

SPOLETO 1991

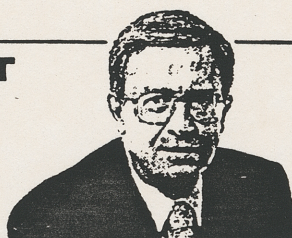
Work explores mysteries of life, art

"The Mysteries and What's So Funny?" is such a rich, multilayered theater piece, and it functions on so many different levels at once, that it may well be the work by which this year's festival will be best remembered. It may not be a work to everybody's taste, but it will be enthusiastically welcomed by people who liked such works in former festivals as "Dead End Kids," "Secrets" and last year's "Hydrogen Jukebox."

The three big names involved in the creation of "Mysteries" are Philip Glass, who composed the music; Red Grooms, who designed sets, costumes and countless mobile pieces; and David Gordon, the choreographer whose work with his own company (David Gordon/Pick Up Co.) has made him a well-known figure in the dance world.

In "Mysteries," Mr. Gordon appears (for the first time, so far as I know) as a writer. The writing and direction of the piece are his and, apparently, so is the concept. Mr. Glass' contributions are confined to the music, and Mr. Grooms' brilliantly colored, cartoon-like curtains and

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drops and mobiles poke gentle fun at the work itself, at the names of all three creators, and especially at the art of the French painter Marcel Duchamp.

But for all the pensive beauties of the songs and piano pieces contributed by Philip Glass, and the wacky delights of the Red Grooms visuals, the artistic burden of the evening falls on David Gordon's shoulders. In "The Mysteries and What's So

Funny?" Mr. Gordon ponders the meaning of art and personal relationships. He wonders what art is, how one should decide what is art and what is not and whether one has any business, or even the right, to decide such things in the first place.

Wandering through this 90-minute stage piece are the figures of M. Duchamp (who spent a lifetime sticking so many pins into the flanks of the art scene that Encyclopaedia Britannica labeled him "artist and anti-artist"), and Sam and Ros (who may be Mr. Gordon's own parents and who are simultaneously seen as both youngsters and as ailing senior citizens). The rest of the large stage population includes a wide range of real and unreal characters. There are even two performers who play Anger. Most of Mr. Gordon's "real" characters speak from numerous life perspectives, from birth to old age and even beyond the grave.

This all may sound terribly cerebral and

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confusing, but it is not. The mysteries of which Mr. Gordon speaks are clearly stated in the early moments of the work: "The mystery of knowing what you want, the art of knowing what you want (or the mystery of it) ... the mystery of how one person makes something, makes something to be interested in, makes something to stay interested in ... the mystery of two people getting interested in each other, staying interested, making something of being together ... the art of making something of being together ... the art of staying together or the mystery of it."

Mr. Glass' music comprises newly composed piano pieces and songs. The general style will be familiar to anyone who knows his previous piano music, though some of the songs have a Broadway brashness that

might startle listeners who are unaware of the multiple musical personalities of this extraordinary composer. The music is beautifully played by pianist Alan Johnson, stationed offstage somewhere but amplified.

The large cast is superb when it has to act, recite and dance. Lola Pashalinski as Old Rose is deeply moving in her shapeless housedress and shuffling shoes, and Ralph Williams is alternately abrasive and tender as Old Sam. Alice Playten bubbles through a number of roles, and Scott Cunningham and Karen Evans-Kandel are spectacular as the two Angers. Dominating them all is Ms. Valda Setterfield, transparently dressed as a man and portraying Marcel Duchamp himself.

Alas, Ms. Pashalinski has no singing voice at all but has mistakenly been ordered to sing anyway, rather than merely talking her song the way a Lotte Lenya or a Rex Har-

rison might have talked it. And though Gayle Tufts (as Mrs. Him) is equipped with a voice of Ethel Merman punch, her pitch is all over the place, or at least it was on opening night. These, though, are mere scratches on the surface of a fundamentally superb effort.

There is so much to hear, see, feel and ponder in "Mysteries" that each listener inevitably will bring his own biography to the piece and react accordingly. On the visual and musical levels, there is much that gives purely esthetic pleasure. Intellectually, there is material for endless argument about art and its meaning. Emotionally, the possibilities are devastating. For this writer in particular, the recent deaths of a mother and several friends made some scenes quite painful to watch. Worse, the knowledge that Philip Glass' own wife, the young and talented Candy Jernigan, was lying near death from cancer in a New York hospital, made hearing his

beautiful and melancholy music almost intolerably painful experience.

Perhaps future hearings — the work goes to New York soon — will prove "The Mysteries and What's So Funny?" a work that does not stir so strongly. But even if the pain goes away, I suspect the beauty will remain.