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## REVIEWS

Sweet Mysteries  
Of Life and Death

## THE MYSTERIES AND WHAT'S SO FUNNY?

A romp through the mysteries of art and life, written and directed by David Gordon, music by Philip Glass, designed by Red Grooms. Joyce Theater, 175 Eighth Ave. Through Jan. 3.

By Amei Wallach

STAFF WRITER

**O**RIGINALLY DAVID GORDON set out to write a mystery for the Spoleto Festival U.S.A. in the summer of 1991. And in a sense he did; he concocted a collaborative theater-music-performance work with music by Philip Glass, artwork by Red Grooms, with plots piled upon subplots, skits within skits, visual puns within puns, and a plethora of supporting characters. Only the mysteries he sets out to solve in his poignant, gently funny and relentlessly busy work are the mysteries of love and death and the whole damn thing — including art.

Did I say solve? Gordon seems far more interested in asking the questions than answering them, which is precisely what gives "Mysteries" its peculiar madcap charm.

When the work was briefly shown at Lincoln Center's "Serious Fun" festival two years ago, it was a critical hit. Now it's back for a two-week run at the Joyce. And if the freshness of discovery tarnishes on second viewing — the timing seems off this time around and the effort shows — still a great deal of the magic remains.

The centerpiece of the work, the character against whom all the questions are bounced, is Marcel Duchamp, the patron saint of downtown artists of

every stripe. By such acts as turning a porcelain urinal upside down, signing it R. Mutt and submitting it to a 1917 New York exhibit, the French artist seemed to be ridiculing everything anyone ever thought they knew about art and its separation from life.

In actual fact, Marcel Duchamp, personally, never did have much to do with real life as we know it. He so successfully used irony, humor and exquisite manners to keep it at bay that his friend, the Chilean artist Matta, once accused him of having "this bullet-proof system. He doesn't live anything; he makes beautiful gestures."

Having brilliantly cast his wife, the British-born dancer, Valda Setterfield, as the amused, bemused and impeccable Marcel, Gordon sets her up as a foil for the messy, dreary emotions of life as lived by the rest of us. He's assembled a floating cast of characters — who come and go in shifting intricate patterns throughout the evening — to play the central couple Rose (Karen Graham young; Lola Pashalinski old) and Sam (Scott Cohen young; Jerry Matz old) Rose's mother Fanny (Jane Hoffman), Mr. and Mrs. Him (Bill Kux and Tisha Roth), and assorted children caught in the most telling, puzzling — and moving — moments of their lives.

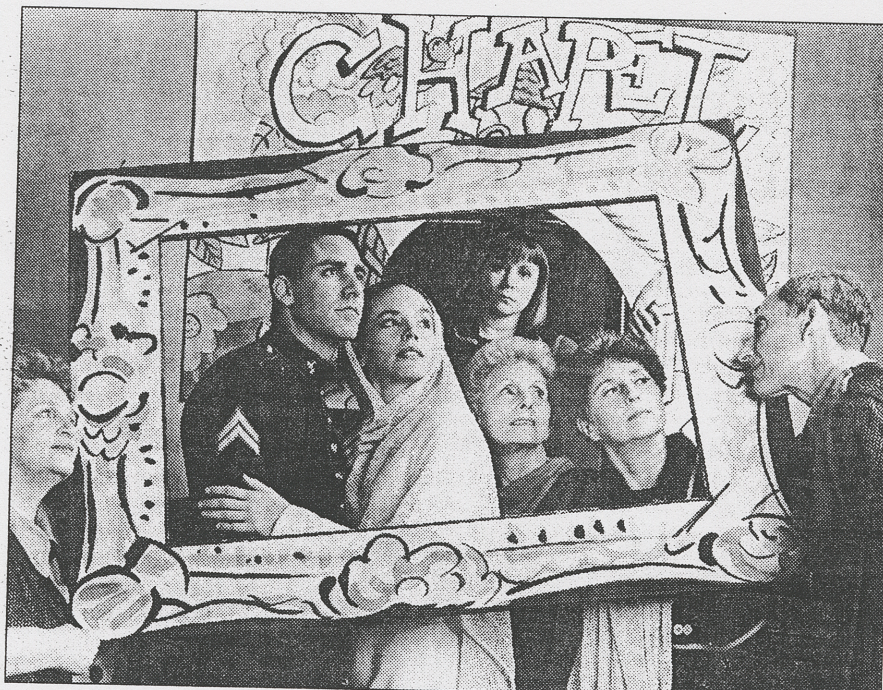
Time gets all mixed up here. Somebody on stage will pose a mystery: The mysterious act of making art, the mystery of wanting babies, the mystery of long marriage and no regrets, the mystery of anger, the chorus will announce. Then it will disperse, as each mystery is probed in a little skit.

By far the most successful skits center on the mystery of anger and the

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# T H E A T E R



Andrew Eccles

A scene from 'The Mysteries and What's So Funny?' at the Joyce Theater through Jan. 3

mystery of old age: old age because of Hoffman's crochety, truculent, altogether believable rendition of the dying and disappointed Fanny; anger because of the hilarious manner in which Scott Cunningham, as Anger I, stokes the argument between the harried couple, using the closest thing to dance movement in this work by Gordon, who is best known as a dancer-choreographer who came out of the Judson dance group of the '60s.

Gordon appears to be taking his cues from Duchamp, questioning the basics of his art; relying far more on words than movement. The movement is inextricable from the props and sets provided by fellow downtown alumni Red Grooms — who gives a Duchampian twist to the action with an ornate frame often paraded across stage to frame a character; or flats that on one side depict

a bed, on the other a coffin. Philip Glass' music makes an uncharacteristic effort to accommodate itself to the action as a satisfying background.

In the end, Marcel for the first time acknowledges a personal feeling: that he can't help but be impressed by "the unalterable fact that you're going to disappear." And then he disappears. And we're left with the old couple holding hands in front of the Red Grooms version of a TV set. Real life has won. Or has it? Above them is a Red Grooms version of the "Mona Lisa" that Duchamp once doctored with mustache and goatee, and signed Rose Selavy, because it sounds like "C'est la vie." Neither the mysteries of art or of life have any solution. Posing them provides enchantment — however fitful — that's sufficient for one 90-minute evening. / ■

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