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Reviews

Dance

Pick Up Performance Company

Place, London

★★★★☆

It's not often that Dance Umbrella programmes a show about marriage — least

of all middle-aged marriage. But central to David Gordon's Family\$Death@Art.COMedy is a slow duet, performed by Gordon and his long-time partner Valda Setterfield, that presents a tender portrait of all the accommodations that make up a long relationship.

The body language is stark but eloquent. The two sixty-something dancers open the duet in an embrace, but then slip away to eye each other up. Their gaze has the critical detachment of strangers — is this really how the person I fell in love with turned out? It also registers a poignant anticipation of loss. Glances of irritation and gestures of readjustment elide together in a courtly dance that forms a statement of immense graciousness and gladness.

But this is not just a celebration of two people surviving a life together; it's also a kind of cabaret about domestic life in general. Gordon, Setterfield and the

six younger dancers in the Pick Up Performance Company whisk through a sequence of scripted and danced vignettes about life behind closed doors, presenting low-key quarrels about being late for a party, wanting to get a pet dog, falling asleep in front of the video. The subjects aren't as important as the ritual of domestic wrangling, the routine story line of escalation, appeasement and stalemate. The rhythm of the arguments, the witty litany of the marital lines, are almost as carefully orchestrated as the physical manoeuvres that the dancers perform, creating a basic but mesmerising choreography of domesticity.

The abstract logic of these encounters is underlined in the series of framing dances that complete the programme. Sometimes the choreography carries blatant emotional baggage — erotically embroiled partnerwork, nervy

standoffs. Sometimes the drama is all in the structure, for instance a square dance in which one performer is always left without a partner. Gordon's dance language is easy on the eye, its inventions engaging. Its pleasures, though, are overshadowed by the stunning observations of the domestic vignettes. With the former we're in familiar modern-dance terrain; with the latter we're looking at a different world.

Judith Mackrell