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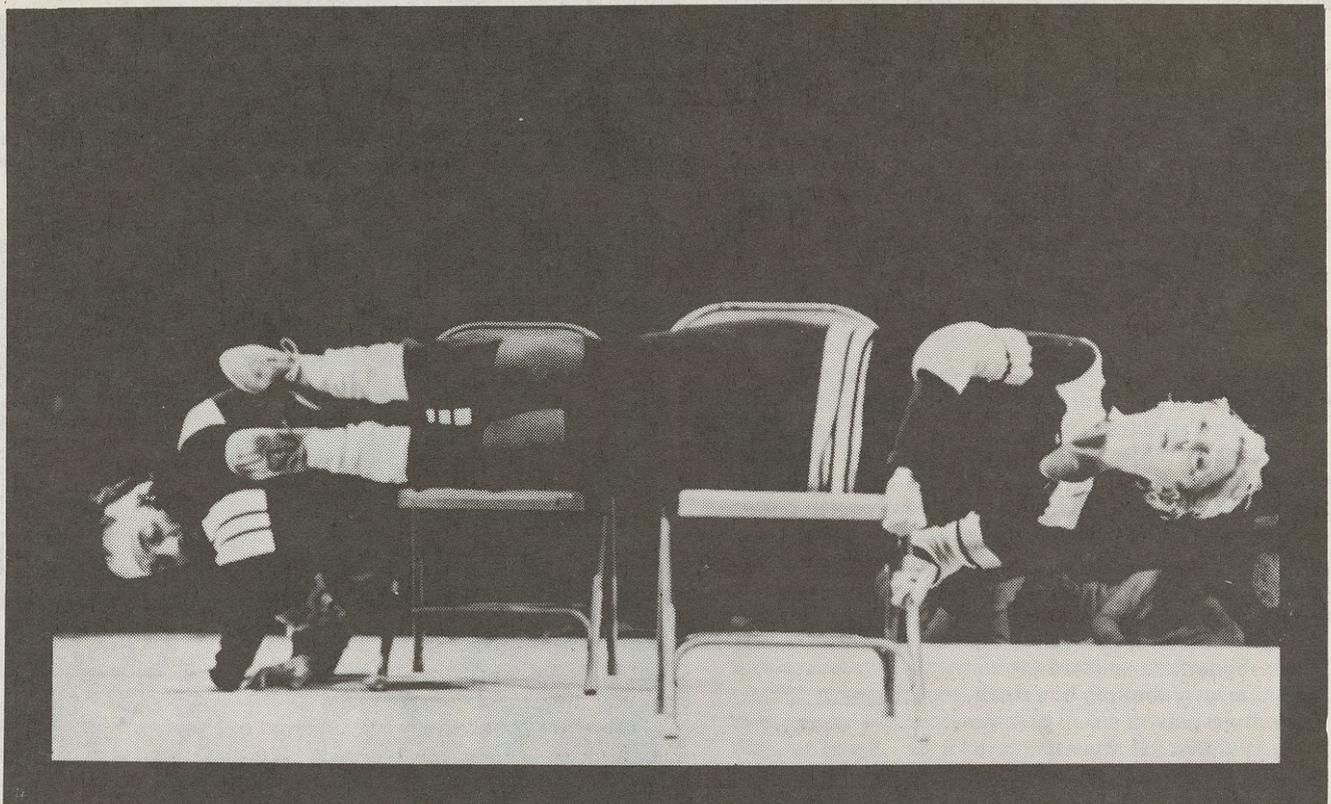
FIELD FIRST-AID SLIDES were found in the Kodak dumpster by Buster Simpson.

THANKS to Northwest Passage in Seattle, Washington for the generous use of their equipment and production facilities, not to mention their patience and support during our 'residency' in their offices. Thanks also to the entire production staff for their perseverance and hard work (without pay).

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LETTERS, art and manuscripts are always welcomed; we review all of our mail for possible publication.



