

# Dance/Tobi Tobias POST-MODERN CONFESSIONS

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... David Gordon blurs the distinction between art and life

WHAT WE SEE ON THE STAGE IS OFTEN art borrowing from life and doctoring it—editing, heightening, reassembling it for effect—quite consciously. In **David Gordon's** pieces, the distinction between the two sorts of existence is deliberately blurred. For instance: While the recent showings of Gordon's *Pick-Up Co.* took place at 541 Broadway, one of post-modernism's most celebrated addresses, small domestic clues revealed that Gordon's second-story loft there is also his home.

Typically, Gordon's performance art—he doesn't call it choreography, and we shouldn't either—mixes naturalism with contrivance. It consists of kaleidoscopic arrangements of verbal and movement phrases that, because of their very ordinariness, may seem improvised, spontaneous, "real." Only as the basic material is repeatedly fractured and reorganized do we sense cleverness of intention at work. Even then, a player may step out of the context of the piece and address us so disarmingly, in his own persona, that we accept his confidences as genuine.

Gordon's devices are far from original, but his quick, ironic intelligence and his appeal to dance-goers' intellectual capacities rather than their sensuous perceptions, make his work diverting. Still, it might be undistinguished without the presence of the troupe's chief performers—Gordon himself and Valda Setterfield. It's the David and Valda characters who give the material its unique appeal. Are we, we're led to wonder, observing their onstage or their offstage personalities, or are these perhaps one and the same? The enigma sustains our fascination.

The pair make marvelous foils. Gordon is a big, well-built man, handsome in a Romantic-Semitic way. Setterfield is a good bit smaller than he, soft-fleshed and slope-shouldered, with large, soulful eyes and clipped silver hair. Remarkably self-possessed, she seems fragile in Gordon's presence, partly because of the unvarying tenderness of his behavior to her. Her movement style is gentle, fluid, almost lyrical, while Gordon is a glorified pedestrian—blunt, a little rough-edged, agile enough for the traffic but with no fancy skills. His speech matches his body language—

straightforward Manhattan. Setterfield speaks well-mannered British, so quietly you have to lean into her orbit to catch the chiseled syllables. Together the two have an extraordinary glamour. It acquires an added piquancy when one knows that they are husband and wife.

Gordon's newest "construction," as he terms it, takes the risk of keeping the David figure offstage until the very last minutes, and even then keeping him silent. *T.V. Reel* plants Setterfield among a quintet of younger, sinewy dancers. They put on a show in which, predictably, a minimal script of words and actions is repeatedly shattered and recomposed. Two outsize television screens display alternative versions (worked up by Gordon and Dennis Diamond) of the live proceedings. The theme is what the junior performers might call "relationships," conducted musical-chairs style. Embraces and more athletic couplings are passed along a line and scrambled, places are exchanged—with casual good cheer. Although the activity goes on too long for the substance it contains, most of it has a fresh, wry charm, in particular, a sprightly changing-partners "square dance"—for five.

The transcendent passage, though, is the Valda-David duet. As Gunther Schuller's "Miller's Reel" replays once more, the taciturn David remains almost rooted in place, somehow partnering Valda—supporting her, displaying her, visibly cherishing her—as, their arms twining intricately, she jogs and glides buoyantly around him. In both design and performance it's artistry of a high order, surely—to make it look as if they're both dancing when only one is, and to keep the spectator simultaneously deceived and undeceived about the matter. Yet your first, instinctive reaction as you watch connects to real life: Ah, what a perfect mating.



Dance with foils: Setterfield, far left; Gordon, second right.

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