

CONTACT QUARTERLY

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*CONTACT IMPROVISATION NEWS (reports, classes & jams) and
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DAVID GORDON & VALDA SETTERFIELD

Talk about Labels, Madmen, Vanity and more

interviewed by Nancy Stark Smith for CQ

'... WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?'

DAVID: The way I got involved in this whole business in the first place was through dancing. I started off by dancing. By going to class and by trying to master certain technical things. In the course of it I began making work and in the course of making work, I am never reviewed by art critics, I am never reviewed by theatre critics, I don't get art audiences, I don't get theatre audiences, I get these things called dance audiences and dance critics. And inevitably what I make is seen through the single telescope of something called dancing. If you run across somebody who's smart enough to say, 'Well its relation to dance is out there, or over there. It's another art form, it's something else,' that's terrific, but most of the time somebody is saying, 'But where was the dancing?'

CQ: *So you feel slightly oppressed by that lens, that telescope?*

DG: Because I'm also at the other end of that lens saying, 'Wait a minute David, are you going to call this something else finally? Are you going to stop going and teaching dance residencies, are you going to stop being on the dance touring program? What are you doing here?' And in fact, I can't find any other place for it to exist in the world and I think that's one of Contact Improvisation's problems, it is something else and it has no area it can function in.

CQ: *Why not change the lens? My appreciation of your work has to do with YOU, as a performer, your mind and sense of humor...*

DG: Okay, that happens in the art world. I mean the art world also categorizes things but within some label called Art the categories are broad enough and flexible enough that you can even move out of one category and into another without the world falling apart. But in the dance world the categories are Modern Dance and Ballet and then what? Ethnic, tap, but what about this entire area of work which is at various times called something like Experimental or Avant-Garde or New. What is that all and do you deal with each of those people separately and their sensibilities in relation to the art that they make or must you in some way align it to dance? And if you're only gonna ever get reviewed by the dance critics, they MUST align it to dance.

CQ: *That's what interests me about this new category in the SoHo Weekly News [Concepts in Performance].*

DG: That's the FIRST place that has attempted to do that. And interestingly, you know I won the SoHo award. But I was nominated in Concepts in Performance and in Dance and I won it in Dance, Avant-Garde Dance.

CQ: *Luckily there are people that have the integrity to continue doing their work WITHOUT knowing what it is.*

DG: Inevitably that's what the making of art is about. You don't know what you're gonna end up with and that's okay.

CQ: *I think a lot of dancers today seem confused by what you, the Grand Union and the people of your generation have introduced as dance performance.*

DG: It's very confusing.

CQ: *It's fantastic because there ARE no labels. That may be one of the reasons for people wanting more traditional technique classes recently. They don't want to 'just improvise' anymore because it has led them nowhere; they have nothing to show for their work except perhaps personal development.*

DG: It also starts to turn me off as audience. I was at a performance the other night and listening to somebody sitting next to me whose physical presence in a performance space I think is quite terrific. And I was listening to her saying that she and some people had been working together for some long period of time doing improvising and finding out what there was and working between them and some morning at 11 o'clock they decided to show something to somebody so they sort of showed it and went on and I began to think more and more that kind of conversation is of less and less interest to me. Personal exploration is terrific for the person and sometimes if I am in the mood to be the receptacle, the passive receptacle for somebody's personal exploration THAT'S terrific. But a lot of the time what I really want is to see ideas and how they influence the movement and the movement influence the ideas. And most of the time in that kind of instance what I see is ALL turned in upon the person him or herself and/or the group and not including the audience in their space and timespan. There's a very peculiar LINE that you walk between your integrity and what the relationship of that information is to an audience situation. At what point is a piece the right length for your personal exploration of material and the WRONG length for the audience's understanding of that exploration. And is it important to know? That seems a very integral part of making work, to me, that I can obviously do something, one thing, for any long period of time but at some point I start to lose the involvement of the people who I am there showing it to and is it my business to figure out at what point that information was at its peak and do I want then to let it go down, which is a choice I should make, or do I want to cut it at that point and keep it where it was the most meaty, potent.

