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# 'What's So Funny?' Romps Through Mysteries of Life

## THEATER

By Hedy Weiss

**W**hat happens when you combine the talents of writer/director/choreographer David Gordon, composer Philip Glass and that ruckus-making artist with a child's-eye view of the world, Red Grooms?

You get a profound, rueful and magically whimsical meditation on the ineffable mysteries of life and art, that's what. You also get a beautiful and true picture of extraordinary ordinary people and ordinary extraordinary people. And you get the womb-to-tomb cycle of man and woman, as well as a portrait of that willfully androgynous creature, "the artist."

Or, to put it more succinctly, you get a theater piece called "The Mysteries and What's So Funny?" A 90-minute journey into the enigma of existence, it springs to life with the fiercely purposeful yet joyful energy of a child scribbling in a coloring book.

In fact, like a child, scriptwriter Gordon poses this simple question: Would you rather be an artist or a "normal" person? Would you rather float freely, suspended above the daily grind, and create artificial mysteries? Or, giving in to a combination of temperament and chance, would you prefer to get caught up in the daily grind, and, in the process, become part of the larger, more diffuse mystery of ordinary life?

The artist in this case is that granddaddy of Dada, Marcel Duchamp, played with intriguing ambiguity by Gordon's elegant English wife, Valda Setterfield. Du-



Performing Arts Chicago puts the whimsy back into the world with "The Mysteries and What's So Funny?" which is on stage at the Blackstone Theatre through Sunday.

champ was the man who turned art into a giant question mark, who played his life like a game, who never made any permanent attachments and who claimed, at the age of 80, that he loved his free-spirited existence and that he was happy.

The ordinary mortals are Sam and Rose (splendidly played by Jerry Matz and Lola Pashsalinski), a long-married Brooklyn couple in their 70s who are just one giant step removed from that fabled and troubled immigrant generation. Their life was predictable—love, youthful marriage, a child, sacrifice, compromise, deadening routine, sickness, dependence and death. And yet Gordon hints that they, perhaps even more than the briefly "popular"

and rarified artist, are part of a more miraculous human clockwork.

All of this (plus a priceless song about women and shoes), unspools in the form of a tragicomic three-dimensional picture book, with Gordon's fluid direction and crisp writing, Glass' rippling, repetitive rhythms and Grooms' brightly colored, faux-naïve cardboard cutout scenery forming a seamless narrative, and, ultimately a deeply spiritual one.

"The Mysteries and What's So Funny," which is being presented by Performing Arts Chicago, will receive its final performance Sunday at 8 p.m. at the Blackstone Theatre, 60 E. Balbo. Tickets: (312) 242-6237.

Catch it if you can!