

David Gordon

Double Identity

By Roger Copeland

To most theatre people, David Gordon is known (if he's known at all) as a recent emigré from the world of dance. Here, for example, is the way a theatre critic for the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* identified Gordon when he directed a production of Max Frisch's *The Firebugs* at the Guthrie Theater last fall: "a New York choreographer only recently trying his hand at stage direction." Technically speaking, that's true: Gordon is a founding member of the legendary Judson Dance Theatre; the longtime artistic director of his own company, the David Gordon/Pick Up Company; and a contributor of dances to the repertoires of many other troupes, including American Ballet Theatre.

A pink housecoat

But some of us have suspected all along that David Gordon is really a theatre person. To anyone who's followed the evolution of his long career, it doesn't seem the least bit odd that Gordon recently staged a play by Frisch or that he directed and choreographed a dementedly zany new musical, *Shlemiel the First*, for Cambridge, Mass.'s American Repertory Theatre; that he conceived, directed and choreographed a revisionist look at commedia characters called *Punch and Judy Get Divorced* for the American Music Theater Festival in Philadelphia; or even that he's co-author (with his talented son Ain) of one of the best new American plays of recent seasons, *The Family Business*.

In fact, Gordon has always approached dance in the spirit of theatre and theatre in the spirit of dance. We see this in the way Gordon "represents" one of the pivotal characters in *The Family Business*, Aunt Annie Kinsman. Annie is an elderly invalid and

world-class kvetch, a Russian-Jewish widow who rarely ever changes out of her pink housecoat. But God—as usual—is in the details, and some of those details don't quite jibe: Peeking subversively out below her frilly bathrobe are Aunt Annie's blue jeans and tennis shoes, and her upper lip sports a big, bushy mustache.

Indeed, Annie is played, with deadpan authenticity, by David Gordon himself, and Gordon is deeply attached (in all senses of the word) to his real-life mustache. He's certainly not about to shave in the name of verisimilitude. This isn't laziness, stub-

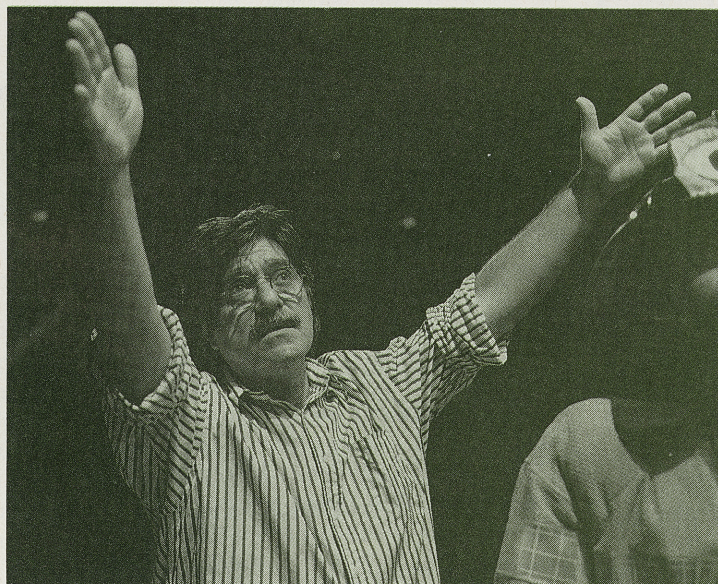
One of his signature pieces, *Chair: Alternatives 1 Through Five* (1974), is an exercise in theme-and-variations for himself, his wife, dancer-actress Valda Setterfield, and two metal folding chairs. By the end of the dance, Gordon and Setterfield have exhausted every imaginable permutation (and then some) for two human beings and two chairs. The chair—at once so simple and so versatile—went on to become an icon in Gordon's work. In *Field, Chair and Mountain*, choreographed for American Ballet Theatre in 1985, the ABT corps not only used metal folding chairs as partners, but also employed them as makeshift ballet barres to support fully extended arabesques and attitudes. In *Shlemiel the First*, the wise men of I. B. Singer's cockeyed village of Chelm perform a manic dance of crossed and uncrossed legs while standing and sitting on (what else?) chairs.

Verbal flip-flops

Gordon's work for the theatre is also linked with his work in dance by the concept of transformation and exchange of identity. In a piece from the early '80s called *Double Identity*, his performers don't just "change partners and dance," they also trade their very identities. They begin "as themselves" by announcing (for example): "Susan as Susan," "Keith as Keith." But as they begin to physically (dis)place

one another, they do verbal flip-flops as well: "Susan as Keith," "Keith as Susan." As with Gordon's beloved chairs, the permutations multiply at a dizzying rate.

Consider some of what happens in just the first few minutes of Gordon's Guthrie production of *The Firebugs*: Lola Pashalinski begins the play by portraying Schmitz the Wrestler. But mid-scene, her costume—all velcro down the back—is stripped off, and she transforms into the play's central character, Biedermann. Before



A conviction that theatre should be, above all, theatrical: choreographer-turned-director Gordon rehearsing *The Firebugs* at the Guthrie Theater.

bornness or vanity. It's a conviction that the theatre should be above all, theatrical; and this belief derives (paradoxically) from Gordon's background in dance, a medium that rarely asks the audience to suspend its disbelief. Gordon has always proceeded on the assumption that almost anything can "represent" anything else in the theatre, that "identity" is always fluid and transformational, and that the most commonplace objects can be invested with a wide variety of functions and meanings.

too long, she's "trading places" with the actress who plays Anna the Maid.

