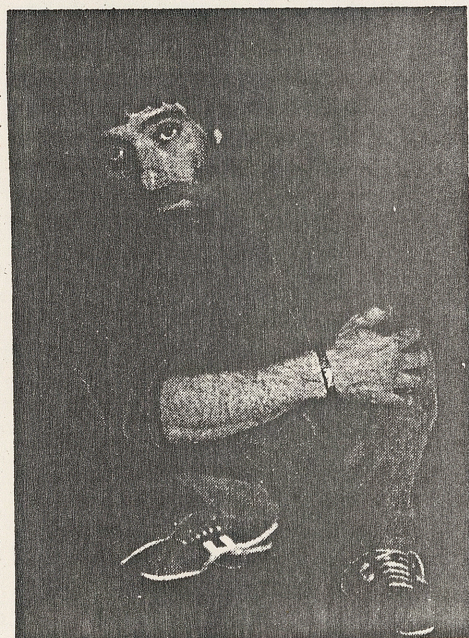


Obsession: The Dancer's Facts of Life



A CONVERSATION WITH CHOREOGRAPHER DAVID GORDON AND DANCER VALDA SETTERFIELD



By Charlie Vernon

"I have been doing this for about 20 years," David Gordon says, "and in the course of that time, it has been called Avant-Garde, Experimental, Post-Modern Dance, New Dance, Performance Art, Concepts in Performance... I do what I do. People run around naming things because that's what *they* do. I'm not very

concerned with those labels."

David Gordon has been investigating the use of movement, words, and props in performance since 1960. His dances are an intense scrutiny of human activities, and an exploration of the forms or contexts into which these activities can be placed. More often than not, the exploration is a reduction to the point of absurdity. His dances are about making dances, a theme that becomes a metaphor for the slipperiness of accomplishment and the inanity of trying to make sense out of life. Gordon is a comedian/tragedian; a muralist whose subject matter is the desperate struggle to complete the mural.

To aid him in the struggle, Gordon has found the perfect partner and foil in Valda Setterfield, who has danced in his work intermittently since the beginning. Gordon and Setterfield, husband and wife, are in Chicago at the MoMing Dance & Art Center for a one-week teaching residency and two performances this weekend, July 14 and 15.

The pair is a study in contrasts. Valda (the "Val" rhymes with pal, not pall) Setterfield is tall, thin, and thoroughly British. She has an open

face, a warm smile, and curly gray hair. Gordon has described himself as looking like a lumberjack, and indeed he is big and sturdy, dark and brooding. Raised in Manhattan, he seems to be something of an American Heathcliff. He slumps down into his chair in avoidance behavior, while Setterfield perches fully erect and enunciates effortlessly. Valda loves dancing and all of its rituals, and David isn't so sure.

Charlie Vernon: David, does performing please you?

David Gordon: When it's over. After the performance. Sometimes during the performance. Almost never before the performance. I have a great ambivalence about performance. Valda has no ambivalence about performance. She loves it and it loves her. Ask Valda that question and you'll get much nicer answers.

Vernon: Does performing please you, Valda?

Setterfield: It pleases me a great deal. That's true: performance loves me, too. I seem to be smiled upon by the gods of performance. I have pleasure in the rehearsal, too. I have pleasure

continued on page 27

GORDON/ SETTERFIELD

continued from page 15

in the class, in getting ready for class. I have a pleasure in dancing, in general.

Vernon: Then I wonder, David, where is the pleasure in the work for you?

Gordon: There are people like me—I don't feel unusual or unique—who have no idea where their pleasure is, who resent interviews, rehearsals, performances, after-performances—

Setterfield: Almost everything. There's a name for that....

Gordon: —almost everything and, at the same time, who would loathe that none of those things occur. So you do what seem to be the obsessive facts of your life. You just do them. Occasionally, very, very rarely, in retrospect, you come up with a really pleasant memory of a specific rehearsal or a specific piece or a specific performance, but in fact you know that you suffered through it like you suffered through everything because you're a sufferer. You just suffer, that's all.

