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# DanceTheatreJournal

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**Can this  
really be  
ballet?**

**What do we mean  
by dynamics?**

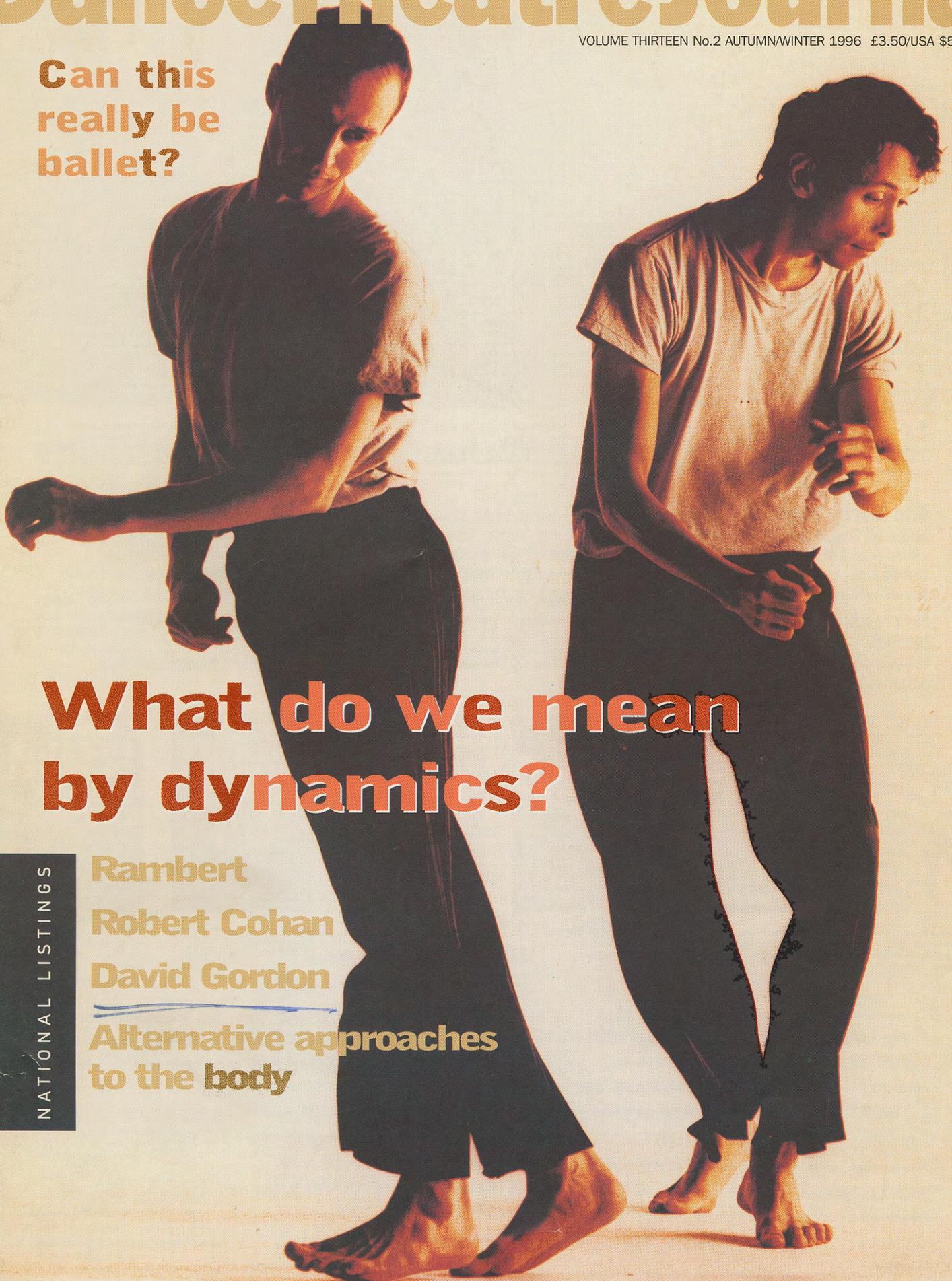
NATIONAL LISTINGS

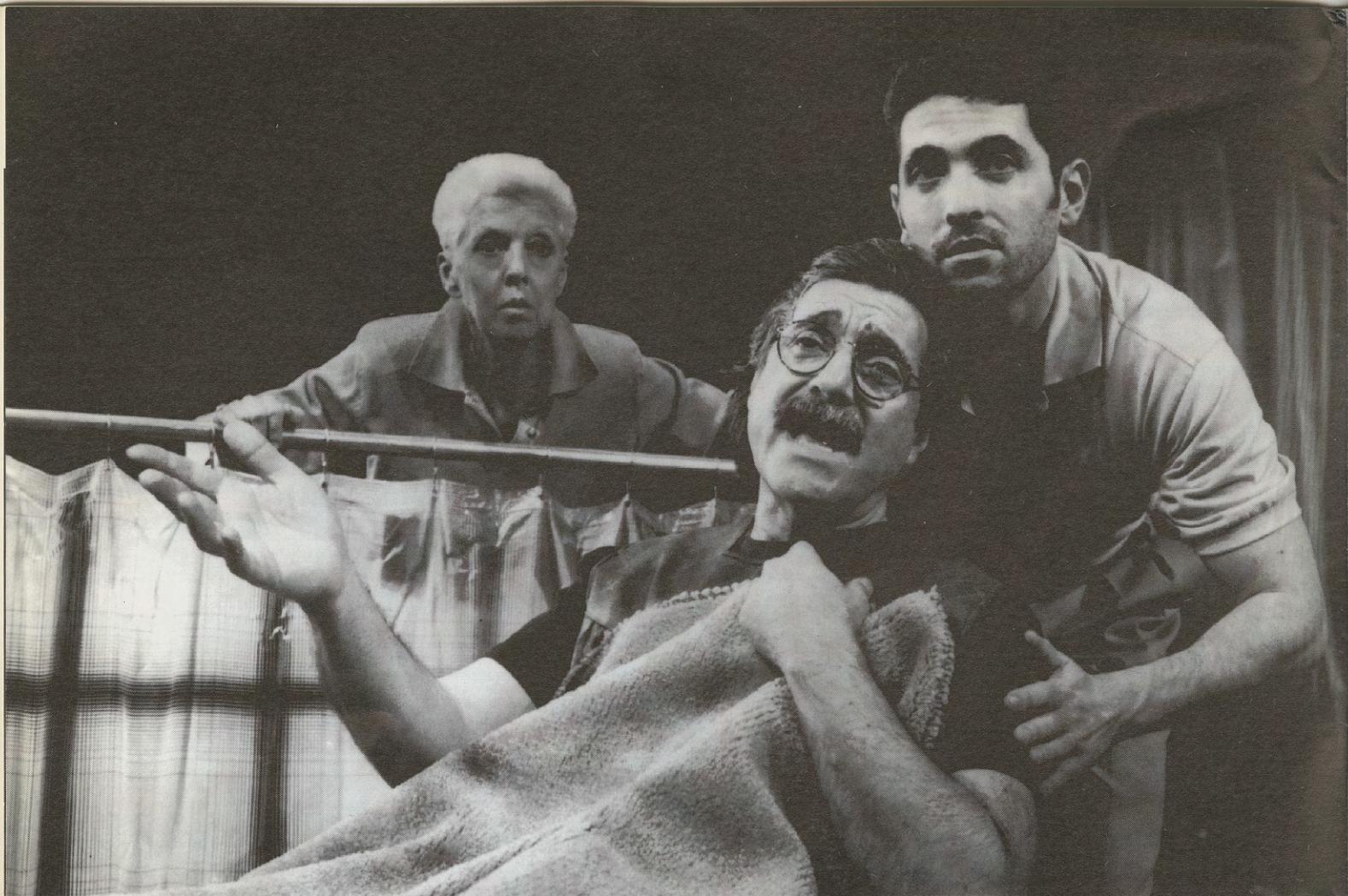
Rambert

Robert Cohan

David Gordon

Alternative approaches  
to the body





# the double identity of David Gordon

Roger Copeland chronicles a career of shifting relationships

To most theatre people, David Gordon is known (if he is known at all) as a recent émigré from the world of dance. Here, for example, is the way a theatre critic for the Minneapolis Star Tribune identified Gordon when he directed a production of Max Frisch's *The Firebugs* at The Guthries last year: 'a New York choreographer only recently trying his hand at stage direction'.

