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Valda Setterfield on Dancing, Acting, and Living

by Kalila Kingsford Smith

[Valda Setterfield](#), British-born dancer/actor, former Cunningham dancer and life partner to David Gordon, sat down with TD writers Megan Bridge and Kalila Kingsford Smith during Political Shenanigans: Dancing With Brecht and Eisler, for an informal interview. A conversation that began with roots in the [current project](#) branched out to include insights and anecdotes about Setterfield's life and career, from her early days as a dancer in England to more recent experience working with theater directors. Setterfield's long and lively discussion stands on its own; all responses are transcribed from an interview with Bridge and Kingsford Smith on March 20, 2014.

On Coming to America

As a ballet student in England, I was very tall—I still am—and I hadn't had very much training. I was clearly not a corps de ballet person. I didn't have the technique for a soloist. Nobody really knew what to do with me. So I came in January 1958 to see what was here because David Vaughn [archivist for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company], who had come to America several years earlier, came home to England to visit his family and former teacher. We became friends and he suggested that if I could come to America there would be interesting work for me. Coming here was my first exposure to modern dance.

When I got here, the classes that I went to were all in the evening. That was amazing to me—in England whether you were a student or a professional, classes were in the morning because that's when your energy was best. In the classes I found myself in, people didn't look at each other, they didn't pay attention to each other. They were always deeply involved in their own dancing, their own agony and ecstasy, and then they went home.

Then I met James Waring and he was very good to all of us who worked with him. He made arrangements to teach us for free two

classes a week. We almost always ate together after rehearsal. Through him, I was exposed to Antony Tudor and Merce Cunningham.

On Merce

I began by watching classes, and I thought they were wonderful. First, Merce talked about alignment—which is what I understood from my ballet training—and the phrasing of the steps themselves was so exciting. The phrasing didn't have anything to do with musical support. It was its own support. So I, who had been the musical one in England, had no problem at all. The rhythm was there. So I said to Merce, "I want to come study with you." Almost immediately—I remember him standing and facing me—he said, "Don't make everything so *pretty*." I thought, "What does he mean? My mother always said I should make it prettier." But it was a real lesson in eliminating all decoration, and it was wonderful for me.

If Merce was teaching (and he taught a complicated class) and I got the rhythm right, he knew he had explained it to somebody at least. But if I didn't get it and nobody got it, he would think "Oh I'd better do this again." ... I mean we never discussed it but I think that's what happened.

At one point, I said to him "One of the things I'm finding out is that I don't really do all the little steps. I'm loving the whole phrase, but I'm not getting all the smaller steps in there. I think the only way for me to get them is to really *do* them, which will make me late for the whole phrase. So don't think I've gone crazy. This is just what I have to do. Once I've managed to do them, *then* I could do them faster and fit them back in. Is that ok?" And he said, "Yes. *It is* ok." I mean he was wonderful about that kind of thing, really wonderful.

On Acting and Dancing

Two things have radically changed the way I work. One is acting. The other is the rise of feminism, which has affected my whole life.

Being involved in acting has made me ask a lot more questions than I formerly did in dance.

"Truthfulness" is what counts. I observed several sessions at the Actor's Studio moderated by the director Arthur Penn, and he dealt very particularly with improvisation. But the improvisation always had to be very specific to the situation. It wasn't, oh let's get up and do what we feel like. There was a process of refining and eventually arriving at the text itself. Once you'd gone through that process, the text had become yours. It sounded real.

I'm also very happy that everyone I've ever worked with has never negated something else. I remember going to ballet class and a teacher would say, "Oh you have to hold your hand like this and your fingers have to be like that." Then you'd go to another teacher who said, "You should *never* do that." In acting, there isn't any of that. It feels extensive. I am at liberty to do anything.

On Working with David Gordon and Beyond

It's very difficult to live and work with somebody because you have no space in between. If you have a studio in your house, you live and work in the same house. Immediately after you have finished rehearsal, you go through that door and you start making supper. There is no clear boundary between work and life, so it requires enormous energy, patience and generosity towards each other. I find that going on vacation together in the summers is very important for David and me. We aren't working—well, he may be working on something in his head but we're not physically working.

I also work with other people. I like working with other people because they perceive you in different lights. When you work with someone for a long time, they have a strong idea of who you are and what you can do. That is inevitable. So by going somewhere else and sticking your neck out—sometimes it's very interesting, sometimes it's a disaster—but you live and you learn. It is also wonderful to

be able to go away from it at the end of the day, to have the space between work and life.

Most recently, I've been working with Jonah Bokaer, who was with Merce after I was there. I met him through alumni and company dinners. He was marvelously generous and refreshing. We did a lot of improvising and we were working with text rather specifically for this one piece. But we did things that I'd never done before. I'd been in much more formal situations, but I had never improvised. In the mornings, I would create a plan for what I would do in rehearsal, and for a couple of days I laughingly excused myself, "I've never improvised and this is all very new to me." I stopped needing to say that very quickly. There's also a John Cage saying, and I'm paraphrasing, "I'm here and I'm doing nothing, but nothing is something."

By Kalila Kingsford Smith

May 6, 2014