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DANCE

Her Curves and Angles Can Mesh in Elegance

By GIA KOURLAS

VALDA SETTERFIELD does not look like anybody else, and that's not always a good thing. When she is performing in dances by her husband, the choreographer David Gordon, she is all quirky, angular elegance. But when she is acting in movies or plays, her individuality makes her an oddball.

Film and stage directors "don't know where to put me," she said over tea at a SoHo hotel. "It's both an asset and a problem."

Ms. Setterfield, who performs in Mr. Gordon's "Private Lives of Dancers 2003" at the Joyce Theater this week, is intense. Even at the hotel, patrons who were very likely unaware of her many decades in dance could not help but stare at this tall 68-year-old woman, with her signature short white hair, trim navy blue jacket and miniskirt. But in a recent interview on the set of Daisy von Scherler Mayer's new film, "The Guru," in which she plays a dancer, Ms. Setterfield said she was aware of the obstacles her appearance can occasion.

"We were supposed to all be at a big party," Ms. Setterfield said. "The director kept saying, 'I have to make it look like there's a lot of people here, but no matter where I put you, I just keep seeing you!'"

On the surface, Ms. Setterfield appears to be a proper English lady with a genteel accent, which she has maintained even though she left London for New York in 1958. But a different picture emerged in the poignant, autobiographical play "Art, Life and Showbiz," which was directed and written by her son, Ain Gordon, and presented last month at P.S. 122. Born in Margate, Kent, about 70 miles east of London, Ms. Setterfield said her early dance training had constantly been interrupted by a string of incompetent teachers and, more dramatically, by World War II.

"Every time a bomb dropped, they would say, 'Oh

Private Lives of Dancers 2003

The Joyce Theater, 175 Eighth Avenue, Chelsea.
Tuesday through Sunday.

you have to go somewhere else where it's safe," she said. "So I'd move to another school, and maybe there would be training and maybe there wouldn't be. There was one terrible woman who used to put her knee in the small of my back and yank my shoulders back."

At 16, she moved to London to study with the legendary Marie Rambert, whom she had heard accepted unconventional dancers. "I had hardly been there five minutes, and I was a court lady in 'Giselle,'" Ms. Setterfield said. "Alignment and technique were not something that you learned. But passion was."

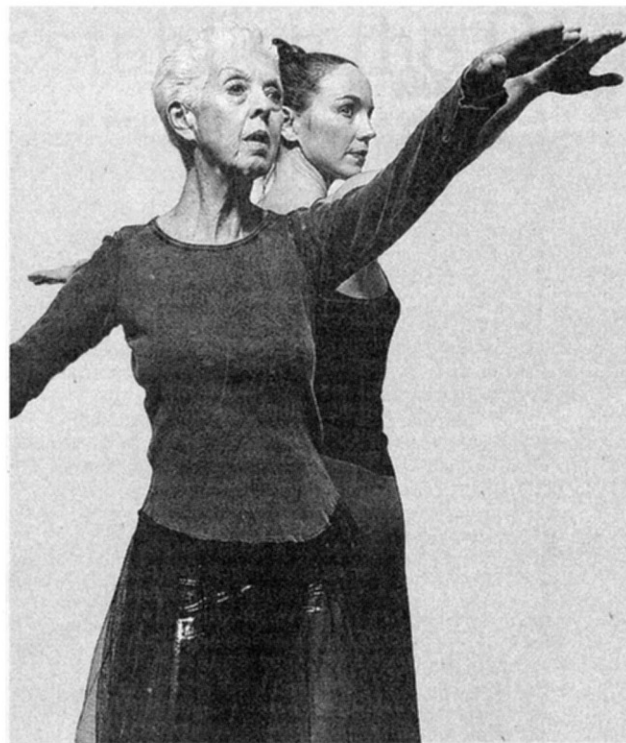
After Ms. Rambert admitted reluctantly that she could not offer her a job, Ms. Setterfield began studying with another unconventional teacher, Audrey de Vos. It was then that Ms. Setterfield met the man who, throughout her life, has served as a guardian angel of sorts: David Vaughan.

At the time, Mr. Vaughan, who is now the archivist at the Cunningham Dance Foundation, was writing about dance and performing in variety shows on British television. "She wasn't in the mold of the average Royal Ballet dancer, who was compact and precise," he said. "Valda was more lyrical and rhapsodic. I told her, 'In America, there are choreographers who could use you, like James Waring and Merce Cunningham.'"

Ms. Setterfield took Mr. Vaughan's advice and moved to New York. He met her at the boat, set her up in an apartment with a friend of his, the New York City Ballet dancer Ruth Sobotka, and took her to a bookshop, where they bought J. D. Salinger's "Catcher in the Rye."

Next, he introduced her to Mr. Waring, who began working with her immediately; it was in his studio that she met Mr. Gordon. Not long afterward, she began studying with Mr. Cunningham.

"David seems to remember saying, 'If nobody asks



Josef Astor

Valda Setterfield, left, rehearsing with Karen Graham in "Private Lives of Dancers 2003."

you, I think we should get married at the end of the year, but I don't want to talk about it," Ms. Setterfield said. In 1961, they did marry, and the next year, Ain was born. While Mr. Gordon continued with dance — he also designed the windows for Azuma, the Japanese import stores in Manhattan — Ms. Setterfield toured with Mr. Cunningham's company.

When he was not in school, Ain (pronounced ANE) spent his childhood on the road with his mother. "In those days, the Cunningham company used to wear big makeup like Moira Shearer in 'The Red Shoes,'" he said. "My memory of my mother is watching her put that face on. And then seeing her after the show, laughing and sweaty, saying, 'Let's go out to dinner.'" Ms. Setterfield retired from the company in 1974,

shortly after she was involved in a serious accident in Long Island; the car she was riding in was hit by a train. "Valda comes home, and she has a sort of amnesia and she is really terrified and crying," Mr. Gordon said. "I am my own terrible self saying: 'Now, listen, I can help you with anything! I will take care of you the rest of my life, but not if you're going to be crazy!'"

At Mr. Gordon's urging, the pair started working on a duet. The ensuing "Chair, Alternatives 1 through 5" has become one of his most treasured works. Ever since, Mr. Gordon has mined his personal history for material.

"Private Lives" is framed by overheard conversations among dancers. In one section, Ms. Setterfield engages in a humorous conversation with the dancer Tricia Brouk (who tells of buying an expensive sofa using her mother's credit card). In another, Mr. Gordon and Ms. Setterfield discuss what to have for breakfast and then, in a transition so subtle that the dialogue seems to melt into movement, begin dancing.

"David and I have a really bravura duet, which is all about walking," she said. "I don't know if he thinks of it like that; we don't do things the same way at all, which seems to interest people. But for me it's absolutely operatic in scale. I just love it."

As for the group dances, Ms. Setterfield is conflicted. "Once, Merce said to me, 'You're discovering the pleasures of being a soloist.' And that's true. I am not terribly patient with unison stuff. So I think my part is both important and possibly expendable. I

mean, they'd probably have to talk about me for a while if I weren't there."

Ms. Setterfield is not the type to vent her emotions publicly, but Mr. Gordon says she is not a serene woman. "The things that make her crazy are not often visible to other people," he said.

Once when a fight would not end, Mr. Gordon fell asleep. "And the next thing I know she is standing over the bed, with a pitcher of water, pouring it on me," he recalled. "That's Valda, you see. I can't imagine that I could love somebody more than this, but I do sometimes imagine that we could be more compatible. But I'm no victim. I must have what I want." □