David Gordon, Valda Setterfield in CHAIR

photo: Nathaniel Tilesen

DAVID GORDON & VALDA SETTERFIELD

PART 2

TALKING about Making Work, Not Making Work, Teaching and More
interviewed by Nancy Stark Smith for CQ

'THEY DIDN'T ALL MOVE ALIKE...'

CQ: Many young dancers today are taking a variety of movement classes from ballet to african to t'ai chi in order to gain the facility they might be called upon to show when auditioning to be in a choreographer's work. What do you look for?

DAVID: Well, 60 people came and auditioned for that women's piece [What Happened]. I mean, I didn't KNOW it was a women's piece when the 60 people came, but it just so happened that of the 60 people, 6 were men. And of the 60 people, I chose the people who I thought could most easily in a short period of time SEE what I was doing and pick up on it and translate it into information in their own bodies which would come back to interest me. They didn't all move alike, they none of them moved like me, and that was all fine. It wasn't necessary to me that they all move like me. It was necessary that a kind of material, a kind of movement that I was interested in would be translatable to another body under certain conditions. If I talk about the fact that something is parallel, I really do want something PARALLEL. I don't want your feet turned out and I don't

want your feet turned in, I want them PARALLEL. However, parallel on Christina [Svane] doesn't look the same as it does on Jane Comfort. And that's what I wanted.

VALDA: A number of people go to a technique class to learn literally those things. Where parallel is, what is parallel, what is shoulder height, what is front, what is diagonal.

CQ: So is the idea to arrive at a standardized version of those positions and movements? In some choreography it seems that the differences serve only to distract the onlookers, rather than enhance their view.

VS: That is exactly why ballet companies hire people to fit into their corps de ballet auditions who are exactly the same size, and physically the same as the person before, because they want that homogeneous look. And they get it.

DG: The only reason why anybody comes up with a standardized version of anything is because they don't have the brains to make the material or the information their own. Parallel is a specific thing. I mean, I didn't

invent it. It's a geometric term. You have to know the relationship of one part of your body to the other. It's very important in Contact that you know what your body is capable of doing and how close you're going to come to another human being. One of the things I think you learn in dance class, or SHOULD learn in dance class is how to stand in a room full of people and not get kicked in the head. In fact, hardly anybody ever learns that. They're so busy following the steps that they never learn about the AMBIENCE of working and performing with other human beings. And I think that's one of the most important things that should happen in a class.

CQ: So you're interested as much in the differences that occur.

DG: It would seem apparent from the performance that you saw [Pickup Company at DTW in NYC, October '78] in which there was that piece at the end in which four people did the same solo entirely differently from each other, that I wanted that to occur. That I use that as part of the material I'm dealing with.

VS: It also must be exceedingly apparent in 'CHAIR' that you have two people of different sizes, different strengths, different . . . The only things they have that are similar are Chair.

DG: And the material.

VS: And the floor.

CQ: So you're working with an initial form and seeing how it evolves through various bodies.

VS: . . . while being extraordinarily specific about the form.

DG: Ya. Starting back in Oberlin doing 'THE MATTER' with 40 people who, god knows, everybody there was doing their own solo piece of work. What I had to make sure of was, that the structure was strong enough and the movements themselves were clear enough that when 40 people did THAT, put their hand on their chest, at whatever part of the world they thought their chest was, or with whatever impetus they needed to get to their chest, that it was clear that 40 people were touching their chest.

CQ: How do you give instructions? If you SAY, 'Put your hand to your chest,' everyone will do it their own way. But if you say, 'Do this,' and then DEMONSTRATE, then what are you showing—the placement, the speed, the intensity?

DG: Okay. Now, I do that on purpose. I mean, there is the possibility that I could sit in a chair and plot out all of the movement instructions of a given piece of work and arrive at something. What I do I do on purpose because I make the assumption that if I demonstrate, 'do this', there are, within the group, a certain number, a minimal number, who will succeed in attempting to do it exactly the way they THINK I'm doing it, a certain number who will attempt to do it the way they think I'm doing it and do it quite differently, and a certain number who don't follow instructions at all. And within the course of that number I am going to get the amount of

variation I want to have occur. And there will be people closer to me and people farther from me and as long as it doesn't get so far out of the range that the movement itself is lost, I hold it at that point.

