I talk." Setterfield is both guide and skeptic within this wonderfully homespun, offbeat enterprise, which features not only Gordon's trademark spiffy wordplay but also a delightfully wide-ranging – and charming—assortment of bird music.

A delicious mix of bird-themed songs and tunes is playing as the audience enters the St. Mark's sanctuary. We hear the nonsensical "Surfin' Bird" from the '60s alongside standards performed by the likes of Bing Crosby, Rosemary Clooney and Leadbelly. In between songs, there are snippets of President Bush ("I take comfort that people are praying for my family") and Pat Robertson (his infamous pronouncement that a town that rejected "intelligent design" in its schools deserved to be punished by God), cluing us in that Gordon's take on ancient Greece is tied in to present-day issues and concerns.

Stan and Ollie, his protagonists are two amiable, slightly goofy pair of "Hystericans"—natives of the United States of Hysteria, Gordon's stand-in for Aristophanes' Athens. They are regular Joes dressed in black coveralls (with an "S" and an "O" stenciled on their backs for easy identification), but they also suggest a kinship with vaudevillean clowning. They are on the road, leaving Hysteria and its problems behind in search of a more pleasant existence among the Birds, who have established a more idealized existence.

Gordon's Birds are a delightful creation, dressed in a fantastical amalgam of plaids, with sleeves and skirts cut into abundant fringes. They wear colorful caps, and armbands of

more fringed plaid to evoke wings. Karen Graham, as Ver(wren)ica, opens the evening with a purposeful solo, set to one of the many sections of Respighi's "The Birds" that Gordon employs, performed on Japanese stringed instruments that give it a magical, exotic flavor. She is a no-nonsense figure, and her chorus of followers (Jonah Bokaer, Sam Johnson and Kevin Williamson) are dutiful, performing not-quite-pedestrian movements that emphasize outstretched arms and shifting *epaulement*. The fiercely intense Norma Fire, a wonderfully versatile and game actress, portrays Hoopoe the Epops, Queen of the Birds, and her motley attire is even more ingenious and delightful than the others.

Nimble wordplay and square dance-like sequences performed between two lines of folding chairs are among the resourceful elements with which Gordon eaves his timely tale. Stan and Ollie join the Birds and found the land of Birdonia—sheltering themselves from the outside by hunkering down within a red-brick fortress—only to have it encounter the same problems that had turned them sour on Hysterica. Is any Utopia doomed by the blind insensitivities and narrow-mindedness of people? Gordon isn't preaching; he is too sly for that. He finds connections between the society Aristophanes was critiquing in his day, and ours of today, but his assured, at times self-mocking, approach manages to tweak our imaginations and tickles our fancies as well as to challenge and warn.

Volume 4, No. 2  
January 16, 2006  
copyright ©2006 Susan Reiter  
[www.danceviewtimes.com](http://www.danceviewtimes.com)