

The Drama Review

Structuralist Performance Issue

David Gordon's *What Happened*

Atelier Théâtre et Musique



Tom Johnson's *Five Shaggy-Dog Operas*

Structuralist Workshop

Structural Film

Theatre of Mistakes

Guy de Cointet's *Tell Me*

New York University/School of the Arts

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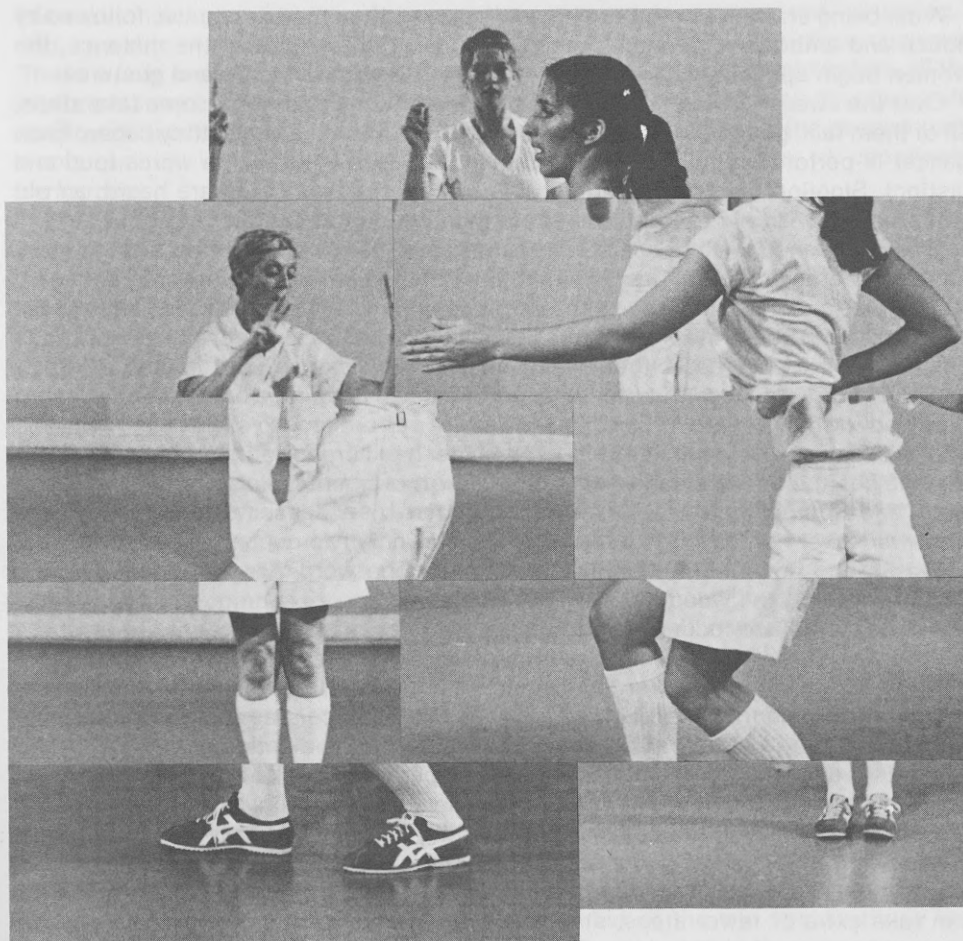
Structuralist Performance Issue

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David Gordon's *What Happened* by Burt Barr

David Gordon's dance piece, *What Happened*, opened at the American Theatre Lab, in September, 1978.

The stage is well-lighted when seven women enter. Some of the women are wearing white walking shorts with kneesocks, others are in white pants, and all are wearing white tops. Across the width and depth of the stage dancers take random positions, paces away from one another. They face the audience, looking straight ahead, arms at their sides—a group of women simply being themselves.

A car being started is heard; the car moves away, then there is a crash, followed by police and ambulance sirens. When the sound of sirens dies in the distance, the women begin speaking and moving. the stage is awash in words and gestures.

