

# David Gordon to debut 'Uncivil Wars' at Schwartz Center

Acclaimed artist's latest work based on Brecht play

by Barbara Adams  
Special to the Journal

"A wealthy chuck diddled a chick farmer's daughter." The line is comical, even to the half-dozen actors threading through the rehearsal space. "Again," the director-writer-choreographer-artist David Gordon bids them, and the actors, dressed in severe black jumpsuits and dowdy grey coats, move once more through their intricate intersecting pattern.

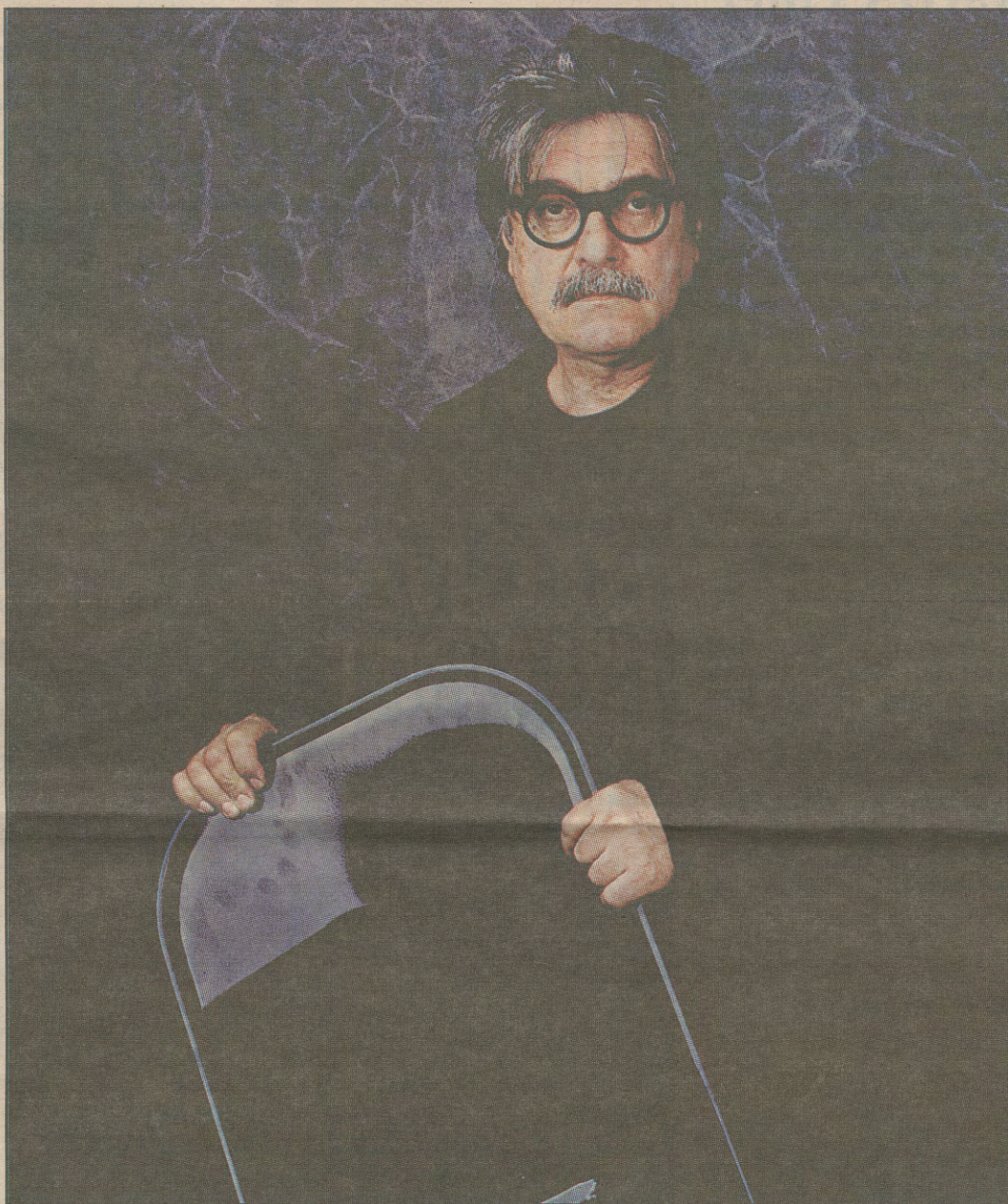
"A wealthy chuck diddled a chick farmer's daughter," one actor intones, and on the fifth or sixth repetition of the scene you recognize the odd words are in fact "Czuch" and "Czich," the like-sounding terms that German playwright Bertolt Brecht used to describe two not-so-different classes of people in his parable play on racism and the rich, "The Roundheads and the Peakheads."