VALDA: Or maybe do you want to even continue it further and see if they come back up into it which happens very often.

'... ALONG COMES THE MADMAN...'

DG: I think that what every improvisational group needs is a very intelligent madman. And that's the person who can throw extraordinary curves into what can result in a kind of introspective, banal, self-perpetuating involvement.

CQ: *Like an unleader...*

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DG: Somebody who just turns the place upside down by his craziness. I thought for awhile that if you were to break down the Grand Union into who I thought was what, I thought I was the madman. But what I find is that my eccentricities are really dominated by a kind of logic and what you really need is somebody who is illogical, whose eccentricity cannot be predicted.

CQ: So you're drawn in to find out what the connections are.

DG: One of the difficulties of working with a group of people and being the boss or working in an improvisational situation is that unless you evolve a dance company over a period of years which is the same group all the time, and little by little you get rid of what you don't want and keep what you want (which I think is impossible, I think it's almost nonexistent)...

CQ: Can you disband and then reband?

DG: In an improvisation group to reband without the people that are of no interest to you it would be very clear what had happened and that, I don't think, would happen. But I made this thing called the Pickup Company. You see, I have solved all the problems of the world cause I can disband at the end of every piece of work. And then I can pick up again, only some of the people and some new people.

CQ: Clever. But what's the difference between being the madman in an improvisation group and being boss?

DG: Boss requires logic. What I would be hoping for in a madman situation in an improvisation group is literally an illogical, unpredictable person amongst whom, with whom you would have to rally in the direction of the madness at some point which would draw you away from the inevitable logic that must grow over a period of time in an improvisational situation. I mean, when one has seen a NUMBER of Contact performances, unless you WANT to tune in to the really fine lines between one person and another person on a given night, in a given space, Contact looks BASICALLY the same from performance to performance. Given a group of people. And that's because there are 87 million permutations, you hit 8,000 of them a night, amongst five people. There it is. You're duets primarily, somebody's up, somebody's down, down, that's it. Along comes the madman and two people are up in the air with nobody down. I mean, that's what happens when a madman is there. You do something impossible. Trisha [Brown] would sometimes serve as the madman [in the Grand Union] but she would do it in terms of physical things. Like in the LaMa-Ma performance there was a ladder but it was only half a ladder; it was only [the steps] without [the support]. And Trisha determined that we could support this ladder while she climbed it and that became the madness at that moment because it was a really difficult thing to be able to hold this ladder upright all surrounding it while Trisha climbed over us and up the ladder as we held the ladder for Trisha to go up into the sky. And of course when she got there, what did you do? So that's the way a madman functions.

CQ: To provoke?

DG: It is provoking, but the madman doesn't necessarily know that he is provoking. The madman only has a vision, and no means of getting there. My visions are always tempered by the steps to the vision. I mean, my vision is never farther out than the end of the string I see attached to it. Trisha's vision is up there and then she invents the string to get to it. That's not the way my mind works. I'm much more literal.

'... THERE IS THIS THING CALLED 'THE WORK' ...'

DG: What happens is there is this thing called 'the work' that gets made over a period of time and with which you have a relationship. And then you take that material and a fair amount of that material IS the relationship you have with it. And you take that work into another space in which you must form two new relationships: one with the space and one with the people who are going to be watching it. And, my idea of a successful performance is if you can either hold on to the relationship to the work that you had or establish a new and interesting relationship with the work because of the performance as opposed to what almost inevitably happens to me which is that the relationship with the work doesn't get new or interesting, it suffers. It is not nearly as interesting as it was, because of attempting to establish what my relationship to the space and audience are.

CQ: At the expense of the work?

DG: Almost always. It's not my INTENTION to make it at the expense of the work but performing produces a kind of tension in me which removes some of the casualness that I have established in relation to the work during the course of its being produced. By the time I END rehearsals with a piece of work, it's really one of my good friends and I feel like I can sit around in it with my feet up. And as soon as I take that work into a performance space and the lights go on and the people are all sitting there quietly waiting, I never saw that piece of work before in my life. (laughing)

CQ: Where does that tension come from and what can be done about it?

