

**2004 – *THE CHAIRS* by Eugene Ionesco**

with: Valda Setterfield as Old Woman

David Gordon as Old Man

translated by Michael Feingold

edited, directed, choreographed by David Gordon

music by Michael Gordon

light by Jennifer Tipton

produced @ London Barbican, Seattle On The Boards & BAM Next Wave Festival Harvey Theater



**VALDA SETTERFIELD**

June 1974 David Gordon Amtraks to Washington DC to guest perform at the Kennedy Center with Trisha Brown.

**DAVID GORDON**

Our friend Norma Fire picks up our 12 year old son Ain Gordon for the day as Valda Setterfield leaves to see a possible summer rental in a car with the woman house owner, who we don't know, driving.

**VALDA SETTERFIELD**

*Cell phone off*

I go partially through the windshield as the car is hit by a train at a Long Island Railroad crossing and dragged till it hits a telephone pole. I'm found, they say, dazed and bloody, covered with broken glass. Norma says I telephone from Riverhead L.I. hospital. Norma says I say: I won't be home today. Would you please put the lamb chops back in the freezer?

**DAVID GORDON**

1<sup>st</sup> Amtrak train to Penn Station is 5 AM. I catch that train, connect with Long Island Railroad to Riverhead. Taxi to thospital.

**VALDA SETTERFIELD**

David says I say, as he walks in, you must be hungry after your long trip. He says I say I bought strawberries at a road side stand. It's a pity to waste them. Would you mind taking them home? Oh and your white shawl collared cardigan I borrowed is also in the "cupboard", he says I say, and I point at the narrow hospital closet.

**DAVID GORDON**

I turn away from Valda to open the metal closet door. Smashed boxes of squashed strawberries and my white sweater are covered in blood and glass. Valda asks if I see the berries. I turn saying yes. Such a lotta stitches in her face. I start to cry. Don't worry, Valda Setterfield says, I'll be okay, she says, better get me vitamin E for the scars.

**VALDA SETTERFIELD**

At home after 4 or 5 days, I think as I get better in a way I get worse. Can't sit up or get out of bed without help. David squats, knees on either side of me, and puts his hands behind my neck to pull me up to a sitting position. He climbs off and pulls me gently to standing and he helps me shower and dress. I find an interesting paperback book I don't think I know but the name Valda Setterfield is written inside the cover. Must be my book. I'm terrified. I realize there are long and frequent periods of not knowing where I am or how I got here. Or there. Or wherever it is I am.

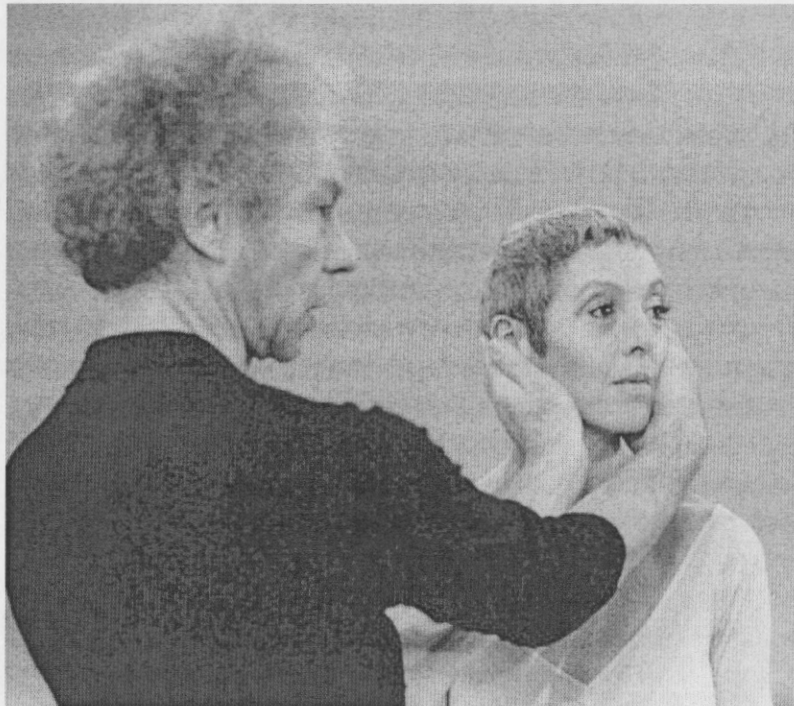
**DAVID GORDON**

*← \**

After dancing with the Merce Cunningham company for 10 years Valda decides, just before that summer of '74, to leave. She's almost 40 when the car accident happens.