Technically speaking, that's true. Gordon is a founding

member of the legendary Judson Dance Theater, the long-time artistic director of his own troupe (the David Gordon/Pick Up Company) as well as a contributor of dances to the repertoires of many other companies, including American Ballet Theatre and the British (now defunct) Extemporaneous Dance Theatre.

But some of us have suspected all along that David Gordon is really a *theatre* person. To anyone who's followed the evolution

of his long career, it doesn't seem the least bit odd that Gordon recently staged a play by Frisch or that he directed and choreographed a dementedly zany new musical for the American Repertory Theater at Harvard (*Shlemiel the First*), that he conceived, directed and choreographed a revisionist look at Commedia characters called *Punch and Judy get Divorced*, or even that he co-wrote (with his talented son Ain) one of the best new American plays in recent years, *The Family Business*. The fact of the matter is, Gordon has always approached dance in the spirit of theatre and theatre in the spirit of dance.

We see this quite clearly in the way Gordon 'represents' one of the pivotal characters in *The Family Business*, Aunt Annie Kinsman. Annie is an elderly invalid and world-class kvetch, a Russian-Jewish widow who rarely changes out of her pink housecoat. But God as usual is in the details and some of those details don't quite jibe. In fact, a few are downright subversive: peeking out just below her frilly bathrobe are blue jeans and tennis shoes. And lest some *really* unobservant audience member fails to notice, Aunt Annie's upper lip sports a big, bushy moustache. The reason for the moustache is quite simple (and it has little or nothing to do with the currently fashionable practice of gender-bending). Aunt Annie is played by David Gordon himself and Gordon is deeply attached (in all senses of the word) to his real-life moustache. He's certainly not about to shave in the name of verisimilitude. (It takes a worthier cause than theatrical 'realism' to extract a sacrifice of that magnitude from David Gordon!) This isn't laziness, stubbornness, or vanity on Gordon's part. It's a conviction that the theatre should be, above all, *theatrical*, and this belief derives (paradoxically) from Gordon's background in dance, a medium that rarely asks the audience to suspend its disbelief.

'The idea that the theater is a *theater* is very important to me. I am never fooled by realism on the stage,' Gordon declared in a recent interview. 'I think it's kind of amazing that you can keep your belief in what's happening when a guy playing an old lady on the floor is ringing a bell that's causing the other characters to pick up the phone.' (Here Gordon is referring to the decidedly low-tech 'sound effects' in *The Family Business*.)

Gordon has in fact always proceeded on the assumption that almost *anything* can 'represent' anything else in the theatre, that 'identity' is always fluid and transformational, and that the most commonplace objects can effortlessly assume a wide variety of functions and meanings.

One of his signature pieces *Chair: Alternatives 1 Through Five* (1974) is an exercise in theme-and-variations for himself, his wife (dancer-actress Valda Setterfield) and two metal folding chairs. By the end of the dance, Gordon and Setterfield have exhausted every imaginable permutation (and then some) for two human beings and two metal chairs.

The chair - at once so simple and so versatile - is one of the great icons in Gordon's work. In 1985, he choreographed *Field, Chair and Mountain* for American Ballet Theatre. Here

the ABT corps not only used metal folding chairs as partners, but also employed them as a makeshift ballet barre to support fully-extended arabesques and attitudes. (His British version of this 'chair' piece, choreographed for Extemporary in 1984, was called *Field Study*.) In *Shlemiel the First* (1994) the wise men of IB Singer's cock-eyed village of Chelm perform a manic dance of criss-crossing legs while standing and sitting on (what else?) chairs.

Another related theme that links Gordon's work for the theatre with his work in dance is the concept of transformation and the exchange of identity. In a piece from the early 1980s called *Double Identity* his performers don't just 'change partners and dance', they also trade identities as well. They literally (and figuratively) *take one another's place*. (The pun in Gordon's work is always intended.) They begin 'as themselves' by announcing, for example: 'Susan as Susan', 'Keith as Keith'. But as they begin to physically displace one another, they perform verbal flip-flops as well: 'Susan as Keith', 'Keith as Susan'. As with Gordon's beloved chairs, the permutations begin to multiply at a dizzying rate.

