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Alexander Kasser Theater



Pick Up Performance Co(s) | David Gordon

DANCING HENRY

FIVE

The New York Times

January 19, 2004

DANCE REVIEW | 'DANCING HENRY FIVE'

A 'Henry V' That Would Amaze the Groundlings at the Globe

By JENNIFER DUNNING

David Gordon's new "Dancing Henry Five," performed by his Pick Up Performance Company on Saturday night at the Danspace Project, is a decidedly offbeat Shakespearean production. It spools out in a mere hour, using physical staging and movie music to tell the story. Shakespeare's words are also used in small but well-chosen dollops placed adroitly in a narrative that is fast-paced and elliptical, yet nonetheless manages to make its points about war, politics and the rituals and vagaries of love.

Valda Setterfield, an engaging blend of Mother Courage and Auntie Mame, presides as the narrator. She perches high on a ladder or spins through the swirl of motion and brilliantly manipulated swatches of striped fabric that establish shifts in time and place. The other dancers move seamlessly from character to character. Tadej Brdnik and Karen Graham emerge at moments as a stern Henry and a watchful Princess Katherine, in a group completed by Tricia Brouk, Todd Allen, Christopher Morgan, Daniel Smith and Luis de Robles Tentindo.

"Dancing Henry V" has a subversive vein that comes through most adroitly in Ms. Satterfield's rumination about a mother's political awakening in a time of war. The play's own darkness is emphasized subtly by Jennifer Tipton's lighting. But for all Mr. Gordon's hip humor, he is a humanist at heart. He uses a killer score by William Walton, based on his music for the 1945 film "Henry V," that expertly pushes all the emotional buttons. So do cannily chosen spoken excerpts from the film and from other British productions. "Dancing Henry V" is a delightful and accomplished evening of theater that sweeps its audiences along in a stylish, essentially feel-good theatrical experience. That may be its slickest subversion.

The New York Times

January 16, 2004

REVERBERATIONS

Three Shakespeares, Each With a Purpose, Each Hoping to Thrill

By JOHN ROCKWELL

From the first preview on Oct. 28 until it closes on Sunday, some 80,000 people will have seen Jack O'Brien's production of Shakespeare's compacted "Henry IV" (Parts 1 and 2), courtesy of Lincoln Center Theater at the Vivian Beaumont.

Most of them, it seems safe to say, will have enjoyed themselves immensely. Certainly most of the critics did: "Glorious," Ben Brantley wrote in the first paragraph of his review in The New York Times. I enjoyed it, too, enough to hang in there for the full 3 hours 45 minutes. (One of the joys of no longer being a critic with a beat, obligated to review a show, is that you can slip away early if you are not engaged or amused.) For me, though, something was missing, something that held the evening short of full satisfaction. But I couldn't quite figure out what that missing element was.

I'm not sure I know yet, but serendipity has ridden to the rescue. First, I saw David Gordon's dance-theater piece "Dancing Henry Five" last weekend at St. Mark's Church. Second, inspired by Mr. Gordon, I rented the DVD of Laurence Olivier's 1944 film version of "Henry V."

What was missing at the Beaumont was that last dollop of style and spirit. In the inward-looking moments, Olivier's acting in the film sounds almost contemporary, with all the intimacy that the microphone permits. There is the towering scene in which the disguised king wanders among his exhausted troops in the predawn hours before the Battle of Agincourt, and the scene in which Henry sexily seduces Princess Katharine of France (Renée Asherson).

But in the big public moments, when Henry is delivering his stirring exhortations ("No King of England, if not King of France!"; "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers"), Olivier rises to a level of rapturous rhetoric that in a lesser actor would seem downright hammy. This is "thea-tuh" with a capital T and several exclamation points. But at this level of excellence, it's thrilling theatuh, harking back to the 19th century if not before, since the film's framing scenes are set in a simulation of the Globe Theater in Shakespeare's day. Kenneth Branagh's 1989 version is more modern but not better.

Perhaps my problem with Mr. O'Brien's "Henry IV" was the final failure of American actors to rise to a comparably convincing level of rhetoric (as Kathryn Hunter did as Richard III at the Globe last summer, for instance). Or perhaps some churlish members of American audiences, like me, refuse to accept their doing it.

Either way, the acting slipped into the overwrought on one extreme and the underplayed on the other. And Mr. O'Brien's pacing, always pressing forward, seemed to undercut the quieter moments.