**VALDA SETTERFIELD**

What will I do if I can't dance? If I'm not a dancer? After the accident I go back to Merce to take class but I don't pick up movement as quickly as I'm used to. Merce reassures me. Says not to worry. Like any injury, he says, it will take time. But he agrees with me. Yes, I'm slower.



(MERCE CUNNINGHAM AND VALDA SETTERFIELD)

**DAVID GORDON**

What happens, I think, if Valda learns to do something she never did before so she won't have anything to compare it to? What if she hasta try to learn something new and technically hard for her to do so her sturdy British resilience will kick in? Merce Cunningham and company's on tour but Valda has a key to the Westbeth studio.

**VALDA SETTERFIELD**

We walk from Charles Street and 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue to Westbeth. Street activities are paralyzing. Traffic is bewildering. Sudden or loud noises frighten me. At Abingdon Square Park I must rest on a wooden bench. There's a wooden bench at Westbeth too. David suggests we do "he loves me, loves me not" from the ballet Giselle. I mime plucking petals off a flower as we move along the bench and he falls off. I laugh. I'm so glad to laugh. We go to the studio more times and sit on and use the bench each time as a starting point till the Cunninghams return. Lucinda Childs then generously lends us her new studio at 541 Broadway. There's no wooden bench. There are blue metal folding chairs.

**STG MGR: PLACE ORIGINAL BLUE METAL FOLDING CHAIR ON TABLE.**

**DAVID GORDON**

For audience seating in her new studio Lucinda Childs buys blue metal folding chairs from Buffalo Roadhouse, a chicken wing joint, at the end of their outdoor season. I have no idea how to make Lucinda's chair be what Valda needs. Does Valda think I know something, anything, about what I'm doing? I have no plan. I am not making art.

**STG MGR: PROJECT VALDA REHEARSES SOLO CHAIR IN TEACHING RESIDENCY @ SANTA CRUZ, CALIFORNIA**

**VALDA SETTERFIELD**

David invents, demonstrates, coaxes and coaches. I learn to fold and carry the chair, step up on, in and over the chair, sit and locomote in the chair, step off, jump off and fall off the Buffalo Roadhouse blue metal folding chair. He piles coats on the floor so I don't bruise my hip falling sideways off the chair. Removes 1 coat at a time as I learn to relax my falling body. He convinces me to stand on the chair, tilt back, slide it out from under my standing foot and my off balance standing body. We do chair moves over and over and in and out of sync till I can remember yesterday's rehearsal and I accumulate movement. We do the first version a second time as a finale and I learn how to breathe

for singing and dancing simultaneously because we also sing Stars and Stripes Forever.