Consider some of what happens in just the first few minutes of Gordon's recent production of Frisch's *The Firebugs*: Lola Pashalinski begins the play by portraying Schmitz the Wrestler. But mid-scene her costume - all velcro down the back - is stripped off and she transforms into the play's central character, Biedermann. Before too long she's 'trading places' with the actress who plays Anna the Maid. And so it goes.

In Gordon's topsy-turvy world, actors and inanimate objects become interchangeable as well. For example, in his production of *Shlemiel*, a mannequin stands in for one of the village elders every time Marilyn Sokol (who normally plays him) is called upon to do double duty as the wife of the title character. It may well be this continuing fascination with 'double identity' that drew Gordon to the story of *Shlemiel* in the first place. When the central character leaves his tiny village in search of the great beyond, he inadvertently wanders back home. But *Shlemiel* becomes convinced that he's actually stumbled upon a second Chelm, the mirror image of home. ('If God made everything in twos, why not Jews', sings one of the characters in a conceit that must have made Gordon feel instantly at home.)

Above all, Gordon has a masterful way of encouraging words and images to 'trade places' in the time-honoured form of the pun. His verbal/visual switcheroos alternate between the exquisitely subtle and the outlandishly literal. In his dance-theatre piece *The Mysteries and What's So Funny?* (1991) a character yells 'Wait a minute!', and the entire company proceed to do just that: they freeze on the spot and hold their poses for exactly sixty seconds. In other circumstances, Gordon will introduce a verbal metaphor and then proceed to take it *literally*. For example in *The Family Business* one of the characters is losing body parts because Aunt Annie - the invalid - is 'eating him alive'. (When his mother realises this, she exclaims in astonishment: 'I know you said she was eating you alive. I thought it was a joke'.)



Gordon's way with words has been evident in much of his work for the past quarter-century but with *The Family Business*, he and his co-author, Ain Gordon, have taken a quantum leap. The always delicate balance in Gordon's work between movement and words has been tipped in the direction of the latter. This is an elaborate way of saying that *The Family Business* is a full-fledged *play*, one that reads exceedingly well.

Gordon is a true contrarian; he always seems to work against the grain. When he created dances for formal *dance* companies and organisations - and this applies equally to the Judson Dance Theater and American Ballet Theatre - he invariably refused to call himself a choreographer. His programme credit usually read, 'movement construction' by David Gordon. But when it came to *The Family Business*, a play that contains no dancing, his credit read 'directed and choreographed by...' Still any attempt to isolate the text of *The Family Business* from the idiosyncratic conditions of its performance misses the real heart of the experience. The double, triple and quadruple identities of *The Family Business* begin with the pun in its title. (It's as much or more about the *family* as about the family's business.) And on one level, it's very much about a specific family, the Gordon family. In fact, the only performers are Gordon himself, son Ain, and Setterfield, 'real-life' wife and mother.

But the casting avoided any straightforward correspondence between the 'actual' family members and the roles they portray. Dad doesn't play dad, he's the great Aunt. Ain (with the help of a plastic nose and Groucho-glasses) portrays both

father and son. Setterfield portrays not just mom, but all of the female characters.

The family business is a plumbing firm called 'Phil and Son, Inc'. Phil, who inherited the firm from his father, never really wanted the business. His (thwarted) dream was to become a composer. Paul, his son, wants to be a playwright (in fact, he's writing the play we're seeing).

But he too is drawn into 'the business' - and the business he's drawn into is in every sense the *family* business. For it's he who assumes the responsibility of caring for elderly Aunt Annie, the archetypal nightmare embodiment of every guilt-ridden-emotional-burden that a sick and ageing relative can impose on a younger family member.

To begin to get some sense of the way *The Family Business* actually plays in performance, try imagining a short story of IB Singer's, adapted to the stage by Ionesco, and directed by Brecht - which is a way of saying that the subject matter is Jewish family life, the style is absurdist deadpan, and the staging devices treat painfully personal material with sufficient distance and impersonality to ward off any easy sentimentality. 'You make what haunts me funny,' announces a character at one point, and that line functions as a succinct declaration of dramatic intent.

