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Valda Setterfield The Performer

Sally R. Sommer

Performance is doing one thing with all your fullness and concentration, one of those rare times when that is possible — a marvelous luxury. With luck, it becomes purged of all trivia and one is focused on this work, totally receptive, totally aware of what is going on, in a kind of heightened sensibility. You only think about where you are now, and where it is leading you.

Valda Setterfield

At the end of David Gordon's *Chair, Alternatives 1-5*, he and Valda Setterfield stand while 16 pianos boom "The Stars and Stripes Forever." The dance was hard and fast, folding chairs were lifted and tossed like rag-doll partners. Gordon is big and strong-looking, but he is heaving, dripping sweat. Beside him Setterfield is pale and thin — fragile almost — and she looks like she just began, refreshed and dry.

Physically arresting, Valda Setterfield is an unconventional beauty, the body willowy, elongated by a neck that melts into her upper back in an especially fluid line. She remembers that one teacher observed the carriage of her upper torso was "very 18th-century." Typical of her personal modesty, she says: "It is clear to me that I am a curious-looking person." And it is that lack of personal vanity that marks her as an extraordinary performer.

Her range is amazing. Since she came to New York in 1958, her performances represent a compendium of the important developments in the avant-garde: late 1950s, James Waring; early 1960s, Judson Church; 1962-72, Merce Cunningham's company; early 1970s, Yvonne Rainer; 1976, Grand Union; 1975, Robert Wilson; currently, David Gordon. In addition, she has appeared in films by Brian dePalma and Yvonne Rainer and acted in theater.

Throughout, she has consistently remained a performer. "I don't want to make pieces. I am interested in dealing with material given to me, in reproducing that material as clearly as I can. There is something wonderful about that attention to detail, and that paring down to precision. It's very satisfying to me to be able to do that with someone. I am willing, eager even, to deal with that. One empties oneself to make oneself available for the work to be shown *through* you. It's cleansing, it's fulfilling — and all the rest of those rather large words."

Her dancing is a curious mixture. She delivers movement with a lyricism that borders on languidness, which contrasts with an exact phrasing and subtle control of intricate timing. The movements are so soft-edged that she almost appears to be "marking" the dance, but no marking has such sophisticated rhythmic detail.

Performing with a kind of serenity akin to meditation, she sails along with supreme calm. When Gordon and Setterfield first were performing together in James Waring's

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pieces, Gordon one time forgot a sequence. Setterfield, unruffled, simply walked around in a large circle until he remembered. "I was steady and reliable, and I think he was grateful for that."

That same calmness distinguishes her personality. English-born, she speaks with an upper-class accent slightly flattened by 20 years in America. The voice is soft, the inflections musical, and when she sings (a wonderful la-la-la rendition of "Stars and Stripes Forever" in *Chair*) she sounds like a fluty English sparrow. Her sentences are careful, filled with words like "keen," "grave," "earnest" and lots of "oneself."

A Rabbit with a Fluffy Tail

Her earliest performance roots are in the theater of popular entertainments. She began dancing at 4, "a military number, a rabbit with a fluffy tail, a solo in a turquoise ballet dress that pricked." She has an impeccable sense of comic timing, picked up from a father "who was a past master at telling a joke or delivering a line. I admired it and immediately recognized it." It was refined by watching the great music hall entertainers with her father at the "6 p.m. 'first house' on Monday nights," and she adds, "One absorbed all that."

In the Christmas pantomimes she played "chorus," everything from a court lady to a mouse. "You always knew if they had money, because you wore tights; if they had a little, you wore leg makeup; and if they had none, you wore no leg makeup at all." Working with those professional performers, "you could learn an extraordinary amount about timing and phrasing."

When Setterfield was 16, she went to London to be a dancer, studying ballet with Marie Rambert. "There was no great soul-searching. It just seemed extraordinarily clear, like when you're hungry, you eat." Even then she was very tall; other ballet dancers "appeared like jockeys to me." Although Rambert was "very fond" of Setterfield's exquisite rhythmic sense, and in turn Setterfield found her "amazing, she taught with passion and fervor," it soon became clear "I was a dilemma. Too tall for the *corps de ballet* and not strong enough for a soloist." She began to study with Audrey de Vos ("who knew a great deal about alignment and musculature"), where she met David Vaughan. He told her she might try America, where size was not a criterion. Their long friendship began when they discovered they "both loathed custard and loved kippers."

She saved money by working for an Italian revue which gave Equity pay scale and eight months of employment. These revues were produced by an Italian, auditioned by a Frenchman, designed by an American, used English chorus girls, and were performed, in Italian, throughout Italy. "I didn't understand the play for weeks." Besides the usual variety dances of "blues, a library scene, a street scene — I got to play a gypsy and had a real entrance," and a nightclub scene with rock 'n' roll music climaxed by the girls ripping off their skirts to reveal the

barest possible coverings, she gained notable success during a reprise, which covered a set change. While the girls paraded around a *passerella* (the apron walk-around) doing sexy, jazzy moves, Setterfield stood, twirling a strand of hair from her long black wig. "I think it made a hit because I was so young, so sincere and earnest."

The first day she was in New York (1958) David Vaughan introduced her to James Waring. She vaguely remembers Waring asking her something about Zen. "I didn't know what he was talking about." A few months later, he called to ask her to be in a piece. When she discussed it with Vaughan, he said, "Well, Jimmy is a particular kind of person, so don't worry if you don't click in." Setterfield responded, "At least I'm musical," and Vaughan replied, "Jimmy probably won't be using any music."