**STG MGR: CUT VALDA REHEARSES SOLO CHAIR- PROJECT VALDA & DAVID SING**



PHOTO BY VICTORIA ROUSE

*START (STOP WATCH) ON VIDEO START*

*video (LOVE)*

*MOVED STARTS*

*\* ←*



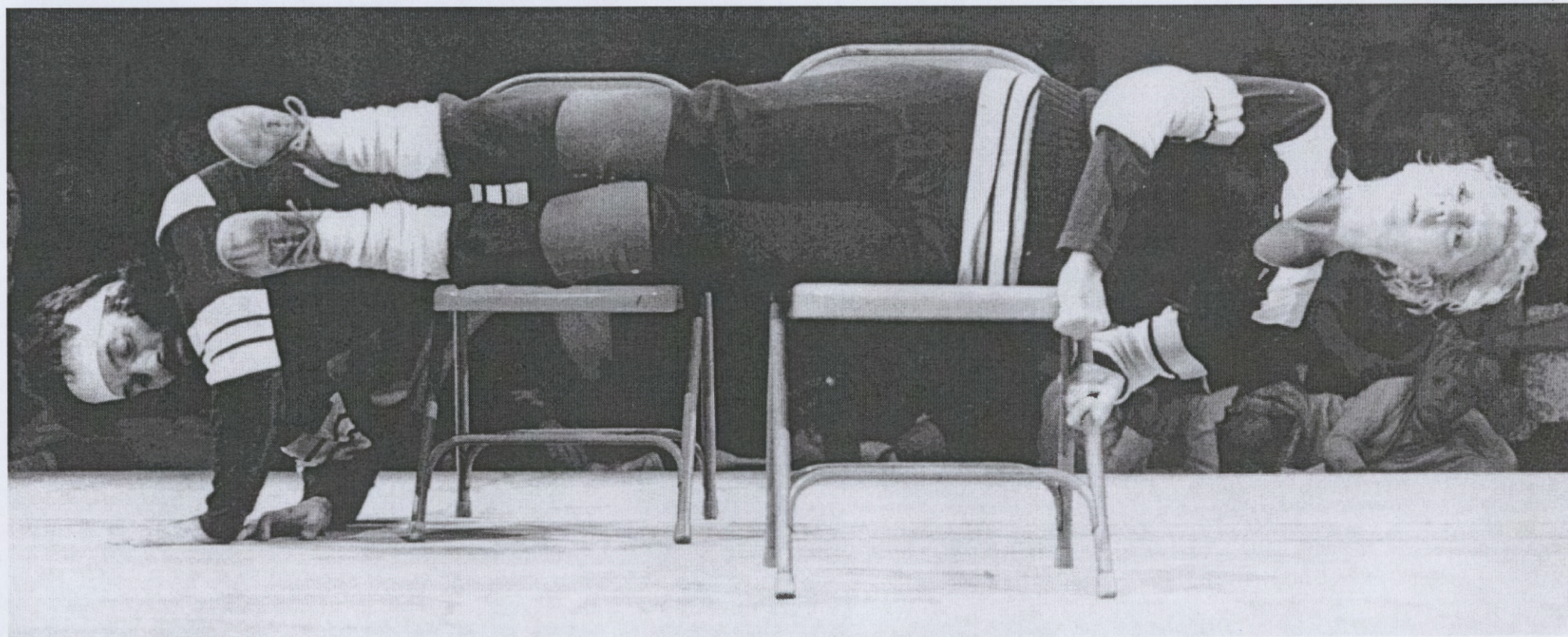
(1:47"GO DAVID") V 315  
 VALDA STEPS OUT  
 OF CHAIR

DAVID GORDON

~~DAVID~~ 7 Vid 4

December 14, 1974, 5 months after Valda is in the car hit by the train, we perform *Chair*, alternatives 1 through 5 @ Paula Cooper's Soho gallery with Lucinda Child's folding chairs for approximately 40 minutes. I ask Valda to teach herself the original 8½ minutes of *Chair* on the left so we can add a symmetrical version when we next perform. Valda says okay.

34



VALDA SETTERFIELD

We perform all 4 *Chair* variations including singing, in theaters, galleries and museums in America, Europe and Japan. Low ceilings, leaking ceilings and waxed marble floors. Nothing stops us. I grow confident. Happy to be "dancing" or whatever it is we're doing with those chairs. I grow fond of the inelegant, unbeautiful, untheatrical but useful metal folding chair.

DAVID GORDON

\* ← 105

I have blue denim drawstring bags made to carry our blue metal chairs, like musical instruments, to performance venues.

