

EXTRA ENTERTAINMENT



AN EVENING WITH SAM & ROSE paints a picture of life — with words, dance & music.

JEWISH LIFE MIMICS ART

Or at least it does in 'The Mysteries,' a Brooklyn saga at the Joyce

By JOAN ACOCELLA

DAVID GORDON'S PLAY "The Mysteries and What's So Funny?," which opened a three-week run at the Joyce on Tuesday, is a story of Jewish family life and a meditation on how to tell such a story. Comically? Tragically? Realistically? Cubistically?

We're shown a classic Brooklyn household. Sam and Rose are the parents. They have a child and, of course, they are always asking him whether he's eaten and whether he has taken a token for the subway. Next door lives Fanny, Rose's grouchy mother, who raised six children by herself. It's a scene straight out of Clifford Odets' realistic dramas of the '30s, with the humor and the pain and the brisket all stewing in the same pot.

At the same time, "The Mysteries" is emphatically nonrealistic. There isn't just one Sam and Rose. There are three: an old couple, a young couple and a bickering cou-

ple. Every time somebody does something, there's somebody else besides him — his younger self, his angry self, the self he might have been — doing much the same thing, or commenting on it.

Furthermore, superimposed on this drama is another drama featuring Marcel Duchamp, the Franco-American artist who, in his experimental works of the 1910s and 1920s, helped to initiate much of 20th-century art's meditation on art. Amid the travails of Sam and Rose, Duchamp keeps strolling through, answering questions from the other characters.

Why didn't he have a family, they ask? How come he has no regrets? Why did he stop painting? Didn't he want to express himself? Everything about Duchamp seems to pose a challenge to Sam and Rose's story, and David Gordon's need to portray it.

Meanwhile, the way that Gordon is portraying it mimics Duchamp's art. In 1917, Duchamp took an or-

dinary urinal, gave it a title ("Fountain"), signed it and sent it off to an art exhibition.

Likewise, Gordon has his actors hold picture frames around the humble dramas of Sam and Rose ("Sam and Rose Meet," "Sam and Rose Get Married").

"What is art? What is life?" the characters ask. "It's a mystery," the other characters say.

THE PLAY MOVES AT A nice clip, helped along by Philip Glass' score, and it brims with wit. The actors could not be better: Valda Setterfield as the debonair Duchamp, Jane Hoffman as Fanny (her death scene is the most powerful and wittiest thing in the show), Alice Playten as 21 different characters, all of them marvelous. The set by Red Grooms is too cute, but everything else about the play is exquisitely judged: Subtle and bold at the same time.

(Acocella is a freelancer.)