Once again, this is not to say there wasn't much pleasure to be derived from the evening. The battle scenes were terrific, and nearly every actor, considered individually, was pretty terrific, too. That includes Kevin Kline's much-admired but still controversial Falstaff. I liked nearly every line-reading yet found the performance too muted and calculating, with Mr. Kline's irrepressible, shrewd intelligence peeping out from behind

every whisker. There's a delicate line between a creative rethinking and a loss of idiomatic authenticity.

The Lincoln Center Theater compaction of two plays into one is by Dakin Matthews, who in a nice echo of Globe practice also acts in the show. Although much is cut and shuffled, it is no more radical than what Olivier did to "Henry V," cutting it nearly in half. Or, certainly, than Mr. Gordon's radically reduced transformation (the comic bits cut out, to start with).

Each version served its purpose, however. Lincoln Center and Mr. O'Brien wanted a workable "Henry IV" that a modern American audience could sit through in a single evening. Olivier was shadowed by several commercially disastrous Shakespeare films from the 1930's and by World War II: the premiere was on Nov. 22, 1944, the evening after London's last blackout.

Olivier updated a few words ("head" for "pate"), interpolated Falstaff's rejection from the end of "Henry IV, Part 2" (as a haunted memory of Falstaff on his death bed), and cut for cinematic brevity and for patriotism: many of Henry's more calculating motives are shorn to present a stirring vision of a British king in victorious foreign combat.

Mr. Gordon has always been a theater man and a performance artist as well as a dancer and choreographer, and his wife, Valda Setterfield, is an actor as well as a dancer. "Dancing Henry Five" by his Pick Up Performance Company may have been presented by the Danspace Project, but it is not "pure" dance, whatever that is. (The human body brings its own blessed contaminant to any choreographic abstraction.)

Its lack of twisty ingenuity has even occasioned some dubiousness among dance critics as to whether it's real dance, or all dance. But for me, its postmodern layering of dance and theater, past and present, text and play and the Olivier film was thrilling, no matter which artistic pigeonhole you choose for it.

With only seven dancers and with Ms. Setterfield filling in for Shakespeare's narrating Chorus, this was a bare-bones production that created a powerful epic mood. It did so through the dancing, of course, but also through recycled props and set pieces, through William Walton's lush, slightly cheesy but still touching recorded music (from the Olivier film), and through audio excerpts from the film and other historical performances, all bathed in Jennifer Tipton's bold lighting.

Some of Mr. Gordon's pointed references to contemporary events seemed a little jarring, although Shakespeare has a character question Henry's ambitions in the face of the horrors of war. The loss of the humorous scenes was compensated for in part by Ms. Setterfield's wit, and allowed the action to sweep along over a tight, uninterrupted, one-hour span. And the dancers, led by Tadej Brdnik, every inch the warrior king, and Karen Graham, manly as a soldier and fetching as Katharine, invested Mr. Gordon's choreography (for choreography it was, after all) with just the right blend of courtly grace and martial vigor.

But other than that I enjoyed myself more at St. Mark's Church than at the Vivian Beaumont, can Mr. Gordon offer any lessons for Mr. O'Brien, or Mr. Brdnik any for Mr. Kline or for Michael Hayden, the first-rate prince in "Henry IV"?

Not really, I suppose. Mr. Gordon's piece will never attract the attention of 80,000 people over 78 performances; it's too esoteric for that. One wouldn't necessarily want to encourage Lincoln Center Theater to venture onto the wilder shores of directorial weirdness. Still, a little more freshness, a little more creative boldness, even a little greater effort to be true to what American actors can do best, might have lifted "Henry IV" to an even higher level than it has undeniably achieved.

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David Vaughan

Oh Henry

"Dancing Henry Five" by David Gordon's Pick Up Performance Co(S.) Production
ODC Theater
San Francisco, CA
May 17, 2007

by Ann Murphy
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The questions Thursday were posed like the opening of a Polish joke: how many dancers does it take to perform a four-hour Shakespeare history play about a feckless war, and how long does it take them to do it?

"Dancing Henry Five" by David Gordon, eminent-grise of post-modernism, answered with sly simplicity: it takes seven dancers (plus three large dolls), a nimble narrator, and a healthy hour. No joke.

As straightforward as that sounds, Gordon's Shakespeare reduction was created from parts as

polished as old bone and put together with a comic and elegant sense of design that dropped what was inessential (the battle of Harfleur) and kept the critical (the devastating rout of the French at Agincourt). Enormous care went into the parade of hand-held signboards that alerted us with fanfare that the show was beginning, into the flow of

chairs in space, into how cloth billowed and a trio of men stood upon moving fabric like heroic ships, window frames became field tents, dancers waltzed, and irony flowed. The result was pared-down drama that succeeded in being poignant, wise and sweetly cheeky.