Over the sweeping view of the stage the dancers turn and pivot, some take steps, all of them talk, gesture, but none leave the given spheres in which they began. Each dancer is performing full-out, the movements crisp and short, the words loud and distinct. Singling out one performer, then others, certain words are heard: an old man... a baby... an old friend... not an old man but a grandfather.

What Happened is composed of seven different but similar stories. In each story there are words and passages common to all of them, thus certain words are heard many times and the same movements, dependent on the words, are seen repeatedly. When a dancer utters the words "the old man," she bends forward, places her hands on the small of her back, then points to herself. For the word "baby," another common word, a dancer links her arms together as if cradling a baby and rocks them back and forth. The word "friend" is shown by a performer who extends her arm as if to drape it around someone's shoulder, then her hand droops and swoops downward into the gesture for a handshake. Also there are movements related to the sound of a word and not its meaning. "Avail" is depicted by a dancer drawing her hands downward over her face. The word "way" is shown by two cupped hands, palms up, going up and down as if weighing something. The word "would" is shown by a dancer touching the wood floor.

It is impossible to focus on a particular performer in order to hear or see an entire story of *What Happened*. When one dancer reaches a greater degree of clarity, it is only momentary, as another performer commands attention, and just as she becomes prominent she is lost to yet another. Each dancer has an equal performing weight, and they forever cancel one another's speech and actions.

In this first section of the piece when seven performers take to the stage at once, speaking and moving in a flurry of activity, they avoid near physical collisions with one another by having the option, upon uttering any word, of swivelling into a one-quarter turn or of pivoting in a semicircle. There is also movement dependent on action words such as "stumbled," "running," and "walking." With these words they can take extra or fewer steps, stay in the foreground or the background, keep in center stage or off to the sides. Similar gestures done by several performers have different visual appearances due to their being done in profile, toward or away from the audience.

After several minutes of words and gestures, Hamlet's "To Be or Not To Be..." soliloquy is heard. Midway through the soliloquy, the words and movement become clearer, growing more united, and toward the end they are in unison. At the conclusion of the Hamlet speech the dancers come to a momentary pause, bringing an end to the first segment.

The dancers regroup, four of them taking off-center stage positions, the other three off to the sides, where they remain as observers. The four women at the center dominate the stage and begin the story once more. In this segment the women are in accordance with one another. While each has her own version to enact, there are passages in all seven stories that run parallel to one another and when this occurs, there is total synchronization on the stage.

There are certain words built into the stories of *What Happened* that serve as instructions for the performers to either stay in sync or not. For example, the command words such as "stop," "out," "up," and "over" tell a dancer where she is in the piece in relation to the others. If a dancer finds herself falling somewhat

behind or moving too far ahead, there are the action words —“stumbled,” “running,” and “walking”— that have the dual purpose of also dealing with time changes. These words enable a performer to move at a desired pace. In the first section, all the performers were out of sync, and the command words those of time changes were employed to accomplish that disjointed presentation. But now, in the second part, where unison is called for, the same words serve as guides to coordinate performers.

Following Shakespeare's words, the women stop moving and face the audience. They embark on a continuation of the story that was not heard in the first segment. They speak of the police arriving... ambulances arriving an accident... that they were witnesses... Upon reaching the very last line, “I left right away,” two dancers exit.

During the third segment, five performers remain. Three are at the right, two at the left. The duet speaks normally but their voices are inaudible to the audience. Every so often they break from their subdued voices by saying the command words more loudly whenever they occur in the stories, letting the trio on the opposite side of the stage know where they are. Of the trio, two dancers actively move and speak while the third member is silent but moving. The movement here is never one of pantomime and nowhere in *What Happened* is it pantomimic. In pantomime, all the mute gestures are central to the telling of the tale. Here, movement accompanies and dramatizes the speech; the story could not be derived from their gestures alone.