VALDA SETTERFIELD

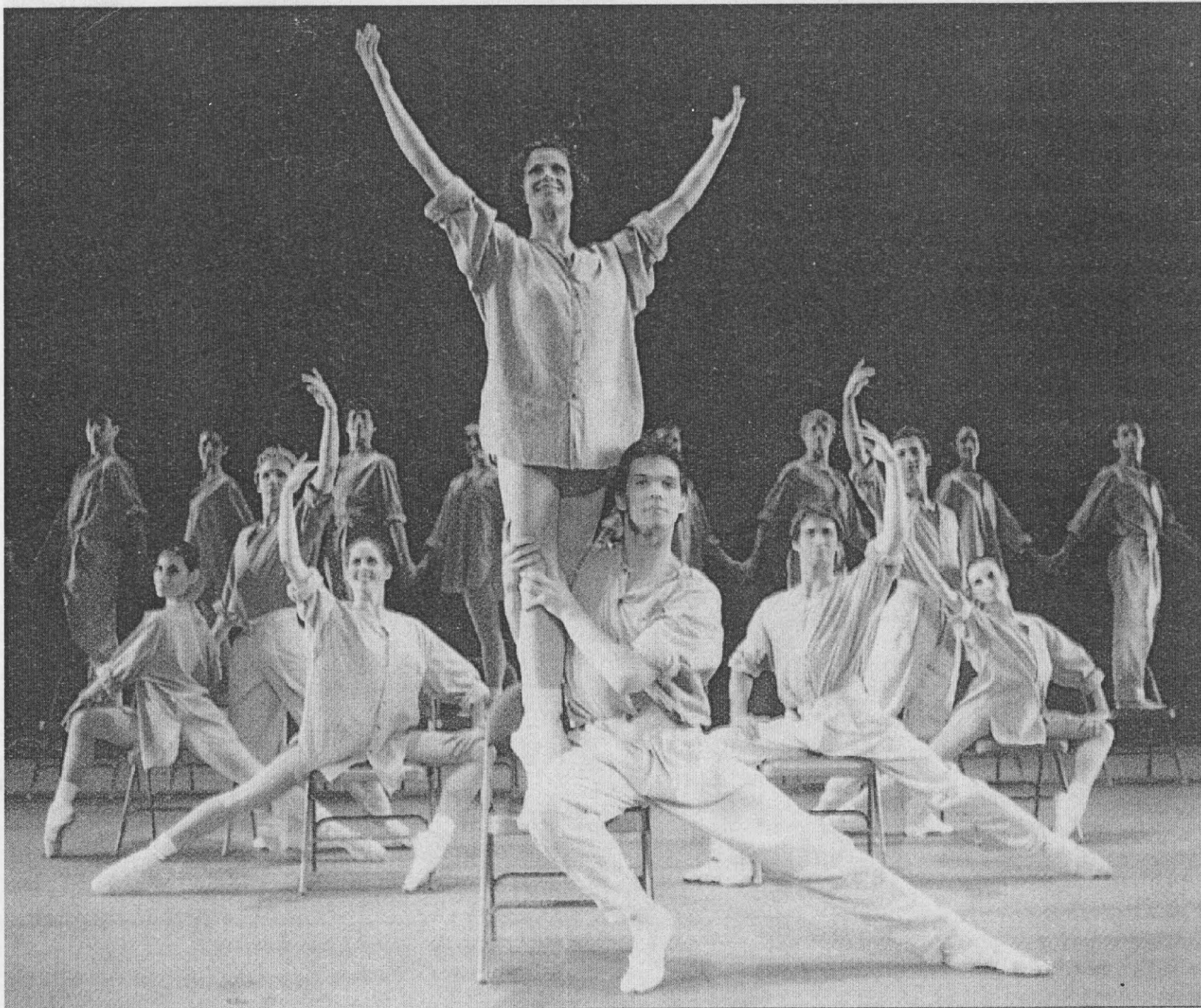
→ 5m more →  
 David doesn't make another metal folding "chair" piece, that is to say a piece in which the chair is a central figure, till he "constructs" *Field, Chair and Mountain* in 1985

STG MGR: REMOVE BLUE METAL FOLDING CHAIR

279  
 428  
 152

111  
 129





MARTHA SWOPE

*Van Hamel and Tippet in 'Field, Chair and Mountain': A flair for the contemporary*

## DAVID GORDON

1985, Valda assists with my 1<sup>st</sup> American Ballet Theater work commissioned by Mikhail Baryshnikov. 12 corps dancers, 6 soloists'n 2 principals.

## VALDASETTERFIELD

Martine Van Hamel and Clark Tippet.