“Dancing Henry Five” concerns one of Shakespeare’s sorrier tales of vanity, hubris and benightedness and how, together, they find company in an almost endless war designed to strengthen a politician and church’s position at home. Greed was a primary motivator — King Henry V was manipulated by the Archbishop of Canterbury to drop progressive legislation and encouraged to seek money from abroad. In other words, he was to attack France to let the English forget their financial woes. To add nuance to the goings-on, Gordon uses as his starting point an already reduced Laurence Olivier film version of the play, which was created as a bit of propaganda during WW II. So when Setterfield speaks in tandem with dialogue from the film we get a deft conceptualist overlay of how the same events can be read anew in another age.

Our Henry at the helm is the once naughty Prince Harry, Harry of the pub and the whorehouse. As you’ll remember, he was the happy bad boy who hung out with bawdy Falstaff in Henry IV until a conversion experience and a crown turned him into a self-righteous Henry V, who renounces his dying hedonist friend and copes with the nation’s complexities through a mix of duplicity and bellicosity. The parallels to our dry-drunk born-again President are obvious yet sophisticated and made by ethereal narrator Valda Setterfield, whose lanky body is a mix of vaudevillian and May Queen. And although she ironically warns us from her station on a ladder that these are Gordon’s opinions, not hers, we believe by her knowing delivery that they’re every bit hers as well.

Before much ado, the work dives in with exquisitely simple sets that the company recycles (ladders, folding chairs, large rectangles of stripey fabric) and delectable lighting (Jennifer Tipton) to deconstruct without an ounce of jargon the messy business of Henry Five and, by association, George Two. Setterfield, who’s been married to Gordon since the 60s and is a former Ballet Rambert and Cunningham Company dancer, has the right ophistication for such a bare-bone task. With swirling pace, she moves us from point to point, compressing, summing up, letting us know what’s been omitted, drawing the parallels so the company of mostly men can sweep in and assume their posts as soldiers, countrymen and kings. They fight by way of percussively striking poles against the ground, creating a poetically spare sense of menace and foreboding. They set up long window frames as tents amid shadows and vermillion light. As for the additional women in the cast, the beautiful pixyish dancer Sadira Smith, who brings her own magic to

the action, and the smooth-limbed Karen Graham inject a keen feminine irony into the proceedings, while William Walton's symphonic score keeps us aptly locked between the clear dance beats of the Renaissance and the emotional tempests of the violent 20th century.



Gordon, who has been absent from the Bay Area a woefully long time, gnaws on the work's contradictions deftly, like a clown who is both erudite and detached and loves chiseled language as he loves starkly elemental dance. As a contretemps between wary Renaissance states, for instance, we get the quintessential post-mod-ironic exercise: a dance with balls (a "screw off" from France in the form of a gift: a cache of tennis balls), here offered as a courtly dance that expands with the accretion of tasks (throw orange ball plus move; throw orange ball, move plus bounce once; throw orange and

green balls, move, bounce twice etc....).

The dancers, dressed in striped rugby shirts with extra sleeves, upside down or draped as overskirts, plus 15th century-ish caps, were able to blend the present and past with apt irony, from the touching and canny minuet between Setterfield as English language tutor and Karen Graham as Catherine of Valois, preparing for the amorous side of political siege ("Big weddings are hell to pull off," Setterfield remarks with typical piquancy); to the depiction of battle in which both England and France lose half their forces. Tadej Brndnik performed Henry with the right mix of boyish self-importance and wry likeability. (Other performers were Lloyd Knight, Eli McAfee, Guillermo Ortega and David Zurak.) The dancey rhythms of Walton livened up the action with suitable irony of its own and gave 20th century weight to the 15th century action.

We've heard the question often these last years: how does an artist

make art about our dire time? Gordon's luminously unaffected dance theater, created in 2004, offers what seems like an almost forgotten and indisputably sagacious response: he locates our tragic compulsion to repeat, often manipulated by blind self-interest couched in the name of larger good, and shows its wryly tragic results. The excuses change, the weapons grow more deadly, and the costs escalate, but the outcome is the same: death and sorrow. In the very finest dance, the elements also change while the results are comparable: beautiful movement and no small pool of enlightenment. Dancing Henry Five gave us both.