And so it goes. In Gordon's topsy-turvy world, actors and inanimate objects can become interchangeable as well. In *Shlemiel*, a mannequin "stands in" for one of the village elders every time Marilyn Sokol (who normally plays the elder) is called upon to do double duty as the wife of the title character. It may well be this continuing fascination with double identity that drew Gordon to the story of *Shlemiel* in the first place. When the play's hero leaves his tiny village in search of the great beyond, he inadvertently wanders back home. But *Shlemiel* convinces himself that he's actually stumbled upon a second Chelm, the mirror image of home. ("If God made everything in two, why not Jews," sings one of the characters, in a conceit that must have made Gordon feel instantly at home.)

Above all, Gordon has a masterful way of encouraging words and images to "trade places" in the time-honored form of the pun. His verbal/visual switcheroos alternate between the exquisitely subtle and the outlandishly literal. In his dance-theatre piece *The Mysteries and What's So Funny?*, a character yells "Wait a Minute!" and the entire company proceeds to do just that: They freeze on the spot and hold their poses for exactly 60 seconds. In other circumstances, Gordon introduces a verbal metaphor and then proceeds to take it literally. In *The Family Business*, one of the characters is losing body parts because Aunt Annie-the-invalid is "eating him alive."

Gordon's way with words has been evident in much of his work for the past 25 years, but with *The Family Business* he and son/co-author Ain have taken a quantum leap. This collaboration is really a full-fledged play, and one that reads exceedingly well. But any attempt to isolate the text from the idiosyncratic conditions of its performance misses the real heart of the experience. On one level, it's very much about a specific family, with the Gordon family (David, Ain and Valda) the only performers. But the casting avoids any straightforward correspondence between the "actual" family members and the roles they portray—Dad doesn't play "dad," he's

the great aunt; Ain (with the help of plastic nose and Groucho glasses) portrays both father and son; Setterfield portrays not just Mom, but all the female characters.

Writing that dances

The family business is a plumbing firm called "Phil and Son, Inc." Phil, who inherited the firm from his father, never really wanted it—his (thwarted) dream was to become a composer. Paul, his son, wants to be a playwright (in fact, he's writing the play we're seeing), but he too is drawn into the "business," which is in every sense the *family* business. For it is Paul who assumes the responsibility of caring for the elderly Aunt Annie, the archetypal nightmare embodiment of every guilt-ridden emotional burden that a sick and aging relative can impose on a younger family member.

To get some sense of what this is like in performance, imagine a short story of I. B. Singer's, adapted for the stage by Ionesco and directed by Brecht. In other words, the subject of *The Family Business* is Jewish family life, told in an absurdist deadpan style through staging techniques that treat painful personal material with sufficient distance to ward off any easy sentimentality. ("You make what haunts me funny," announces one character.) The setting is pure minimalism, with only metal coat racks on wheels with sliding colored curtains signifying the various locales. And

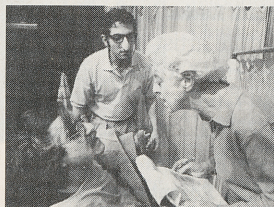
although the evening contains no dance sequences per se, the blocking is so fast, fluid and complicated that it feels choreographed. Even the writing seems to dance, gliding gracefully between terse narration and dizzily fast-paced dialogue, often emulating the one-two punch rhythms of classic vaudeville routines.

But for all its Marx Brothers antics, *The Family Business* also contains some of the most moving images in recent memory: When David Gordon as the dying Aunt Annie slowly crosses the stage pushing a chair, the image is inexplicably heart-breaking. That's because the first time around, Gordon's favorite all-purpose prop has come to represent the walker that Aunt Annie now needs to remain upright.

Gordon isn't the first choreographer to make a major contribution to the theatre. (One thinks, above all, of Jerome Robbins.) But Gordon is the first "dance person" who can animate words and bodies with equal agility. It's been 30 years since Robbins's production of *Fiddler on the Roof*, a musical that bore some obvious similarities to *Shlemiel the First*, opened on Broadway. Following *Fiddler*, Robbins left the theatre, retreating (and who can blame him) to the pampered security of the New York City Ballet. Let's hope that Gordon, by contrast, maintains his double identity.

Roger Copeland, the author of *What Is Dance?* (Oxford University Press), teaches at Oberlin College and has contributed to the New York Times, the New Republic and other publications.

"A character yells 'Wait a minute!' and the company freezes for 60 seconds."



The Gordons in *The Family Business*

bibliophiles. *American Theatre* decided to make it our business to ask the family of *The Family Business* what they were reading this summer, and—even if it's none of our beeswax—why.

Valda Setterfield: *Middlemarch* by George Eliot and *Against Interpretation* by Susan Sontag. "*Middlemarch* for its elo-

Creative storytelling with a postmodern buzz could only be hived (we figured) from a home of busy

quence and order, and *Against Interpretation* for its brain cleaning and stimulation in a time of intense rehearsals."

David Gordon: *The Parade's Gone By* by Kevin Brownlow, *Race Matters* by Cornel West and the *New York Times* (not the Sunday edition). "I'm beginning work on a script about the history of film in America and trying hard to keep up with the rest of the world."

Ain Gordon: *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens. "My play, *Wally's Ghost*, used to be called *Hard Work*. Besides, I didn't want to read *Sexing the Cherry* (by Jeanette Winterson) which was the only other thing on the shelf."

Family Reading