## Performance

## Beguiling 'Mysteries'

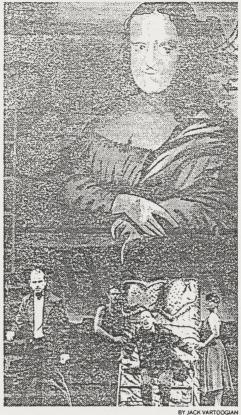
By Alan M. Kriegsman Washington Post Staff Writer

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

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

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

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



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 Kotlowitz 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.