Although the complexity of the previous run-throughs has subsided, the duet and trio steadily counter each other. It is and on-again, off-again recitation, and the story of *What Happened* continues to move in and out of focus. In addition to varying story lines, each story has words that have one meaning in the phrase that precedes them and quite another in the phrase that follows. They serve to shift the meaning while moving the story along in one smooth flow. For example: “when man was a monkey at the top of the morning to you” or “where I live over a five and ten minutes to three.” Built with the use of these connectives, each story is one long sentence. And even with one or two performers telling their stories, the sentence takes sudden turns, leaving a listener stranded until another story is heard. At the end of this segment, one dancer of the trio reaches the last line, “I left right away,” and she leaves. Moments later, the other speaking member of the trio speaks those last words, and she too exits.

When the remaining three performers meet in midstage, they are at midpoints in their stories. here there is the expectation that the complete story will at last be heard. But in moments one dancer leaves. She is soon followed by another, leaving one performer. Only her last line of “I left right away” is heard alone and intact; then she leaves, bringing the piece to a close.



What Happened uses a basic narrative common to each of its seven stories—that of an accident, of a possible death. Due to the rearranging of the main characters and certain events, and to subtle twists caused by adding or deleting words, different tales evolve. A story of a baby might possibly have been heard, to another it was of an old man, another heard of an old friend, and still someone else may have heard of a woman who feared that her child was being harmed. The entire work consists of three parts: the first section is the beginning of the seven stories. The second part is

Hamlet's soliloquy, and the third part is the completion of the story, which tells of the police and ambulances arriving. There is but one version of the third part. The dialog is performed four times and takes, overall, thirty minutes.

Each of the seven stories written by David Gordon is told in the same direct manner. It is written with a controlled vocabulary, using a limited number of words. The narrative is unemotional, all the words nonexpressive of feeling, and so is the movement—just straight-to-the-ear and the straight-to-the-eye contact. Even though the language is precise, a full story is impossible to grasp; there are always one or more performers speaking. The work is to be watched as well as heard, and this is another overlapping, leaving the viewer to visually crisscross the stage. When the work does clarify itself at different times, it happens either too briefly or too late in the piece to learn the entire story.

In the spring of 1977, David Gordon performed *What Happened* as a solo at St. Mark's Church. During the summer of 1977 it was performed again at Fêtes Musicales de la Saint-Beaume in Aix-en-Provence. The work was translated into French: *Au coin de la rue ou je demeure au-dessus d'un cinq et dix...* With a new language and national characteristics and gestures, the work changed, creating another version. With the multitude of languages, the addition and deletion of key words, using several dancers or few, the work can forever express itself anew.



This version of *What Happened* was performed by Valda Setterfield.

THE WORDS:

On the corner

of the street

where I

live

over

a five

and ten

minutes

to three

I

heard

the old man

say

he was going

out

to sit

in

the son

of an old friend

of mine

telephoned

my house

THE MOVEMENT:

