

A whimsical foray through heady terrain

DANCE REVIEW

THE MYSTERIES AND WHAT'S SO FUNNY? Written and directed by David Gordon; music by Philip Glass; visual design by Red Grooms. Through Jan. 3. The Joyce Theater, Eighth Avenue at 19th Street, Manhattan. \$28. 1-(212) 242-0800.

By JOSEPH H. MAZO
Special to The Record

"The Mysteries and What's So Funny?" is a remarkable theatrical experience that is as entertaining as it is provocative.

The 90-minute work is a collaboration among three contemporary artists: writer-director David Gordon, composer Philip Glass, and visual artist Red Grooms. It opened at the Joyce Thursday night, and it's worth putting on your Christmas list.

The first mystery about "The Mysteries" is how to label it. Despite extensive use of dance movement, it isn't a dance, and while highly theatrical, it's not a play. Although there are only two brief songs and Glass's sweet arpeggios and moody chords underlie the action and set the mood, it might best be considered a kind of opera.

There's an intense musicality to the entire production: Performers speak in clearly defined rhythmic phrases, sometimes singly, sometimes in duets, sometimes in chorus. Their movement also is governed by rhythm, and the stage often is a swirl of action as performers rush by, occasionally carrying Grooms' whimsical set pieces as they go.

The split title refers to the two story elements of the production. The first concerns Marcel Duchamp (portrayed with warmth and elegance by Valda Setterfield), the artist and champion of Dada who spent his life asking "What is



The art of living: A family in a frame makes a point in "The Mysteries and What's So Funny?"

art?" The second is the story of a family. People are born, get married, and die.

"What is art?" is one of the mysteries. Why we are born, live, and die are others. Duchamp never had a family; he produced art. Late in the text, Gordon equates "Dada" with "Daddy."

One of Duchamp's tricks was to put an ornate frame around a mundane object and hang it in an exhibition; if it's framed, it's art,

right? One of Gordon's (and Grooms') tricks is to have performers hold an ornate frame around a bridal couple. Is life itself an art? Can we make it one?

Paintings, Duchamp says, "die after 40 or 50 years." People die, too, but families produce children, and posterity is assured. Which is more important, producing art or producing children? Can one possibly answer that question, or even ask it properly?

Duchamp was poor, like the

family Gordon has created, but he seems to have had a happier life than they. Was that because he was free, because he did only what he chose? Was it possibly because he was always questioning, because he took nothing for granted? In the last analysis, nothing can be taken for granted, anyway; people die.

Grooms' designs, which make references to Duchamp's most famous works, are cheerful and witty, and Gordon's text and stag-

ing is filled with humor. Still, as hard times, anger, pain, and death assault the family and several peripheral characters, we have to ask, "What's so funny?"

The importance of freedom — living as one chooses, whether it involves making art or making children — is a key point of the work. So is the importance of finding a reason to laugh, and of finding the strength to love. "What's so funny?" Life is, and art is, and we are.

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