

Chicago Tribune

Tempo 4 Section 5 Chicago Tribune, Sunday, October 25, 1992

'Mysteries' captivates with stirring images and impressions

By Richard Christiansen
Chief critic

Theater

In the Blackstone Theatre, just for this weekend, is the extraordinary, captivating and imaginative performance piece "The Mysteries and What's So Funny?".

The 90-minute work, aswirl with ideas and emotions, is the work of three artistic comrades: visual designer Red Grooms, who has fashioned its playful, colorful framework and cutouts; composer Philip Glass, whose keyboard music provides a stream of background music; and David Gordon, long a gifted maker of dance theater who in this breakthrough work also has written a script to be spoken, and sung, by 13 actors.

The subject of the piece can be summarized in the two big

questions it asks: "What is art?" and "What is life?" To which the answer, given with casual certainty, is: "It's a mystery to me."

In the whirl of images and impressions that the show presents, the mystery of art is personified in Marcel Duchamp, the Dadaist artist whose "Nude Descending a Staircase" and subsequent installations of "found objects" effectively altered our notions of the structure and nature of art.

Portrayed with insouciant elegance by Valda Setterfield (Gordon's wife), Duchamp is an ironic master of ceremonies for the evening, weaving in and out of the procession to answer questions about his life and

'The Mysteries and What's So Funny?'

A theater piece written and directed by David Gordon, with music by Philip Glass, design by Red Grooms, musical direction by Alan Johnson, lighting by Dan Kottowitz, sound by David Meschter. Presented as part of the DeJavant series by Performing Arts Chicago. Opened a 3-day run Friday in the Blackstone Theatre, 60 E. Balbo Ave., and plays at 8 p.m. Saturday and Sunday only. Running time: 1:30. Tickets are \$15 to \$35. Phone 312-242-6237.

THE CAST

Marcel Duchamp	Valda Setterfield
Detective	Norma Fire
Old Sam	Jerry Matz
Old Rose	Lola Pashalinski
Young Sam	Scott Cohen
Young Rose	Karen Graham
Fanny	Jane Hoffman
Mr. Him	Bill Kux
Mrs. Him	Tisha Roth
Actor	Alice Playten
Anger I	Scott Cunningham
Anger II	Adina Porter
Young Artist	Dean Moss

work and to remind us of the ephemeral, mysterious quality of the work we call art.

The greater mystery of "The Mysteries," however, is that of

life, which from birth to death seems even more ephemeral.

In Gordon's inventive hands, the wonder of youth, the pain of aging and the agony of dying are encapsulated in the life cycle of one family and framed in one striking image after another.

A wedding veil becomes a funeral shroud, a hospital bed turns into a coffin, a handsome youth is transformed into an old and failing man. And as these events flow on in the circle of life, a door moves in and out, providing a binding metaphor for the entrances and exits, greetings and farewells, beginnings and endings of life.

Along with these stirring visions, Gordon provides light-hearted views on the quirky, nutty nature of everyday relationships, such as the brilliant cartoon of a couple waking up

in the morning to the same old partners with the same old annoyances.

The questions "The Mysteries" asks are profound, but the answers, while thoughtful, are never pretentious. On the question of individual identity, for example, the show provides a hilarious monologue from a woman who rattles off all the nicknames she is called by all the people in her life.

The entire evening is like that. It entertains while it enlightens.

It should also be noted, with encouragement and support, that it is one of several performance pieces being presented this season, in a bright mix of high-quality programming, by the Performing Arts Chicago organization under sponsorship by Philip Morris Companies and Kraft General Foods.