



David Gordon and Valda Setterfield

Disciplined Upstarts

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David Gordon and Valda Setterfield enjoy looking outrageous, and for their non-stop evening called *WORDSWORTH and the motor* + *TIMES FOUR* they got themselves up in blue and white sweat outfits, blue knee pads, orange athletic socks, and blue suede running shoes, all of which made a really strange effect with Setterfield's porcelain-shepherdess head and Gordon's shaggy black hair and beard. As unconventional as they looked, however, they did some of the most stringent dancing I've seen all season.

Gordon works in a sophisticated, almost rarefied kind of post-Cunningham idiom in which nontechnical movements are arranged in sequentially demanding structures. What's interesting about it is not its plastique or its spatial architecture, but the precision with which it's designed and executed. It has the kind of beauty that scientists mean when they call a complex equation elegant.

Gordon's older dance *Times Four* was sandwiched in between some related ideas titled *Wordsworth*, with a little postscript dance accompanied by motor sounds. At least, that's the way I understood the somewhat peculiar way the evening was described on the program. There seemed to be three separate ideas anyway, though they weren't all presented in neat, self-contained packages.

When you think about it, there's no reason a dance has to be delivered as discrete, boxed ideas. Gordon's progression was more like the way we—I—live, doing something for a while, dropping it to do something else, then continuing the unfinished job. It told me something about the way an idea can accumulate energy, focus force, and sometimes dissipate

them, when it's pursued in a concentrated way, and how you can come back to an idea with fresh impetus if you leave it alone.

Times Four is a step dance. Gordon and Setterfield begin side by side and advance a few paces toward one side of the room, retrace their path, make a quarter turn, and do the same thing in each of the other three directions. The dance consists of themselves back onto their knees.

They stay in unison the whole time, and eventually you begin to marvel at how they can remember the sequence. Watching it, I could hardly keep track of the directions, let alone the individual patterns, even though each one was done four times. The step-designs make so few or such small body changes that it's easier to hear them rhythmically than to see them. Besides this feat of memory, Setterfield and Gordon must have had to use exceptional control to keep from speeding up or allowing any emphasis to sneak into the movement. I wanted to scream or run around the block before they were through.

Wordsworth seemed to be about speaking while moving. Again, there was no attempt to make conventional dance phrases or movement designs, or involve the whole body in a changing activity. The dance was merely a sequence of gestures, each one accompanied at first by a word perhaps 50 different ways of doing this, each variation following directly after the other, the dynamics even, the steps purposely unfancy—stepping or striding forward and back, little runs, hops, pivot turns, and a few cross-legged twisty moves. They only use their arms to support themselves when they fall forward or lie on their stomachs and have to hitch

describing the body part that was moving or the kind of motion: circle, arm, knee, side, straight, breathe. The gestures got a bit more complicated—swing, fall, stare, turn—but they were still non-sequiturs.

The audience had been seated in two facing ranks divided by a screen down the middle of the room, which was removed as the dance began, and Gordon and Setterfield started facing opposite sides. At first they followed separate trains of thought, though just the sound of each other's voice tended to throw them off. After getting stuck and unsuccessfully trying to resume a couple of times, Gordon grinned at the audience and said, "We were watching Nixon before the performance," as if that explained everything.

Variations on *Wordsworth's* theme included a section where they worked in unison or counterpoint but performed different words and gestures; a series of one-beat phrases—let's go—out there—too hot—I don't care—with illustrative gestures, that they recited in canon; a sequence of doing these gestures while giving Shakespeare soliloquies. After *Times Four*, they did the gesture sequence in silence but with Setterfield beginning a little ahead and Gordon catching up and passing her, as the stage managers replaced the screens between them.

In their separate portions of the room finally, they did a new gesture sequence—at least, I guess Setterfield, whom I couldn't see, was doing the same one as Gordon—and they accompanied themselves by intermittent humming. By that time they'd already done such phenomenal things that *and the motor* looked pretty tame. Sort of an anti-anticlimax. •