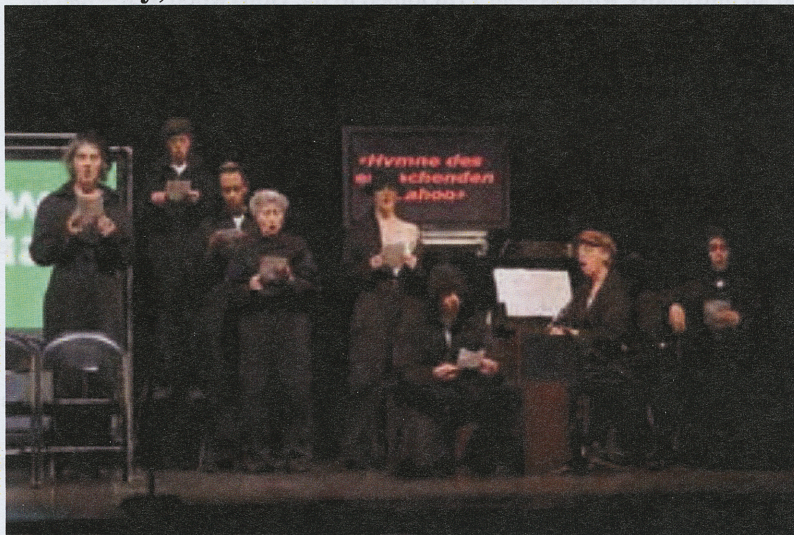




## David Gordon Reworks a Brecht Play to Prod at America Political Perils

By Deborah Jowitt

Wednesday, November 11th 2009



"Measure for Measure" through Brecht and Gordon

Amanda Stevens

### Details:

David Gordon's *Uncivil Wars: Moving w/Brecht & Eisler*

Alexander Kasser Theater

Peak Performances, Montclair State University, Montclair, New Jersey

November 5 through 8

No matter how much dialogue David Gordon casts about in his productions, they're usually still listed as upcoming attractions under "dance," and dance critics regularly review them. His latest work, *Uncivil Wars: Moving w/Brecht & Eisler*, like his brilliant 2004 take on Shakespeare, *Dancing Henry V*, has a great deal of text, and much of it not by Gordon. But even though almost all the performers in *Uncivil Wars* are actors, not dancers, that word "moving" in the title is telling.

Gordon, an important figure in postmodern dance since the 1960s, has taken Bertholt Brecht's little-known 1931 play *The Roundheads and the Pointheads*, as translated by the Voice's Michael Feingold, folded in allusions to Brecht's life and ideas, and turned it into a whirling carousel of political ideologies. This uncannily timely scenario about war-mongering, greed, and discrimination is in almost constant motion. Gina Leishman as Brecht's musical collaborator Hanns Eisler is the only one of the eight principal performers with a single role; she plays piano, organ, and accordion, sings and confers with Brecht (Valda Setterfield). The others slide in and out of two or three roles each, donning wigs or hats or wimples on the run—sometimes stowing these in the pockets of their black coveralls. They arrange and disarrange chairs and tables, wheel ladders and jail-cell grills around, and handle what could be a ballet barre as if it were a swinging door. They march. They stamp their feet and clap their hands in synch. Most of the time, they deliver their lines briskly—especially Setterfield—with a kind of on-rolling rhythm. Words announcing song titles (in German), credits, and newspaper headlines dance onto a couple of video screens or the back wall (credit Dean Moss and Ed Fitzgerald for the media manipulations). During a trial with Setterfield as judge, a projected transcript is rendered in text-message shorthand to comic—and thought-provoking—effect.



## More About ...

Brecht took as a model for *The Roundheads and the Pointheads* Shakespeare's dark comedy *Measure for Measure* (whose plot, as Brecht-Setterfield tells us, can be traced back through a slew of related 16<sup>th</sup>-century stories and dramas). The tale of a cruel deputy whose schemes are deflected by the other characters by means of a variety of disguises and deceptions became in Brecht's hands a didactic political satire. Gordon began working on his version of the play in 2003, and the re-election of George W. Bush in 2004 galvanized him into pushing forward with it. Its relevance is striking. The country of Yahoo has a huge deficit and a surplus of corn; the people are restless. The Vice Viceroy (Davis Duffield) slyly suggests that "war makes new markets." When the Viceroy goes off on a trip, leaving the VV in charge, the local newspaper helps foment antagonism between the original inhabitants of Yahoo (the roundheads, known as Czuchs) and the recent immigrants (the pointheads, known as Czichs). Former friends become enemies; Czichs are hunted down ("Here, czich, czich!" call their pursuers). Trials figure in Brecht's play (a horse is stolen, and justice miscarries to an absurd degree). Gordon has inserted a parallel: Eisler and Brecht's being summoned (separately) to appear before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. Brecht would have been labeled an unfriendly witness—an 11th joined to the Hollywood Ten—had he not fled to Europe.

One factor that gives the production its bewitching, almost dizzying fluidity is the multiple casting. The confusion that sometimes ensues as to who's being whom now adds to the farcical aspect of disguising. Is Michael Rogers of the resonant voice being the Czuch slum landlord now or the wealthy Czich landowner, De Guzman? Wait, he's wearing a pointy little headpiece; he must be De Guzman. If it weren't for the Czichish peak under the wimple, it might take us several seconds to realize that Charlotte Cohn is now De Guzman's sister Isabella, who's taken refuge in a convent, and not Nana Collas, a roundhead farmer's daughter turned whore; when pretending to *be* Isabella, she wears a wimple that sits lower on her head.

Cohn sings wonderfully both characters' bittersweet songs in the cabaret style that Eisler and Brecht devised, and all the performers—singly and together—are splendid in the meditative or vituperative songs. Duffield is equally fine as both the vicious Vice Viceroy and the bewildered, victimized Farmer Lopez. Norma Fire takes on the roles of his wife and a feisty lawyer and plays both with distinction. It's entertaining to see Duffield and David Skeist—who's oafishly naive and greedy as Farmer Callas, the roundhead horse stealer—jumping up and down as two gleeful nuns who need—and get—a reprimand from Mother Superior John Kelly. (Kelly is also terrific as the town's resigned and practical madam.) Setterfield and Leishman, with their commentary and Leishman's accompaniment for the songs, hold the piece together and link it to this country's present ills.

In the end, the actors are joined by the chorus of volunteers from the Montclair community, and all of them, clustered irregularly on chairs, stamp and clap out a long, engrossing, rhythmically complicated sequence. It sends a strong, if oblique message—suggesting that pigeonholing of people by gender or race, or as, say, red-staters and blue-staters, is a divisive oversimplification of our differences and that harmony is within our reach. Provided our moral compass can again find its true north.