hands flat, fingers of each hand touching, forming a right angle—

arms held waist high in front, move inward, forming X—

point one's thumb to oneself—

arms thrust downward at each side—

one arm makes semicircle overhead—

five fingers at shoulder height—

ten fingers at shoulder height—

points to wrist—

two fingers of one hand, followed by three of the other, shoulder height—

point one's thumb to oneself—

hand cupped to ear—

bending forward with hands on small of back, then point to oneself—

hands opening and closing as a mouth, held next to mouth—

thumb pointing off to the side, other arm points to opposite side—

pointing diagonally away with right hand—

semi-squat—

forefinger thrust into stomach as performer is hunched over—

pointing to sky with two fingers while looking up—

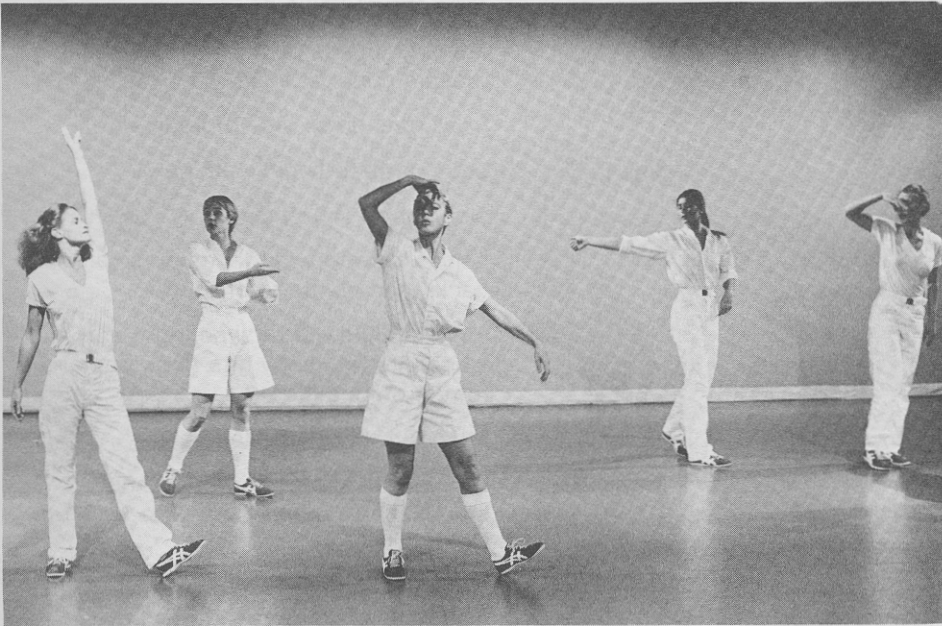
one arm rounded, parallel to shoulder, hand droops then swoops downward into gesture of a handshake—

point one's thumb to oneself—

head tilted, holding imaginary phone—

thumb points to oneself, then hands shape outline of house beginning with peaked roof—

<i>is near</i>	right shoulder up and right arm flat against body—
<i>a four</i>	two fingers of each hand held up—
<i>way</i>	both hands, palms up and cupped, going up and down as if weighing—
<i>crossing</i>	making the Sign of the Cross—
<i>himself</i>	thumb off to side then pointed toward the chest—
<i>he stepped</i>	thumb off to the side, then two steps or more are taken—
<i>out</i>	pointing diagonally off to the side—
<i>into</i>	finger of one hand thrust into stomach, two fingers of other hand are held up—
<i>the street</i>	arms held waist high in front, move inward, forming X—
<i>car</i>	knees bent into walking position, arms parallel to waist, hands flat—
<i>rounded</i>	body pivots—
<i>the corner</i>	hands flat, fingers of each hand touching, forming a right angle—
<i>knocking</i>	fist knocking in air—
<i>at my door</i>	hand turning imaginary knob, then opening imaginary door—
<i>step</i>	two or more steps are taken
<i>lay</i>	lies on back, one leg bent
<i>a small</i>	hand flat, held down at knee height—
<i>baby</i>	arms cradled and rocking—
<i>wrapped around</i>	arms wrap around body, pivots—
<i>the stop</i>	hands held out in front of chest, palms outward—
<i>sign</i>	writing signature in air—
<i>off</i>	brushing something off thigh—
<i>over</i>	arm makes semicircle overhead—
<i>and out</i>	points diagonally away from body—
<i>of my house</i>	thumb points to oneself, hands shape house with peaked roof—



running

into

the son

of an old friend

of mine

was waiting

at the corner

for

a street

car

lurched

jogging in place—

finger of one hand thrust into
stomach, two fingers of other hand
held up—

pointing to sky with two fingers while
looking up—

one arm rounded, parallel to shoulder,
hand droops then swoops downward
into gesture of a handshake—

point one's thumb to oneself—

one leg slightly bent and held rigid—

hands flat, fingers of each hand
touching, forming a right angle—

two fingers of both hands held up—

arms held waist high in front, move
inward, forming an X—

knees bent into walking position,
arms parallel to waist, hands flat—

body stumbles to side, arms overhead

up

onto

the side

walk

hitting

the old man

who fell

to the ground

was wet

so I

picked up

the baby

in time

to see

the son

of and old friend

of mine

running

over

to the old man

to see

if he

arms thrust upward—

arms up, hands bent over as if grasping onto a ledge—

hand runs down side of body—

body turns to begin walking—

slaps oneself on face—

bends forward with hands on small of back, then points to oneself—

arms circling out of sync, right arm leads into fall, body hits floor, comes to rest on one side—