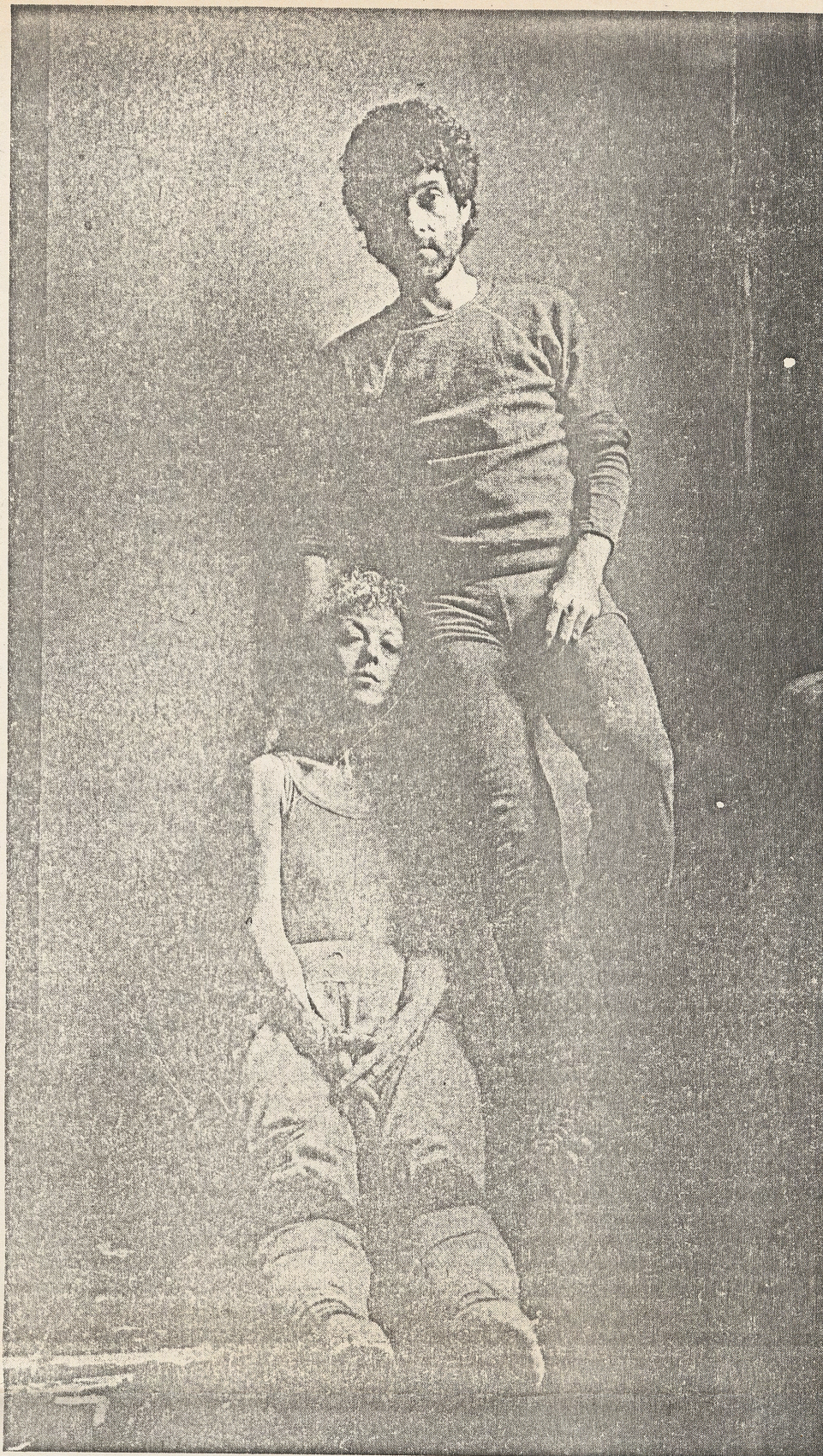
The obsessive facts of Gordon's life: He began dancing in the company of James Waring in the late 50s. He became actively involved in the Judson Dance Theater, the hotbed of Avant-Garde dance of the mid-60s, where he presented solo and duet works with Setterfield. The concerns of the Judson innovators (who included Yvonne Rainer, Lucinda Childs, Steve Paxton, and others) may be summed up in Rainer's dictum:

"NO to spectacle NO to virtuosity NO to transformations and magic and make-believe NO to the glamour and transcendence of the star image...."

"We very much wanted to be taken seriously," Lucinda Childs said recently about the Judson movement. "We went to ballet class during the day and at night [in performance] we would move mattresses around."

