

# thINKIngDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Courtesy of the artist

## Dance's Past: Time is Running Out

by Lynn Matluck Brooks

It's two minutes before the end of the UArts class period devoted to "[David Gordon](#) & Collaborators" discussion of "Archiveography." Gordon's long-time producing director, Alyce Dissette, is attempting to finish her *much-interrupted* talk-through of the [Archiveography website](#) to demonstrate its presentation of Gordon's life and work. Much interrupted by Gordon, mostly, as he inserts commentary on this or that image or snippet of text—comments that his stage manager, Ed Fitzgerald, follows deeper into the website, while Dissette's very different agenda is to trot us, before the bell, through the large-grained site overview. This is life crashing into history—or historiography: the messiness of day-to-day living-working-loving-remembering-forgetting-losing-finding-inventing, coming face to face with the organized articulation of archiving, as explained to listeners by Jan Schmidt, Archiveography editor (and former Dance Curator at the NY Public Library for the Performing Arts). And all of this—and every day of our lives—is constrained by our forever running out of time, time to do our work, invent our art, write our stories, state our stances, make sense of life before it lands irrevocably in the past tense. Gordon, now 81 and not much mobile, speaks thoughtfully about trying to keep his perspective present-tense.

In fact, the morning session revealed more messiness. The 11:30 start-time was preceded by an announced half-hour video from a PBS *Great Performance* featuring Mikhail Baryshnikov dancing with Gordon's lifelong partner, [Valda Setterfield](#) (a long-time Cunningham dancer), and with American Ballet Theatre in Gordon's *Murder*. In the course of that video-showing at the Gershman Y Gym Theater, the presenters were preparing for the upcoming talk, setting their chairs before the screen, walking in front of the projector, talking to one another over the soundtrack, and generally creating obstacles for the viewer—that is, for me, since I think I was the only one who arrived to watch that part of the event. As a dance historian, I understand the situation, having worked in a range of archives that I plumbed for my many investigations: life is messy, the archives can only cough up what has been found and catalogued (sometimes miscatalogued, misidentified, mistreated, or even misplaced), much remains obscure, and every researcher handling a document asks a unique set of questions, brings a particular lens to the material, and expresses that encounter with the document in a personal way.

More messiness: Gordon and Setterfield reveal the rifts and flows that shape any long marriage: different perspectives, memories, modes of expression, even accents (he's a NYC Jew, she was raised in British convent schools). He takes spontaneously generated conversations (between Baryshnikov and Setterfield) and creates scripted humor from them, choreographing the dancers' beautiful improvisations into a complex movement counterpart to their now-memorized commentary, then overlaying hand-drawn cartoons on the video. Many channels stream forth, a lot to take in, so much can be missed.

Gordon is generous with the UArts student audience, encouraging them to think about their own archiveography, to save their reviews, feedback good and bad, records, images still and moving, notebooks. He remarks that he had, in his early years, tossed it all, thinking this phase of his life wouldn't last, wasn't important. His friend [Yvonne Rainer](#), he remarks, "saved everything she ever touched." Ah, she knew she would play a role in dance history. He now acknowledges that he does, too. In this audience are others who have the power to shape this flow.

How would I, as a dance historian, regard Gordon's archiving work? First, I'm enormously grateful for it—the digitization of images, the inclusion of times, places, people, titles, commentary, the links to videos, the very smart organization of the project. The website is itself a work of art, with its own history, process, and point of view. On the other hand, archives—as Schmidt noted earlier in the discussion—catalogue but do not contextualize; it is the historian who must provide the framework and weave the material into the web of questions that motivated the investigation. Someone has to make a story out of disparate, found-and-saved documents.

With Archiveography, Gordon has tried to do much of that for us. He remarks to the students that he never reads program notes for dance pieces because he wants the work to speak for itself, not the artist to speak for it. What Gordon has done for his own performance pieces, then, is to give the dancers text to speak *during* the dance. Hmm... is this not verbally shaping the spectator's grasp of the piece? — orally, if not in written program text? I find that his Archiveography is a similar effort, a rich and humor-filled work-around that leads us to the artist's portrait of himself. No doubt, historians will draw that profile quite differently.

*A Conversation about Archiveography with David Gordon & Collaborators*, Oct. 11, University of the Arts YGym Dance Theater,  
<http://www.philadelphiadance.org/calendar/index.php?eID=9795>

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