

## **"Uncivil Wars" @ Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, 2/28/09**

March 2, 2009 at 11:56 am by Terry Brown

### **'Wars' successful at pushing envelopes at Skidmore College**

**By Tresca Weinstein**  
**Special to the Times Union**

SARATOGA SPRINGS – With "Uncivil Wars," director David Gordon simultaneously strips theater down its essence and layers it with multiple allusions, storylines and identities.

Gordon's most recent revival of his 2003 work, based on a Bertolt Brecht allegory, was onstage Friday evening at the Skidmore College Dance Theater and will be performed again tonight (Saturday) by the Pick Up Performance Co(S.), which Gordon codirects with his son Ain.

A member of the groundbreaking Judson Dance Theater in the 1960s, Gordon has been experimenting for four decades with what has become known as a postmodernist approach to theater and dance. In "Uncivil Wars," actors step out of their roles and address the audience; an actor playing Brecht (Gordon's wife and frequent collaborator, Valda Setterfield) talks about the playwright's history and influences; a scene begins, stops and is replayed.

The eight actors, most playing dual roles, are all wonderful, particularly John Kelly as the madam of a local brothel and the Mother Superior of the local convent, and Charlotte Cohn as a prostitute and a nun. These four and their relatives and neighbors are caught up in the turmoil that rocks the fictional land of Yahoo when the government decides to handle a surplus of corn and a budget deficit by creating artificial divisions between the citizens and fomenting a war between the two groups. A satirical look at the class struggle, greed, loyalty and love ensues.

The script, adapted from Brecht's story "The Roundheads and the Pointheads," is both syntactically and logically complex, interweaving wordplay, rhyming text, songs by Hanns Eisler (who is also a character in the play, played by music director Gina Leishman) and several Alice-in-Wonderland-like trials. Gordon added a House Un-American Activities Committee trial, noting that both Brecht and Eisler were subpoenaed by HUAC.

"Uncivil Wars" doesn't really qualify as dance/theater, but there's a clever scene in which the seated actors "dance" to a song called "Cash Breeds Passion" by crossing and uncrossing their legs in sync; in another scene, they're joined by seven Skidmore students in a perfectly timed succession of stamping, clapping and drumming on chairs. The transitions between scenes are beautifully choreographed, with the actors rearranging the set – which consists of folding chairs, rolling stepladders and screens, and a piano that Leishman plays – even as they step from one role into another. Cohn moves from convent to brothel simply by removing her pointy headpiece and wimple and lowering the zipper on her black jumpsuit, which serves as the standard costume for all the actors.

Setterfield informs us that Brecht was heavily influenced by Shakespeare, who also loved dual roles and mistaken identities. One could imagine "Uncivil Wars" influencing a 21st-century director and eventually ending up on stage in a new incarnation, collecting more and more layers as it moves into the future.

*Tresca Weinstein is a freelance writer from Canaan and a frequent contributor to the Times Union..*

#### **Dance review**

#### **"UNCIVIL WARS: MOVING W/ BRECHT & EISLER"**

**Where:** Skidmore College Dance Theater, 815 N. Broadway, Saratoga Springs

**When:** 8 p.m. Friday

**Length:** 90 minutes, no intermission

**The crowd:** 100-plus Skidmore students, faculty and adventurous locals