



LOIS GREENFIELD

David Gordon's "Profile": unusually sober and poignant

By Deborah Jowitt

DAVID GORDON/PICKUP COMPANY. At American Theatre Lab (January 28 to February 8). *Profile*.

David Gordon always makes us laugh, doesn't he? We snicker over the sophisticated wordplay that the dancers in his Pickup Co. are so clever at, titter over provocative juxtapositions of music and/or speech and/or movement, chuckle over how shrewdly Gordon pushes things around within the immaculate form of his dances. He can make us believe that anything is something else, that perhaps it's only our perspective that makes events what they seem to be. Those aren't such funny ideas.

Although his new *Profile* (the first of Dance Theatre Workshop's "Winter Events") draws, certainly, a nothing-to-sneeze-at amount of hahas and teehees from audiences, it's very serious. More sober in tone than anything I've seen of Gordon's, and—to me—extremely poignant. As usual, Gordon places old material next to new stuff, as if to take stock of the glints one casts on the other. In this case, the sense that rises like mist from the circuitous trails of words and jostling bits of brilliance has to do with leaving and—with luck—coming back home, with love misprized or misunderstood, with people who—despite good intentions—cast others in the role of victim or play the victim themselves.

Gordon himself, looking glum and slow, performs a liquid shambling solo near the beginning of the piece; then, until nearly the end, he stands on the sidelines with other unengaged dancers or blends in with the crowd. This in itself is unusual; usually he seems to be playing, with enormous enjoyment, the role of manipulator and creator, even of star. In *Profile*, he has the air of observing something he has set, willy-nilly, in motion.

Most of the movement in *Profile* consists of dancers doing big, plain actions—lunging, leaning, toppling, walking—or moving to a position, or negotiating some business with another dancer, holding that pose—perhaps commenting on it—and

moving on. In "Double Identity," Susan Eschelbach, Margaret Hoeffel, and Keith Marshall stand in a line facing us to announce, one by one, "Susan as Susan," "Keith as Keith," "Margaret as Margaret." Gradually they move into dancerly anonymity: Susan standing in Keith's place is, for all practical purposes "Keith." Margaret may eventually have to say, "Margaret as Susan as Keith as Margaret as Susan as Keith." Where you stand determines who you are; what you do announces your role. Pretty soon Margaret, with a hand on each of the other's backs, is saying "Margaret as

Mother, as Terra Firma . . ." Then it's "Susan as victim" (and other synonymous objects) slung around by Margaret and Keith. Margaret and Keith can briefly become "Lovers," Susan an "Abandoned Woman," who was a second earlier a "Woman abandoned."

Another less loaded kind of anonymity occurs when the dancers all stand in a big wedge, counting long, unlikely sequences, while "soloists" take turns performing parts of what could be one long, matter-of-fact phrase. And although at the beginning of the evening, each dancer has entered with a swatch of solo material (related, I think, to some prearranged grab-bag of solo material, but feathered with individuality), and each has had his or her name projected onto a background, there is a melancholy and sardonic perception of them as interchangeable. Often they function as chorus, conferring mass status on, or adding bulk to, what have earlier been shown as individual gestures. Sometimes they're oddly like the grown children of a large family.

Some of the work's most tender moments involve Valda Setterfield. A telephone rings. "Hello," says Setterfield in her gentle, polite English voice, while diligently working through what amounts to an offbeat ballet adagio. All the dancers except Gordon respond "hello." Sitting on the floor around her, one or another of

them rises from time to time to support Setterfield, touch her, lift her. When she asks, "what have you been doing"? A long babble of voices responds. When they ask her the same question, she says nothing, only continues patiently dancing, as if that is the only possible answer.

She and Margaret Hoeffel exchange quiet reminiscences about their mothers, while lifting and pulling on each other. Their manner toward each other is solicitous yet workaday, their voices conversational, yet although the activity is intimate, not all of it is comfortable (for example, a couple of times one worms her

hands up into the other's armpits to hoist her out of the way). The memories aren't all comfortable either. Love and pride inevitably come up against bafflement and awkwardness as the women talk and move. Hoeffel remembers her mother's flair for making clothes for herself and her many sisters, how people would go to church just to see the family's latest outfits. Setterfield remembers that the austere days of wartime England conditioned her mother never to buy anything not serviceable or built to last, so that new clothes and furniture always looked just like the old ones. They have sadder stories to tell. Both women, improvising this dialogue each night out of some deep and private store, go far beyond interesting performing into something that is moving beyond description.

Gordon joins Setterfield for a final dialogue in which single words metamorphose into other words—"slip," say, into "sleep"—often with quietly punning actions to suit. "I'm glad you're back," they say walking backward until they bump. Occasionally the words eddy into intimate dialogue that is both funny and sad, sparring and peaceful. ("What's an 11-letter word beginning with W that means . . .?" says Gordon propped up on one elbow beside Setterfield who, unfailingly polite, is much too sleepy to think of an answer). Is it because we know that Gordon and Setterfield are married that

they seem so exposed in this? The feelings which in Gordon's previous works have been contained and distanced by the pristine structures and unemphatic performing style here seem as close to us—and as dangerous—as our own.

PERFORMING ARTSERVICES, INC.

463 WEST STREET • NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10014