



Scene from David Gordon's 'The Mysteries and What's So Funny?'

Staff Photo by Stephanie Harvin

# Tapestry Of Life Is Rewarding

By WILLIAM FURTWANGLER  
Post-Courier reviewer

"The Mysteries and What's So Funny?" premiered Thursday night at the Sottile Theatre. This "theater/music/dance presentation" was written and directed by David Gordon with a commissioned solo piano score by Philip Glass and visual design by Red Grooms.

If this description conjures up in your mind a very splashy avant-garde evening, you are wrong.

Instead, it was an evening of understated, lovely, lyrical emotion, strong visual fantasy, surrealistic movement and games of words and ideas all about art, family, life and death.

After so many Spoleto evenings of gut-wrenching drama, super-charged romantic opera and exhausting dance, "The Mysteries and What's So Funny" proved that simple humor and genuine pathos ingeniously mixed in almost chance associations of words, music and movement can entertain and stimulate the imagination.

Gordon chose two unrelated subjects — the French-American artist Marcel Duchamp and an elderly couple, Sam and Rose (Gordon's parents) — and wove a tapestry of life that powerfully reveals human nature. Duchamp (a major force in 20th century art, particularly in the dada and surrealist movements) drifted in and out of the

## Review

THE MYSTERIES AND WHAT'S SO FUNNY? written and directed by David Gordon; music by Philip Glass; visual design by Red Grooms; lighting by Dan Kotlowitz; at the Sottile Theatre, Friday and Sunday at 8 p.m.; Saturday at 1 p.m.

### THE CAST

Benjamin Bode, Scott Cunningham, Karen Evans-Kandel, Norma Fire, Karen Graham, Jane Hoffman, Alan Johnson, Deann Moss, Lola Pashalinski, Alice Playten, Valda Setterfield, Gayle Tufts, Jonathan Walker, Ralph Williams

action, pondering the imponderables of life and art. Valda Setterfield as this revolutionary liberator of modern art made him an extraordinarily appealing character. The novel casting of a woman in this part added an other-worldly dimension.

Lola Pashalinski as Old Rose and Ralph Williams as Old Sam gave a moving portrait of a 50-year couple. Benjamin Bode as Young Sam and Karen Graham as Young Rose appealingly created the couple when they were courting.

Fanny (Rose's mother) was expertly played by Jane Hoffman, displaying a commanding stage presence. Norma Fire as the Detective (among other roles) was the narrator, moving in and out of the action and in and out of parts with aplomb.

Alice Playten, who had 21 parts, was even more adept and an expert comedienne. The extraordinarily agile Scott Cunningham and Karen

Evans-Kandel (Anger I; Anger II) were fascinating as two spirits who comically taunted and mischievously manipulated the other characters, particularly the longsuffering Mrs. Him (Gayle Tufts) and Mr. Him (Jonathan Walker), a youthful counterpoint to the elderly Sam and Rose.

What about the music? It was largely relegated to the background, accompanying the dialogue and stage action most of the 90-minute length of the production. There were several songs, sung most notably by Pashalinski and Tufts. The piano pieces were reminiscent of those on Glass' "Solo Piano" album. Music director and pianist Alan Johnson was the off-stage soloist on an amplified piano and an expert and perfect accompanist.

Red Grooms' magical cartoonlike props, backdrop and main curtain made many visual references to Duchamp, his art (the Mona Lisa Moustache), his interests (chess), and the various art movements at the beginning and end of his life that he either participated in or heavily influenced (such as Op-Art).

Gordon's script told Duchamp's life story in condensed form as well as hitting the highlights of Sam and Rose's, but it was Gordon's extraordinary use of fluid movement and stage space and props that was mesmerizing and made this evening different, challenging, and above all satisfying. It all seemed so disarmingly simple, but on reflection it was complex in structure and conception, rich in sentiment and never sentimental. Highly recommended.