

Dance/Tobi Tobias

LIFE WITH DADA

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The Mysteries and What's So Funny?, THE opening installment of the ridiculously titled “Serious Fun!” festival at Alice Tully Hall, is something you might call a multimedia work by a group you might call the Three Gs. **David Gordon**, who has worked extensively in the dance field, is definitely the chief “G” here, responsible for text and direction, with Red Grooms and Philip Glass playing backup.

In this witty and touching exercise in controlled chaos, with its disarming—and deceptive—air of the homemade, Gordon charts two themes: life at its domestic level, present and ancestral, and a life in art. In other words, the mystery of who we are (and why) and what we aspire to make (and why). For family, he presents us with three generations of what must be his own kin, but they're generic enough in their platitudes, their tragedies, and the sweet poignancy of their sentiments to be Everyfamily.

Representing art, Gordon gives us the Dadaist Marcel Duchamp (embodied with relaxed charm and crackerjack timing by Valda Setterfield, who happens to be Gordon's wife). Duchamp matches Gordon's aesthetic in numerous ways, among them the play of a free-associating antic genius and an instinct for the ready-made that transforms the ordinary into art. Gordon also seems attracted to Duchamp's being so at home in life that he can love simple existence even more than the creative act. “I like breathing better than working,” intones the sublimely calm Setterfield with an enigmatic smile.

The “mysteries” Gordon probes are issues that would naturally preoccupy a person of his years (55), family situation, and occupation: the inevitable unraveling, with age, of the self you once knew; the artist's desire for recognition and, yes, fame; the haplessness of parent-child relationships; the enormous compromises necessary to an enduring marriage; the fact that primal emotions, such as rage, sustain as well as destroy; the obtuseness of professional art watchers who pose highfalutin questions when they should just look at the material in front of their face and shut up; and the parallel probing of psychotherapy in its near-futile attempt to understand and heal the walking wounded. If the artist's family and critics don't do him in with impossible ques-



PRIMAL RIB: Valda Setterfield (looking out window center right) and friends.

tions, his therapist will: “Is this the exact truth?” What is so funny—“Don't ask me; I don't know” goes the family's refrain—is that life itself can be understood, if at all, as one supreme Dadaist joke.

The chief beauty, however, of this gloriously sad and funny piece is not its meaning but its means. Typical of Gordon's work, it's constructed of fast-flying plays on ideas that draw simultaneously on words, movements, and images. The spoken text is fragmented, a single line batted from person to person like a Ping-Pong ball. (Characters are similarly apportioned among several players.) At other times, lines are intoned chorally, with mock solemnity, or rendered in canon. At all times, the speakers execute movement to suit, often manipulating props as well. The sole flaw of the work is that it's so packed with information delivered at such a lively pace with such subtly syncopated rhythms, you can barely take it in. Given the resulting vitality, I wouldn't want it otherwise, but I'd like to see it again.

Glass's contribution is fairly unobtrusive—pulsing notes that support both action and meditation. Grooms is more evident, imposing his customary rickety gaiety in a set crammed with Duchamp references and dominated by the Mona

Lisa (mustache and goatee available, no doubt, in a do-it-yourself kit). He is especially good with the props of life: food-laden tables; unmade beds; picture frames and door frames (a device Gordon himself has often used to freeze and imprint an idea); porch steps (should nudes need to descend); a coffin. This man could probably make a hearse look like (serious) fun.

IT WAS PARENTAL BUSINESS THAT TOOK ME to the semi-annual performance of choreography created by advanced students at the Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance. At this elegant, low-key display of brief works selected by the school's faculty under the supervision of its director, Diane Gray, I had the good fortune to see a near-perfect solo by a 25-year-old Norwegian woman, **Kristin Lööden**. Set to an excerpt from Mahler's First Symphony and called *Irreversible Steps*, it was Lööden's first professional work. The dance would have been heartening just for its coupling of instinctive craft with truthful feeling unaffectedly rendered. It was all the more encouraging because it proved that, with the aesthetic and financial disintegration and threatened collapse of our behemoth dance institutions, re-