Photos, both by Paula Court.
Top, Valda Setterfield.
Bottom, Tadej Brdnik who plays Henry V.

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Stand a tip-toe when this day is named

David Gordon and the Pick Up Performance Company's "Dancing Henry Five" gracefully delivers an abbreviated Shakespeare, indeed atop and atip ladders, toes and folding chairs.

By [KARINNE KEITHLEY](#)
Offoffoff.com

David Gordon's "Dancing Henry Five," recently performed at Danspace Project, is an exercise in the pleasures of locution. A danced digest of Shakespeare's play set to vintage recordings of the play and to William Walton's film score for the Laurence Olivier "Henry V." Gordon's performance is as much about manner and comment as it about the story.

DANCING HENRY FIVE

Company: **David Gordon and the Pick Up Performance Company.**
Choreography by: **David Gordon.**
Directed by: **David Gordon.**
Dancers: **Todd Allen, Tadej Brdnik, Karen Graham, Christopher Morgan, Valda Setterfield, Daniel Smith and Luis de Robles Tentido.**
Music by: **William Walton.**
After William Shakespeare's "Henry V"

SCHEDULE

[Danspace Project](#)
St. Mark's Church, 131 E. 10th St.
Jan. 8-18, 2004

Seating the audience on both sides of the sanctuary of St. Marks Church, the piece was played for width rather than front, creating a gymnasium-like atmosphere. Many scenes are constructed as rule-games, and lay claim to their relationship to the voiceover text only very slowly. Foremost is the manner of doing things. In this, there is a slightly archaic focus to the usual Pick Up Performance Co. mode. As a group, they employ a performance mode of casual formality. The dance phrases build primarily from walking variations — lots of lunges in Henry. All the performers are in full command of a classical training without paying it too much heed. So there is a casual grace to things. Add to that a dose of classical theatrical manner (think of a time when American actors went for a hard, but refined, locution) and you have the tone of Gordon's "Henry." The resulting style is quite beautiful, quite calm, rooted in multiple traditions, some of which critique each other — though this creates not contradiction but a sense of balance. An example: introducing a party scene, they use the acknowledged shorthand of a boar's head ceremonially carried about by one of the dancers, to refer to the male, hunting-party type setting. But the boar's head is a frame hung with a cardboard sign that reads "boar's head." Thus the classical modern and postmodern stage styles peaceably coexist in this production.

The resulting style is quite beautiful, quite calm, rooted in multiple traditions, some of which critique each other — though this creates not contradiction but a sense of balance.

The marvelous Valda Setterfield acts as the chorus, guiding us through the story and explaining their mode as she goes, careful to refer to the authorship of each Henry- Shakespeare's, Walter's, Gordon's. Beginning atop a ladder amidst a pile of recycled props (their shows-of-origin are all listed in the program), she explains that Shakespeare's "Henry" is five acts and takes five hours, while Gordon's "Henry" has one act and will take one hour. She explains that she, as "Gordon's Chorus," will move us through the story, and once in a while offer an opinion, not hers of course, "but Gordon's."

The story advances like this: reminding us of Henry's earlier manifestation as the errant prince Hal, and his friend Falstaff, Setterfield introduces a bawdy dance, wherein drunkenness is implied. Setterfield explains that Henry, upon ascending to the throne, discovers gravitas ("No one is more moral than a born-again moralist") and rejects good Falstaff. Excerpted text from Laurence Olivier's film version of Henry plays. Tricia Brouk dances a simple, lunge-filled dance, which slowly settles in relation to the text. Setterfield lies down on a table, draped with cloth, as the dying Falstaff. Then abruptly she casts off the cloth and says, "Okay, Falstaff is dead."

Throughout the production, Setterfield's commentary (those opinions of Gordon's she occasionally offers) extracts from the old story some timely meditations on war and kings. This operation on the work of Shakespeare, especially his Richard and Henry plays, seems to be so impossible to resist as to be inevitable. Like much else in this production, these comments are not exactly on fire, but rather come with a settled opinion, excellently articulated. Oddly their weight is mitigated by the production's archaic grace and politesse. Gordon may not have too much to say that's good about kings, but courtliness has survived his dance intact.

