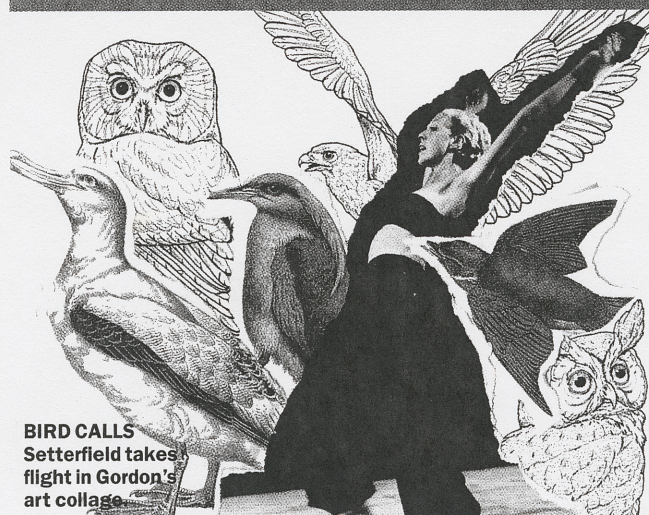


JANUARY 12-18, 2006

DANCE



BIRD CALLS
Setterfield takes flight in Gordon's art collage

Let it fly

David Gordon remakes Aristophanes' *The Birds* in his latest political comedy By **Gia Kourlas**

David Gordon first considered creating a version of Aristophanes' *The Birds* several years ago. "I remember thinking how much I would just like to have a stage full of birds," he recalls, sitting in the Soho loft that he shares with his wife and muse, dancer-actor Valda Setterfield. His flock of dancers never worked out, but after creating *The Chairs* (a marvelous adaptation of Eugene Ionesco's play) for Setterfield and himself at BAM last year, he reconsidered the idea. "After dealing with the estate of Ionesco," he says dryly, "I decided the next playwright I worked from had to be deadlier than Ionesco."

A revered figure in the dance world, Gordon, who was a vital member of Judson Dance Theater during the '60s, is a quick-witted choreographer and director who seems to relish all things ridiculous. His *Aristophanes in Birdonia* transforms Aristophanes' *The Birds* into a modern political comedy, in which Euelpides and Pithetaerus become Stan and Ollie and hail from America, not Greece. "I read that the real Greek names might be translated as 'persuasive' and 'optimistic,' and after thinking about that I decided, 'This is Stan and Ollie!'" Gordon says, with a giggle. "Stan's the one with the plan and whenever Ollie

makes a mistake, Stan is going to say, 'Another fine mess you've gotten us into....'"

In this imagined utopia, christened Birdonia, faith-based initiatives consume the government and media. "The thing I'm most interested in is this battle over creationism, and when we hear the President or Pat Robertson or somebody saying a version of, 'You who are ruling

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this out of your schools, don't be surprised if God doesn't come and help you when you need help," he says. "I might actually be very happy if there were to be a class called Alternative Theories of Creation. Why not? I don't want to stop people from thinking what they think, I just don't want them to stop me from thinking what I think."

Gordon drafted *Aristophanes in Birdonia* by reading several translations of *The Birds* at the same time and writing in increments. "I deter-

mined to read ten pages at a time of every translation and to start writing without knowing Aristophanes' ending so that I could really try and move along with him through the script," he says. "One of the things that happens is that the Stan character leaves the stage and never comes back, while the Ollie character marries somebody. I didn't want to go there. I want to show that in the invention of a new world, things do not prove to be radically much better or even other than before. All the same bureaucracies rear their heads. That, in part, comes from watching what's happening in Iraq."

Another departure involves the inclusion of Aristophanes himself, played by the regal Setterfield. "Valda talks about being Aristophanes and says that the director has ordered her to keep dancing around even after she told him that as an actor she doesn't really think that a 1,500-year-old Greek comedy writer would be doing a lot of that," he says. Actor Norma Fire plays Hoopoe Queen of the Birds, and Karen Graham is Ver(wren)ica—the leader of an all-Greek bird chorus. Gordon, in keeping with Aristophanes, also includes four visitors; his list features a general, an inspector, a parson and a producer, the latter of whom is a recurring theme in his work. "My favorite final visitor these days is the producer who gets to talk about how come, in this brand-new city, there are no good places to present things?" the choreographer says, laughing gleefully.

One of the many pleasures in following Gordon's work is watching the way he recycles his own material, from shredded plaid birdlike costumes that are almost Vivienne Westwood-like, to the set—the same tents that appeared in *Dancing Henry Five*, for instance, have become a brick fortress. "In a kind of way, I have a costume shop and a prop shop," he says. "You have noticed what thing has made its way into the collection or what has been transformed into it, and I like seeing that. It is as if you're having a dialogue with the same designer. Economically, I am always going to be careful, but it's a little like I own my own theater."

***Aristophanes in Birdonia* is at Danspace Project Thursday 12 through Sunday 15 and January 19 through 22.**