

CULTURE SHOCK

Making Silent Movies Dance

No Attitude Turns

BY RICHARD GOLDSTEIN

There's a special purgatory for children of famous families in the very small world of the New York avant-garde. Ain Gordon, son of two Downtown dance doyens, has certainly done time there. His Greenwich Village childhood—complete with alienation, hooky, and petty shoplifting—offered no escape from his parents' shadow. "I never wanted to be a dancer or a choreographer," Ain says. "I started out wanting to be an actor, did summer stock at 20, decided I didn't want to do that, became a techie, worked lights at Dance Theater Workshop. . . ."

"And may I say that anything he tried he did extremely well," Valda Setterfield interjects.

"That's my mother," Ain replies, rolling his eyes. In fact, he notes, "I wasn't falling into any world."

Ain's father is David Gordon, whose career epitomizes the era when Downtown dance went from the Judson to the Joyce. In the '70s, David and Valda became the first (hetero) couple of what is sometimes called postmodern choreography. (Caveat: David hates these terms, describing them as "stakes driven into the heart of a work.")

These days, David is directing *The First Picture Show*, his second collaboration with his son. Barely a week before opening night, it still feels to Ain "a little like swimming." He paces the theater, shooting private signals to his father whenever David looks up from the thick script. Thick script—in a David Gordon piece? Well, yes; as followers of the Gordon-Setterfield oeuvre know, their recent work seems less and less like dance. This is partly because of the company's newest member.

It all began in 1985, when DTW asked Ain to contribute a piece to an evening of short plays. He had never written dialogue before, and he'd always had trouble with grammar in school. "I decided to use only monosyllabic words, no proper nouns, only run-on sentences, and then everyone would think I had done that on purpose." Other pieces followed. "I didn't dare say I was a writer because then, I was sure, I would not be."

Later, Ain's great-aunt became seriously ill, and as he tended to her, he slowly found his calling. "I started writing about her, and at some point I showed it to David, and he liked it, and we began to work together." The process—the arguing and sharing—was, for Ain, "a rebirth."

Father and son toiled on their project every day. ("I provided food and support," Valda interjects.) Finally, they decided to do a reading at the St. Mark's Poetry Project. "There were 300 people there," Ain recalls. "I thought, 'Omygod, everyone here is doing real art and we're doing *The Sunshine Boys*.'"

By 1994, their joint project had coalesced into a play called *The Family Business*, starring David (complete with moustache) as the dying matriarchal aunt Annie, Ain as both a Downtown gay boy and his own father (wearing a false nose), and Valda as everyone else. It won an Obie, establishing Ain as a powerful young playwright and David as a theatrical director. (Valda was already established as an actress of considerable mimetic gifts.) In the process of forging his own identity, the son was father to his parents, and in making room for him, the family business found a future.

DANCE IS AN ART of discontinuity; it disappears with time. But this rubric is hell on aging dancers, and even on choreographers (or "constructors," the term David prefers) whose work breaks the rules of perfect bodies in seamless motion. By 1990, David and Valda were

well into middle age. He was tired of railing at dancers who wanted to make pieces with toilet paper. And, though she continued to move audiences long after the age when female dancers are expected to make art rather than embody it, Valda, too, felt constrained. "Dancers, of necessity, spend an enormous amount of time tending their bodies," she says, "whereas actors, I think, deal more with the mind and the heart."

Fortunately, their pieces had always verged on narrative. There were snippets of dialogue and wisecracks tossed among the *shmatte*-clad dancers. It wasn't much of a leap from "major movement and minor dialogue to moving less and speaking more," David says. In 1991, he got a grant from the Guthrie to work with Valda on something they called "the mystery project." (By the time it opened at the Joyce, it had become *The Mysteries and What's So Funny*.) They were dealing with material that depended less on the placement of body weight than on motivation. "An actor asked, 'When I go through this door, am I leaving or entering someplace?'" David recalls. "It was the most mind-boggling question I had ever heard, and it changed my life."

Ain gave David's work an unabashed emotionalism that, for his father's generation of Downtown artists, was too yucky to express. But David brought to Ain's passion the sly balance of abstract and ordinary movement he had culled from 30 years in the avant-garde. He'd learned to infuse the gestures of swaying, turning, and walking with a fluidity that could be arch or aching—and often both. Valda's wiry body was the perfect foil for David's tumbling imagination, her face a mask of British reserve. All this poise and feeling is present in the family's current enterprise. It just doesn't show.

WHEN IT ALL COMES together at the Mark Taper Forum in L.A. next year, *The First Picture Show* will be a multimedia megillah featuring music, movement, snippets of silent film, and dialogue—lots of dialogue. Title cards will be whisked across the stage. Flimsy props on wheels will roll around. The actors will dart or glide in slo-mo, and the music will underscore emotions, just like in a penny arcade. One could call this constantly shifting tableau a postmodern postindustrial show—if one wanted to drive a stake through its heart.

As of now, the show isn't postanything. It still lacks a score, since the original plan, involving Philip Glass (a long-time collaborator of Gordon's), fell through. "Philip has 14 projects simultaneously all around the world," David explains. He wasn't available to work the way the Gordons wanted to—in slow, steady motion. Over the past two years, the script has been ceaselessly rewritten, and a dance made for the show (and presented at Jacob's Pillow) was dropped. (What remains are bits of business and stylized gestures—the endur-

ing legacy, perhaps, of David's days as a window-dresser at Azuma. They're a sort of silent score, insinuating emotion as only movement can.

This, too, David insists, is dance. "It doesn't have pirouettes and attitude turns because I've never been interested in them. I *am* interested in the kind of movement you're looking at here, where things come and go, and form and disintegrate."

This dance is reason enough to check out the four-day workshop of *The First Picture Show* in the Playhouse at St. Clement's this week. True, the music will be provisional, and the lighting—by Jennifer Tipton—preliminary. But the process is plain to see. The seams show, along with the odd connections between narrative and motion, saga and shtick, art and family business that have always preoccupied David Gordon. All that and another fierce Ain Gordon matriarch named Annie, played to the hilt by Estelle Parsons.

She is 99-year-old Annie First, confined to a wheelchair amid the swirl of movement and memory. "I made 100 movies in 20 years," she tells her great-grandniece, who has come to interview her for a CD-ROM about the pioneers of cinema. "Every day I



Ain Gordon (left), David Gordon, and Valda Setterfield

imagined what to do and we figured out how to do it. . . . I found truth in ordinary people coming and going, shapes and rhythms, silent movies."

How does it feel to be directed by a dancer, I ask Parsons. "I'm more insecure than in a well-made play. I can't just hide behind the character. The form seems much more difficult, but also richer." Then she laughs. "I was hoping to have a dance number, but . . ."