Gordon - founder of the dance group David Gordon and the Pick Up Performance Company, winner of two Obie and three Bessie awards, unclassifiable artist from the early Grand Union and Judson Dance Theatre days to the present - is adapting Brecht's play, which premieres this Saturday evening at Cornell's Schwartz Center for the Performing Arts. He and his troupe, which includes his wife and partner Valda Setterfield, have been developing the work during their three-week NYSCA residency at Cornell.

Brecht himself was fond of adapting others' work, and his original play (which premiered in Copenhagen in 1936) was itself based on Shakespeare's dramatic tale of social justice, "Measure for Measure." Gordon sees his re-envisioning of the story as a collaboration with Brecht and his composer Hanns Eisler.

"Essentially it seems to me that when you're working with an 'art ancestor' you are in some way collaborating," Gordon says. You want to respect the material and simultaneously have a dialogue with it."

"I like the story a lot," Gordon adds. "It's about a fictitious coun-



David Gordon will unveil his latest work, "Uncivil Wars: Collaborating with Brecht," 8 p.m. Saturday at Cornell University's Schwartz Center. Call 254-ARTS for tickets or more information.

try with a large deficit and over-production of certain farm products. The government is determined that the best way to lower the deficit and make the people happy is to wage war...." Gordon smiles knowingly, hinting at contemporary parallels. "So the government gets half the people angry with the other half, nomad immigrants who take farm jobs away from them and work for less money. And so, to secure the economy, the government makes a civil war."

This is the only play by Brecht that Gordon has worked with, and their "dialogue" began a few years back, when Estelle Parsons of New York's Actors Studio asked Gordon to direct a pro-

duction of the play. He'd never read the work, but found the translation *Village Voice* writer Michael Feingold had done some 30 years earlier as a student at Yale.

"It was 90 pages long and a hundred characters," Gordon winces at the memory. "On the first read-through, the entire small studio was full of actors. They had a line each, and it took hours. I took the script home and cut it to 60 pages and reduced the characters to about 13 or 14 actors."

But it wasn't enough simplification for Gordon, who admits, "After eight weeks of rehearsal, I ran out of patience. I quit after the show ran for a week." He

says, "Sometimes when I work on something for an intense period of time, I can hardly wait never to think about it again. Then time passes and I think of what I didn't do the last time."

So the idea of working with the piece in other forms stayed with him. Gordon wanted to look at another translation, and this time found N. Goold-Verschöyle's 1937 version. He'll collaborate with Feingold again on a future version of this, but for now, he says, "a dead translator is best."

"I wanted to be more ruthless about it. I wanted to do this play about doing the play. And I wanted more freedom with the language."

## IF YOU GO

David Gordon's 'Uncivil Wars: Collaborating with Brecht'

► **What:** world premiere of new theater/music/dance work

► **When:** 8 p.m. Saturday

► **Where:** Schwartz Center at Cornell University

Gordon also sought to reveal Brecht's opinionated material, he says, "while relieving it of some of the didactic overkill - and therefore allow people to see the connection between Brecht's writing, the time he wrote, what he wrote about, and the world we live in. So I took the story out of time, and let it be in its own time - in ways that allow for physical action."

And the current piece reflects that: It's the core of Brecht's tale, chopped and choreographed, with Gordon narrating bits of his original experience directing the show. He stands at the side of the rehearsal space behind a music stand. "And there was an esoteric song," Gordon reads. The actors chant a Brechtian tune. "Estelle admitted she didn't know what it meant."

The rehearsal space is littered with black metal folding chairs, wooden poles, and cardboard signs boldly announcing locales like "CAFÉ," "FARMLAND," and "HOLY CROSS PRISON." There's a wooden door frame on a rolling mount, and Gordon stands inside it. "So here's the door...." As Gordon begins blocking a scene, Ed Fitzgerald, his long-time stage manager, runs around with the café sign, tucking a chair under an actress as she begins to sit, anticipating Gordon's choices within milliseconds.