VS: That thing about your mind being changed by the circumstance started with 'RANDOM BREAKFAST AND THE STRIP TEASE', god knows.

DG: Ya, exactly.

VS: . . . Where I did a strip tease from an 1890s walking dress with buttons—about 40 buttons on each cuff, and 90 buttons down the front and gloves with buttons on the glove and David had this idea that I would do it like a real stripper. And I had never SEEN a stripper. I mean, I don't think it OCCURRED to you to have any other idea; it was a STRIP tease, what did you do, you did like a stripper, I had never SEEN a stripper. We would talk about strippers, I was not doing it like a stripper. He said, "I'll take you to night clubs; I'll show you a stripper." I said, "Terrific."

DG: I DEMonstrated. I knew the kind of vulgarity of that movement and the way you WALK back and forth, dropping your clothes and the kind of way you gave that thing away and the way you looked at those people and then I gave it to her and I got this INCREDIBLE ladylike woman UNDESSING in PUBLIC. (All laughing.) And for WEEKS and WEEKS I tried to get her to be this other thing.

' . . . THE BOTTOM LINE.'

VS: 'TIMES FOUR', for instance, was a duet piece and the unison quality of it was very important to it. Therefore my, your, endeavoring to get it to be like you in its energy and in its shape and the space it took was . . .

DG: Right. The things in 'TIMES FOUR' that really had to be dealt with very carefully and caused huge battles between us started with the very simplest thing—'TIMES FOUR' is a piece built with no use of your arms. Your arms are down at your sides, relaxed, through most of the piece except when you use them to get down on the floor or support you in some fashion but there are no gestures in 'TIMES FOUR'. And Valda would hold her arms at her side and I said, "Valda . . ." She said, "They're relaxed. They're at my sides." (David demonstrates holding arms out slightly from the sides.) And it took an ENORMOUS amount of work because even as you were working, the arms began to do this THING. And then another thing was, you know, I'm not a terrific dancer and she's a terrific dancer and when I make a turn, it's why when they write about me they said I don't have a dancer's body, I don't have an athlete's body, they can't quite figure it out. The movement seems very complex but yet it's so ordinary. Well, I just kind of turn and Valda would go FFWUUITT (sound effect) turn and I didn't want that thrust in there. You didn't need all that energy to get around. So we had to work on that kind of thing.

VS: Those were the things that I understood. The part that was difficult was that you sometimes have a personal logic that I cannot apply to myself and my way of moving. And the only time I got really angry was when you asked for something and you asked for it and you asked for it and I finally did it and you said, "There, you're doing it. How are you doing it," and I said, "I'm imitating YOU. I know by now exactly what you want and I'm just doing it; I'm being an actress, that's all, I'm being an actress moving." (All laughing.) And I was.

DG: But there are times when you get particularly attached to the way you think some movement or some phrase looks. I mean, I don't use a MIRROR. So I don't know what anything LOOKS like. I only know what I THINK it looks like. And then when I see it and it doesn't look like what I FEEL like, I think that that can't be right. There's something missing there. And then we work at what that can be and in some instances it really IS imitation. When I used to work with Yvonne [Rainer] on 'TRIO A', and we would do something and do it over and over and over and she would say, "No. I want you to really do that NATURALLY." And finally I shouted at her one day and said, "You don't mean NATURALLY. You mean YOUR way. This . . . I AM doing it naturally." (David laughing.) And in fact, you wind up with that in certain circumstances.

VS: I need to have clear for me, to have explained to me the logic of the piece at some point. I am loathe to take chances when I don't have any clear sense of what the core is from which the chances can be taken. And sometimes David finds that I ask for what he thinks of as details before he wants to deal with them. And for me they're not details, they're . . .

CQ: . . . the bottom line.

VS: Yeah, and that's what happens between us.

DG: And sometimes you're right and you're really asking for the bottom line by asking for those details but I haven't arrived at the bottom line. I'm accumulating the bottom line from both the positive and negative energies being exerted in the situation.