## DAVID GORDON

I must choose music before choreography starts which I'm not used to with my own company. \* -

## VALDASETTERFIELD

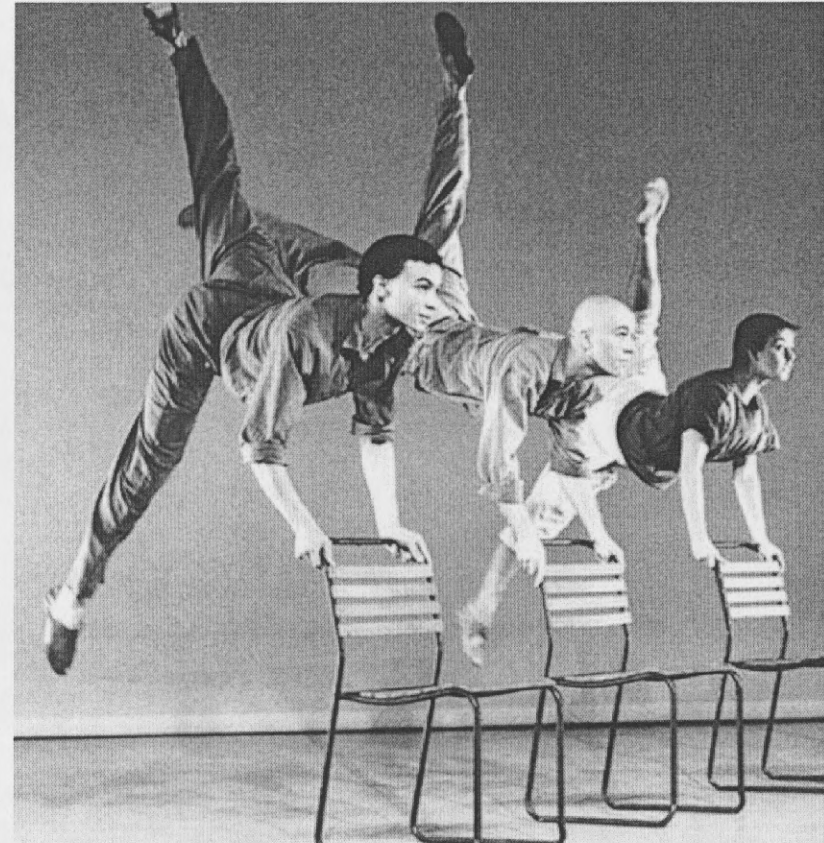
He chooses 7<sup>th</sup> piano concerto by Irish composer John Field, premiered in 1832. In the studio at A.B.T. the metal folding chair has a cushioned seat. Martine Van Hamel is promenaded on point in rehearsal on the seat by Clark Tippet. Martine drills holes in the cushion as she turns and A.B.T. must order new chairs for rehearsals of *Field, Chair and Mountain*.



**DAVID GORDON**

I am in London beforehand and I make a sorta practice piece called *Field Study* for a British company called Extemporary Dance Theater and I use available studio chairs which are wood and metal.

video ↑ to level



**VALDA SETTERFIELD**

1987, David Gordon's *Made In USA* for PBS Great Performances includes a new duet Valda & Misha.

**STG MGR: PROJECT MADE IN USA OPENING EXCERPT**

video

**VALDA SETTERFIELD** (continues)

Misha and I, step off 2 animated drawings of ships on the way to America from Britain and Russia.

**VIDEO EXCERPT ENDS W/MISHA SAYING "LOOK WHO'S TALKING"**

**VALDA SETTERFIELD** (continues)

We enter a drawing of a room and dance and talk together with one real metal folding chair.

