

Downtown theater artists bend old plays to new purposes

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CLASSICS AT  
GENERATION GAP

BY ELIZABETH ZIMMER

"When the playwright is dead," observes pioneer postmodernist David Gordon, "the director can do anything he wants with the script." His new *Aristophanes in Birdonia* (opening a two-weekend run at Danspace Project January 12) relocates Aristophanes' political comedy *The Birds* to contemporary America—renamed *Hysterica*—and thence to a utopia in the sky.

"I was interested in the idea of a stage full of rocks and birds," Gordon says after a *Birdonia* rehearsal in his Soho loft. An avuncular figure whose last local outing was Ionesco's *The Chairs* at BAM, he's once again spotlighting his gifted wife, actor-dancer Valda Setterfield (she plays Aristophanes). Also in the cast are Norma Fire, who's performed with him for 50 years; Karen Graham, an 18-year veteran of his Pick Up Performance Co.; others familiar from previous projects; and new recruits including Cunningham dancer Jonah Bokaer.

"As long as somebody will allow me to deconstruct and reconstruct art products I believe are amazingly pertinent and valuable, and let me imagine myself in the time of the thing and the thing in my own time," says Gordon, he's satisfied. "This activity requires an interesting amount of research on how the art of the time informs the politics of the time." He recently mounted his own version of Shakespeare's *Henry IV*. "I have a great sense of humor and am melancholy beyond reason; I'm cynical and romantic, a hopeless pessimist, but my anger comes about because I imagine something could be different. I don't know how to deal with the violent religious fervor of our time, and the insistence, in the 21st century, on 'my daddy is bigger than your daddy.' It seems we might have outgrown that."

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Outgrowing violence is the subtext of *The Seven*, Will Power's astonishing hip-hop adaptation of Aeschylus's tragedy *Seven Against Thebes*. Directed by Obie winner Jo Bonney and choreographed by Bill T. Jones, it begins previews January 18 and opens February 12 at New York Theatre Workshop. Everybody dies in the original; the conceit of Power's remix is that you can change history and elude an ancient curse.

Power's long hair is cornrowed; his résumé includes playwrighting and acting (in



Photograph by Shiho Fukada

Setterfield (top) and Fire in *Birdonia*

his solo shows *The Gathering* and *Flow*, and in the film *Drylongso*), rapping, and singing lead vocals with the Omar Sosa Sextet. He found in the story of the sons of Oedipus themes common in America. "Are we doomed to repeat the mistakes of our ancestors—the abuse of drugs and alcohol, say? There are national issues of a curse continuing through a family," he notes, referring to certain occupants of the White House. Like Aeschylus, he's constructed a script entirely in rhymed verse, but instead of hexameters he gives us hip-hop, calypso, funk, and blues. Its lines "might be half the original text and half hip-hop stuff."

"We needed people who could handle complex vocal rhythms and rhymes, and be able to move and act," says Power. "The pool of actors who can do this is still developing. Our cast is multicultural; hip-hop comes from African American roots, but it's very global now." He wants the various characters, drawn from different generations of the hip-hop aesthetic, to sound authentic. A dozen actors play many roles, with the Greek chorus represented by a female DJ's entourage.

Jones, charged with developing the gestural language that tells the story, brings the perspective of an elder. "If I didn't jump in with these younger people, it would be a boat I've missed," he says. "I'm learning more about hip-hop culture. When we were casting *Right Hand*—a slick, slippery character—I suggested the piece would have more resonance if he were played by a white guy. The notion that race is not an issue in hip-hop culture gave me great pause. That's one of the things that's generational. I have an old-fashioned habit of 'racial looking,' and hope the younger generation really is freer than that. I'm learning at breakneck speed something about the nature of culture: Their references have happened in the last three years, things I know nothing about. It behooves me to pay attention. The krumping kids see the B-boys as 'old school' and 'over.' It behooves me to become more clear about what I know and love; one must know where one is standing."

To see *Birdonia*, call 212-674-8194 or visit [danspaceproject.com](http://danspaceproject.com). Order tickets for *The Seven* at 212-239-6200 or at New York Theatre Workshop's box office, 212-460-5475.