DG: It is all self-imposed. What it is is I am a dancer and an artist and I have made this work which I am now showing. And in order to retain my relationship with the work I have to rule out all of my constantly functioning judgemental processes. 'You didn't do that very well. Look who's sitting there in the first row writing. Is this really a piece. Is this concert too long? Is this boring?' I have to NOT think of all of those things because if they ever get hold of me in a performance, I'm lost. And so there's some part of me that is saying, 'You must not dismiss the audience. You must not try to pretend that they're not there. You must acknowledge their existence.' There's something quite mystical there because it doesn't necessarily mean that you look at them or smile at them. It means that you somehow leave yourself available to them and at the same time all of your concentration has

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to be on the center of what you're doing. I don't say that that's impossible, or even difficult for some people. It's just very difficult for me. It's not the major force to be dealt with in a performing situation. I feel as if it is my private affliction. I don't see that everybody has it. I don't think Valda has it.

VS: I don't have it, but I have a very different position from you in that I am not responsible for the work in the way that you are. I guess I find the DOING of almost anything so interesting and very often a great deal more interesting than watching somebody else doing something, that it embodies all my concentration. I am incredibly aware of the support and energy and attention and concentration of the audience, sort of like it amplifies the whole situation. But the pleasure of doing what I am doing in that circumstance is marvelous. It isn't always marvelous.

'... FLOATING VANITY...'

DG: What makes somebody be a performer? Are you kidding? 'Look at me, look at me, I'm a performer.'
[David squeals in a high voice] Yes, you are a performer. Yes, you want to be out in a space being admired. Yes, that is the space that you think you are best suited to be admired in. On the other hand also the way that you get to be the most admired person in that space is that you go right back to the work itself and give all your concentration to it. And Valda's vanity is very peculiar. Because it exists on one level and then disappears. It's sort of like a floating vanity. It starts in the dressing room and she looks at her hips and she looks at her face and she says, 'Oh my, oh my,' and she gets herself all together and then she goes out there and never thinks of it AGAIN. It's just amazing to me, that she never thinks of it AGAIN.

CQ: *How do you do it?*

DG: Me I never stop thinking of it. 'Oh my, oh my,' all the time. (laughs)

'... I'M SO GLAD YOU SAID THAT.'

VS: For me applause is a peculiarly mercurial thing like temperature. It supports you; if you don't support it back instantly it falls like a souffle. It dies. There has to be a constant support from the audience to the performer. They should know exactly when to appear to boost that applause, so that they meet each other halfway.

DG: I think that's sometimes true and I think also you have to just pull into your head for a minute the memory of Steve's [Paxton] performance [Backwater, DTW, NYC, with David Moss, November 1978] in which the applause was very robust and Steve stands around with that kind of half grin on his face and his moist eyes, sort of ALLOWING it to occur to him, for a period of time. It doesn't lessen the applause. He goes off, kind of ambles off. And the applause KEEPS going. He ambles back on and the applause KEEPS going. And it has nothing to DO with what you're talking about.

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CQ: But it does have to do with what happened before the applause. That ambling and that moist eye and that standing there just letting it occur to him was exactly what he had been doing through the performance. Where-as if the performance had more to do with set work. . .

VS: Absolutely. I'm so glad you said that.

DG: That's true. And I'll remember that. One of the things that Valda and Bruce Hoover have been trying to teach me is how to bow. Bruce says that I am the worst bower in the world.

VS: Well it's not about the act of bending your body. It's about accepting applause from an audience.

DG: It's also about accepting the STRUCTURE that is implied in a BOW at the end of a very structured and formal piece of work. I tend to get it done with as soon as possible in the most perfunctory fashion and if the audience by its sheer determination has managed to lure me out into the space again for a second bow I think, 'Gee, I really must be doing good.' But in fact I do nothing to make that happen and I am incredibly uncomfortable and embarrassed at other performances in which the bows have all been set very carefully and whether or not there is sufficient applause the bows keep going on. So instead of the applause generating the bows, the bows are generating the applause. And that makes me CRAZY. I NEVER want to get involved in THAT.

