

Love Valour Remembrance

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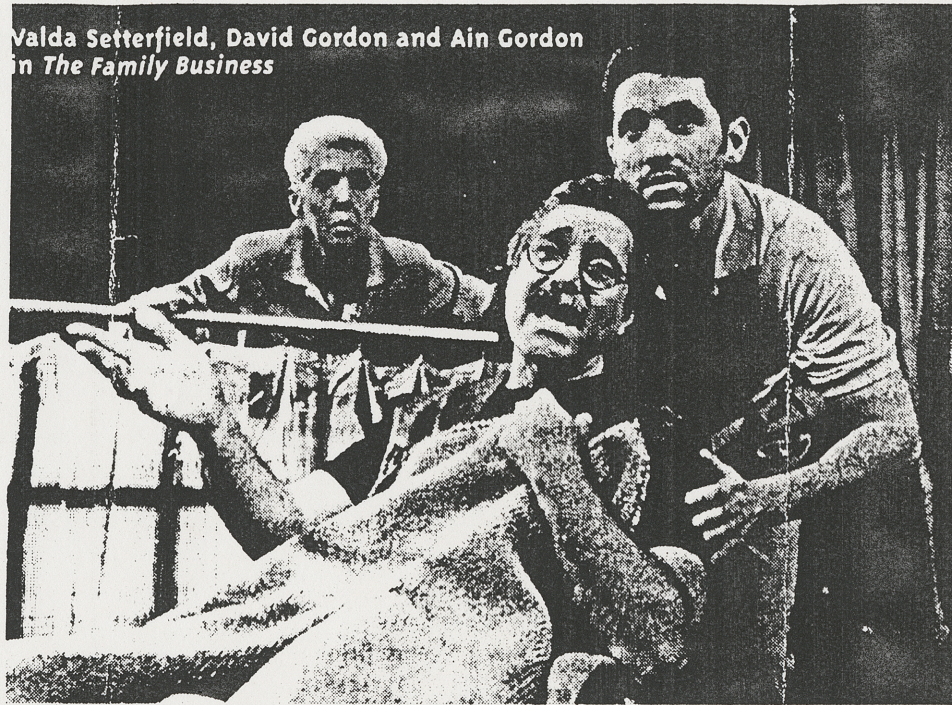
BY AARON MACK SCHLOFF

Do the dead pay us any mind, or, as Thornton Wilder's stage manager said, are the dead "weaned from the earth?"

Hold that thought. Now let's go to the theater! Let's go twice, to *Love! Valour! Compassion!* on Broadway at the Walter Kerr, and *The Family Business* off-Broadway at New York Theatre Workshop. Each stands at the summit of its art, and neither is very expensive (Broadway tickets start at \$15). Each holds a world that is beautiful but also useful; each folds a style of death into its style of life.

In Terrence McNally's *Love! Valour! Compassion!* directed by Joe Mantello, there's one romance and another affair, food and wine, music and dance, much swimming, the doffing and donning of different outfits (fine work by Jess Goldstein) and, in between, a fair amount of naked flesh. Not a lot happens, but in the same sense not a lot happens in Wilder's *Our Town* or Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band*. As in Wilder, people reach for the cosmos (if they're describing how they acted in "the present," then where are they speaking from?) and find it in the nearly ordinary acts—serving dinner, or sitting out the the rain, or clip-

Valda Setterfield, David Gordon and Ain Gordon in *The Family Business*



ping ear hair—that allow the men to show how they care for each other. As in Crowley's pre-Stonewall horror show, men hang out and strive to teach each other what it means to be gay, and how it matters. Only now, after the fall of most homosexual demonology and the

rise of political and economic liberation, a mass audience can share that concern for identity but not wither it with condescension or contempt. One quarter century into gay lib, Crowley's wit is trapped in toxic aspic, while McNally's sometimes sly, sometimes campy

banter is the sharpest on Broadway.

"This house was meant to stand," says their host and ours, Stephen Bogardus, as he introduces what is in effect the community meeting hall. It's in Dutchess County, "two hours north of New York City," as the program notes remind us. In other words, it's away. It's a utopia. No one lives or works nearby. It's an island, just like Prospero's or Gilligan's, but even more than theirs, it's a fantasy of leisure. Everyone has enough money, and, for the weekends that comprise the play, no one needs to work, except artists. It's magical. For three hours of gay country-house antics, countless quotidian things are never spoken of or never appear: there is no chest or back hair (despite substantial nudity), no hard or soft drugs beyond light social drinking, nothing to buy or sell, no parents, no children, no childhood abuse, no coming out, no therapy, no rock and roll, no smoking, no animals, no bugs, no Jews. (For contrast, one recent McNally play marooned two hetero couples on Fire Island, where they were hemmed in by homos on either side, with gnats above and snakes below.)

With these elements planed away, and with an audience seduced by a vision of the free time we're ever less likely to have ourselves, McNally lays out his taxonomy of gay couples: the sweetly stodgy professional pair that's been

together forever (Anthony Heald and John Benjamin Hickey); the older dancer/host (Bogardus) and the young blind man (Justin Kirk); the musical theater writer manqué, an Englishman (John Glover) and his latest find, an edgy young Puerto Rican dancer (Randy Becker); and the PWA AIDS worker (Nathan Lane), who's alone until the arrival of the Englishman's PWA good twin (happily, Glover again).

