

November, 1986

ON THE

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BROOKLYN ACADEMY OF MUSIC NEXT WAVE FESTIVAL  
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and

# LIGHTER *than*

# MEANING

# LARGER



# *than* AIR



BY MINDY ALOFF

During the late 1970s, I was among a handful of dance critics who took a workshop with David Gordon in a peeling corner of Manhattan's Ansonia Hotel, the biggest space the Dance Critics Association could afford for that hour. We loped in virtually blank. Only two or three of us had ever seen Gordon's Pick Up Co. perform, and several of us were there because we couldn't get tickets to our matinee of choice. Gordon, meanwhile, was waiting, armored with plans. The class wouldn't overtax our muscles, but it would have a structure, he explained in a voice so subdued he might have been throwing it from Fort Lee. First, we'd move while keeping quiet. Then, we'd stay in place and say something aloud. Then, we'd combine activities. He laid down several more rules and we plunged into our tasks.

It soon became clear that we weren't going to be subjected to any sort of crisis, external or visceral. (Once in the late sixties, I'd taken a master class at the New School with Gordon's Judson Church colleague, Yvonne Rainer, who had us jog in a circle for ten minutes at a clip while we pressed our palms to our heads or sped up the tempo of our trot on command. This movement may have been "everyday" for the preteens, but for most of the group—who enjoyed a fairly low level of fitness—it inspired dramatic feelings of doom.) With Gordon, the proceedings took on a more restrained tone, about two thirds brisk detach-

ment and one third domesticity, like what you might find among the members of a small co-op who decided to get together on a Saturday for a game of baseball. Restrained, though hardly bland. Although we were asked to sketch out our own movement sequences and to choose what we were going to say, everyone recognized that our freedom was linked to the tight control Gordon maintained over spacing and pacing. A few pinch-points between freedom and order sparked some lively collisions. I, myself, went to the mound. In the guise of asking a question about procedure, I seized the chance to remind everyone that it's *unnatural* to talk and—getting carried away here I gestured emphatically—move about. Silent, and, in memory, stone still, the rest of the workshop watched the ball practically float into the strike zone. Gordon made contact with a polite stroke, exerting only as much force as was called for by the occasion. "A contrary idea," he mused. With a certain lumbering yet decisive beauty, my point sailed out of the park, up to the land of blue sky. It was a consciousness-raising moment to see how much lightness could be coaxed from a few well-grounded words, and, ever since, I've taken a steady interest in David Gordon's communications for the theater.

Many performers combine talking with physical spectacle, but few generate the supple dance effects from the marriage that Gordon does, even

when there's no recognizable dance step in sight. Somehow he manages to keep the idea alive of an integrity between what people say and do, without reducing what they do to what they say. I think he goes further: he manages to make words sound like fact, and movement feel like truth. In Gordon's work, no less than Martha Graham's, the body never lies, although 'the body' may spend an evening on its back, prevaricating among puns, endlessly on the verge of concluding an argument with itself over an accusation everyone else has forgotten. Words, for Gordon, are where we start from. They set the agenda of themes, images, concepts. Meanwhile, evoked from inarticulate depth, movement cruises up to shadow them, undercut their presumptions, detect new connections, and generally call their categories into question, like a shark traveling in the wake of a survivor's raft at sea. Rarely does the text in a Gordon piece achieve an unambiguous ending, but how often the movement comes to a firm rest, as if, in the course of its flow, a story had been told and a transformation achieved.

When Gordon's work is rolling, it has the serpentine complexity and mirror-house fun of eighteenth-century novels, where stories well up within stories until the whole construction seems one continuously exuberant display of unmitigated logic. I have in mind the square-dancing patterns of *T.V. Reel* for the Pick Up





Left: The many faces of David Gordon, as seen on the PBS program *Alive from Off Center*. Photos: Mark Skap̃yak.



The David Gordon/Pick Up Co. in *My Folks*. An expanded version of this work will be presented as part of the 1986 NEXT WAVE Festival. Photo: Tom Caravaglia © 1986.

