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Life as Art

By Deborah Jowitt

David Gordon

*The Mysteries And
What's So Funny?*

At the Bardavon Opera House,
Poughkeepsie

June 28 through 29

At Serious Fun! Alice Tully Hall,
Broadway and 65th Street,
875-5050

July 11 through 13

Maybe in writing and directing *The Mysteries And What's So Funny?*, David Gordon was influenced by the theater pieces of his son Ain (who was undoubtedly influenced by his father). This witty, thoughtful, moving work is less of a dance and more of a play than anything Gordon *père* has yet made. It is, in part, about generations, about parents and children, husbands and wives, about growing old and cranky versus living life to one's decided-upon hilt. Also about the artist's choices and happy accidents. The twin mysteries of art and domestic life.

I saw the stunning production that opens the Serious Fun! Festival in the beautifully restored little Bardavon Opera House in Poughkeepsie, where Red Grooms's vivid backdrop of a mustachioed Mona Lisa (among many other things) was framed by an ornate blue proscenium. Grooms has made a seemingly endless supply of ingenious painted cutouts for Gordon's performers to carry on, invert, rotate, pose behind. Spring flips to reveal summer. A chess table is wheeled on

in the nick of time. A staircase appears for Marcel Duchamp to descend. Portals swing open to frame new realities.

Given additional continuity by Philip Glass's piano score—now hustling things along, now hinting at sweet memories—Gordon's work is like a revue that never pauses to congratulate itself on its jokes or sock home its points. It sweeps onward, deftly mingling several strands. Duchamp (Valda Setterfield, who is marvelous), radiant with bonhomie, is interviewed about his radical career, about presenting morsels of reality framed as art (the famous urinal, signed R. Mutt, whisks through), about his happy life, and art as "serious fun." The most persistent interviewer (Norma Fire) is also the child of Rose (Lola Pashalinski) and Sam (Ralph Williams), sad and sour, who once were a loving young couple (Karen Graham and Benjamin Bodé) facing down Rose's professional-level pessimist of a mother, Fanny (Jane Hoffman). There's also a squabbling couple, Mr. Him (Jonathan Walker) and Mrs. Him (Gayle Tufts), whose husband calls her "hon," whose mother calls her "baby" and who bitterly looks forward to being "Granny Baby" some day. The artist's dilemma is also tackled by Dean Moss and the terrific Alice Playten, who plays 21 roles, some of them almost simultaneously.

I wish that I hadn't forgotten to remember the often hilarious, often poignant lines that swing and twist to echo one another, the

words that all but dance, the voices that rush to finish—no, to undo—others' sentences, like elegant comedians tripping each other up. I do remember that if Adlai Stevenson had worn his underwear outside his clothes like Madonna, he might have beaten Ike. I can tell you about the great song-and-dance team, Anger I and Anger II (Scott Cunningham and Karen Evans-Kandel), who butt into the waking hours of Mr. and Mrs. Him, pushing at them, pinching their cheeks, lying heavily across their laps, clamping jaws on Mrs. H's hand, making the day begin with rage. I remember Young Sam listening to Old Sam's last, sad speech about giving his family all he had to give: backbreaking labor and the money it brought. How even more touching it is because the two actors really do look alike.

Although a few passages sound uncomfortably like a Jewish *Our Town*, the work is a great accomplishment. Gordon is not as addicted to chance as Duchamp was, but his queries about art and life, his memories of a fractious and beloved family are framed with an imagination and theatrical skill that in no way betray the charm of the everyday.