

Life is sweet on the avant-garde side of the street

By Devin Leonard
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Choreographer David Gordon sees art as an impenetrable mystery, something we'll never really understand.

It's a place where you'll find more questions than answers, but take heart! — there are some pretty good jokes lurking in the shadows. Madonna jokes, no less.

With that in mind, the name of Gordon's performance piece — "The Mysteries and What's so Funny?" — a collaboration with artist Red Grooms and composer Philip Glass, isn't quite as enigmatic as it may seem.

The work, which delves into the mystery and laughter in the art of visionary French avant-gardist Marcel Duchamp and the ordinary lives of Mr. and Mrs. X, opened Serious Fun! Thursday night at Lincoln Center and ran through Saturday night.

Gordon is a bit of a visionary himself. One of the leading choreographers in the postmodernist Judson Church movement of the 1960s, he and his Pick Up Company dissolve the boundaries separating dance and theater in "Mysteries," commissioned by Serious Fun! and the Spoleto Festival U.S.A., where it premiered in May.

The piece is largely a series of vignettes contrasting the lives and reminiscences of the elderly Duchamp — played by Valda Setterfield, the choreographer's wife — and those of Sam and Rose X, senior citizens themselves.



PHILIP GLASS

Minimalist score

As these scenes are acted out, other cast members — there are 13 in all — move about the stage. They often carry pieces of Grooms' colorful, provocative set. A bed flips over to become a coffin, an arch labeled "chapel" is reversed to provide an entranceway to an orphanage.

Glass' churning, minimalist piano score provides a melancholy backdrop. It's music for a cloudy autumn day.

Setterfield does a fine job as a rather world-weary Duchamp, reflecting on a life well-lived and fielding a host of questions from a would-be student, a critic, and even a detective. Her answers to inquiries about the meaning and motivation underlying his work — including the "ready-mades," ev-

eryday objects like combs and urinals, which Duchamp signed and proclaimed art — are answered invariably with a shrug.

"It's a mystery to me," she tells the prying detective, played by Norma Fire. Gordon's artist would rather talk about life: "I just like breathing. I like breathing better than working."

Setterfield's Duchamp also gets the Madonna joke; it has to do with Maidenform ads, Adlai Stevenson, and how you wear your underwear.

Gordon's idealized artist can be a bit of a bore with his glib quips. The same cannot be said for Sam and Rose, played by Ralph Williams and Lola Pashalinski. They are approaching the end of their lives unhappily, trying hopelessly to make sense of it all — the short bursts of happiness and the overwhelming sadness.

There's a heart-rending recollection of their marriage, during which the elderly couple shadow a younger version of themselves around the stage. And the death of Rose's caustic mother, Fanny, portrayed splendidly by Jane Hoffman, is full of sadness and bitter laughter.

Duchamp may get the last word about life and its ironies, but in the end, it is the bittersweet laughter of family life, of birth, marriage, and death, that makes Gordon's collaboration with Glass and Grooms haunting and unforgettable.