Co. (1982), or the musical chair exchanges in *Field, Chair and Mountain* for American Ballet Theatre (1985), where the reorientation of a person or prop has the force of a point scored, so that every new move seems to carry on a debate with the one prior. These qualities of narrative and litigation are intrinsic to Gordon's wit, yet, by themselves, they don't entirely sum up what makes his art charming to an American observer. For, given the delicate touches of which his technique is capable, one of the most impressive things about his tone is how down-to-earth it is—practical, intimate, familiar, direct. Everything his performers do is immediately legible. Even someone unaccustomed to looking at dance can readily take in the firm shapes of the action, the deliberative placement of weight, the naturalistic gestures and functional rhythm. The hard thing to detect is the motor that keeps them all going so smoothly for so long.

Although Gordon has lately been filtering ballet steps into his Pick Up work, he hasn't pursued that heightened rhythmic tension we associate with "dancey" (allegro) dancing, a tension one finds now in the work of other Judson Church/Grand Union choreographers such as Lucinda Childs and Douglas Dunn. Instead, Gordon has by and large stayed loyal to his adagios of repetitive but exacting physical anecdote. The characteristic measure of his pacing connects up with two other conditions to make a

climate: the dancers are directed to look at one another as they move, and the entire cast of a given work tends to remain on stage from beginning to end. The resulting communality borders on an image of extended family, and it permeates even Gordon's work for ballet: his *Piano Movers* for the Dance Theatre of Harlem (1985) made the dancers look so relaxed that they seemed to have come in from another company.

Gordon's art is getting larger in all respects: length, musical complexity, number of dancers involved, amount of stage (and fly) space used, degree of stylization in the movement. But to see his thought at its purest, to see the "dichotomy" of which he's fond, you have to see the duets. Two—*Dorothy and Eileen* and *Close Up* (both made for the theater in 1982)—have been sensitively translated to video by Gordon and Edward Steinberg; this past summer, they were nationally broadcast with a Gordon monologue, *Panel*, on one of the programs in PBS's "Alive From Off Center" series. *Dorothy and Eileen* offers less to look at—half of its effect depends on what you hear—but it's a more typical example of how Gordon's style can create a grand illusion that the performers are behaving "normally" or that their action intimates something verifiable about their offstage tastes, feelings, motives.

You see the performers, Margaret Hoeffel and Valda Setterfield, conducting two sorts of dialogues: a verbal one, in which they relate stories

(that may or may not be true) about how they view their own mothers, and a kinetic one, in which they repeat a series of intimate physical interchanges: they shake each other up at the shoulders, support each other in a fall, roll into each other's path. The stories are told in two different environments: a real kitchen, and the studio where the movement is photographed. The stylized movement is only performed in the studio; it doesn't translate. (Gordon is very careful to take responsibility for lack of change as well as for mutability.) Through editing and performance, the words lend the movement a local significance, as when Setterfield's tale about receiving a velvet cloak in wartime abuts a sequence in which Hoeffel appears to hang for a moment from Setterfield's shoulders. Eventually, the women stand side by side. Hoeffel, taller yet younger, says to Setterfield, more complicated yet more open, "What was your mother's name?" "Eileen" Setterfield answers. "What's your mother's name?" "Dorothy," Hoeffel says. As the facts that set them apart hang in the air, the women clasp hands. Without words, the clasping acting is repeated in close up, one huge hand (whose?) cupping the other (as friend? mother? "mother"?). The conversation has been exaggerated to a poster image, yet—and here's what for me is Gordon's magic—the degree of resonance increases, too. This painter's mastery of proportion and projection permits him to oversee





David Gordon.

the scale and density of his work, giving it an atmosphere and conceptual interest even when it seems to lack range, or to be bluntly designed.