CQ: Deductive reasoning. That's how you work? Isolating entities, sorting them out to find the thread?

DG: Often, yeah.

'... HERE ARE THE RULES.'

DG: By boss, or director, I mean somebody that says, "Here are the rules, here are the freedoms. The freedoms only apply as long as I allow them. If I take away your freedom it's because I'm the boss."

VS: Okay, but you also like some titillation or some provoking in that situation. But the judicious part is to know when to stop. How far to take those things. Fine balance.

DG: And that judiciousness is only as clear as the bravery or cowardice of the boss. For me there is a cutoff point of risk. I will take all the risks right up to that point, and at that point I want to see a product which I know is going to be presented in performance and which I will not want to drown myself when it is presented because it will have my name on it. Therefore at some point I have to say, 'Okay, this is the material. From now on we are dealing with this.' As a matter of fact, what it results in is a very boring period of probably one week or two weeks or three weeks, depending upon how much time I have given myself to polish this thing in preparation for performance. Because that's the time I hate most in the world. That's called rehearsal. The other time, the time of invention, is terrifically interesting, frightening, makes me crazy; I'm happy, I walk around at night. I love THAT time. Then that time comes in which you just come in every day and do it again, and we do it again and we do it again.

CQ: That isn't somehow satisfying, to see it shape up?

DG: To watch it is fine. If I'm in it, to do it again and again and again in a rehearsal situation just bores me. (Pause.) I might temper that a little bit by saying that sometimes my boredom with that situation is my incredible discomfort with boring the people who are working with me.

'... ONE IS CURIOUSLY CUT OFF.'

VS: The first two nights of our performance [Pickup Company, DTW, October 1978, NYC] I remember as being the least interesting. Part of the strangeness of that place is that backstage one is peculiarly isolated. There are two dressing rooms and with 11 people we had to split up. And in order to go from one to the other, you have to cross a corridor in which the audience can see you. And there is no area from backstage where you can watch what's going on. So one is curiously cut off.

CQ: So no one had a total sense of how the picture came into focus.

DG: We met here on Thursday morning for a kind of brushup rehearsal and I talked to them and I said that it had not been my intention to isolate myself from them or them from me and I felt like we weren't having any feedback with each other about the performance. I wanted to arrange that we met every night in their dressing room at the end of the performance. Because it was like we had been in this process together, in this incubator here for 6 weeks and then we went there, split up into two rooms and I saw them just before they went on and said, 'Have a good time,' and went AWAY. I couldn't get out front and I couldn't see it from the back; there is no wing.

CQ: How did the feedback that day affect the performance?

DG: Well Thursday night performance was just dynamite. They came off like something terrific had happened and it had not been like that the nights before. And it had indeed. All I could do was hear it from the back and the SOUND of it, which was a very important part of that piece, was just incredible that night. The incredible chaos at the beginning, and the way it all moved in and out all through. It was just wonderful.

'... GRADUATE TO WHAT?'

DG: The GRAND UNION would go out on tour and teach classes and when I watched Steve [Paxton] and Barbara [Lloyd Dilley] teach in those kinds of group teaching situations there was always this atmosphere of freedom and of allowing the talents or energies of the students to emerge without pressure. And I looked at that and I thought that was wonderful and couldn't, please couldn't I figure out how to be that person instead of this person. And in fact rather than ask them to COUNT something couldn't I ask them to BREATHE it or something REAL and ORGANIC like that. I'm not making fun of it because I tried my damndest to do that. She [Valda] has BEEN at rehearsals in which I tried to get information to come about through some other means than my saying, 'I want this.' In fact, however, what I couldn't figure out was how not to WANT what I wanted. So, I would inevitably wind up with having given freedom and having to take it back piece by piece to get what I wanted. I always begin by trying to get to this other thing, 'You're gonna all KNOW this in your HEARTS and GIVE it to me.' Finally I said to myself, 'This is a waste of time. What you're really trying to do is get them to EVOLVE a PROCESS which you can PLACE right on top of this in ten minutes. Why are you doing this. Are you here for the betterment of these dancers or are you here because you're making a piece? Don't confuse these issues.'

