

## Performance

# Beguiling 'Mysteries'

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Strange, wonderful, many-sided, comical and poignant, "The Mysteries And What's So Funny?"—which opened at the beautifully re-outfitted Warner Theatre last night—is all these things and a brilliantly original piece of theater work at the same time.

It's also powerfully invasive. Despite its prevailing lightness of tone, it gnaws deep and triggers waves of emotional association. "The Mysteries" doesn't evaporate the instant the curtain drops—it hangs around and teases thought and feeling from buried wells of memory.

As to genre, it defies classification, but this is no small part of its appeal. Assuredly it is theater—it is text (by David Gordon, also the director and choreographer), sharply defined characters and extended narratives; it's also part musical and chamber opera, having an almost continuous piano score by Philip Glass, one of his most inveigling ever, along with doggerel and patter songs; and it is together choreographed—whatever is not clearly once nevertheless moves, including the scenery (by Red Grooms), in a continuum of rhythm and shape that only the canniest of dance makers could have devised. All this demands and receives a cast of superlative ambidexterity.

Perhaps, overall, the work is closest to the kinds of "movement theater" defined by such others as Martha Clarke, Robert Wilson, Meredith Monk and the Adaptors, as well as some previous Gordon productions. Taxonomy aside, "The Mysteries" is an gratifying landmark, one that pushes the perime-



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A scene from "The Mysteries and What's So Funny?," a multimedia work at the Warner.

ter of theater art ever so gently but perceptibly outward.

The themes of the piece also interlace what at first sight might appear to be only remotely related ideas—the life and work of artistic maverick Marcel Duchamp, and the recurring conflicts of familial relationships. Duchamp, as wittily and magnetically impersonated here by dancer-actress Valda Setterfield, ties it all together with the help of one of his

central motifs—the emancipation of the ordinary, an esthetic notion launched by Erik Satie and given more recent twists by Andy Warhol and the late John Cage, among others. Duchamp also put into question the essential natures of art, artists and art works, and these enigmas in turn become grist for the milling of various "mysteries" by Gordon, Glass, Grooms and performers.

Hovering over the work, despite a humorous veneer, is a penumbra of sadness, a profound sigh at the transience of life and human effort. In a very odd sort of way, "The Mysteries" may remind you of "Our Town," transposed to a contemporary urban milieu but ultimately haunting—as in its final scenes of aging, decline and death—in a similarly wistful, poetic fashion. At other points, the piece also evokes the Marx Brothers ("Wait a minute!," someone exclaims, and all the performers freeze to do just that, checking their watches to make it literal), Gertrude Stein (in its witty repetitions and verbal rhythms) and Ionesco (in its absurd juxtapositions and recycled imagery).

The hand of Gordon as auteur is everywhere apparent, in his deployment of favorite devices (picture frames and chairs, for instance, as mobile props), his delight in permutation and chainings, and his penchant for paradox and the humor of logical dislocation—as well, of course, as in the intriguing flow of movement. Glass's score, identifiable by its iterated figuration and characteristic harmonic schemes, is among his most melodically prolific, and it traverses moods from lulling and dreamy to whimsical, ardent and elegiac. Grooms's lively, satiric set pieces and costumes—making hay with Duchamp allusions, such as the mustachioed Mona Lisa, with the Brooklyn Bridge as background, that forms the backdrop's centerpiece—strike just the right visual chords for the business at hand, and dovetail superbly with both Gordon's movement and Glass's music. Also worth kudos are musical director-pianist Alan Johnson, lighting designer Dan Kowitz and the excellent cast.

District Curators deserves highest credit for importing this treasure. Tonight's repeat performance is the last chance to catch it locally.