



David Gordon and Margaret Hoeffel: making contact by making a dance

# In word and deed

## David Gordon gets framed

by Laura A. Jacobs

Just as Mother Courage encompasses the sensibility of Brecht's play, Valda Setterfield canonizes the tone and values of husband David Gordon's performance piece *Framework*, which was presented by the Harvard Summer Dance Center in conjunction with the ICA two weeks ago at the Loeb Drama Center. It begins when she strides on stage in a tie-dyed, rag-doll practice dress and rehearses a liltingly off-axis dance to Chopin. Her ease, elegance, and sterling concentration (the stage darkens as she gets deeper into the dance) is interrupted by the ringing of a phone; she calls for someone to answer it. Coming forward into a spotlight Setterfield begins a soliloquy: "The telephone is hard, because you can't see who you're talking to. And encounters in the flesh are hard, because you can . . . see who you're talking to." She lists more dichotomies that are "hard" in their way and then graciously thanks us for the conversation. It's a wonderfully droll start to a work that will question, without questions, to what extent social/work obligations become emotional and perhaps moral ones.

When Setterfield finishes her soliloquy she joins the company in a theatrical verbal spree — all take part in the syncopated (and choreographically plotted) patter that begins the story (Valda has received a phone call from company members who may want to "come over," thus disturbing her rehearsal). Gordon's word games have been called Sitwellian or Joycean; actually, with their emphasis on the opacity of language and on forked syntax, they're more a cross between Gertrude Stein and Dr. Seuss — exceedingly pointed, and absurd. The punning is funny, but it's not just for fun. In this adult version of Telephone misunderstandings can have bad consequences.

The wordplay resonates, hovering in space the way emotions do. Gordon then fills that space with dances that reiterate the theme of the preceding conversation in a kind of dream residue (the music for

the dances is almost always rap or punk). The first spoken section is about entrances, exits, and doorjambs; the dancers literally get stuck in the doors, which are formed by other dancers. The dance that follows uses the skit as its choreographic blueprint — it's a double, but silent and more highly evolved. Gordon's not only expanding on the story (a thin one that grows rich), he's clueing us into the operating mechanism of the entire work (the "framework," so to speak), giving us the key to the house. You can look at *Framework* as a series of dances framed by notched and dovetailed speech, or as toothy skits abstracted into smooth, insistent movement. However you look at it, the work draws you in; and it's like finding yourself in a hall of mirrors.

Gordon's galvanizing prop is a rectangular frame (about six feet high) that acts in increasingly suggestive and abstract ways. Near the end of the first half we start reading more into its manipulation. That frame is a doorway, a window, a snapshot border, but it's also a threshold, a viewpoint, a momentary stock taking. By the arrival of the long pas de deux that begins the second half we are ready to see that frame as a symbol: of personality (its parameters and sharp corners), or of creative work (it's a ballet barre, the dancer's mirror, the choreographer's eye for space). In one of the evening's best sequences, a board the size of the frame is used as the nucleus of an impromptu narrative that plays on the colloquial use of the verb "to go" ("I go, 'Very funny.' I go, 'Ha ha.' He goes, 'I'm going.' I go, 'Go.'") and is fueled by the group's refrain, "Then what happened?" Here the board is a wall, a bed, a table, a mountain the dancers scale in turn. It's a mutual context that holds the group together. Gordon's constructions are so inventive that the possible meanings proliferate — and within his strict format they all cohere. This makes for the electrical changes of *Framework*; its synapses are always firing. But the beauty of the work is in the dances. They

seem more real than speech.

There's an improvisational flow to Gordon's dances, a flow he takes care to keep clean and distinct. The movement is mostly workaday — walking, jumping, simple straightlegged lifts, leans and spins; but it's mapped out with neat specificity and performed with luster. The rhythms are conversational (quick-witted, slow to anger, eager, impatient) and yet they're musical too, meticulously so. Gordon's choreography in *Framework* has great kinetic appeal — Gordon himself doesn't dance much, but he's got a forceful, jivy presence. Even when the music's dark thump grows belligerent, the dances offer up human events, gestures cloaked in intrigue (the way the dancers slowly turn their heads in the musical pauses of the "Wanting Contact" dance is haunting).

Of the eight or so dance sections in *Framework*, three are especially notable — the first two pas de deux and the dance to "Wanting Contact." The first pas is between Gordon and Margaret Hoeffel, and it's an amazing, erotic number. The two manipulate a frame and its board in manifold shapes. They make a sliding door, they hang a picture, they angle the frame off into space — it's as if they were building a house. There's a gentle, tensile quality in their handling of the objects; they're synchronized, like lovers. And the objects come to represent this encounter; they're the hinge of the action, and so surreal you may feel anxious. As the dance ends, light shines in from the wing and reflects off their skin in a kind of aura. You remind yourself they're just working; this is a metaphor for building a dance. But later in *Framework* "David and Margaret fall out," and the statement ricochets off this dance, reanimating our understanding of it, veining the story.

The second pas de deux is an adagio between Gordon and Setterfield, and it's a more intimate, subliminal exploration. He wields the frame like a ringmaster, and she goes through her paces, en-

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# Gordon

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grossed in its movement (it represents the dances he can create for her). Gordon in turn is measuring, weighing, supporting her as he seeks out her boundaries. The dance to "Wanting Contact" seems to happen in two rows of three, and its topography is that of a wedge, or a resting seesaw. The dancers are bound into this formation like sled dogs, yet even within its grid the dance is alive and ornate. Perhaps the persons at the high end mean to fly but the need of those at the low end weighs them down. The dance has the impacted energy of the moment preceding a basketball tipoff, and the visual order of a graph. It's very baroque.

As *Framework* nears its end a gigantic yellow rectangle is lowered from the rafters point first. It's a caricature of one of the little yellow frames; a gleaming mutation with the androgynous menace of the obelisk in *2001*. Behind it Gordon struggles across the stage in slow motion, as if under water, a man drowning in jostling, needy egos. The phone rings and no one answers. The rectangle continues to descend, folding over on itself until it's a yellow line across the stage, a flat EKG, a dial tone. Has something broken in Gordon; has something died? The dancers gather in the final pose — all clustered in one of the frames, as if for a Christmas greeting card. And on the music's last note Gordon pivots and joins them.

*Framework's* drama is without ef-



fusion: the tension builds in the dances while the words click along the surface in their daily way. Over the duration of the performance we become sensitive to the movement dynamics — their degree of playfulness or irritation, of solidarity or isolation. When Susan Eschelbach tells her story in the "Then What Happened?" sequence, it too is shadowed by wisps of dance (and then followed by a longer dance that rehashes the theme). It's a story within a story, and it affects the surface of *Framework* the way the radiating rings of a small disturbance affect the entire pool. The individual cannot help influencing the group pattern even as he or she is swallowed up in it. When Setterfield leans against the barre, her head dropped on her arm and the huge yellow frame looming overhead, the image is rending. And it reflects on Gordon. She alone must understand what to us is an ambiguous finale.

Toward the end of her opening soliloquy Setterfield says, "To be casual is hard. To be formal is hard too." She's discussing life, but she's also talking aesthetics. *Framework* is both casual and formal, with a freshness of design that breaks down into logical parts — and with an interior logic that translates not into words but into concepts: harmony, continuity, compassion. Gordon has spurned the labels postmodern and avant-garde in order to call himself simply a dance maker. In *Framework* he verges on classicism. □