

# Ringling the Changes



David Gordon/Pick Up Company

photo/Nancie Battaglia

## DAVID GORDON/PICK UP COMPANY

at the Dance Center of  
Columbia College  
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By Cerinda Survant

In their long-awaited Chicago debut—a fast, frolicsome, and often furious 80-minute performance work for eight dancers entitled *Framework*—David Gordon and the Pick Up Company offered Chicago proof that contemporary dance works can be accessible and iconoclastic, and still be entertaining. One of the most delicious characteristics of Gordon's work is its mercurial nature, its uncanny ability to change the meaning of words and movements from mo-

ment to moment and from mind to mind. At one moment, *Framework* is a serious and sad examination of love and trust; at another, a caustic comment upon the casual callousness of people at parties; and at still another, a bemused look at the hilarious possibilities concealed underneath the surface of a language we use daily but seldom stop to consider. As with a masterful jazzman at the piano, warping and twisting a familiar melody, creating something at once new and old, precious and ordinary, the name of the game is ringing the changes.

The performance began with the ringing of a particularly insistent, clamorous telephone. The stage was stripped: no wings, no black canvas flats; light poles and stage lights defined the edges of the performance space. Susan Eschel-

bach, Paul Evans, Theodora Fogarty, David Gordon, Margaret Hoeffel, Keith Marshall, Dean Moss, and Valda Setterfield entered under house and stage lights, carrying a piece of the set—a big wooden frame—making no attempt to hide from the audience or cloak the artificiality of the situation. From the very beginning, *Framework* played with the audience, twisting the conventions of the stage, warping the frame of the performance.

The frame became a *barre* for Setterfield's ballet warm-up. As she halfheartedly performed familiar *tendus*, battements, and plies surrounded by the other performers, she talked to them; one conversation spilled over another and another, and fragmented phrases of politeness emerged from the cacophony only occasionally.

Setterfield left the *barre*, shattered the stage's imaginary fourth wall, and addressed the audience in a monologue that produced both howls of laughter and rueful half smiles of recognition. While the others continued to manipulate the set—a wooden construction resembling a picture frame for the human body—Setterfield embodied the mazy insecurities of today's social life: "Telephoning is hard because you can't see the person and in-person talks are hard because you can. Long encounters are hard because they're so long. Brief encounters are hard because they're so... brief.... Parties are hard. Not going is easy. Being out of town is best."

As she spoke, the stage erupted into a party; the performers' sing-song chatter provided a play-by-play for their gestures of entering doors, admiring the view from their hosts' apartment, greeting friends, repeating the same inanities over and over, finding chairs, and falling off them. Performers changed from guests to pieces of furniture and back again. Surreal snippets of conversation reached the audience like the verbal equivalent of light refracted through a prism. A phrase repeated and repeated across the stage lost its meaning, underlining the similarity between the rituals of adults at parties and children playing telephone.

As the conversation faded, the score intensified, and *Framework* changed tone. Now wearing black T-shirts with numbers front and back, the dancers struggled to get themselves into proper numerical order, and then rushed and scrambled out of order. The numbered performers created jagged shapes with rigid, extended arms as they

held, lifted, wrapped, supported, and caged one another in turn. Obstreperous fractions in the mind of a second-grader? Perhaps. Analogous to the methods of composition of John Cage or Lucinda Childs? Equally likely. In *Framework*, Gordon holds out a wealth of possible meanings and refrains from insisting on any of them; a certain sensibility lurks just out of the performance's frame and whispers, "Yes, it is about this and that. But did you think about the other thing, too?"

The wooden frame returned to the stage, balancing on one corner, spinning slowly. It turned to frame first one performer, then another, as each in turn offered a short narration. The stories could as easily be about the earlier party—"She asked me who do I know in

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town and what do I do in town and where do I stay in town and when did I get to town and..."—as explicit references to *Framework* itself—"Is there a frame of reference? Is there," he asks me, breathing hard, "a framework?"