So she went to rehearsal terrified, not knowing what to expect. "But it was wonderful! I felt a freedom because it wasn't technically threatening to me, yet had subtle and complex rhythms which I adored. It was the first time I hadn't been forced to rely on fakery to deflect focus from my weak knees and spiky feet." Waring made a duet for her and David Gordon. "We both found it difficult. He said I was too heavy to lift, and I said he didn't know how to lift." In 1960 Gordon and Setterfield got married.

'Merce Moved Like the Wind, I Moved Like a Bicycle'

Between 1958 and 1962 she continued performing with Waring; danced in some of Gordon's early Judson pieces; had a son, Ain; studied with Merce Cunningham; acted as an understudy and a kind of "liaison" between the company and Cunningham. "There was always an honesty and openness between us." In 1962, she joined Cunningham's company. It began, what was for her, an incredibly rich experience. "They were 10 very important years, doing something momentous, intimate, and emotional with someone — which dance is. I think of Merce with great warmth."

When she first started performing with him, she remembers "Merce moved like the wind, and I moved like a bicycle. I simply couldn't keep up with that extraordinary force. It was so obvious, there was nothing to do but set about laughing. And so did he. Then he asked what he could do to help, and from then on, he was always exceedingly generous with me. Performing with Merce is amazing. He is *there at that moment* in a remarkable way, totally attentive to what is happening, with a sense of immediacy that I love, plus that fabulous rhythm."

Setterfield's own rhythmicity is flawless. "I sense rhythm very clearly, and I have always dealt with rhythm like breath, like one's pulse. It was obviously something that interested Merce. I was a paradox. I was tall like the rest of them, but I couldn't dance like the rest of them. I wasn't as strong as them, not as turned out. I didn't have the kind of extensions they had — but he couldn't ever quite deny the fact that there was that rhythm."

"David [Gordon] is right. I think I am not vain, and that I understand very well that I am a peculiar dancer with particular limitations and particular qualities and strengths. But Merce was very generous in helping me, and he opened my eyes to dance as being larger than I had understood it to be."

Throughout these years Setterfield taught, and the same modesty and calmness informs her philosophy as a teacher (this May she is offering Cunningham technique classes at her loft). "One can remove the stress, so ease

rather than struggle pervades the room, and, through serenity, get at the rhythmic structure. Everybody can look natural doing what they do, they have those possibilities within their musculature. They simply have to find their way of dealing with the principles of equilibrium within themselves, applying the technique to their own bodies."

"Merce said very sweetly once, when I said I don't *make* art, 'Yes. But you cook, and that's enough.'" Among her friends, Setterfield is famous for her fine cooking. And it is one of the many things she shared with John Cage. "I am very fond of John, and that kind of passion for detail he has, I share. He was spectacular at giving picnics for the company, and I apprenticed myself totally to him at those times. One watched not only John's enormous cooking abilities, but that extraordinary humanitarian instinct he would talk to everybody, and pretty soon the world of that small town was involved in that situation. It was remarkable." She started cooking when she was 15, and in one of her subdued statements says: "It has maintained my interest. I like to do it."

'I Am a Methodical Creature'

Dressed in green sweat pants, red-and-white striped athletic socks, red-and-green banded shirt (Gordon greets her with a caress, a kiss, and announces she looks like the Italian flag), Setterfield begins a slow careful warm-up. Gordon's Pickup Company is rehearsing for the opening of *An Audience with the Pope, or This Is Where I Came In* (opening April 12). The section without Setterfield is long, then abruptly over. It happens quickly and quietly, but as quickly, Setterfield is there, imperturbable and ready. Gordon says of her that "she is completely responsible and reliable to work with." She says of herself, "I am a methodical creature who likes to rehearse."

I have been watching Valda Setterfield perform for years, but it is in Gordon's pieces that I find her at her best. Their duets are eloquent, sensitive, and sensual studies in unison motion. His dances fit her abilities with perfection, structured right at the edge of her own "keen earnestness" and beguiling wit. Her verbal skill is exploited fully in Gordon's perverse orchestrations of recycled words and movements — the beautiful and funny basis of

his work. Her serenity and cool physical precision make an elegant foil for the verbal counterpoint. Setterfield's performance mode and *persona* are sublimely suited to those foxy, logical discussions about absurdities, the cat-and-mouse pursuits of meaning scrambled in an ever-changing context. The sly dialog of "now-I'm-performing, now-I'm-not" shifts faster than it can be captured, and such quicksand word plays sound better in that fluty English voice.

Gordon's wit works on the rebound of contrast — reali-

ty vs. pretensions, performance vs. life, dance vs. non-dance. At its best, it's like a delicate but flatulent poof in terribly polite society. Gordon's understated explosions at the interface of reality and artifice are personified in that refined English woman.

She and Gordon are moving in an exacting duet, even their fingers loosely curled in the same relaxed fist. Then they break up the timing. Suddenly Setterfield stumbles, recovers quickly, and moves onward. The woman next to me whispers, "She should have practiced more." Good, I think, Setterfield has seduced another viewer into the complex and self-referential world of Gordon's art. She dances on, beautiful and serene.



Setterfield in Turin, Italy, in 1955. "I got to play a gypsy and had a real entrance."