



Mysteries of the Humorous

By Janice Berman
STAFF WRITER

ORIGINALLY," said choreographer David Gordon, "I was thinking about writing a mystery. Then I began to realize that the things that interested me were the things I couldn't solve — concerns about work, art, relationships, continuity. So I began to put down the questions."

They were not just questions, but concerns that might be classed as some of life's eternal mysteries. And because they were posed by Gordon, whose work can be significant and hilarious at the same time, it's appropriate that the piece that evolved is called "The Mysteries and What's So Funny." The work, which opens Serious Fun! tonight at Alice Tully Hall and runs through Saturday, was well received when it premiered in May at the Spoleto Festival U.S.A., which commissioned it. It's a collaboration among three denizens of the downtown art scene: Gordon, composer Philip Glass, and visual artist Red Grooms.

As Gordon considered his questions, the one that came to the fore, he said, was this one: "How many answers did I need, and were there answers I couldn't live without?"

Gordon, whose career in dance took off with the Judson post-modern revolt of the '60s, finds, in his 50s, that "if I ever can manage to find an answer, the next day I find a new question."

In this new work, some of the questions and answers are embodied in the main character, Marcel Duchamp, a pioneering artist of the avant-garde. "David sees him (Duchamp) as a hero, leading an exemplary artist's life," said Grooms. "David has this funny idea that Duchamp, without doing anything and without being an operator, has had a more durable career than any other 20th-Century artist."

Using words and a stream of movement, Gordon links the life of Duchamp — played by Valda Setterfield, who is married to Gordon — and the far more everyday lives of Rose and Sam, an elderly Jewish couple who have visible connections to Gordon's own forebears.

A cast of 13, many in multiple roles, sweeps through endless events and the mysteries they raise. Marriage and babies, fighting and shopping, youth and old age, illness and wellness, living and dying, all unfold in a swirl of monologue, jokes, dialogue, puns, motion and emo-

tion, laughter and tears.

Glass contributed a piano score — played by musical director Alan Johnston — whose minor key lends an uncommon sweet sadness. Grooms drew a lively cartoony curtain and coordinating proscenium arch.

Gordon, who wrote the script, has always been a word person. An example that springs to mind is in a bygone piece that his Pick Up Company performed in the Soho loft that is his and Setterfield's home. "Let's play Susan," says Setterfield. Then she and the other dancers move like the dancer named Susan. And then it becomes "Let's place Susan," as they move her to another spot.

Gordon's interest in text naturally led him to use some actors as well as dancers. The giant "United States," commissioned all over the country, included oral history; a section from Minnesota, for instance, discussed rural life. Some of the "Mysteries" cast worked with him on "TV Reel," a piece he created for Setterfield, Mikhail Baryshnikov and public television. But "The Mysteries . . ." casts more people who might strictly be defined as actors and fewer who are dancers than any of his previous creations.

AND WHAT'S the difference? "An actor, when you first give them something, tries as to do it as large as they can do it," said Gordon in his studio before the Spoleto Festival. "A dancer moves gingerly, step by step. Actors ask more questions. If you tell a dancer you want something done upside down and backward, they'll say, oh, okay."

At the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, where part of "The Mysteries . . ." was developed, "the actors were so generous and so smart that it set me on a positive and direct path," Gordon said. "I got enormously good information for them. They were so with me, I didn't have to spend time seducing them, or monitoring behavior."

The three collaborators also worked together quite comfortably, having moved in each other's circles for years. Gordon and Glass had wanted to work together again ever since Gordon created the movement and Glass the music for the multi-media "The Photographer" at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and he became intrigued with the solo piano idea after hearing

Glass play a solo concert of his music.

Glass, for his part, had seen Gordon's "My Folks," said "Mysteries" producer Jedediah Wheeler. A dance he made for his Pick-Up Company, it makes poignant reference to his Jewish immigrant forebears. "It struck him how wonderful it would be to have a piano onstage with David's work," said Wheeler.

Gordon and Glass talked through the play together, said Wheeler, "and Philip would try something out and David would invariably say, yeah."

Gordon wrote the lyrics of two of the songs himself. Initially, he tried for rhyme, said Wheeler, "But Philip gently explained that it was more difficult to write music to rhyming sentences, that text was better. David was astonished that what was coming out of him could be a song."

For Red Grooms, the madcap creator of 3-D walk-through comics, "The Mysteries . . ." represents "the most professional scenic work I've done alone. I'm pretty excited." Grooms joked that Gordon (who at one time designed store windows), "had done half my work," by devising, on his own, certain hand-carried props as symbols. "They were useful as a starting point."

Together Grooms and Gordon discussed the time period the performance would span, from the early teens of this century into the '40s or '50s. "I was trying to be a little restrained," Grooms said. "My thinking was to veil it, make it look a little antique." He designed two arched pieces. One is a wedding chapel that reverses on the other side to a boat. There's also an orphanage that reverses to a table and a coffin that turns into a hospital bed.

"I'm not a Duchampian," said Grooms. "I respect him, but I'm not of his camp. It's fun to rifle his imagery."

Initially, Gordon started small, asking Grooms for "a swinging door on wheels, a three-step staircase on wheels, and a (picture) frame." And it was then, said the choreographer, that one of the actors asked him: "I just want to know — when I walk through the door, am I leaving the space or entering the space?"

Said Gordon, "I thought it was the best question I'd ever been asked." ■