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Yasuko Yokoshi Retools David Gordon's *Framework* Dance history, revisited

By Deborah Jowitt

Choreographers traditionally have no truck with dance's history. They keep their minds on the present and the possible future. But in the 1980s, postmodernism, enthralled with referring to the past through the viewing glass of contemporary issues and critical theories, started impelling dancemakers to re-envision classics of all kinds—from novels, films, fairytales, and short stories to 19th-century ballets. Think of Bill T. Jones's *Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land* (1990); Big Dance Theater's *A Simple Heart* (2004), based on a Flaubert novella; Matthew Bourne's 1995 *Swan Lake* and 2002 *Play Without Words* (based on the 1963 movie *The Servant*).

One such work was David Gordon's 2004 *Dancing Henry V* (based on Shakespeare's history play). Now Yasuko Yokoshi has reconfigured a work from Gordon's past. Her *Reframe the Framework DDD* is based on the structural principles and style of his *Framework*, which premiered at Dance Theater Workshop in June 1984, performed by Gordon, Valda Setterfield, and six adroit members of his *Pick-Up Company*. The cast of Yokoshi's *Reframe* consists of nine students at Brattleboro Union High School in Vermont; an additional five also contributed to the text and choreography over the nearly two years



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the project took to develop (with the assistance of Kathleen Keller and Alison Mott of the Brattleboro School of Dance).

The new "construction"; (as Gordon always used to call his works) begins exactly as the old did. Setterfield, alone onstage, dances meditatively to a Chopin nocturne, as if she were practicing it. But she does have company. Projected behind her on a large screen in fuzzy black-and-white, her younger, more fluid self echoes her. Her image also appears on a monitor in a video shot in a Brattleboro studio; gazing at it are the student-performers, their tender, healthy young faces seen in closeup. When an unseen phone interrupts Setterfield, she reproduces her civil, witty, very charming address to the audience, in which she ponders telephone conversations versus in-person encounters, formality versus casualness (issues even more timely in this era of digital connectivity). She then sits in the front row to watch what Yokoshi and her collaborators have wrought.

As a further link between past and present, Caitlin Greve, a ballet student, dances a mild, understated solo that's like, yet unlike, Setterfield's earlier one. A stormy passage from Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* accompanies her. The performing style throughout, as in Gordon's piece, is noncommittal. The young people deliver their words in flat, clipped tones, whether speaking alone or in chorus. Precise, subtly timed words and gestures, along with repetitions, create ingenious rhythms. The movement, much of it simple walking and running, is carefully patterned. The patterns themselves create complexity, especially when the dancers manipulate the single red, four-by-six-foot frame that's an obstacle, a tool, and a device to focus attention.

The dancers are beguiling in their rawness, their lack of affectation, and their serious attention to what's required of them. Because they're adolescents, the text that emerges is far less noncommittal than what Gordon and his dancers devised. In the earlier work, the content wasn't profoundly personal, and words riffed off other words, luring us into thickets of possible meanings. The words Yokoshi sets in Gordonesque structures allude to school, possible colleges, friendships, and parents, plus longer sequences dealing with issues like friends-forever, should-I-kiss-her, and depression over parental separation. The tension between the cool, forthright performing style and crisp structures and the very warm content is oddly touching. The framing devices that calm and objectify the experiences also set in high relief the feelings we have to infer. Helga Gardner, standing motionless, recites a letter to a friend in a quiet, almost apathetic voice; it's about "her"; falling-apart family, and when she mentions writing a suicide note, you can feel mothers in the audience draw in their breaths. But Yokoshi, wisely, doesn't let sentiment get out of hand. The "letter"; ends: "Enough about me. How are you?"



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In one scene, the only guy onstage, Andrew Marchev (a very engaging actor), manipulates the frame with Gardner's help, while recounting the machinations leading up to a kiss in a graveyard. The two of them maneuver around and in the frame without ever touching, while in the video behind them, Marchev and another girl (not in the live cast) laugh uproariously as they snuggle together to re-tell this episode and end by kissing. Sarah McKinney and Nicole Thomas, both small and compact, moving in synch, affirm and query their friendship and how it might end (it does). They're like sisters, they say, and suddenly we notice in delight that the two tall persons moving the frame behind them are sisters; identical twins in fact. And these two, Danielle Crouch and Lindsay Crouch, have a lot of fun reciting in mocking antiphony all the dumb questions folks ask them about being twins.

Greve, Chelsea Hausrath, and Genevieve Amarante speak alone and in counterpoint of their love of dancing-the first two clearly ballet kids and Amarante a more busting-loose jazz baby. But there's little indication that others are contemplating a career in dance. At the end, as in the original production, Setterfield has rejoined the flock, and the frame has again become her ballet barre. This time, however, when the others sit within it like a living snapshot, she leans on its top edge-the world-weary den mother of this operation.

Reframe the Framework DDD was clearly an eye-opening project for all the young performers-even if it wasn't always one they trusted or liked. After the applause has died away and the cast has exited, McKinney and Thomas, in a video taken during rehearsals, giggle and squirm with all the spontaneity they've restrained in performance. What will Valda be like, they wonder. Will she be snooty to them? Will David Gordon actually come to the performance? (He does. And when they cluster in the lobby afterward, he tells them that they were all very good.)