

Heart Isn't Easy

By Michael Feingold

The Mysteries and What's So Funny

By David Gordon
Lincoln Center (Closed)

Getting Married

By Bernard Shaw
Circle in the Square
50th Street and Broadway
307-2704

Teenage Wedding

By John Stepping
HOME
44 Walker Street
431-7434

White Water

By John Jesurun
Performing Garage
44 Wooster Street
966-3651

The professional avant-gardists—i.e., people not intelligent enough to understand the avant-garde—have been telling us for two decades that playwrighting is dead. All they really mean is that a few people who should have been writing plays have been busy with other things, such as making dances, staging spectacles, and performing in them, like David Gordon. Gordon's performances have often included chunks of spoken or prerecorded text, but *The Mysteries and What's So Funny* is his first fully scripted play—a 95-minute narrative, with many dramatic high points, in which the talk is virtually continuous. This doesn't stop the work from also being a dance, since Gordon keeps the company in constant motion, underscored by some of Philip Glass's most attractive recent music; nor do dance and talk combined edge out spectacle, since the movement is carried on amid flying and whirling bits of Red Grooms's playful scenery. Most remarkably, what the collision of these three heavy hitters of post-modernism with the old concepts of script and story and character has produced is never heavy or arch: *The Mysteries* is a pure artist's pleasurable yet perfectly serious delight. And there's nothing funny about that... except that it's often extremely funny too.

If playwrighting and dance are the horizontal and vertical of Gordon's aesthetic grid, the narrative he maps out on it has a matching doubleness, alternating scenes from the life of an American (apparently New York Jewish) married couple with the interrogation, by a character called "Detective" (Norma Fire), of that arch-bachelor and artists' artist Marcel Duchamp. The Detective, clearly an authorial avatar, is the child of the married couple, Rose and Sam, thus linking the two stories. To thicken not the plot but the narrative approach, Gordon presents four versions of Rose and Sam: in old age (Lola Pashalinski and Ralph Williams); as young newlyweds (Karen Graham and Ben Bodé); in a kind of essentialized caricature of their day-to-day life, as "Mr. and Mrs. Him" (Gayle Tufts and Jonathan Walker); and as "Anger I and Anger II" (Scott Cunningham and Karen Evans-Kandel)—a pair of rampant, tormenting ids, interfering with whichever of the other three pairs happens to be onstage.



The Mysteries and What's So Funny?: marriage as a frameup

This pileup, given the performance's top speed and constant motion, has the effect of an emotionally deepened, live-action Futurist painting: We watch Sam and Rose descend the staircase of life, from nervous youth to ailing, bickering senility, in a series of overlapping flickers, like the nude figure in the painting that made Duchamp famous. As the latter's ideas about art as an instance and an action in the continuity of life are unfolded, pointing the way to conceptualism and deconstruction, Rose and Sam's marriage gradually turns from a living entity into an empty concept and then in effect deconstructs itself; their end, a muddled mixture of love and wailing over unfulfilled promises, contrasts with Duchamp's quiet, assured (and faintly smug) acceptance of his own long artistic silence and oncoming death.

Gordon keeps the Duchamp-versus-ordinary-mortals comparison from being glib by juxtaposing Duchamp's relative economic comfort and his shunning of marital ties with Sam's and Rose's immigrant families, which have left them a miserable legacy of broken homes and abandonings. (The unspoken thought they deliver to the audience as they wed is, "I love you Rose/Sam. I hope you won't disappear like my mother/father.") He buttresses this with another contrast to Duchamp's placid old age, the last agony of Rose's mother Fanny (Jane Hoffman), a nursing-home nightmare of IV tubes and helpless anger.

Hoffman's delivery of Fanny's final querulous outburst—daintily precise, her fury ever-present yet never overstressed—is the peak of a generally resplendent performance, with dancers and actors mingling as if leaps and lines normally stepped out together. The sustained brilliance of physical sequences like the two Angers' wake-up assault on Mr. and Mrs. Him, is matched by witty virtuoso speeches, like Mrs. Him's account (delivered hilariously by Tufts) of the compulsive shopping which alleviates her marital stress.

Alice Playten gives the show a touch of cabaret revue, embody-

ing in instant one-liners 21-plus characters, from a squalling baby to the entire Duchamp clan. Yet in all the foolery, adorned by Grooms with cutout alley cats and clocks with free-falling hands, the mysteries that preoccupy Gordon get probed, compassionately and lucidly: How does one live? How—why—does one create art? How do two share one life? His perplexity is expressed charmingly in his wittiest stroke of casting. The gnomish male eroticist Duchamp, with his grave warnings that marriage and family are no good for an artist, is played by Gordon's wife and partner, Valda Setterfield—a Mona Lisa painted on a mustache.