Gordon will tell you that he's always thought of himself "as a reactive person"—he emphasizes it every time someone calls him a choreographer and he corrects, "No, I construct movement." ("Movement constructed by David Gordon" is written into his BAM contract.) But his work shows again and again that the reaction stops at a sense of rightness, justice, a suspension of all the elements in a solution of a particular felt density. Valda Setterfield, a former dancer with Merce Cunningham and Gordon's wife of 25 years, represents that solution. She serves as instrument, moral value. Her most important gift—as Arlene Croce noted in "Making Work," her affectionate 1982 *New Yorker* profile of the couple—is objectivity as a performer. "Close Up," the second duet on the TV program, is a charming and summarizing instance of how

Gordon exploits Setterfield's performance abilities, shadowing her luster with his own determination. It starts out with the two in fragments of social dancing, as if to tell us that this isn't going to be about life but about style. They then move into the section that everyone remembers: a series of meetings in which they embrace or seem to rest their weight on one another. Just as each figure gels, however, it changes. This person stays frozen, while that one slips away like a popsicle melting down a drain. Photos of Gordon and Setterfield performing similar actions in more glamorous dance clothing are introduced; their moves are amusingly timed to the sound of pacing jungle cats. Again, Gordon reminds us, he's talking about style. But the style has a remarkable emotional force. It looks like entropy and fulfillment, and feels like love and loss, without directly expressing anything more or less than the steadiness of dance continuity and the satisfaction of sculptural poses expertly assumed and abandoned. This integrity on a physical level, imperturbable, direct, and humanly scaled, gives the whole piece the quality of classic art. Gordon's concentration in performance helps to put over that look, but it wouldn't communicate without Setterfield's cool deployment of energy. Her power intensifies by comparison with all it is not: the more action she seems to have edited away, the simpler the task element of her movement is to the reason, and the greater becomes her aesthetic appeal. There are times in a Setterfield performance when she doesn't appear to be moving herself, but rather to be carried along on some larger impulse about which even she is curious, and subtly critical.

Up close, as on a TV screen, this subtlety is especially telling. But Gordon has been working in opera houses, too, over the past few years—BAM audiences may remember his contribution to *The Photographer* in 1983, with Setterfield's naiad solo in a wading pool—and so the movement must be arranged in a new way, to project the intimate resonance that Gordon values across large distances. If Setterfield will agree. During a rehearsal last summer of *Transparent Means For Traveling Light*, one of the works the Pick Up Co. will present on BAM's NEXT WAVE this month, I complimented Gordon on a section he'd set for Setterfield and several men. She takes a single unsupported pirouette, and before she's finishing turning they've become extensions of her, so that her calm seems to radiate

indefinitely, and to be supported without a break in the transformation. From solo to mass takes a second to accomplish, but the effect continues over a very long phrase. "Yes," Gordon said. "My son, Ain, liked that, too. I wish Valda did. Only one pirouette, she said. They'll think I can't do more." But could anyone think that Gordon is capable of making Setterfield look less than beautiful? In describing the genesis of *Transparent Means*, he spoke of her in terms that read as both practicality and poetry:

"I made up a thing: Dean [Moss, a Pick Up dancer] gets knocked down. I didn't know why. Later, I tried to figure out why. I asked our lighting person, Could you replug the stage at intermission so that Dean keeps walking up against a wall of darkness? He could. And the next thing I did was to bring on Chuck [Finlon, another dancer], who didn't have any problem with the light. I didn't know why not.

"Then, I brought Valda into a rehearsal, late, between them. I thought, Ah, Valda brings the light with her. And the light evens out."

One thing that creative artists of all stripes tend to agree on is that to persist, you must be prepared to contend. Where imagination is both prosecutor and final arbiter, everything's debatable—from the facts of one's soul to the authenticity of one's training. Yet, as Gordon insists on reminding his audience, when the artist attempts to mount a self-defense, to make a piece that gets to the bottom of his thinking, he finds himself in a cover-up. For the irritants that provoke him to make art—those that drift down from the world, or up from within—can't be recognized as what they are until we intuit them in what they cause to be made. A person who commits his or her energies to the patterns of uncensored play that serve as the blueprints for artmaking continually faces contradictions (God is in the design, God is in the details), an aggravating process. But then the shell opens and, shining, out steps Valda, pearl of great price. The movement is ordinary, the timing dramatic, the meaning classic, the art mild. The theater offers more electrifying alternatives; so does life. But Gordon is at heart a dancer. He's trying for something you don't find every day. He wants to be merely lighter than meaning and larger than air.

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