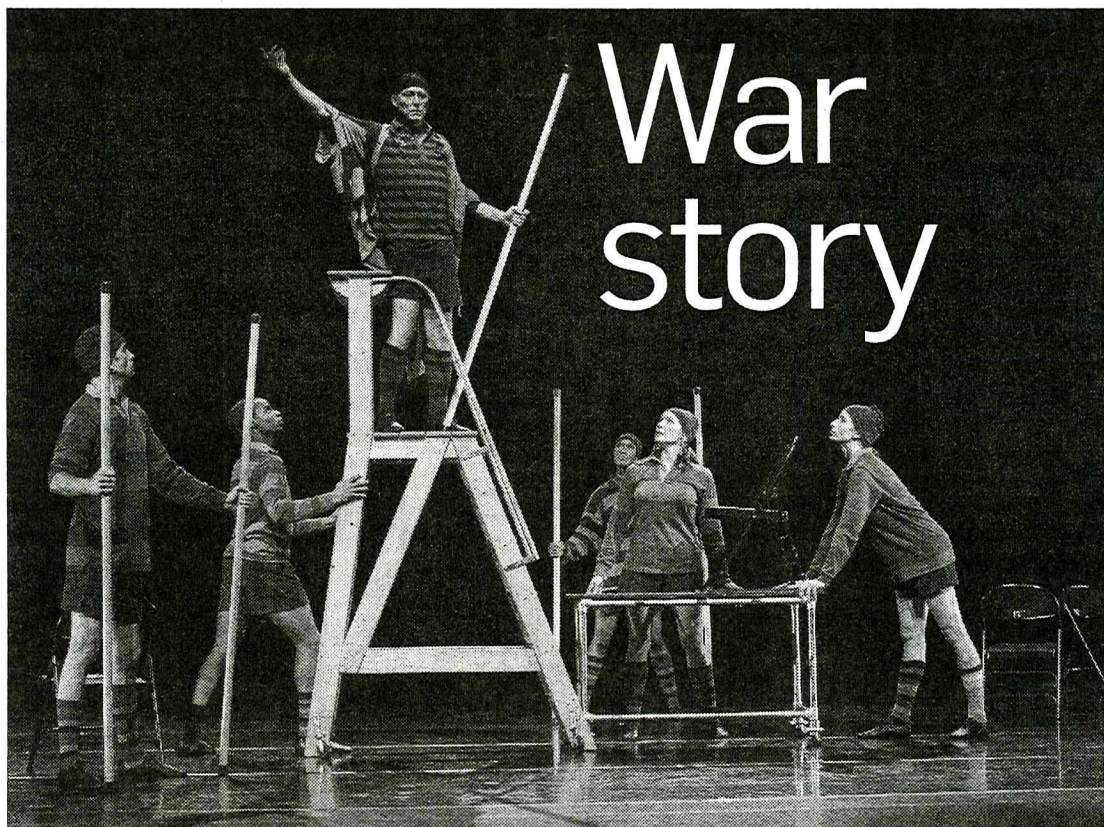


OCTOBER 9, 2011

SPOTLIGHT

DANCE REVIEW



The Pick Up Performance Co(s) in David Gordon's "Dancing Henry Five."

Troupe revives dance work that mirrors Bard play about conflict

By Robert Johnson
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

They may not be the Royal Shakespeare Company — but choreographer David Gordon's Pick Up Performance Co(s) have something special to offer.

The shabby players in this post-modern dance troupe, which revived Gordon's "Dancing Henry Five" at Montclair State University, have nailed together a ramshackle production that mirrors one of the Bard's sturdiest edifices, the history play "Henry V."

In this vastly abbreviated version of the play, simple dances substitute for much of the text. As the narrator, Valda Setterfield matter of factly points out omissions and salts the action with understated commentary. With these wry asides, she undermines Shakespeare's heroic narrative in which an English monarch, youthful and headstrong, sets out to conquer France. Setterfield, the choreographer's wife, also doubles as King Hal's old drinking buddy, Falstaff, clutching a pillow to her stomach to aid in this impersonation; and in a further role as Lady in Waiting to the French princess, Katherine, this versatile artist supplies a dainty minuet with English lessons.

"Breasting the lofty surge" of Shakespeare's play without the usual resources — and with subversive intent — this homemade history offers a "Henry V" without the spittle and bombast, questioning the reasons we go to war. Gordon originally created "Dancing Henry Five" in 2004, closely following the workshop of his piece "Uncivil Wars," which Montclair's Peak Performances series presented in 2009. References to a born-again leader who renounces his dissolute past, and to the vexing problem of a national deficit, originally alluded to President Bush in the midst of the Iraq conflict.

Yet in "Dancing Henry Five," Gordon shifts the

conversation away from any single war, belittling the pretexts used for slaughter. (Tennis balls. Really?) Instead we get general principles: the economic chicanery that underlies war, and the adolescent lust for conquest which not so incidentally involves capturing a nubile princess. As a foil to the mawkish patriotism of Shakespeare's "Saint Crispin's Day" speech, with its faux nostalgia for blood brothers and the ghastly prospect of veterans exhibiting their scars at memorial dinners, Gordon has Setterfield dissect the logic of war from a mother's point of view. Since she doesn't want her own son to die, this must mean "I want somebody else's son to die," she concludes chillingly.

Gordon's work has a knowing innocence. The tale emerges from a pile of recycled props heaped centerstage: folding chairs, wooden frames, sticks and ladders. Dressed in the striped jerseys of a rugby scrum, the small cast ("seven dancers, two dummies and me," Setterfield enumerates) wrap themselves in additional rags, prancing, leaping and carrying handmade signs. Standing resolutely on the corners

of blankets stretched to resemble ships' prows, Henry's army crosses the Channel to arrive at Agincourt. This puny adventure might be a grade-school pantomime of Washington crossing the Delaware. Sound bites from the motion-picture version of the play, and music by William Walton add to the impression of watching Masterpiece Theatre while snuggled in the family den. The childlike simplicity of this production distances us not only from the horrors of war, but also from the rhetoric that glorifies a bloody con game.

Gordon's gentleness proves corrosive, stripping the veneer of flattery from Shakespeare's gilded language.

Robert Johnson: rjohnson@starledger.com

Dancing Henry Five

Where: Alexander Kasser Theater, Montclair State University, One Normal Ave., Montclair

When: Tonight at 8 and tomorrow at 3 p.m.

How much: \$15. Call (973) 655-5112, or visit peakperfs.org.