

# 'The Mysteries and What's So Funny?':

## A summation of life and art

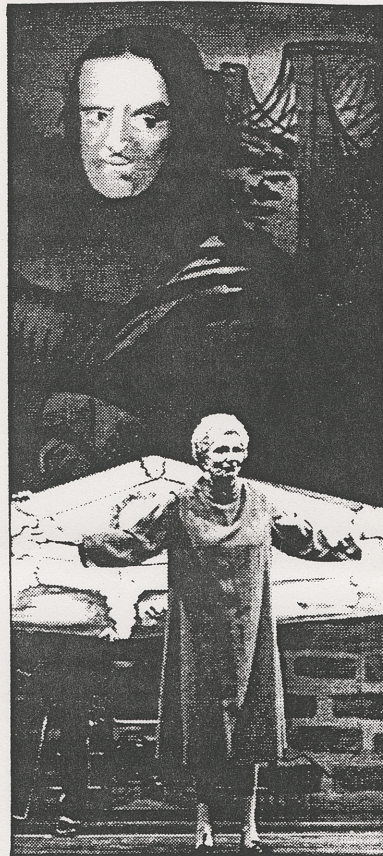
By Kevin Kelly  
GLOBE STAFF

**'T**he Mysteries and What's So Funny" is, perhaps, a mini-masterpiece, a deliberately scattershot summation of nothing less than life and art. Further, in its current production at the Loeb in the American Repertory Theater Fall Festival, it may be the only theatrical experience – and unclassifiable

as such – that sends up human experience with an antiphonal yawp and takes us with it. In a brief 90-minutes it asks What's-wrong-with-this-picture then, blithely, innocently offers neither correction nor answer. When, for example, its central figure, the renowned Dadaist Marcel Duchamp, is asked, "What is art," his reply is a similarly calculated question, "What is what?"

Written and directed by David Gordon, "Mysteries" is, in fact, a mindbending iconoclasm that might have been dreamed by Duchamp had he thought about dramatizing his own life while spelling out his theories about art. Working from an interview Duchamp had in 1967 with Pierre Cabanne, Gordon has imagined Duchamp not only as the celebrated Cubist – whose "Nude Descending a Staircase" caused a revolution in painting – but also as counterpart to another totally unrelated existence: that of Gordon's parents, Sam and Rose. Odd as this juxtaposition is, it proves – by itself – the main point of "Mysteries": the randomness of human connection, the utter chaos of history. Secure in his vision (even when disparaging it), Duchamp is the opposite of Sam and Rose who are doomed by their ordinariness, yet all three share the same perplexity about life. Everything, finally, is a mystery to everyone, a mystery which thought – and creativity – only deepen.

As weighted as some of this may



PHOTO/TOM BRAZIL

A scene from "The Mysteries and What's So Funny?"

seem, it isn't. There's a sense of humor behind what we're being told, not rollicking, really, but fairly steady in its awareness. What's more surprising is that the evening is very moving. As the story of Sam and Rose unfolds, it has genuine pathos. We see them old, stumbling, depressed. Then we see them younger – falling in love, starting out, having a child (their only child), with their early and late experiences watched by both sets of themselves. We're also witness to another couple, Mrs.

Him and Mr. Him, whose endearments edge to enmity. Many of the actions are repeated by other characters. Gordon has even simulated Duchamp's attempt to give painting the illusion of movement (chronophotography) by having an actor create the gestures – like a puppeteer – during an early-morning argument between Mrs. and Mrs. Him.

"Mysteries" is played out in a cartoon world vividly imagined by Red Grooms. Duchamp once painted a "Mona Lisa" with a moustache. Here the centerpiece is a "Mona Lisa" with a mug like Al Pacino as Big Boy Caprice in "Dick Tracy." The painting is flanked by two checkerboards. Life is an enigmatic grimace as well as a game. The actors carry vaudeville props, a cut-out bed is reversed to become a coffin. And it's all as quick and disposable as the best of mankind. The performances are appealing with, except for Duchamp, a driving urgency. Duchamp is played by Velda Setterfield (art has no gender) with a dignified passivity, rather the way Celeste Holm might play Quentin Crisp, were she asked. The attitude sets up an immediate distance with the rest of the actors, specifically, of course, with Sam and Rose, Edward Seamon and Lola Pashalinski in their older years, Karen Graham and Benjamin Bode, in earlier times. Kim Crosby Westenberg and Jonathan Walker are the simmeringly spiteful Hims. Alice Playten, as an actor who may be acting or may not, is wonderful, and so are Norma Fire, as Sam and Rose's child, and Jane Hoffman, as Rose's mother.

Philip Glass has contributed some effectively rippling music, although there are a couple of strained songs. Occasionally last night the rippling drowned out some of the dialogue but, again, that may have been another deliberately inverted metaphor about life in which chances are often lost. Some chances? Most chances? As someone says elsewhere when asked, "Is this the exact truth?," don't ask me. But take my word, "The Mysteries and What's So Funny" is a tantalizing whotsis.