**STG MGR: VIDEO EXCERPT CONTINUES TILL VALDA SAYS "GO WEST MISHA".**

move w/ chair

**VALDA SETTERFIELD** (continues)

*Made In USA* includes David's 1985 piece, *Four Man Nine Lives*, with a set of painted and cut out cardboard folding chairs. Misha exits our duet as a drawing and transforms into 1 of the 4 men I enter, sporting a handlebar mustache, as number 5.

video ↑  
← \* inter  
chain ⊕  
chain ⊖



**STG MGR: ~~PLACE ORIGINAL BROWN PAINTED CHAIR ON TABLE~~ - PROJECT FOUR MAN NINE LIVES .**

**VALDA SETTERFIELD** (continues)

*Made in USA* also includes *Murder*, a second A.B.T. ballet commissioned by Baryshnikov. After *Murder*, the drawing of a curtain descends on the drawing of a stage. Misha and I appear as ourselves seated in the drawing of an audience. We applaud the performance and exit. Misha carries a drawing of a folding chair.

**STG MGR: ~~REMOVE BROWN PAINTED CHAIR~~ - PROJECT EXCERPT OF MADE IN USA FOOTAGE.**

**DAVID GORDON**

In 1990 I write, direct'n choreograph *The Mysteries* & What's So Funny with Philip Glass music and a set by Red Grooms.

**VALDA SETTERFIELD**

I act and dance the character of Marcel Duchamp and his alter ego Rose Selavie

**STG MGR: PLACE BLACK METAL FOLDING CHAIR SIGNED R. MUTT ON TABLE**

**DAVID GORDON**

*The Mysteries* is about my family and about being an artist and about the artist Duchamp, deciding to sign commercially designed and manufactured found objects as a part of his "art". The cast acts and dances with black metal folding chairs stenciled with the signature R. Mutt used by Marcel Duchamp to sign the original porcelain urinal.

**STG MGR: REMOVE BLACK METAL FOLDING CHAIR**

**VALDA SETTERFIELD**

In 1998 David and I see Eugene Ionesco's *The Chairs*, a London collaboration between Theatre de Complicite and The Royal Court Theater, directed by Simon McBurney with Geraldine McEwan as Old Woman and Richard Briers as Old Man.

**DAVID GORDON**

I'm 18 when I see *The Chairs* for the 1<sup>st</sup> time in a Greenwich Village basement. I'm 62 when I see *The Chairs* in a Broadway theater in a too narrow seat which cost too much with no leg room on a rainy night with a damp raincoat bundled in my lap.

**VALDA SETTERFIELD**

From NY Times: Why are people at the Golden Theater laughing with such childlike happiness? If you're looking for a bubbly pick-me-up of a night at the theater, you couldn't do better.

**DAVID GORDON**

NY Times loves this too charming too amusing sitcom version of *The Chairs*. I buy'n read a new copy of the old play and remember my 1<sup>st</sup> pleasure. The Old Man can't forgive or forget anything and is afraid to be forgotten and his Old Wife reminds him again'n again of what he mighta been if he had any get up'n go.

**VALDA SETTERFIELD**

If we ever do this play, David says, Old Man and Old Woman hafta fight to remember and remind each other of who they were and are. It's 1998 and David's 62, trudging through the last miles of his own career, and faced with his own mortality when Joseph Mellilo invites us to perform *The Chairs* at BAM's Next Wave in 2004

**DAVID GORDON**

Alyce Dissette, manager and producer, orders 10 dozen black metal folding chairs, which are sequentially numbered by stage manager Ed Fitzgerald.

**VALDA SETTERFIELD**

For our back to back 1<sup>st</sup> engagements Alyce ships half to London's Barbican Center, half to Seattle's On The Boards.



**DAVID GORDON**

Arguments oughta be scripted, I say, so pages of blame games, the same old same olds, get tossed till the floor is littered with discarded accusation. You say this'n I say that'n you say I "always" say that'n I always say I don't always say anything. Timing and placement of chair entrances, text signs and script pages are rehearsed by dancers Guillermo Resto and Karen Graham and, as audience enters, stage manager Fitzgerald collects yesterday's abandoned script pages so Old Man and Old Woman can have the same bloody argument again and he can point at and read his same words right off the damn page.

**VALDA SETTERFIELD**

From NY Times in 2004: Mr. Gordon's casual interpretation is perhaps epitomized by his apparent inability to commit his role to memory. As he performs the play he tosses around pages of text pulled from pockets. This detritus suggests, at first, rough drafts from the long-awaited oration the old man hopes will justify and ennoble his unsatisfactory passage through life. But eventually 2 assistants begin handing Mr. Gordon pages of script, along with those chairs for the couple's invisible visitors. By the play's conclusion, he is clearly reading dialogue straight from the page.