Gordon describes his early work as a hostile response to the chance methods of music and dance composition that were developed by John Cage and Merce Cunningham, methods that were very much in vogue among the Judson dancers. He rebelled against any preconceived notion of what a dance ought to be. In 1966, he stopped choreographing and began performing in Yvonne Rainer's company, where he stayed for five years. At that time, Rainer's work was involved with the performance of tasks and consisted of set material. During this time, Setterfield was dancing with Merce Cunningham's company, with which she was associated for ten years.

Grand Union came into being when Rainer decided to shift her focus to film. Grand Union, made up of Rainer's company members sans Rainer, was a strictly collaborative improvisational performance group that stayed together for several years. When Gordon began to choreograph his own work again during this time, it was work that was diametrically opposed to the improvisational aesthetic. Since 1974, Gordon and



Setterfield have been performing together again, and in addition Gordon has begun working with larger groups.

"Variety is *not* the spice of life," Gordon told his Improvisation/Composition students in a workshop this week. Instead, the way Gordon works in class and in composing is to zoom in to an extreme close-up of an event or function and find all the ramifications of that thing. In the extremely inventive *Chair* series (1974), he methodically presented all the intricacies of a collapsible metal chair and the ways a body can move in and with it in a restricted space. The movement in *Chair* is presented deadpan, twice, to the tune of "Stars and Stripes Forever"—a model of Gordon's understated humor. His workshop students at MoMing were encouraged to explore the infinite possibilities of the simplest movement or situation by means of judicious decision-making. He warned that the funnier you think you are, the less funny it will be for the audience. Gordon and Setterfield

spoke of these concepts in the concluding part of the interview:

Setterfield (to Gordon): I think you're very tenacious. It's the way you work. You worry it like cats worry mice. You ferret out every bit of goodness and usefulness from that work. You absolutely turn it inside out and backwards and look at it from every single angle. You may not concern yourself with huge numbers of things, but the things you decide to do, you do with extreme thoroughness.

Gordon: One of the ways to get at humor is to turn something inside out. I just think that being very serious about anything—which I am—is very funny.

Essentially, I think I am a humorless person. I think it is funny that I am humorless or that the world is humorless. And so I always laugh at the perversity of it. If you're terribly serious, you examine and examine and examine and when you have examined it all, you realize that it is all nothing...or something...or X. You just laugh at it.

Setterfield: It's another proportion.

Gordon: Or no proportion. It's nowhere. There's a point when you read the newspaper and you see the headline and the headline says: *Leaders Meet at the Summit*. You say, "Leaders meet at the summit—I'd better read this." Why do you have to read this? You know who the leaders are, you know where the summit is, you know what they're going to discuss. They are either going to come out and say, "Mr. Carter must blame all of this on the Arabs and thereby save his presidency," or "Mr. Carter must not blame all of this on the Arabs and thereby save his presidency." Either way, the solution is the same: it's either going to save his presidency or not save his presidency.

Mr. Kennedy will either run against Mr. Carter or he will not run against Mr. Carter. If he does, he will either win or he will lose. When he either wins or loses and either Mr. Carter or Mr. Kennedy is in the White House, the headlines will say: *Leaders Come to the Summit with Mr. Kennedy*, or with Mr. Carter.

It won't mean anything.

There are very few acts that affect our destiny enormously. If that thing falls out of the sky in the next 30 hours and plunks you on the head, your destiny will be affected.

Setterfield: You'll either be dead or very rich. I'm very concerned about Skylab.

Gordon: I think all my dances are inordinately important to me at the time I'm making them and at the time I'm performing them and possibly vaguely important to people watching them at the time they're watching them and have no importance and are of no interest to anybody the day after, the day before, or forever more.

Vernon: What if someone stops at a street corner and thinks, "Gee, I remember that movement in that David Gordon dance from two years ago." Does that mean anything to you?

Gordon: No, not a thing. You see, I thought we turned the world upside down in 1962 at the Judson. But in fact, I have now been around the country and I have visited modern dance departments at universities, I've seen dance companies and young choreographers making work all over the place—we *didn't* do anything in 1962.

It was another revolution that affected the smallest percentage of people it could possibly have affected. And...so...what?

Setterfield: I think it had a large effect but I think that dancers are more resistant to change than other artists. I think that the Dada movement had a great effect on visual art, but you can't just take a dance off the wall in the way you can with a painting.

Gordon: That's a good closing line: Dancers are more resistant to change than other artists.

Setterfield: I don't like to make generalizations, but I've just made one which I will stand behind, for the time being anyway. I'd love to be proved wrong.

It's funny that dancers don't even just plain say *why*. You don't really need an example to say *why*.