Many of Gordon's questions about marriage were formulated, in more detail and in lush phrasing, by George Bernard Shaw in his 1908 "disquisition" *Getting Married*. If only one could hear them spoken onstage without Stephen Porter's 1908 notion of stagecraft getting in the way, the current revival might be a striking event indeed. While the Bishop's family waits for daughter Edith to stop reading that Socialist pamphlet and get hitched, their conversation turns to up-to-date topics like battered wives, lesbian mothers, single parenting, getting paid for housework, open marriages, no-fault divorces, and voluntary celibacy, till it all rises into one transcendent sweep with the advent of Mrs. George, mental adulteress and mystic, who talks, as nobody since Socrates has talked, about the nature of love, just to enchant the play's resident snob and cynic—to whom Shaw gave his own boyhood nickname.

Nothing could be more personal, intense, or immediate. Only half the cast, unfortunately, takes Shaw's characters to mean what they say; the other half is made up of posturers who view the thing as a period romp, and try desperately to attitudinize laughs into it. Elizabeth Franz, Lee Richardson, Simon Jones, and Scott Wentworth weigh in strongly on the good side. I'd like to see them in a

Getting Married staged by almost anyone other than Stephen Porter.

No marriage at all, and little of anything else, is discussed in John Stepping's *Teenage Wedding*, a play as flat and monotonous as the California desert where it's

Very Thin Man

By Robert Massa

I Can't Get Started

By Declan Hughes
Rough Magic Theatre
International Theatre Festival
SUNY Stony Brook (Closed)

A hard-boiled Hollywood detective writer struggles with his muse, his lover, and his whiskey stage right. Stage left, the characters he's invented act out the story he's trying to write—a noir yarn about a wisecracking detective and a mysterious woman who hires him. Just in case we don't catch the parallels between the writer's life and the story he's creating, the two collide as the writer and the detective discuss where the plots are heading.

I Can't Get Started, by Dublin's Rough Magic Theatre, has an evocative premise: a film noir projected in a hall of mirrors. Unfortunately, what the play most evokes is *City of Angels*. In fact the two are so close—here, too, the "fictional" characters are dressed in black and white while the "real life" writer and his friends wear color—that *I Can't Get Started* looks like a low-budget remake of the Broadway hit, minus the music.

Playwright Declan Hughes may have had loftier ambitions. His real-life plot is drawn from real life: the writer is Dashiell Hammett. Hughes attempts to present a Hammett much more complex than the sanitized one in Lillian Hellman's memoirs. We meet Hammett the artist who reinvented detective fiction and Hammett the idealist who went to jail dur-

set, and, as staged lugubriously by the author, no fun at all to watch. Stepping, who's much admired on the West Coast, clearly has serious intentions. But he never fulfills them here: substance is replaced by a constant fake-serious strain. Only Lola Glaudini's acting, as a teenage "coke whore," has a hint of human surprise to it; the rest act as if they knew the end from page one. That's no surprise, since we do too.

Much more entertaining, though just as dubious in some ways, is Paul Schiff Berman's production of *White Water*—the first staging of a Jesurun text by anyone but

the author. Trying for a different approach, Berman has made some lethal mistakes, like interrupting Jesurun's giddy verbal careen, and having the cast make highly emotional decisions about matters the text leaves not only ambiguous but contradictory; the insistent music and eccentric movement suggest a young director's effort to shove chunks of "style" into every accessible corner. Still, many passages are stylishly animated by Berman's game young cast, especially Sean Eden. What the evening proves is that Jesurun's text stands up as writing, even against such a contrary approach; more directors ought to tackle his work, daunting as it may seem.

ing the McCarthy period, but also Hammett the philanderer and the boozier who squandered his talent and the affections of those around him.

This portrait is unveiled in fragments from three decades. Since the real-life plot is so choppy, and the noir plot so convoluted, the whole comes across almost as a psychotic dream or alcoholic hallucination, which is not inappropriate. But moment to moment the writing is talky and didactic. The archness of the noir dialogue might be an attempt at satire, yet the writing in the real-life scenes is scarcely more plausible. In fact, despite all the name- and event-dropping, we learn precious little about the writers behind their famous facades. Change the style of the subplot and this could be a play about Percy and Mary Shelley. Hughes's themes—men who can't deal with emotion, women who give too much—are bluntly announced and trite. In short, this hard-boiled play feels half-baked.

Lynn Parker's staging is also disappointing. The set—two desks facing each other, a few sticks of furniture—cramps the actors when the two plots overlap. The real-life characters seem to wear the same styles through three decades. The men have fun with their roles—Stanley Townsend is particularly wry as the wisecracking gumshoe, and Arthur Riordan is a nicely broodish Hammett—but the women hit many sour notes, and all struggle a bit with their American accents, which only adds to the overriding sense that this production is second-hand.