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ENTERTAINMENT

## THEATER REVIEW

# David Gordon Wraps 'Mysteries' in Fun

**THE MYSTERIES AND WHAT'S SO FUNNY**  
(premiere). Music by Philip Glass, visual design by Red Grooms. Written and directed by David Gordon. Spoleto Festival U.S.A., Friday night at the Sottile Theater, Charleston, S.C.

By Janice Berman  
STAFF WRITER

**I**N A PIECE THAT explores questions about what art is and is not, how art is made or is not, David Gordon, amply abetted by collaborators Red Grooms and Philip Glass, has created a considerable and most loving work of art.

But "The Mysteries and What's So Funny" is even better than that, because it's enormously entertaining. Whether art should be entertaining is one of those wonderful cosmic issues that Gordon, thankfully, has answered in the affirmative throughout his career.

It sounds just as good as it moves. Gordon's been punning since his beginnings at Judson Church in Greenwich Village in the '60s; and now has written a funny, punny play — it's not just playwrighting, it's play writing — with two songs, yet.

There are at least three and possibly more threads to what's onstage. They are knit together by the three collaborators. Red Grooms has made exuberantly cartoony curtains and a proscenium arch, along with hand-held props and scenery, large cutouts that sometimes are reversible, often ironically so. A bed becomes a coffin; an arch of flowers for a wedding chapel is also an orphanage.

Gordon's genius for movement creates a steady sweep of the multitude of characters — a fine company of actors and dancers who act — most of whom are constantly onstage. There's a circling flow, but little dance per se.

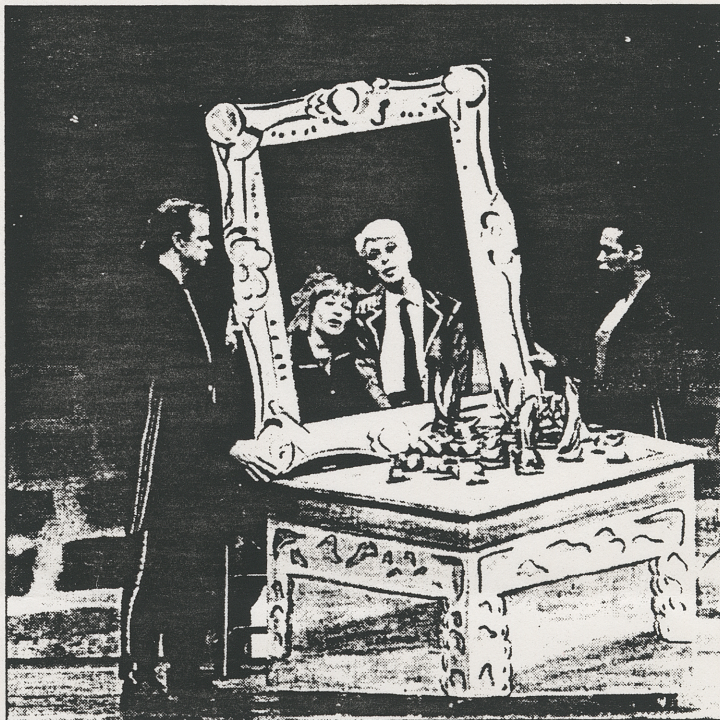
Glass' piano music, played by Alan Johnson, the music director, is a significant presence, doing more than merely knitting the production together. Friday night, the audience seemed reluctant after the 90-minute performance to let the cast go. They had all become family.

Actually, there are several family histories here.

One is that of the French painter Marcel Duchamp. One belongs to Gordon's family, and one is a sort of family of foibles.

Gordon takes Duchamp as his exemplar of an artist's life well lived. Clearly, this dada of dada is a Gordon alter ego. Duchamp is played, naturally, by Valda Setterfield, Gordon's muse and wife and mother of their son.

Duchamp's works range from the urinal that he signed "R. Mutt,"



A scene from David Gordon's 'The Mysteries and What's So Funny'

to "Nude Descending a Staircase." He has not led a tortured artist's life; he tells the audience he should not be pitied. He has remained sane, whatever that means, with a life beyond his work. Duchamp had a family, a home, a love life, a passionate hobby, chess, and, it says onstage here, a reasonable sensibility, a calm center.

Duchamp comes and goes within the recounting of the lives of Sam and Rose, the parents of another artist.

David Gordon talked about — danced about — his family several years ago when his Pick Up Company did "My Folks." That production led Philip Glass to suggest a collaboration, specifically a piano score. The poignancy inherent in Glass's rippling minor-key composition works beautifully.

Here are Old Sam (Ralph Williams) and Old Rose (Lola Pashalinski). They discuss their infirmities, watch their friends die and watch TV, worry about each other. Unlike Duchamp, unlike Gordon, Sam had nothing in his life but work. But, he said, he did the best he could. Sam and Rose's story is told through a young Sam (Benjamin Bode)

and a young Rose (Karen Graham) and her mother, Fanny (Jane Hoffman). Since there are mysteries, there's a Detective (Norma Fire), Rose and Sam's only child, first child, last child, a child even when she's 41 years old. Alice Playten is here in many voices, many mysteries, and Dean Moss is a Young Artist.

Then there's Anger I and II (Scott Cunningham and Karen Evans-Kandel), who come between Mr. and Mrs. Him (Gayle Tufts and Jonathan Walker). The Angers hammer at the Hims like Bill Murray giving noogies. It might make art or might make havoc; from here it looks like Gordon's saying that anger can't make art unless it's leavened with forgiveness.

"The Mysteries and What's So Funny" is part of a very rich year at Spoleto, despite the contretemps between Gian Carlo Menotti and the festival board (speaking of mysteries and what's so funny?). In the presence of art like this, the thought that anger without forgiveness could spell the end of Spoleto is chilling.

"The Mysteries and What's So Funny" will be seen later this summer at Alice Tully Hall during "Serious Fun," which co-commissioned it. / 11