rolls onto back, one leg bent—

and with bent leg, turns over and stands, shaking hands as if to shake water off—

sewing imaginary stitches and pulls needle up and over head—

arm swoops to floor, other arm held high—

arms cradled and rocking—

points to wrist—

hands shaped as circles and held to eyes—

points to sky with two fingers while looking upward—

one arm rounded, parallel to shoulder, hand droops then swoops downward into gesture of handshake—

thumb points to oneself—

jogging in place—

arms makes semicircle overhead—

two fingers held up, bends forward with hands held on small of back, then points to oneself—

hands shaped as circles, held to eyes—

thumb points off to side—

was hurt

hands clasped, placed on side above hip—

which

cupped hand on nose draws away into hooked shaped nose, arms go up flapping like wings, leg goes up to side, body bends—

was to no

hands crossing each other, pushing away—

avail

hands flat, drawing downward over face—

for

two fingers of each hand raised—

he was beyond

arms twirling out of sync, left hand points to corner of room, right arm straight and right leg bent—

hope

hands clasped as in prayer, held to side of tilted head—

the driver

steering an imaginary wheel—

is punished

right hand slaps top of left hand—

for his crime

hands choking throat—

does not pay

steps to side, rubs thumb and fingers of one hand in the gesture for money—

phone

head tilted, holding imaginary phone—

to

two fingers held up—

call

hand cupped held to mouth—

the baby

arms cradled and rocking—

slim

thumb and forefinger held close together, vertically moving downward from head-high position—

which

cupped hand on nose draws away into hooked shaped nose, arms go up flapping like wings, leg goes up to side, body bends over—

I remember

hand touches forehead, face has thoughtful look—

was the way

thumb points over shoulder, hands are then cupped, going up and down as if weighing—



my

grandfather

always

wished

"To Be Or Not To Be. . . ."

thumb points to oneself—

outline a vertical rectangle, circle drawn at its top, forefinger points up then moves clockwise to 3 o'clock, arm swings as pendulum—

large circle drawn in air, hands are then cupped, going up and down as if weighing—

hands clasped in front of chest.

This version of *What Happened* was performed by Christina Svane.

THE WORDS:

THE MOVEMENT:

At the corner

hands flat, fingers of each hand touching, forming a right angle—

of the street

arms held waist high in front, move inward, forming an X—

where I

point one's thumb to oneself—

live

arms thrust downward at each side—

a car

knees bent into walking position, arms parallel to waist, hands flat—

ran

jogging in place—

over

one arm makes semicircle overhead—

an old man

bending forward with hands on small of back, then points to oneself—

who fell

arms circling out of sync, right arm leads into fall, body hits floor, comes to rest on one side—

to the ground

rolls onto back, one leg bent—

was wet

and with leg bent, rolls over and stands, shaking hands as if to shake off water—

so I spread a blanket

tossing an imaginary blanket out and down on floor—

and lay down

body turns and lies down on imaginary blanket—

to let the son

still on back, both hands raised and pulls down imaginary sun—

of and old friend

one arm rounded, parallel to shoulder, hand droops then swoops downward into gesture of a handshake—

