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Iterations and Investigations: Three Weeks with Gordon, Brecht & Eisler

by Megan Bridge and Kalila Kingsford Smith

“I have no idea what I’m doing.” Choreographer/director David Gordon spoke these words more than once over the course of the three-week workshop that he led during a cold, windy March in Philadelphia. *Political Shenanigans: dancing w/ Brecht & Eisler* is a treatment of Bertolt Brecht’s 1933 script “The Roundheads and the Pointheads” (translated by Michael Feingold)and a project that Gordon has been working on for several years. Past iterations have taken place at the Actors Studio in New York, the Walker Art Center and Montclair State University. The current workshop, at Christ Church Neighborhood House, was presented by Susan Hess Modern Dance and funded through a planning grant, from the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, for research and development, not production.

Gordon brought four members of his New York-based Pick Up Performance Co(s) for the workshop to join five paid “principle” actors and six unpaid “ensemble” actors from Philadelphia (more about this division of labor later) to work evenings and weekends, between 20 and 30 hours per week. TD writers Kalila Kingsford Smith and Megan Bridge were workshop participants, and share their thoughts on the experience below.

Encountering the work

Megan Bridge: *I was hired as David’s rehearsal assistant for this project, so I got to meet with him a few times before the workshop started. In January and February 2014 I visited the New York loft that David shares with Valda Setterfield, his muse and partner of fifty-three years. It’s the same studio where they have been living and working since the ’70s, in a building full of choreographic history. (Trisha Brown is still upstairs, and Lucinda Childs’ live/work space was here, too, for some time. David still has some of the blue folding chairs that Childs purchased so that people wouldn’t have to sit on the floor at those fabled loft performances.) In a two-week recording session and workshop with his New York cast (which included Gus Solomons Jr, Estelle Parsons, and Ken Marks), David listened, learned, and revised his script.*

"*In my not very enormous experience with actors,*" *he said one morning,* "*one of the things I have learned is to keep my mouth shut and listen to what's happening.*"

Kalila Kingsford Smith: *I was a volunteer for this workshop. I had my own reasons and justifications for participating since my work would not be rewarded by a paycheck. Perhaps knowing this raised my expectations. I continually searched for an experiential reward that would make up for the fact that I wasn't being paid. A lot of the work I do in my dance career is so focused on the finished product, on that final performance. So I participated because I wanted to experience the process of creation. I observed with fascination as this renowned choreographer worked through his ideas, and I attempted to translate the experience into guidelines that I could work with in my own choreographic process. But I am still left with unanswered questions. Why has he been working with this one text for so long? What was he specifically working on in this variation of the work? Though the process was fulfilling to me, I wish I could have gotten more. I am still eager for information.*

Dance, theater, gesture, movement

MB: *For many dance performers, it might be puzzling at first that David Gordon, of Judson Dance Theater fame, is in many ways now working as a script writer (Feingold did the translation that Gordon is working with on this project, but much of the re-write is Gordon's own language) and director. But David's treatment of the text, and his treatment of the people and objects on stage, is decidedly choreographic.*

KKS: *When David worked with us, he asked us to get rid of almost every extra gesture so that our focus was on simply speaking the text, understanding the meaning and what it is like to be in the position of the character. This process seemed to involve content and training that is more aligned with actors' theatrical education. So why did the audition call go out to dancers? Was it to engage dancers in work because he is known among dancers as a choreographer? Why did he want to work on this project with actors* and *dancers?*

MB: *It seems to me that David is not very interested in traditional acting or gesture. He said in rehearsal one day that he feels when actors gesture to add "meaning" to their words, they are essentially saying to the audience, "Will you take me seriously? Can I convince you I am sincere?" David is much more interested in giving the performer a task to perform to keep their hands busy, to eliminate gesture. The task could be as simple as holding a script with one hand and a microphone with the other, or as complicated as rearranging the positions of two tables, four chairs, and a rolling light fixture. Through clarity of articulation and specificity of delivery, the meaning built into the language of the script comes through and stands on its own. In this way I think his choreographic approach makes sense to dancers. He's not interested in that acting thing of working to "develop" the character. His task-based approach follows directly from his early days as a founder of postmodern dance.*

Process, product, work, play

MB: *From day one, the message was loud and clear: "We're here to have fun!" David's approach is clearly part of a Cagean lineage. For Gordon, as it was for John Cage, the nature of an experiment is such that you don't know what the outcome will be. Gordon listened and watched attentively as we worked through different stagings of the script. He let us fumble and often incorporated our mistakes, saying "I have been using error in my work for fifty years. Sometimes the original intention becomes so undone by error, that error becomes part of the material."*

KKS: *One of the reasons why it seemed like he wanted to do this workshop was that he could explore and experiment in his process without the pressure of presenting a formal performance. While working with him, however, I thought he seemed less interested in experimenting and more interested in finalizing. Perhaps the majority of experimenting occurred earlier in the day and as a "volunteer" I was not subject to that process. Perhaps the requirement to hold "open rehearsals" actually stifled his creative process, focusing his energies more on creating something "audience worthy."*

MB: *I think those showings definitely put pressure on him. The concept of the "open rehearsal" works theoretically, and I think David was genuinely pleased to have an opportunity to experiment and generate new ideas without the pressure of a fully produced performance. By the end of the workshop he shared with us that there were definitely things he had tried for the first time here, such as doubling the live actors on stage with recorded voices of the New York cast. But David seems to be the kind of artist that feels uncomfortable working out new ideas in front of a public, so the "open rehearsal" idea wound up turning into what felt to me like a series of 3 performances of a work very much in-progress.*

Division of labor, politics

MB: *There was tension around the fact that some people were paid for this project and some were not. I had an insider view of the project, and I know that the division of "principals" and "ensemble" or, as the groups were originally referred to in the audition notice, " professionals" and "volunteers," made David really uncomfortable. More than once he asked, "why can't we just pay everyone?" For those "professionals" who auditioned and weren't cast, David absolutely refused to invite them to participate as volunteers. He didn' t want to bear the responsibility of asking people to work for free.*

KKS: More than once, David mentioned fulfilling contractual agreements, which makes it seem as though there were more "political shenanigans" at play than we as participants were truly aware of. When asked how politics came to play in our own work, many of us participants recoiled thinking, "I am not a political person." David countered this by suggesting that whether or not you are making "political" work, the artistic world is saturated with political circumstances outside our control. We continually churn out work, compete for the same funds, fight for the same audiences and this keeps us trudging along the same paths, marching in line with the others. These ideas were at the heart of Political Shenanigans*, and Brecht's "Ballad of the Mill Wheel" drove the concept home:*

Yes, the Mill Wheel turns and turns forever
What's on top will soon be down below
But this only means the stream beneath can never
Stop the endless work that makes it go.*

*Excerpt from Hanns Eisler's song "Ballad of the Mill Wheel," with lyrics by Bertolt Brecht.

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By Megan Bridge
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