This deliberate ambiguity and ironic wit marks much of Gordon's work. Unlike the purely intellectual humor that many other choreographers use—the subtle send-ups, parodies, and in-jokes that only dancers, critics, and the most regu-



lar of dance-goers recognize—Gordon's wit ranges all the way from puns and allusions to slapstick; when Setterfield pulls her knee away just as Moss is about to sit on it, it's funny even the third time around. And unlike still other of his contemporaries, Gordon does not hesitate to create dances with emotional as well as intellectual content.

The two sections that close the first half of *Framework* are unabashedly emotional. In the first, Gordon and Hoefel danced with one of the two frames and a rectangular sheet of Masonite cut to fit. As the two dancers manipulated them, the props became a front door, a closet door, a window, a bed. The two bodies and the two props created imagery that suggested the fearful and vulnerable beginnings of a love affair. Setterfield's sudden entrance—her manner as she crossed the stage, saw them, and immediately exited—suggested that theirs was a relationship that wounded and compromised her.

In the section that followed, Setterfield and Gordon reestablished their own relationship. The frame no longer suggested a myriad of places and activities; it was an enclosure, a kind of cage. Gordon surrounded Setterfield with it, she fell away. He captured her again; the *tendus* and *developpes* with which she began the performance grew more and more stunted, twisted, and pained. Moments later, she escaped and he was caged. Mercurial transformations continued: the frame surrounded Setterfield posing as a Degas ballerina, surrounded the two in a formal family portrait, became an object of mirth as they threw it back and forth (the only time any of the performers wore frank grins), supported her *barre* work. The lights dimmed as the two danced through and around the upright frame, having defused—not necessarily resolved—their painful conflict.

*Framework's* second 40 min-

utes began the same way as the first: the company chattered away, distracting Setterfield from her ballet, vying for her attention. The six performers danced a kaleidoscopic series of duets while Setterfield and Gordon again danced through and around the upright frame. The movement material was entirely familiar: gestures that were accompanied by the performers' narration in earlier party scenes reappeared without accompaniment, grew larger and larger, and were repeated in pure dance terms. One by one and two by two, the performers whirled across the stage in a series of lazy, lilting turns; only after a section danced in unison did they begin to relate to one another.

Once they had begun to establish relationships, a highly structured sextet appeared; they lifted, spun, and tossed each other, giving in to weight and gravity, resisting it; just as the movement threatened to grow predictable, the dancers changed the direction they faced, or rushed to replace one another. Familiar movement phrases reappeared, altering meanings and affects with every repetition. While five others gathered around the Masonite—a fence? a bed? a table? a couch?—Eschelbach told a story whose literal sense disappeared in a maze of artful argot ("So I go 'go' and he goes for me and I go 'hold it' and he goes 'I'm going'") while the company's reactions to her conveyed the story's sense of an affair characterized by simultaneous loving and loathing.

Story followed story as Eschelbach and Evans performed a richly sensuous pas de deux. Three other couples watched with expressions that ranged from disdain to admiration; when they adopted the pair's movement, it was pale, tentative, inhibited, and restrained. When Eschelbach and Evans were finally framed, the life and fire drained from them as well.

The stage again erupted as everyone but Gordon attempted to snare Setterfield's attention; standing just outside the light, he crossed the stage in slow motion, trying in vain to push the pandemonium away. The company struggled, bickered, and joked. In the brief moment before the lights dimmed, shrill voices and a piercing telephone beat against the audience while even more possible meanings emerged. Perhaps David Gordon and the Pick Up Company's performance of *Framework* characterized the environment they work in every day. Perhaps the shape and structure of *Framework* were only a happy happenstance. Perhaps we'll never really know. It's enough to spend an hour and a half looking at the world through the eyes of a genuinely original artist who is at once a clown, a wit, and a revolutionary.

# READER

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