of mine

point one's thumb to oneself—

have the money

reach in pocket, then the gesture of rubbing fingers and thumb for money—

to go

arm points off to side—

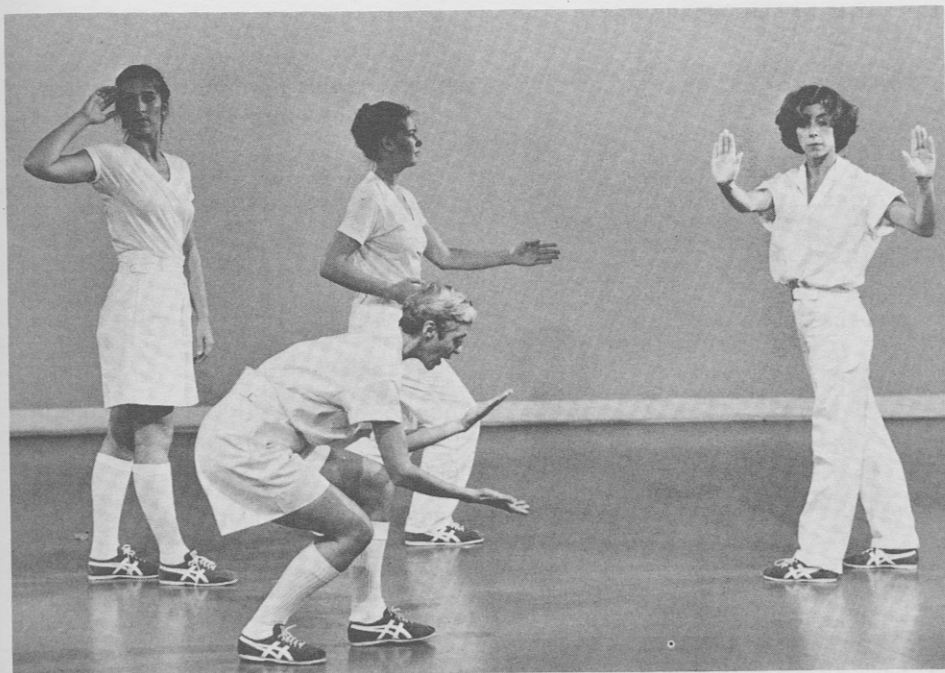
to school

clasped hands, squat, one knee closer to floor than the other—

<i>where</i>	hands held flat, palms up, chest high—
<i>was I</i>	looks to side, baffled, hand goes limp—
<i>searched</i>	moves backwards, tossing imaginary things right and left with both hands—
<i>high and low</i>	with one arm points above with two fingers, then points below—
<i>turning</i>	makes a quarter-turn—
<i>the house</i>	hands shape outline of house beginning with peaked roof—
<i>upside down</i>	both hands go up, then come down sides of body—
<i>and back</i>	hands on small of back and bends over—
<i>to the beginning</i>	(refer to first four moves of this story)
<i>of time</i>	(refer to first four moves of this story)
<i>when man</i>	crossing hands, negating—
<i>was a monkey</i>	scratching under arms, both hands—
<i>at the top</i>	points to ceiling in corner of space—
<i>of the morning</i>	tip one's imaginary hat—
<i>to you</i>	two fingers of one hand held up, points away with other hand—
<i>walked</i>	body turns to begin walking—
<i>all the way</i>	arms create circle, weighing motion of cupped hands going up and down—
<i>here</i>	hands thrust down sides of body—
<i>to see</i>	hands shaped as circles, held to eyes—
<i>out</i>	point diagonally away with right hand—
<i>the window</i>	arms outline a rectangle beginning at top and when reaching bottom, pull imaginary window up—
<i>to see</i>	hands shaped as circles, held to eyes—

<i>if the old man</i>	bending forward with hands on small of back, then points to oneself—
<i>was hurt</i>	hands clasped, placed on side above hip—
<i>which</i>	cupped hand on nose draws away into hooked shaped nose, arms go up flapping like wings, leg goes up to side, body bends—
<i>was to no</i>	hands crossing each other, negating—
<i>avail</i>	hands flact, drawing downward over face—
<i>for</i>	two fingers of each hand raised—
<i>he was beyond</i>	arms twirling out of sync, left hand points to corner of room right arm straight, right leg bent—
<i>hope</i>	hands clasped as in prayer, held to side of tilted head—
<i>the driver</i>	steering imaginary wheel—
<i>is punished</i>	right hand slaps top of left hand—
<i>for his crime</i>	hands choking throat—
<i>does not pay</i>	steps to side, rubs thumb and fingers of one hand in the gesture for money—
<i>for the son</i>	points to sky with two fingers—
<i>of an old friend</i>	one arm rounded, parallel to shoulder, hand droops then swoops downward into gesture of a handshake—
<i>of mine</i>	thumb points to oneself—
<i>to go</i>	arm points off to side—
<i>to school</i>	clasped hands, squat, one knee closer to floor than the other—
<i>where</i>	hands held flat, palms up, chest high—
<i>was I</i>	looks to side, baffled, hand goes limp—
<i>stumbled</i>	right foot behind ankle of left foot and trips forward—