The setting is minimalism personified. A couple of metal coat racks on wheels with sliding curtains of various colours are all the Gordons need to signify a variety of locales. And although the evening contains no dance sequences per se, the blocking is so fast, fluid and complicated that it feels choreographed. In



fact, everything in this production, including the words, seems to dance. The writing segues gracefully between terse narration and dizzying fast-paced dialogue, often emulating the one-two punch rhythms of classic vaudeville routines. At one point, Setterfield narrates 'Phil's Entire Life' in flashback. The whole sequence takes no more than a minute or two. 'That's it?' asks Phil forlornly. 'It's a synopsis, Phil...' replies Setterfield as narrator.

But for all of its Marx Brothers antics, *The Family Business* also contains some of the most emotionally wrenching images in recent memory: when David Gordon as the dying Aunt Annie slowly crosses the stage pushing a chair, the image is inexplicably heartbreaking. That's because *this* time around Gordon's favourite all-purpose prop has come to represent the walker that Aunt Annie now needs to remain upright. And even though *The Family Business* is clearly a theatre piece and not a dance, its connection to Gordon's Judson-era background is always apparent. The Gordons, père et fils, rely throughout on a mode of theatrical representation (one that has little to do with 'realistic' acting) that might be regarded as the exact stylistic equivalent of Judson's pedestrianism: a workmanlike, unembellished, low-key efficiency. No 'impersonation' in the conventional sense; yet, paradoxically, an extraordinarily diverse gallery of 'characters' emerges in the course of the evening. And this in turn reminds us that even in the heyday of Judson, Gordon was one of the odd-men-out.

The mythology of Judson often equates the entire era with

Yvonne Rainer's manifesto of renunciation:  
*NO to spectacle, no to virtuosity, no to transformations and magic and make-believe, no to the glamour and transcendence of the star image... no to moving or being moved.*

No to transformations and magic? Not for David Gordon. (Although it's essential to point out that his attitude toward transformations and magic has more in common with the work of hip, anti-illusionistic conjurers like Penn and Teller than with the overproduced, mysterioso/glitz of David Copperfield.) Gordon is the sort of magician who shows you where the rabbit is hiding in the hat.

No to moving or being moved? Not so for *The Family Business*. Gordon's willingness to acknowledge that even the outer fringes of the avant-garde has 'family', is inextricably connected to it and 'haunted' by it, results in one of the most emotionally *moving* works of recent seasons. Gordon's artistic interest in 'family values' has been developing for some years now. It was there (however disguised) in *My Folks* (1984). But in that work, the reference to 'folks' could still be dismissed as a pun on 'folk' dance. By the time of *The Mysteries* (1991), the subject had manifestly become the relationship between art (a narrative about Duchamp) and life (a narrative about an 'ordinary' elderly couple - clearly modelled on Gordon's own 'folks').

This brings us to the single most important distinction between the Judson avant-garde of the early 1960s and a recent work of David Gordon's like *The Family Business*: its subject matter. In fact, one could argue that it's about the very two subjects that the 'downtown' avant-garde, in its more bohemian manifestations, avoided for so long: family and business. To what extent do artists belong to a larger family that extends beyond the hermetic insularity of the 'art world', and to what extent is even the most unpopular form of art a 'business'? (The 1960s avant-garde was largely oblivious to the financial concerns that became such a routine part of every artist's life in the 1980s and 1990s.)

Robert Benchley once said that there are two categories of people: those who believe that people can be divided into two categories and those who don't. Gordon, clearly, is allergic to categories, especially those as oversimplified as 'dance person' versus 'theatre person'. Similarly, he isn't the first choreographer to make a major contribution to the theatre. (One thinks above all of Jerome Robbins.) But Gordon is the first 'dance person' who's as much a playwright as a choreographer. It's been thirty years since Robbins's Broadway production of *Fiddler on the Roof* (a musical that bore some obvious similarities to *Shlemiel the First*). Following *Fiddler*, Robbins left the theatre, retreating (and who can blame him) to the pampered security of the New York City Ballet. Let's hope that Gordon, by contrast, maintains his double identity. ●

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