The battle of Agincourt too is more ceremonial than fiery or brutal. Armed with sticks, folding chairs and a one-two rhythm, the battle scene doesn't energetically stand too far out from the rest of the scenes. Walton's music for this scene verges on corny, and feels dated. But if Agincourt doesn't get to the heart of battle (admittedly difficult in a dance performance), the images that precede and follow the battle scene more than repay our attention, getting straight to the evocative point: the famous St. Crispin's Day speech ("We few, we happy few, we band of brothers..."), in which the cast, perched on chairs, rotates on tiptoe, gesturing simply; and then the final image of the skewered dead, in which dancers and stuffed dummies lay strewn over chairs and about the space, gorgeously lit by Jennifer Tipton (that's Tipton's "Henry," a simultaneous enterprise).

Sometimes it is hard to take in everything that's happening, and Shakespeare's rich text gets folded into the atmosphere, especially when the voiceovers come in to dances that are always underway. When this happens, the timbre of the voice (especially Laurence Olivier's) gives things a wrapping-up feel, a possessed sense of nobility, of thinking on things, as is Right and Just to do. I lost the details of the thoughts occasionally, but I think that most of the audience could well be assumed to have read or seen Henry at least once before, so the transmission of all the excellent words is not a priority.

Always a pleasure of seeing the Pick Up Performance Company is getting to be in a room where Karen Graham is dancing. She has a consistent, undisturbed grace, and remarkable exactitude. In addition to Graham, Setterfield and Brouk, the other lovely performers were Todd Allen, Tadej Brdnik, Christopher Morgan, Daniel Smith and Luis de Robles Tentido. Stage Manager Ed Fitzgerald also did a very good job of collecting sticks.

Well-met, Mr. Gordon.

choreographers enter history, bringing it to bear on the present and the personal.

Confession of a *Henry V* junkie: Smitten in the eighth grade with Laurence Olivier's film, Shakespeare, and Olivier himself, I saw the movie 10 times. I can still recite most of the speeches. The excitement I felt watching David Gordon's stunning and provocative *Dancing Henry V* resonates with memories of that earlier crush. ■ Shakespeare's Chorus

bids the audience, "On your imaginary forces work." Gordon's witty, weary, sometimes angry narrator, Valda Setterfield—waving a hand over the piled-up props recycled from earlier Gordon works—reminds us that downtown choreographers are used to making do and getting audiences to use their imagination. And indeed, a rolling table serves as both Falstaff's deathbed and a galloping steed. Gauzy striped fabric sheets become flags, sails, ceremonial carpets, and at one magic moment the ships on which people, still as statues, are pulled across a wooden ocean. The weapons at this Agincourt are poles handed out by production stage manager Ed Fitzgerald. The performers open folding chairs and set them down with a decisive, carefully aimed bang that expresses martial resolve as powerfully as any words. Some of the victims falling and hurtling in Jennifer Tipton's suddenly fiery-dark lighting are dummies. Setterfield delivers one of her most despairing speeches—about lost sons, and leaders who shove their nations into war—claiming that God is on "bur" side—while holding a dummy in her arms. Olivier's *Henry*, filmed during World War II, struck a patriotic chord in beleaguered Britain. Gordon's text zeroes in on current parallels (including the leader as redeemed playboy heir). Setterfield reminds us tartly that back in 1415, kings rode into battle with their soldiers and knew what hell it was.

As always with Gordon, the tone is con-

O FOR A MUSE OF FIRE

BY DEBORAH JOWITT



Photograph by Tom Brazil

versational and the dancing built primarily on walks—tiptoe marches, slow lunges, business-like striding—that create an oblique shifting flow. The eight marvelous performers pick up objects, and alter the striped drapes they wear over rugby shirts, without stopping. They weave around one another, building and dissolving arches and fences and embraces as they go. The French Dauphin's mocking gift of balls sets off a

Defending Henry: The Pickup Company

toss-and-catch game that, though serene, suggests careful drill. Tadej Brdnik is now a foot soldier, now Henry. Tying on a pillow, Setterfield is still commenting on the plot as she sags into the dying Falstaff.

Voices from Olivier's film (occasionally in out-of-sync duets with other recorded Henrys) weave in and out of William Walton's rousing film score. Movement slides against text. When Setterfield and Karen Graham dance the charming scene in which the French princess attempts to learn English from her duenna (she's expected to wed Henry if he wins), their gestures for "fingers" and "hails" are part of a dance language, not bits of pantomime, and they coast easily on the taped dialogue from the movie.

Dancing Henry V is Gordon's first brush, as far as I know, with a literary narrative, and—querying the paradoxes that cling to the very notions of victory and defeat—he comes out victorious.

the village
VOICE

DAVID GORDON
Dancing Henry V
DanceSpace Project at St. Mark's Church
131 East 10th Street
212.674.8194
Through Sunday