

SECTION



SATURDAY

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STAGE REVIEW

The 'Mysteries' of Life

David Gordon Probes Art and Living With a Touch of Humor, Creating a Loopy World of Music, Choreography and Theater

By SYLVIE DRAKE
TIMES THEATER CRITIC

David Gordon's "The Mysteries and What's So Funny?" asks all the right questions. At Wadsworth Theater through Sunday, this perpetual-motion piece of musically supported movement tweaks life's abiding conundrums: the mysteries of art, identity, relationships and, not the least, self-importance.

Done much in the style of Richard Foreman's Ontological Hysteric Theatre, and with a sprinkling of Charles Ludlam's Ridiculous Theatre, Gordon keeps things whirling in a choreographed pavane of bickering couples on the one hand, and Dadaiste painter and sculptor Marcel Duchamp on the other—a symbol of the generic iconoclast questioning traditional preconceptions of art. Or life.

Probe, push, poke, preferably with humor. These are precepts Gordon adheres to with a

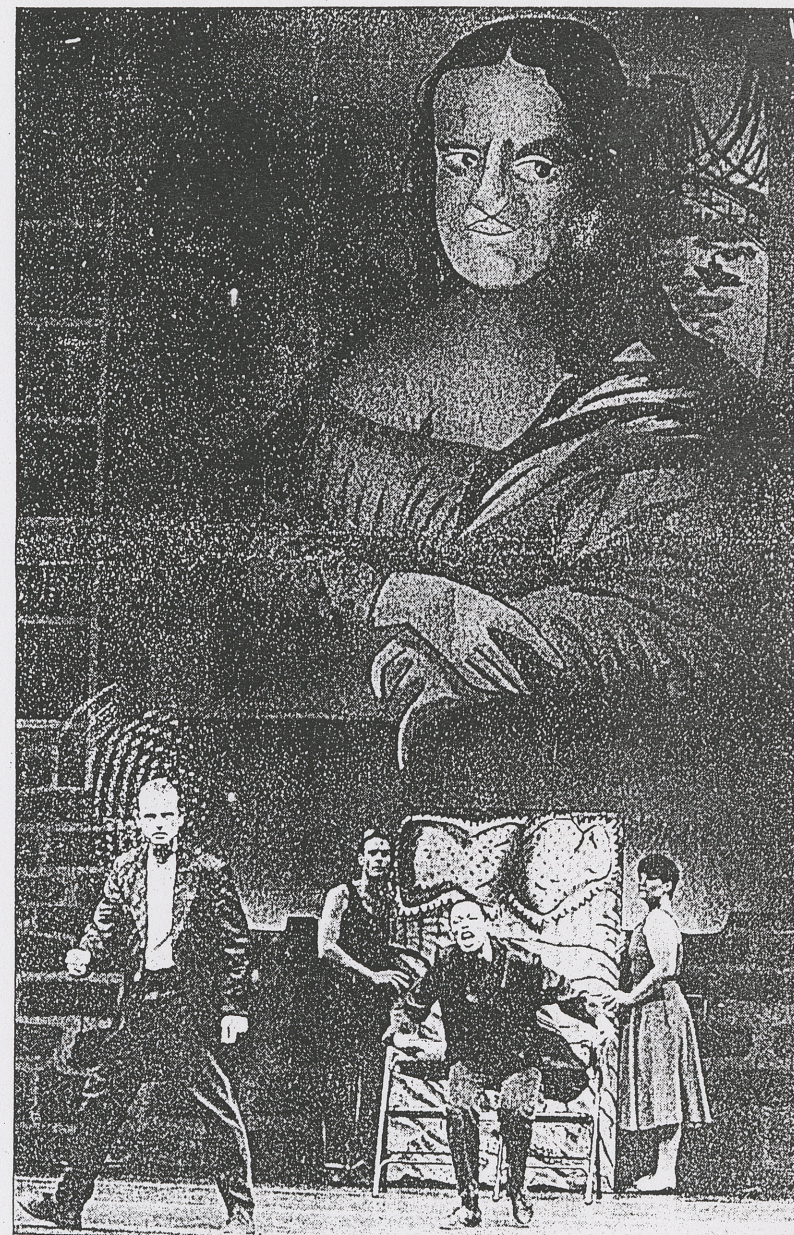
kind of subdued, tumultuous glee. You find them in his spinning but unhurried choreography, in the wacky Red Grooms clue-ridden context, with its terrorized alley cats, its giant chessboards, its rolling staircase (for descending nudes), its parade of one-dimensional placards.