CQ: That explains the perfunctory nature of your own bows. I have trouble bowing too but in some ways it's a great relief because it releases the tension between the audience and performer. It's perhaps the first and only direct contact with them. As performers we seem to dread that confrontation and at the same time gear ourselves up for it, taking the response as some sort of indication of how we did.

DG: It is, at best, a very peculiar kind of indication. I am very aware of where everybody is in the audience. Who's out there and who didn't applaud. 'Uh, oh, so and so wasn't applauding at the end.' And a month afterwards you run into so and so who says, 'That was the best concert you ever gave and I had the most terrific time and have been thinking about it ever since,' and there goes my whole idea of what reaction is indeed indicative of a response. In France, we performed two summers ago at Ste. Baum and at the end of the first night's performance the audience [D is stamping and clapping] did that until we came back and I thought, 'Oh boy, they really love us,' and then I went to every other performance that whole time and every performance they [demonstrates again] did that and it's what they do. In Japan, they sit and pay incredible attention for hours on end and at the end you can barely get offstage with the amount of polite applause which in NO way reflects that they may have been exceedingly interested.

CQ: I heard an explanation of bowing from a Zen priest that changed the whole picture for me. That bowing was the completion of a circuit. That in bowing you were not just receiving but giving at the same time, giving back what had been given you, being gracious. So in that way bowing

wasn't like taking on the applause and storing it for yourself but emptying out into it. So you left clean, not bloated and confused. Then the timing of the bow became interesting; how long it took to empty out and float back up.

DG: I think that possibly under the best of circumstances as you describe it that is indeed a possibility. What I witnessed in Japan when I was there was mostly about protocol—who bows first, who bows lowest. And indeed, at one point I had a conversation with my two Japanese people I was traveling with and they said, 'What is the American word for 'too humble'?' And I said, 'Gee, I don't know. I don't even know how to look it up, 'too humble' as opposed to humble.' And they said, 'Well, some people, you can tell from their bow that they're just being too humble.' (all laugh)

VS: Actually the most interesting bow for me was the bow at the end of that concert [David Gordon and the Pickup Company, DTW, NYC, October 1978] because it was a very peculiar bow, an ambiguous bow. Hardly anybody knew if the concert was over or not. So it did NOT come as a response to applause, nor did it directly signal it because nobody knew whether it was another of those errors that we had been busy making all the time. I was alone there dealing with that and I LOVED/that, It was very mysterious and one had to be entirely comfortable with it or everybody would have been very uncomfortable with it.

‘... LIKE A LUMBERJACK.’

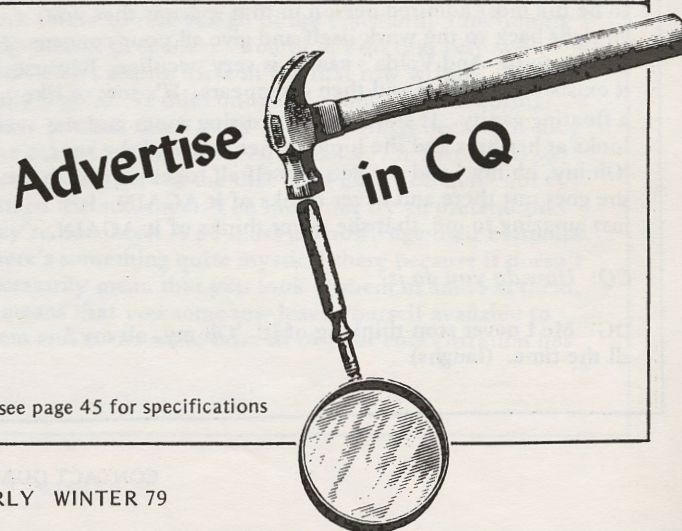
CQ: What is a good dancer?

DG: Technically, if you put me and Steve [Paxton] together in a performance space, Steve looks like a dancer and I look like a lumberjack.

VS: More than that, if you put David and Steve and Baryshnikov together in a performance space, Steve and Baryshnikov would look like dancers and David would not.

Q

COMING UP in the next issue of CQ: DAVID & VALDA talk about making work, not making work, teaching and more.



see page 45 for specifications