<i>into the back</i>	two fingers thrust in stomach, then hands placed on small of back—
<i>of the van</i>	steering an imaginary wheel—
<i>that hit</i>	slaps oneself on face—
<i>the man</i>	crossing hands, negating—
<i>who fell</i>	arms circling out of sync, right arm leads into fall, body hits floor, comes to rest on one side—
<i>to the ground</i>	rolls onto back, one leg bent—
<i>dead</i>	flat on back—
<i>as a door</i>	hand turning imaginary knob, then opening imaginary door—
<i>you</i>	points away—
<i>with all</i>	large circle drawn in air—
<i>my heart</i>	point thumb at oneself, place hands on heart—
<i>to heart</i>	two fingers raised then places both hands on heart—
<i>talk</i>	hands opening and closing as a mouth next to mouth—
<i>which</i>	cupped hand on nose draws away into hooked shaped nose, arms go up flapping like wings, leg goes up to side, body bends—
<i>would</i>	bends to touch wooden floor—
<i>stop</i>	hands held out in front of chest, palms outward—
<i>him</i>	thumb points to side—
<i>she</i>	thumb points to opposite side—
<i>cried</i>	hands cover face, body circles and is bent forward, performer sobs—
<i>grabbing</i>	arm extended, hand grabbing—
<i>his shirt</i>	pulls on shirt—
<i>as he ran</i>	jogging in place—
<i>to the car</i>	knees bent into walking position, arms parallel to waist, hands flat—



fare

to give

to the son

of an old friend

of mine

to go

to school

days

off

now

hear this

old man

was waiting

rubs thumb and fingers together in the gesture for money—

gesture for money—

points upward with two fingers—

one arm rounded, parallel to shoulder, hand droops then swoops downward into gesture of a handshake—

point one's thumb to oneself—

arm points off to side—

clasped hands, squat, one knee closer to floor than other—

back of hand on forehead as if in a daze—

brushing something off thigh—

arm thrust down side—

hand cupped to ear—

bends forward with hands on small of back—

one leg slightly bent and held rigid—

<i>between</i>	as hand comes from thigh it makes a circle, comes down and goes between legs—
<i>to cross</i>	makes the Sign of the Cross—
<i>the street</i>	arms held waist high in front, move inward forming an X—
<i>car back</i>	car position walking backwards—
<i>up</i>	hand raise overhead—
<i>into</i>	finger of one hand thrust into stomach, two fingers of other hand held up—
<i>the car</i>	knees bent into walking position, arms parallel to waist, hands flat—
<i>of the son</i>	pointing to sky with two fingers while looking up—
<i>of an old friend</i>	one arm rounded, parallel to shoulder, hand droops then swoops downward into gesture of a handshake—
<i>of mine</i>	point one's thumb to oneself—
<i>which</i>	cupped hand on nose draws away into hooked shaped nose, arms go up flapping like wings, leg goes up to side, body bends—
<i>was waiting</i>	car position but not moving—
<i>for</i>	two fingers of both hands held up—
<i>the light</i>	points to light on ceiling—
<i>to turn</i>	makes a quarter-turn—
<i>to go</i>	arm thrust off to side—
<i>to school</i>	clasped hands, squat, one knee closer to floor than the other—
<i>to study</i>	hands open imaginary book—

"To Be Or Not To Be. . . ."

Burt Barr is a fiction writer living in New York City.