**DAVID GORDON**

From NY Times: Gordon's lazy performance is particularly disappointing because Ms. Setterfield is clearly equal - and then some - to the role of the old woman.

**VALDA SETTERFIELD**

From NY Times: She, too, takes a softer, more vaudevillian approach than is ideal, but the sharpness of her acting ability is never in doubt and while she is best known as a dancer, her diction is a model of clarity and precision.

**DAVID GORDON**

I commission a new translation of *The Chairs* by Michael Feingold and he generously accepts my determination to change the character of the "emperor" to the "producer" whose attention and regard Old Woman and Old Man once had but who is no longer inclined to offer them work or to remember who the hell they are or were.

**VALDA SETTERFIELD**

FROM NY Times: Mr. Feingold's translation pays tribute to Setterfield and Gordon's intertwined artistic careers by including a "producer" among the more breathlessly awaited visitors.

**DAVID GORDON**

We're not on good terms with the French, Americans stop eating "French Fries" and Ionesco estate objects to "producer".

**VALDA SETTERFIELD**

From NY Times: Mr. Gordon's free-form version of the play, which ignores many of the author's staging dictates, is self-indulgent and largely ineffective. Ionesco's bleak vision is blurred and softened, the play's macabre power -

**DAVID GORDON**

memorably transmitted in Simon McBurney's spellbinding production, seen all too briefly on Broadway in 1998 - \* Patsy

**VALDA SETTERFIELD**

is vitiated by Mr. Gordon's loose approach to Michael Feingold's fresh new translation, given short shrift here. Old Man and Old Woman exchange bits of jumbled reminiscence and sweet endearments. Ms. Setterfield and Mr. Gordon have a long personal and professional history together (they've been married since 1960), and it naturally informs their stage rapport. It's impossible not to take pleasure in the spectacle of 2 performers so clearly relishing their simultaneous presence onstage.



**STG MGR: PHOTOGRAPHS OF VALDA & DAVID IN THE CHAIRS PROJECTED THROUGH TO THE END****VALDA SETTERFIELD** (continues)

Continued from NY Times: There is accordingly an undeniable poignancy to the couple's separation in the play's final moments. But Ionesco was striving for something far harsher than poignancy, and he didn't necessarily mean to write a play about the tough slog of a career in the arts. The play's wider and darker meanings get lost in the friendly glow the performers give off, despite the shadowy glints in Jennifer Tipton's lighting and Michael Gordon's haunting cello-based score ably performed by Wendy Sutter. A mordant meditation on the futility of life, *The Chairs* loses much of its sting when it is inhabited by a couple whose long, artistically fruitful partnership resoundingly belies that bitter truth.

**DAVID GORDON**

~~From NY Times:~~ We open to good press prior to BAM Harvey but we get killed by the NY Times so we hafta store the 10 dozen black metal folding chairs because, after the Times review, no producer wantsa take a chance on our version of *The Chairs*.

**STG MGR: PROJECTED PHOTOGRAPHS OF VALDA & DAVID IN THE CHAIRS CONCLUDE**

\*Thank you

**VALDA SETTERFIELD**

2004 TO 2014 -

Newly constructed "chair-centric" works:

*Dancing Henry Five* based on William Shakespeare's *Henry V*,

*Aristophanes in Birdonia* based on Aristophanes *The Birds*,

*Uncivil Wars* based on Bertolt Brecht's *Roundheads & Pointheads*

*Beginning of the End* based on Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*

These works are produced at Danspace Project, at The Kitchen and at Joyce Soho in New York, at the Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis Minnesota and Peak Performances at Montclair State University in New Jersey.

This evening's text and visual projections are excerpted from an archive-o-graphical work in progress which will deal, in part, with David Gordon's experimental use of chairs as partners in 50 years of movement theater work to be housed at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center

This archive-o-graphy is supported by the National Endowment for the Arts, and The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.