

The Villager

Preview

Arts & Entertainment

Three lives in the theater is a real family affair

By Jerry Tallmer

The family that plays together stays together. Plays in plays, that is. "We fight like dogs," says David Gordon. Next breath: "We perversely enjoy the battle."

David Gordon is the father, Valda Setterfield the mother, Ain Gordon the son.

The family business, founded 1971 by David Gordon, incorporated 1978, is the Pick Up Performance Company, currently based at 131 Varick St. "The Family Business" is also a full-length three-actor many-character play written and directed by David and Ain Gordon — the first of what is now several such collaborations. Its Obie-winning 1994 premiere at the Dance Theater Workshop was followed by 1995 runs at the New York Theater Workshop and the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. You can guess who the three actors were.

The main one of those many characters was 78-year-old Aunt Annie Kinsman, a tyrannical Brooklyn Jewish widow played by David Gordon in housecoat, bluejeans, and moustache (his own). Her final and postmortem line, closing the piece: "Being dead is not so bad."

Eight performances a week is another matter. "We have infinite respect for those who can do eight shows a week," says Ain Gordon, gravely, "and we are not they."

All three members of the Gordon-Setterfield family have had and do have flourishing individual careers — in dance, acting, direction, choreography, playwriting, performance art, etc. — while father and son together have since further engendered (with Arnold Weinstein and composer Edward Barnes) a dance-theater work called "Punch & Judy Get Divorced," and are at this very moment deep in the throes of bringing to life (with music by Philip Glass) a new project called "Silent Movie."

Ain Gordon on his own is the author of "Wally's Ghost," done at Soho Rep on Walker St. last April.

"It won a playwright Obie, so I guess it's a play," he said, as if he had a doubt or two. Ain further admitted he'd been writing full-length plays — "or whatever you want to call them" — since he was 25. On July 4, 1997, Independence Day, he will be 35.

David Gordon, father of Ain, was born on Bastille Day, July 14, 1936, not in France but at Gouverneur Hospital on the Lower East Side of Manhattan.

He was brought up on Ludlow St., between Delancey and Rivington, the son of Sam and Rose Gordon — "Sam, a mailman, Rose, a mother," two people who were manifest as characters under their own names in "The Mysteries and What's So Funny?," the 1991 musical by David Gordon and Philip Glass (sets by Red Grooms) in which tall, stunning, unflappable Valda Setterfield ran away with the show as Dada's Marcel Duchamp.

"A lot of fortuitous accidents" took Sam and Rose's son David from Ludlow St. into dance, and from dance into theater.

The mailman's mail route was from the Post Office at 45th and Lex.

"When I was in college he got me a



David Gordon, Valda Setterfield and Ain Gordon

Villager photo by Joe Fornabaio

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Christmas job there. I'd pick up all the mail in Grand Central Station, which took about four minutes, and then hide before going back to the Post Office."

College was Brooklyn College.

"From the Fine Arts department I somehow got maneuvered into the Modern Dance Club, and then I was in a play, as the Witch Boy in 'Dark of the Moon.'

"The only thing I remember about that is opening night, when I was hanging by my fingers from the top of a papier mache mountain and somebody took the ladder away. I said: 'Please, God, if I get through this, I'll never talk on stage again.'"

One fine day David Gordon was sitting in Washington Square doing his homework when along came a fellow named James Waring, who stopped and asked David if he were a dancer.

Jimmy Waring himself was a dancer, actor, choreographer — and a very nice guy indeed, as the present writer can testify. With Yvonne Rainer and others he was a prominent part of the avant-garde dance-theater-music-painting, etc., that would soon be settling in at Judson Memorial Church on the south edge of the Square under unmainstream ministers Howard Moody and Al Carmines.

"I came to audition for Jimmy," says Gordon, "and found I was somehow in the piece."

It was through a fellow dancer named David Vaughan that David Gordon in 1957 met Valda Setterfield, a slim young British dancer just off the boat. Waring cast a quick eye at Gordon and Setterfield and said: "You two look like you should dance together," so they did.

"We didn't love each other right away," says Gordon.

They danced together in and out of the Waring and Rainer companies and, starting in 1962, at Judson.

"And then while I was performing at Judson, Valda was at New York Hospital having Ain."

Gordon kept up with the modernist dancing for a half-dozen or more years, but never felt it was quite enough. Drama critic Kenneth Tynan, emerging from a Merce Cunningham dance recital, once said (to me): "I require words," and David Gordon shares that requirement.

Even words about movies with no words. Silent movies. As in the dance-music-theater-and-film piece he's been working on with his son.

"I grew up in Greenwich Village," says tall, muscular Ain Gordon.

"Went to P.S. 41, of course, and then for a year I went to I.S. 70, and hated it, and then there was an alternative school to which I

Continued on page 23

Three lives in the theater is a real family affair

Continued from page 9

kind of didn't go but hung around a lot and did the usual walking the streets and shoplifting chocolate bars. I went to the Met Museum a lot.

"Then at the High School of Art and Design, up on Second Ave. and 59th, I got into the Film department, which is where everybody who couldn't deal with that school wound up."

And made movies?

"Supposedly."

There followed four years at N.Y.U. — "two as an actor, two in art history." Today he looks on himself as a writer-director. Actor?

"Only if I have to."

He dropped out of school in the fourth year to take a job as electrician at Dance Theater Workshop — "and never finished college, to my father's deep regret to this day."

Ain Gordon lives with his own lover, dancer Wally Cardona, in an apartment in Brooklyn. His parents occupy a loft in Soho they've had for 20 years.

"Silent Movie," which had a reading at the Mark Taper Forum a few weeks ago and is to get a full workshop production there in March, mostly takes place in a Hollywood retirement home populated by old retired bit players, extras, wardrobe people, stunt people, child stars, character actors who by race or ethnicity (blacks, Asians, Jews,

Latinos) were confined throughout their careers to stereotyped caricature roles.

The central figure is Anne First, born Anne Furstmann, a long-forgotten 99-year-old silent-film director, fictional but based on truth.

"She had once been a girl from Ohio

who came to Hollywood and got to be an actor at 15, a producer-director at 17. By the age of 20," said Ain Gordon, "she has her own studio. And leaves the business at 30, in disgust at the barriers against women as producers and directors, as well as the rise in censorship as the talkies are coming in."

"When we were researching this show I happened to come across a 1970s book, 'Early Women Directors,' by Anthony Slide.

What woman directors? I said. 'There weren't any.'"

How wrong he was, Ain found out. There were actually a considerable number of women writers, directors, producers, even heads of their own studios, in early Hollywood.

Anne First is based on two of them: Lois Weber, the first American movie director male or female, according to the records, and Alice Guy Blache, pronounced Blah-shay, since she indeed was born in France.

"She may even have been the first director in the whole world," said Ain.

Alice Guy Blache never met Valda Setterfield or vice versa. They might have had a good bit to say to one another.