And you find them in the tinkling, tender, nearly continuous piano score by Philip Glass, effusively delivered by music director Alan Johnson with a lyricism by turns playful and elegiac.

"The Mysteries," to its credit, defies classification, which is the ultimate nose-thumbing at preconception. But with its cast of nine actors and only four dancers, and what is touted as Gordon's first full narrative script, it comes closer to theater than dance or performance.

Duchamp, who gave up art for chess at 26, is clearly a favorite model ("My life is my art") and a grand jumping-off point for Gordon's

Please see 'MYSTERIES,' F5



JACK VAHTOOGIAN

"Mysteries, What's So Funny?" at Wadsworth: Fun and games tweaking life's conundrums.

'MYSTERIES'

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parallel examinations of art (Duchamp) and life (sundry couples who are shadow presences and alter egos of one another).

Duchamp, performed by Gordon's wife and perennial leading lady Valda Setterfield, is full of sly proclamations: "I think a picture dies after 40 or 50 years . . . the mystery of the Disappearing Dada . . . I like breathing better than working."

But the most telling writing is reserved for Sam and Rose in their various permutations: Young Sam and Rose (Scott Cohen and Karen Graham), Old Sam and Rose (Jerry Matz and Lola Pashalinski), their alter egos Mr. and Mrs. Him (Bill Kux and Tisha Roth, reminding us of woman's canceled identity in marriage), and Angers I and II (Scott Cunningham and Adina Porter, respectively), the embodiment of the prevailing mood between Old Sam and Old Rose.

"Rose and Sam lived together with his anger and her anger at his anger" is the kickoff into a spiraling exploration of generational cliches, husband-wife dynamics, parent-child stresses and the queasy contemplation of death.

"You think about it," says Duchamp, "as you lose your friends, the people who knew the world as you knew it; you think that you will completely disappear. . . ."

But before death (a placard is a painted hospital bed on one side, a coffin on the other), Gordon has less terminal mysteries to examine: the making of art, the banalities of shopping; the role of regret, the influence of names, aging parents, aging, period. ("I am Rose; I am old; I was thin; I am fat; I didn't realize I would end up alone. . . .")

Despite the seriousness of the investigations, Gordon has plenty of fun, either with sheer giddy wordplay ("Here's the ointment, where's the fly?") or the expressive burlesque of his movement—literal when somebody says wait a minute and everyone does, graphic during an argument in bed between Mr. and Mrs. Him about what to have for breakfast. Angers I and II weave in, out and over the beleaguered pair, exacerbating the verbal punches with physical ones.

But this is an ensemble piece *par excellence* where everyone is equally guilty. The tumbling loopiness is precise, ironic, in the end poignant, and presided over by a giant, mustachioed faintly grinning ersatz-Mona Lisa that sets the tone for this flaunting of tradition.

It suggests that to be full life requires a happy defiance, of which art is, if not the handiest provider, then surely the most provocative.

■ "The Mysteries and What's So Funny?," Wadsworth Theater, Wilshire and San Vicente, Westwood. Tonight and Sunday, 8 p.m. Ends Sunday. \$20-\$25; (310) 825-2101. Running time: 1 hour, 30 minutes.

Scott Cohen	Young Sam
Scott Cunningham	Anger I
Norma Fire	Detective/Only Oldest Child
Karen Graham	Young Rose
Jane Hoffman	Fanny
Bill Kux	Mr. Him
Jerry Matz	Old Sam
Dean Moss	Young Artist
Lola Pashalinski	Old Rose
Alice Playten	Actor/Grandfather/Father
Adina Porter	Anger II
Tisha Roth	Mrs. Him
Valda Setterfield	Marcel Duchamp
Alan Johnson	Planist

A presentation of UCLA Center for the Performing Arts of a co-production of the Pick-Up Performance Company and International Production Associates, Inc. Producer Jedediah Wheeler. Writer-Director David Gordon. Visual design Red Grooms. Lights Dan Kottowitz. Sound David Meschter. Composer Philip Glass. Music director Alan Johnson.