

JANUARY 18–24, 2006

**If the new country turns out to be just like the old, you'd be better off staying where you are**

A stellar playwright of the Old Comedy like Aristophanes could skewer pretty much whatever bothered him about politics, morals, and religion in fifth-century-B.C. Athens. In 21st-century America, David Gordon turns Aristophanes' *The Birds* into a flight of barbs aimed at issues like pollution, corruption, separation of church and state, voter apathy, and warmongering. He does this with wit and gusto.

If his *Aristophanes in Birdonia* isn't as multi-layered as his 2004 *Dancing Henry V*, it's only because he doesn't have Shakespeare's rich language and characters to fool around with. Gordon's play—both beguiling and angst-provoking—is more of a moral fable than Aristophanes'. The pre-show sound collages created by Ed Fitzgerald set the tone: Amid the sweetness of Doris Day singing about the bluebird in our window and Etta Jones sighing "Bye Bye Blackbird," we hear Pat Robertson telling school board members, "You just voted God out of your city."

Gordon's protagonists, like Aristophanes', are fleeing their home country (here called Hysterica) to set up a utopia in the sky. These two guys go by Stan and Ollie, but they're not the high-definition comedians Laurel and Hardy were. Ollie (Ken Marks) usually leads; he's bigger and louder. Stan (Derek Lucci), who staggers after him carrying all their bags, is more sensitive and soft-voiced. (Both actors are terrific.)

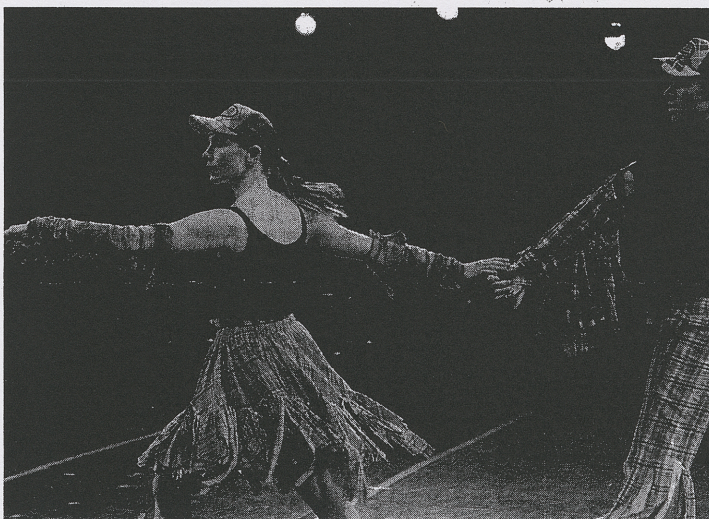
Hoopoe the Epops, Queen of the Birds (Norma Fire), is persuaded to cooperate with them, but Ver-wren-ica (Karen Graham) and members of her Greek Bird Chorus (Jonah Bokaer, Sam Johnson, and Kevin Williamson) are molting crankily (tearing pieces of cloth to shreds as they march about) and understandably wary of humans. (The birds wear billed caps and great plaid outfits cut into feathery rags.) Ollie advances a convincing argument: Tariffs can be charged, since gods and men will have to pass through the midair kingdom to communicate. But it's his Theory of Bird Evolution—gobbledygook about Eros fertilizing the egg of Chaos and birds being the first creatures—that wins the day.

The real Chorus leader is the wonderful Valda Setterfield, Gordon's wife and muse. Wearing a shabby toga and a frizzly

**DAVID GORDON'S ARISTOPHANES  
IN BIRDONIA**  
Danspace Project at St. Mark's Church  
131 East 10th Street  
212-674-8194  
Through Sunday

**STARTING OVER?**

BY DEBORAH JOWITT



Photograph by Paula Court

**Bird's the word: Karen Graham and Kevin Williamson**

gray wig, she plays a resurrected Aristophanes, chafing against postmodern devices and a director who puts words in the playwright's mouth (some of them very good, sly jokes). She also remembers to do a few tap shuffles now and then because this is a dance space and someone always has to be dancing.

Aristophanes swoops along in fine Gordonian style. As usual in his productions, there are many folding chairs—piled, set out in rows, moved around. The dancing spools along in walking patterns that may or

may not come to rest in poses (Graham solos like someone who's had ballet classes but is very relaxed about it). While moving on and between two rows of chairs in the "Exposition Square Dance," the performers talk all the time, their astute rhythms and pauses creating a quotidian form of birdsong. In one passage, they name every bird they can think of. The music is as varied as Respighi's *The Birds* and Les Paul and Mary Ford's version of "Mockingbird Hill."

Birdonia acquires all the faults of earth's civilization. Its inhabitants pen themselves in a faux-brick fortress and pop their heads over its walls or through its swing-up windows to list developments, punctuating the increasingly dismal account with chants of "more time passes." Setterfield offers rueful commentary and asides from a rolling ladder. Ollie and Stan briefly take on the roles of an inspector, a parson, and a producer.

It's Stan who finally utters a poignant speech about being homesick. Like his parents, who left New York for Florida and soon returned, he'd rather have the bad old he's used to than the new bad where he feels like an outsider. When they leave, he's leading, and Ollie is carrying his own bags. Maybe it's a not major moral shift but it's a start.

**The performers' astute rhythms and pauses create a quotidian birdsong.**