CQ: Good point. And are THEY there for their betterment or to help you do your piece?

DG: I think they're there for both. And I think that what happens is that when you work with an interesting choreographer or an interesting person who makes art, you have a really terrific crash course in both the making and the performing of work.

CQ: Does it bother you that many of the people you might enjoy working with the most might then 'graduate' and start doing their own work?

DG: No. What bothers me now, if anything bothers me, is that graduation seems to be, or seems to have BEEN a distinct cutoff point; that after graduation there is something you can LOSE. I mean, I believe that Trisha [Brown] wouldn't dream of... it would be a step BACK for her to go now and perform in somebody else's work.

VS: There aren't very many other people like me who don't perceive, not only is it graduate to WHAT but

WHY graduate? Why assume that so many of the people with superior intelligence or who are interesting to work with, why assume they're going to graduate to making work? True the system promotes that, but if people are intelligent, why do they have to deal with the system?

CQ: I think, in part, it's to try your hand at it. After being on one side of the process for awhile maybe a number of choices have come up that you would have made differently. You feel your own voice start up and decide you want to try out your tongue.

DG: There's also the syndrome to GET somewhere. And you can't GET somewhere if you're in somebody else's work and also making your own work. You and your work don't GET somewhere until you abandon all those other things and become only identified with your own work.

VS: Actually, in terms of sheer economics, I can't apply for a grant.

CQ: After being with the Cunningham company for so long and working with David and others, you weren't interested in making work of your own?

VS: I never wanted to make work. I think at certain points I was uncomfortable with the idea that I didn't. It was like there was something missing if I couldn't do it. It didn't last very long and I think the reason I felt it was because it was assumed that particularly if you had been with a large company for a long time and you left it, of course it was assumed that you were making work. People constantly now over the last 3, 4 years and STILL, THINK I am making work or that I have MY company. I don't want to MAKE work. I in no way feel lesser because I don't make it. I think I make a very real contribution to people whose work I'm in. If my contribution is to make myself as empty and translucent as possible so that the work is revealed, that's my contribution.

CQ: And that's your focus when performing and working with a choreographer, is to...

VS: ... get down to the nitty gritty of what is the work. Never about what do I look like or what do I bring to it, but how to render it as clearly and faithfully and straightforwardly as it can be done. Unless I am ASKED for something else.

CQ: That's rare I think.

DG: Very.

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S U B S C R I B E

HEARD LIVE ON WBAI-FM

radio review by Ellen Elias, copyright 1979

In an interview this winter, David Gordon said, "What I really want is to see ideas. I want to see how they influence the movement and the movement influences them." In those two sentences is a cursory description of Gordon's work. What is missing from the description is mention of the fine thread between intelligence and theatricality which Gordon weaves into his pieces. With slides, on tape, and in movement, Gordon presents us with ideas. I think he has great affection for them. This affection results in his rolling the ideas over and over in performance, as you might if you had a tasty piece of candy in your mouth.

