

CHESS MATCH NO. 5

[Charles Wright](#) [Drama](#), [Experimental Theater](#), [Reviews](#)

"While the radical composer John Cage (1912–92) was alive, it seemed easier to dismiss him as an irritating crackpot than it does now."

That rhetorical flourish, from critic Alastair Macaulay of the *New York Times*, is as outlandish as any of Cage's own colorful, self-conscious proclamations; but it captures the crescendo of acclaim accorded this American avant-garde composer over the 25 years since his death. Macaulay's recent assertion that "no study of 20th-century music is complete without Cage" would have been argumentative a quarter century ago. Now it's an accepted tenet of commentary on music history.

Cage—or, more accurately, Cage's aesthetics—is the focus of *Chess Match No. 5*, conceived and directed by avant-garde theater artist Anne Bogart and "created" by the SITI Company, of which she is co-artistic director. This attraction, now being given its world premiere by Off-Broadway's Abingdon Theatre Company, features textual material from Cage's letters, essays, lectures, and speeches, assembled by Jocelyn Clarke into a brief, elliptical script for a pair of performers.

Chess Match No. 5 is probably best described as a "performance piece," since it lacks sufficient plot or conflict to qualify as a play. The two roles are designated merely "He" and "She"; and, though it's tempting to identify He as Cage, Clarke's script (with its paucity of information about the speakers' identities or personalities) can't really be said to feature characters in any traditional sense.

Cage, who studied the arts and philosophy throughout his life, came to believe that traditional composition has erred by imposing aesthetic structure—principally through concerted arrangement of notes and phrases—in the hope of communicating musically with the listener. Through years of musical experimentation, Cage developed the contrarian view that a composer's task should be to encourage auditors' receptivity to sensory stimuli that are already in the environment where the performance is taking place. That means permitting what's present in the particular moment of the musical event to influence—in fact, to determine —form and content.

Cage's most famous composition consists of four minutes and 33 seconds of silence. In his view, sound is everywhere at all times and inescapable, which means that what we initially perceive as a void isn't such at all. "The sweetest music," said Cage, "is the sound of what happens." Hence that controversial piece, "4'33", "is neither silent nor soundless—in Cagean terms, it's music, and music that's distinct in every performance.

Chess Match No. 5 engages the ear and eye and, from time to time, the intellect. In the course of this 90-minute exercise, Bogart and her two-person cast (in addition to Bond, Ellen Lauren, Bogart's fellow co-artistic director of SITI) offer recitation, chatter, radio static, ticking timers, ringing phones, party hats, clanking spoons, boiling water, an array of electric light-bulbs (both illuminated and dark), and dancing.

But all this activity and all the on-stage artifacts don't make a case for the theatricality which Cage claimed for his aesthetic—and there's nothing here to touch the emotional or spiritual aspects of playgoers' psyches.

Designers James Schuette (set) and Brian H. Scott (lighting) have created an antiseptic environment for the performance. It's unadorned and bewilderingly non-specific—an office, perhaps, or some sort of workshop or even a makeshift green room. In this rudimentary yet somehow mysterious locale, lots gets done but little or nothing happens.

Bond and Lauren are seasoned actors adept at adding wit to lines or stage business that might be bland in other hands. They fix coffee and toast, engage in hurried games of chess, ignore the frequently ringing phone, sit in chairs, on a table, and on the floor. And they dance—waltzing like Astaire and Rogers; doing a little soft shoe and something 1925-ish, reminiscent of Helen Gallagher and Bobby Van in *No, No Nanette*. It's all pleasant enough (and, thanks to the particular performers, thoroughly charming); but it's bloodless, unemotional, and forgettable.

Midway through *Chess Match No. 5*, Bond (or, rather, He) refers to the view, ostensibly South Asian (though actually far more widespread), that music's purpose is "to quiet the mind [and make] it susceptible to divine influences." As an experimental composer, Cage made susceptibility to external influences, divine or otherwise, the cornerstone of his musical endeavors. But it's not clear that his music reflects any personal religious affection. In fact, Cage's radical aesthetic innovations challenged almost everything music-lovers had held sacred for centuries, so it would be surprising (and ironic) to find anything sacerdotal in his approach to the art form. Exploring that question, though, would require a more reflective, less earthbound endeavor than this drive-by evocation of a great 20th-century avant-gardist.

SITI Company's Chess Match No. 5 plays through April 2 at Abingdon Theatre Company's June Havoc Theatre (312 West 36th St., between Eighth and Ninth avenues). Evening performances are at 7 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday; 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday. Matinees are 3 p.m. Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday. For tickets, call (212) 352-3101 or visit abingdontheatre.org.