

# The ARTS JOURNAL

November  
1981

## DANCE

### Post-Modern Dance Festival

#### Innovation & History

by Ann Dunn

The Post-Modern Dance Festival, held September 22-26 at NCSU's Stewart Theatre in Raleigh, was the first of its kind in the country. Mary Regan, director of the North Carolina Arts Council, once again insured this state's significant place in the history of innovative and historical dance events. The Festival was conceived by Ms. Regan and David White of American Theatre Lab in New York. It was funded in part by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, and the NC Arts Council. And it was implemented with unusual grace by Stewart Theatre director, Susan Coon.

David Gordon and his wife Valda Setterfield performed on Friday night. The highlight of the Festival, their performance was the only event I would label "post-modern." David Gordon personified the history of post-modern dance and Valda Setterfield is a master of dance.

In his college days, Gordon was a non-dancer who became a trouble-seeking student in James Waring's composition class. In the early sixties he participated in the creative explosion of the Judson Church performances, initiated by Robert Dunn (composition teacher for Cunningham and noted for his emphasis on chance and repetition). Gordon quit dance for many years after being badly received by critics (at a nascent stage in post-modern development when far-sighted criticism could have played a more supportive role). In the early seventies he helped form and worked with the improvisational, chance-oriented, happenings of "Grand Union." He currently works with what he calls his "permanently temporary" Pick Up Company.

Post-modern choreographers no longer must fulfill the exciting, dangerous and necessary role of the revolutionary, to break rules because rules have become straight jackets, or to try everything to find out what "everything" consists of. The dancers who have maintained contact with early post-modern concerns and who have stayed dancers (unlike Tharp who has gone big-time traditional, or Rainer who is making films) are now making, it seems to me, dances that will stretch with time along side *Swan Lake*, *Clytemnestra*, *Miss Julie*, *Summerspace*, *Les Noces*, *Pillar of Fire*. This also is exciting, dangerous, and necessary.

These choreographers have absorbed and co-ordinated elements of chance, intuition, humor, repetition, contact, and indeed, revolution itself. Curiously, due in part to the built-in lack of concern with exterior art rules, their dances (made by people born in the 30's and 40's) still have a more revolutionary look to them than much of the bland work made by emerging generation choreographers (the 50's babies). The post-moderns have lived, with active

Performing Artservices, Inc.  
325 Spring Street  
New York, New York 10013  
212.243.6153



# DANCE



concern, through a world war, a cold war, civil rights campaigns, the Vietnam War, and threatened nuclear and environmental disaster. David Gordon, with his twenty year post-modern involvement, is a leading example.

There is another art involved in public dance besides choreography – the art of performance. The only female dancer I would rather watch than Cynthia Gregory is Valda Setterfield. I am not immune to the emotional and physical pyrotechnics of a Makarova. They are thrilling. It's simply that I receive a more lasting sense of the beauty of movement from understatement.

Setterfield's purity, her controlled, smooth style is as clear as a well, and makes one thirsty to gaze upon. Whether slipping out of Gordon's arms, or breaking through a wall of people, or executing a set movement phrase, her apparent ease captures our whole attention.

The post-modern dance world is not given to or interested in creating stars. In spite of that, I would go to any event just to see compelling Setterfield move.

I remember enduring (only way to put it) a Grand Union performance in '71, and thinking, "This has to happen. These people have to act out this performance and I have to do my part by being audience to support this stage of this thread of dance history. But it is SO TIRESOME. The idea and fact of implementation are more stimulating than the performance itself."

Friday night I was amply rewarded for my decade-plus apprenticeship to post-modern dance. David Gordon did it. He really did it.

*ANN DUNN is a dancer, choreographer and poet. She is director of Little Snowbird, a multi-arts company currently touring dance, music, poetry and fabric. ■*