

Arty humor, almost dance

Duchamp town ladies sing this song: 'Dada, dada'

By Allan Ulrich
EXAMINER DANCE CRITIC

FORGET ART for the millions. David Gordon's "The Mysteries and What's So Funny?" is art for the smarties. That's ironic, since the 90-minute multimedia work was inspired by the late French artist and aesthete Marcel Duchamp, and we all know that Duchamp, one of the fathers of Dadaism, devoted much of his career battling against rigid notions of "taste" and connoisseurship. This, after all, was the man who once signed a urinal (with a pseudonym, of course) and called it art.

So, let the ironies abound. The constant breeze of invention sweeping through "The Mysteries and What's So Funny?" and the sheer energy of the piece demand to be enjoyed for their own sake. Under sponsorship of San Francisco Performances, the collaborative dance-theater work opened a week's run at Fort Mason's Cowell Theater Wednesday evening; and, even if some members of the audience didn't catch every last allu-

sion, there are still five more opportunities to attend this unique foray into contemplative zaniness.

The 1991 work, which was commissioned by Spoleto Festival U.S.A. and the Lincoln Center "Serious Fun!" Festival, features New York-based Gordon's Pick Up Company (augmented on this occasion to 13 performers). The original and unobtrusive piano score is by famed minimalist Philip Glass and was played live by Alan Johnson. And Red Grooms designed the deliciously piquant sets and props.

"The Mysteries" is barely a dance piece and Gordon, perhaps the most appealing artist to emerge from the Judson Church concerts in the 1960s, has always refused the job description of "choreographer." Gordon is listed here as "writer" and "director"; he has conceived "The Mysteries" as a unit. And it's impossible to imagine his script without the smoothly engineered flood of activity underlining the text.

Moreover, the work reflects Gordon's delight in word play and visual puns. And the piece explores his preoccupation with the family unit and intergenerational conflict, a theme investigated in some of the finest Gordon essays of the past decade. He has incorporated spoken passages in earlier works, but

[See GORDON, D-4]



Scott Cunningham, left, Alice Playten, Valda Setterfield, and Adina Porter in "The Mysteries and What's So Funny."

◆ GORDON from D-1

'The Mysteries' is arty, funny

this is the first time that the word predominates.

The opening 15 minutes of "The Mysteries" are unforgettable. A dazzling Grooms drop curtain disappears, and we're confronted with a huge painting of the Mona Lisa with the Manhattan harbor in the background, a brick wall and skewed facsimiles of the artist's chess boards. The gags proliferate: "Time passes" and someone dashes through with a cut-out clock-face.

Art history has never seemed so painless. As Duchamp, Valda Setterfield, clad in a see-through blazer, recounts the highlights of the artist's life with crisp timing and endearing charm, all the time fighting off journalistic demands to explain "his" work. The seasons float by on cut-outs. Grooms conveniently supplies a small staircase, which Setterfield descends (with her clothes on), thus recreating Duchamp's most famous painting. And we meet some of the artist's

Rose, however, metamorphoses into a matron (Lola Pashalinski, a former member of the late Charles Ludlam's theater troupe), who has been married for 50 years to Sam (Jerry Matz). We meet Young Rose (Karen Graham) and Young Sam (Scott Cohen) and follow the progress of their courtship, impeded by the demands of her crotchety mother, Fanny (Jane Hoffman), who brings new meaning to the word pessimism.

If Rose and Sam have followed their lives through instinct, another couple Mr. Him (Bill Kux) and Mrs. Him (Tisha Roth) venture down the path with a measure of calculation, calling each other, "hon" and "babe." They are often tormented by a pair of dark angels, Anger I (Scott Cunningham) and Anger II (Adina Porter), who pester their victims by crawling up their legs and spreading across their laps like domesticated garter snakes.

Rose's Only Oldest Child (Norma Fire) is also Duchamp's most relentless interviewer, probing the

artist for answers that only experience will provide. And there's the wonderful Alice Playten, cast in 21 separate assignments. So, who can keep count?

Gordon has produced this epic with dizzying intelligence. Portions of the text are rendered choral-style, parts of the dialogue are traded off, beginning in the mouth of one character and ending in the throat of another. And Gordon's trademark deployment of picture frames seems eminently apt in this context. Duchamp's theory of the impermanence of art may, indeed, reflect on life. We are not what we were. And the aged Rose who complains of her swollen limbs is scarcely the fresh-faced ingenue courted by her well-scrubbed marine.

So, there's a measure of sadness in Gordon's witty pageant. You emerge from "The Mysteries and What's So Funny?" slightly tipsy and probably a whole lot wiser.

The presentation will be repeated Thursday through Saturday at 8 p.m. and Saturday and Sunday at 2 p.m. For tickets, call (415) 392-4400.