Gordon, burly and thick-haired, rolls the frame around the floor, scowls, reflects. "I'm trying to start this moving...until she (an imperceptible glance at the actress) finishes the bloody line which she sometimes takes a long time to do." He pauses. "But perhaps Norma will find enjoyment in speed...." The entire cast, including Norma Fire, enjoys the drollery.

There are many moments of subtle accord between Gordon and his actors, some of whom are new to this production; others with whom he's worked for decades. One exchange is positively Beckettian: Valda Setterfield, tall and lithe, states politely, in her elegant British

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voice, an implied question: "More of a segue...."

"It's an inner..." Gordon responds.

Everyone smiles.

"Yes, of course," she says quietly, "I should have known."

The sparse props are signature Gordon pieces, reappearing in many productions. "I like rolling everything," he says. "And I like music stands and I like black metal folding chairs. The poles are from 'Dancing Henry V' - I did that in 2004. I like the idea of using things over and over in different ways."

Gordon brought with him the jumpsuits - used in his production of Ionesco's "The Chairs" at BAM in 2004, and in last January's "Aristophanes in Birdonia" at St. Marks' Danspace Project.

"I like them very much; they seemed like very dramatic work-clothes. And I brought 14 yards of black t-shirt jersey, to cut out some sort of robes for the lawyers and judges."

But as luck would have it, in the Schwartz Center closets Gordon stumbled onto a pile of homely coats made of quilted blankets for moving furniture.

"They seemed to stand for a number of things, the greyness of them - people could turn into mothers and nuns and officials; they could put them on backwards and inside out."

And so the coats - whole racks of them - are swept up into the production.

Gordon's vision routinely incorporates the ordinary, the happenstance, the whimsical; like the Hannover Dadaist Kurt Schwitters, he finds detritus everywhere and collages it into something unique and arresting and oddly beautiful.

Even a tiny detail like the clear plastic hooks on the newly purchased bandanas the actors wear. One actor went to remove the hook, and Gordon insisted it remain. So the Peakheads, whose bandanas perch on their heads in wispy points, are completed by this absurd extra detail.

Like all improvisational performance artists, Gordon makes do with what he has. Originally music was to be provided by the group Mr. Wau-Wa, whose leader specializes in Brechtian songs. At the last minute, family illness prevented that, and so an accordionist will arrive five days before opening night to begin rehearsals. Somehow, it will all work out.

Gordon enjoys recalling the serendipitous origin of one of his favorite set pieces. He was working at the Guthrie in



Leslie Morris/Provided

Members of the Pick Up Performance Co. rehearse at Cornell's Schwartz Center earlier this week.

Minneapolis, and noticed in an acting class there was a door frame on wheels. He asked for one to be built for him, but with a swinging door.

"It was a most gorgeous object," Gordon says, still delighted in the remembrance. "I thought it was wonderful. Immediately my dancers began

racing around with it, riding it, going through the door, jumping through the door two at a time." One woman walked through it and asked, "When I go through that door, am I leaving some place or arriving some place? That's it, a gorgeous question. And dancers don't ask that kind of question!"

And Gordon thought, Leaving or arriving? Let's find out.

He repeats a core value: "I like costumes, set pieces that move - that extend pieces like body action, like dancing."

Gordon's long history as an artist began as a disaffected English major at Brooklyn College

who switched to visual arts without telling his parents. Today's visually oriented choreographer has roots in the young man designing store windows. And the actor-dancer began by hanging out with dancers and simply reading pieces he'd written within their performances.

And his roots as a writer? "I come from the world before TV," Gordon says. "There were always books in my house; I was always reading. Each week at the library, I took home as many books as I was allowed and I read them all."

Gordon sums up the random beginnings of a ground-breaking career: "So now I was a guy who could write, a visual arts major, and this person jumping around in the middle of modern dance stuff. I just did all the things I did because they were the things I could do - I wasn't thinking of them as revolutionary."

Just out of college in the late '50s, where he'd met Valda, Gordon was hanging out with James Waring, who had a dance company. "Jimmy was a collageist. He had a trunk of found objects. So we'd all sit around with cardboard and glue, reaching into the trunk and making collages. Things that were literary and visual and antique and contemporary - everything I care about. And I think I still do that."



Leslie Morris/Provided

Valda Setterfield, David Gordon's wife and collaborator, at a recent rehearsal at Cornell.