

Chair

by Allen Robertson

Chair is an event for hard-core addicts, a dance for people who get spacey over movement. A modest yet at the same time seductive work, **Chair** is small in scale; simply a series of clear, uncomplicated movements gliding along in unstressed, unstrained, easy flow.

*Conceived and performed by New York dancers David Gordon and Valda Setterfield, **Chair**, plus a second work, **One Act Play**, were on view at Walker Art Center last weekend. Gordon is a part of the Grand Union, Setterfield dances with the Merce Cunningham company. The sense of both those groups is present in these works, (though it's hard to believe that this is the same smart alecky David Gordon who romped around in precious, precocious buffonery during the Union's visit to WAC less than two months ago).

Chair—two chairs (metal, folding, painted sky blue), two dancers (man and woman, husband and wife), one piece of choreography (performed as two

simultaneous solos)—begins with an overture, a piano arrangement of "Stars and Stripes Forever" played over a loud speaker. As the music ends, the performers enter. They're wearing black sweat pants with bright yellow knee pads, thin soled navy blue jazz shoes and short sleeved green shirts over red jerseys. At first they look identical but, as with all the dancing that follows, there are all sorts of subtle differences and little individual touches.

The central core of **Chair** is a short spiraling phrase of crisscrossing legs and arms that winds the dancer, like the stripes on a barber pole, down to the ground and back up to standing again. After doing this spiral movement the dancers stand in front of their chairs, calmly relaxed and staring out at the audience while we listen to Gordon's pre-recorded voice narrating "Colorful History."

This is a day by day diary about the genesis and evolution of **Chair**. It runs from November 1 to December 13, and each day has its own color—"blue funk," "my check book balanced in the red," "Valda's brown eyes crossed in black rage. She has no patience

with symbolism"—and so forth.

After performing the spiral again, the dancers stand with their backs to us while we hear "Chance History." This monolog explains how Gordon went about creating the **Chair** movements. Using the Merce Cunningham-John Cage chance system, he chalked out a grid on the hallway floor of his apartment building. Each square of the grid was assigned a specific movement and as the grid was eroded, through the chance passings of various people in the hall, the sequence of those movements was established. (He hadn't counted on the janitor mopping the hallway.)

The next part of **Chair**, "Primary Form," is a visualization of that chance sequence. Beginning with the spiral, it moves on to become a veritable pas de deux for dancer and chair. The performers move in, on and through: over, under and around their chairs. These moves are smoothly blended together and danced without seams or punctuation marks.

This is followed by "Plus Repetition." Gordon and Setterfield start together but throughout this section each of them chooses

various movements that they repeat several times. While one of them begins repeating a move, the other dancer moves on ahead, but then gets stuck in a repetition of his own. In turn the first dancer moves forward in the sequence, passing the spot where the other performer is now stalled, and shooting out ahead until, in turn, he comes to his next repetition. This overlapping contrapuntal form is fascinating to watch, completely familiarizes our eyes with the movement pattern and is a perfect setup for the next part of the dance, "Symmetrical Form."

It's hard to convey the beauty, the excitement and the deeply felt kinetic satisfaction of this section. After all, it's merely the same set of movements done all over again. The difference is that Gordon is moving toward the right while Setterfield has switched to moving toward the left. The resulting mirror image, which throws the movement into high relief like a piece of sculpture hit with a spotlight from an unexpected angle, is positively architectural.

Still, the dancers maintain their own internal rhythms. They're never exact mirrors of each other and this saves the movement from

becoming square, clinical or military.

"Symmetrical Form" is the climax of **Chair**. It's followed by comic relief. Called "Plus Music," it once again features the primary movement sequence only now the dancers accompany themselves with their own humming renditions of the "Stars and Stripes Forever" overture.

When "Plus Music" ends Gordon and Setterfield quietly stand beside their chairs while the auditorium is flooded with an overblown full symphonic version of the same march. Then **Chair** is over.

Not exactly Petipa or Martha Graham, nor even Balanchine or Twyla Tharp, **Chair** is a long way from being everyone's cup of tea. But for anyone interested in exploring the paths contemporary movement is traveling **Chair**, with its complex mutations of simple themes, is a rich and lively journey down a side corridor.

One Act Play, a three scene dialog-oriented event, has little of the energy and variety of **Chair**. It's depersonalized and cold (purposefully), and seems to be focused on the collapse of meaning in language. As an afterpiece to **Chair**, it's a letdown.

* **CHAIR** was conceived by David Gordon; performed by David Gordon and Valda Setterfield.