What they do in their days and nights of cooing, bickering, camping, consoling and talking trash is articulate their common culture. At the end of three swift hours, an invisible monument stands on stage. The foundation is unconditional love: according to the blind boy, this is God. Amp it down slightly, and it's a wary tolerance, as the good twin regards his lesions—"not people you like, but people you've made your peace with." McNally's title holds his cardinal virtues, which are displayed most onstage in the way Lane's character cares for Glover's. The holy knowledge is the history and appreciation of classical music, opera, popular standards and show tunes.

(If all of this sounds quite natural and inevitable, imagine the David Wojnarowicz rewrite: *Rage! Terror! Sorrow!*)

The threats to culture are homophobia, youth and mortality. Inevitably, they're all brought in. Heald's character accidentally tunes in to a gaybash riot on TV. "They hate us... they fucking hate us," he shudders, then someone whisks in a cake and surprise! The

The Gordons have made a city play, full of Jews, garbage, taxis, rent history and bad coffee.

moment is gone, but the boundary line is laid. Youth is a bigger problem. Not only do you have to keep it in your bed (the play opens with the two young men at night, in a adulterous clinch), but you have to teach it how to behave. As the older characters parse Becker's character, it's not that he's young, or sexy, or a dancer, or Puerto Rican. (His ethnicity is more a talking point than an culture option.) The problem is his ignorance, combined with his sexual depredation. Middle age taking the measure of dumb youth, bringing it to heel with terrifying discipline, then magnanimously admitting it into the communal fold becomes the major action (and the major fantasy) of the play.

But this regeneration only goes so far. "We defy augury!" cries Glover's good twin, quoting Shakespeare with accent and attitude that's vaguely Rula Lenska, but in the end they defy it only by auguring themselves. As they dance Swan Lake in tutus, each man steps out and describes how he has died. Some of the deaths are in the near future and others are distant but when you realize the point from which they speak is somewhere decades hence, beyond the farthest death, it's uncanny. We never knew they were gone, but they are, and they've come back to us. Remembrance!

Little of this would work if Mantello had not wisely decided to let actors just act. A small amount of Wilderesque stagecraft, e.g., chairs for car seats, keeps the performances uncluttered, fluid and nearly propless. Loy Arcenas's set is a raised green rectangle with a potato-chip curve, and some railroad ties sticking up out of it for trees. Upstage is the scrim and where they hide the lake. That's it—sublime efficiency. Why can't more Broadway plays be done this way?

Downtown, at New York Theatre Workshop, is *The Family Business*, written, directed and choreographed by Ain Gordon and his father,

David. In contrast to McNally's pastorate, the Gordons have made a city play, full of Jews, garbage, taxis, rent history and bad coffee. Here another culture is on the verge of disappearance—the culture of the American immigrant Jews. "She was the last of the Mohicans this one was," a rabbi muttered in the funeral that opened *Angels in America*. Not quite. So many in the tribe have yet to die, but their passage seems imminent. Here too, choice lies not in whether or when to die, but how to feel about it. When we first see octogenarian Annie Kinsman (David Gordon), she's already fallen and hit her head. She says she's covered in blood. We see little, but we also see a fiftysomething David Gordon with a big mustache, two barrettes in his hair, and a house-dress over black jeans and running shoes. He says he's Annie Kinsman. He needs someone to help and he needs us to listen. His need is compelling, so we believe.

As the widowed, childless Annie goes into terminal decline, Paul (Ain Gordon), the gay grandnephew forced into service, sorts out his ties to her, his largely absent father Phil (Ain Gordon with glasses and a false nose) and the whole family business—plumbing—that has trapped three generations of frustrated artists. As the aptly named company secretary Mrs. Wonder, Valda Setterfield (Ain's mother and David's wife) rounds out the cast, also wondrously playing over a dozen other parts as nurses, home attendants, automobiles, an answering machine and the deli guy.

The Gordon family members are all primarily trained as dancers, with histories weaving through the Judson Church and Merce Cunningham. In their show they now play characters and work from scripts, without music, but dance, as a metaphor if not an act, infuses their whole world.

For example, take Anita Stewart's sets. They're accordion lengths of shower curtains on garment racks, and they dance. They're walls, doors, windows, a taxi, an ambulance, a hospital partition. Every wheeling move is intricate and precise and looks effortless. Like Fred Astaire's top hat, every object always finds its place.

With wild narrative sidesteps, breakouts and flourishes (one three-minute synopsis scene is called "Phil's entire life"), the story dances, too—needfully so, otherwise the frustration and sorrow might overwhelm. The show is largely a comedy, and it's about people who get what they want—ultimately—but in the meantime romance is about longing, and comedy is about pain. Paul's line, "You make what haunts me funny," sums up their whole aesthetic.

Paul's feeling for Annie is richly ambivalent. His community prostrates itself before hers. She had the kosher butcher, he has Bergdorf's. It's not the same. "She's the last link to my history," he says, but she's bossy and maddening. Sometimes he wishes her dead. So does the play—so long as she's alive on stage, no one gets what they want. Once she dies everything falls into place. (Watch David play her last living scene in eerie, heartrendingly private slow motion.) Father and son make peace and agree to collaborate, son gets recognition on the company letterhead, company secretary gets father for a groom. From beyond the grave, a mellower Annie blesses her gay grandnephew's couplehood. She returns only when someone thinks of her. Remembrance! Everyone's happy until you think about who created whose character and who's playing whom. The real-life family itself seems uncomfortable with our applause, but what other trio could play this script? Who else could detail the subway-carful of minor characters with Setterfield's droll genius? What other father and son would script and act a fight like Gordon and Gordon? Who else would play out such a truthful tangent on their own real lives? No one. See them while you can.