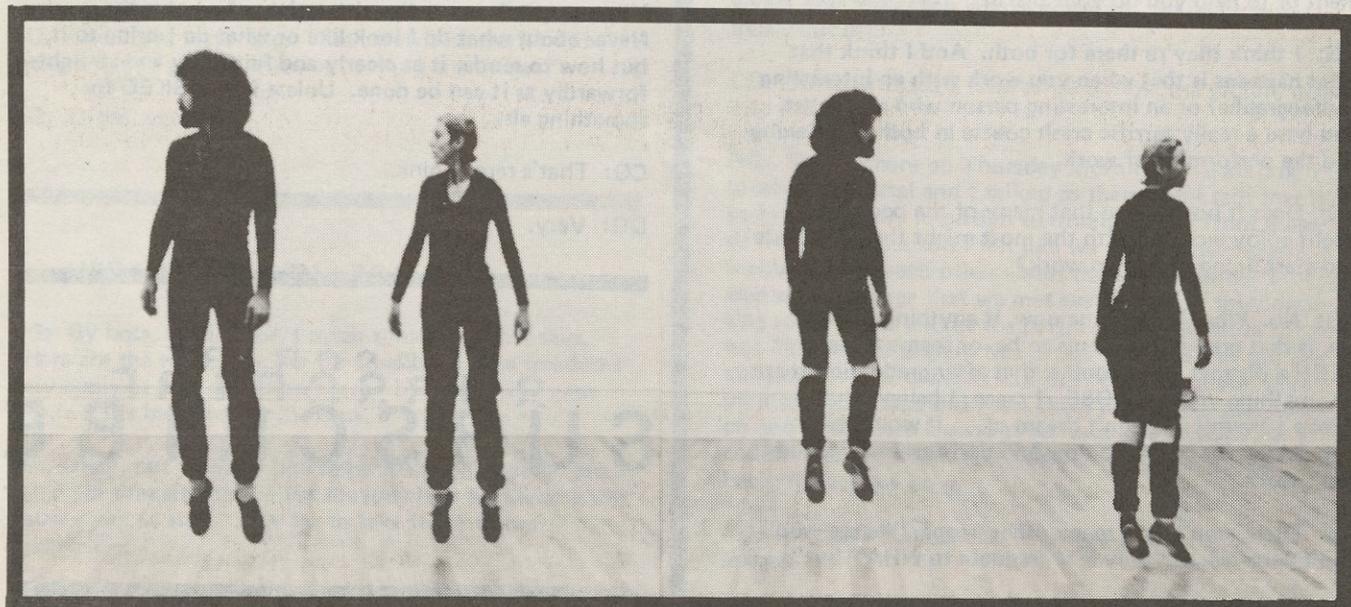
The evening begins with a tape of Gordon describing to Valda Setterfield exactly how she is to look in a series of poses. Dressed in something that looks like an old-fashioned bathing suit and looking like an elegant ostrich, Setterfield assumes countless positions. It appears that Gordon has used photographs which, according to the tape, Setterfield is supposed to reproduce exactly. Her delivery combines dry and subtle humor in her face and timing with care and precision in her movements. The piece is a clear merger of Gordon's concept and Setterfield's execution of the concept. The merger creates a kind of living gallery exhibit.

The next piece, called, 'An Audience With The Pope', begins with slides of critic David Vaughan dressed like the Pope. Like Setterfield in the first piece, Vaughan strikes a series of poses. His voice on tape discusses the history of, for, and with the Pope. This discussion humorously interweaves ideas about dance and performance with descriptions of duties and choices in the life of a Pope. Meanwhile, Gordon dances in front of the slide projections. His movement is smooth, clean, and calm, including phrases which we are to see throughout the rest of the evening. The taped voice says, "The time has come to separate movement and narrative." We chuckle: for that is one of the things that Gordon very specifically chooses NOT to do. His way of combining movement and narrative is simultaneously pedestrian and mime-like, resulting in a formal kind of informality.

Gordon has also said, "By the time I end rehearsals with a piece of work, it's really one of my good friends. 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 people are all sitting there quietly waiting, I never saw that piece of work before in my life."

The material Gordon introduces early in the concert is recycled later into a duet, a quartet, and a septet. Although he may feel he hasn't seen the work before, by that time, the material is a good friend to us. We know each movement's accompanying sounds and energies, where they go in space and how. In this way Gordon helps the audience to see the increasingly complex choreographic structures without confusion. The audience can perceive a maximal amount of choreographic intent because the movement stays a known commodity.

I wonder if his company feels as though the movements are their friends. The dancers clearly embody Gordon's style and forms, but at times their facial expressions reveal some discomfort. Their feeling seems to be: I know the movement, I can do it, I am presenting an idea through it. But they don't seem to have an affection for it—the thrill of performing isn't there. Granted, this is not the kind of work which cries out for dancers to "sell it." Yet Gordon and Setterfield obviously have a kind of affection, ease, and respect for the material, and it shows. Perhaps Gordon's next task is to inspire his dancers to roll those movements over and over in their selves, like that piece of candy in your mouth.



David Gordon, Valda Setterfield in TIMES FOUR