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Theatre in Review: *Chess Match No. 5* (SITI Company/Abingdon Theatre Company)

If you're a fan of the composer and music theorist **John Cage**, or if you're curious about him and don't want to think too hard, *Chess Match No. 5* may be just the thing for you. The latest in a series of pieces devised by the director **Anne Bogart** in which she examines a famous artist by combining his or her own words with movement, comically offbeat staging, and lighting and sound effects, this piece works best as a kind of tribute to a singular figure in twentieth-century culture, done with great affection and no small amount of charm.



Ellen Lauren, Will Bond. Photo: Maria Baranova

The actors **Will Bond** and **Ellen Lauren** are our nameless host and hostess; they career around **James Schuette**'s sparsely furnished set, quoting Cage's writings even as they engage in chess games, vaudeville dance steps, and other carefully worked-out bits of business. The commentary throughout is oracular, suggestive, sometimes provocative; Bond, looking the audience in the collective eye, says, "What am I doing? Where am I going? I'm in the business of making something." Lauren, playing an interviewer, says, "I was thinking about your silent pieces. Aren't they superfluous since the noises of nature already exist?" He replies, "The aspect of nature with which we are most familiar -- and this familiarity is almost painful -- is that we, as a human species, have endangered nature. We have acted against it, we have rebelled against its existence." "So," she adds, "our concern today must be to reconstitute it for what it is." "And," he replies, "nature is not a separation of water from air, or of the sky from the earth, but a 'working together' or a 'playing together' of these elements." "That is what we call ecology," she says, having an aha moment. "Yes," he says. "Music, as I conceive it, is ecological."

With dialogue like that, is it any wonder there's a choreographer on hand? (He is **Barney O'Hanlon**, and he comes up with a lovely modified Fred-and-Ginger routine for the stars to perform.) Much of Bogart's staging provides witty illustrations for the text, hoping -- and sometimes succeeding -- to cast some of Cage's most forbidding notions in a warmly appealing light. When Bond comments that what we call silence is really filled with sounds, he and Lauren make the point with a series of actions -- zipping open a bag, putting slices in a toaster, and, most amusingly, crunching on nuts -- that reverberate throughout the theatre. Their chess games provide a visual analog to Cage speaking with an interlocutor struggling to parse the composer's ideas, the back-and-forth between them mirrored in the movement of knights, bishops, and queens.

What comes across most clearly is Cage's notion that, in some sense, music, as a carefully ordered arrangement of lovely and/or emotionally affecting sounds, has run its course, that the world is loaded with sounds that, carefully curated, are as revelatory as anything composed by Mozart. As theory-ridden as all this may sound, *Chess Match No. 5* presents Cage as impish, fun-loving, and always accessible. (Lauren comments, "Many people ask me, 'How do I reach John Cage?' And I say, 'Just pick up the telephone.'") It's an understatement to say that, even at its most impenetrable, *Chess Match No. 5* coasts on the charms of its two stars. Bond, who looks a bit like Cage but is armed with a disarming smile, is unfailingly affable, and Lauren imbues everything she does with an understated screwball humor. Together, they make for a kind of Nick and Nora Charles of twentieth-century Modernism.

Whether Bogart is really serving Cage's interests is less clear. The text, which appears to have been culled from here and there, doesn't really assist in understanding the line of Cage's thought, and the director's slick, often amusing direction may be at odds with his rather austere ideas. For most of its running time, *Chess Match No. 5* feels like an accomplished, but not particularly illuminating, piece of staging that may be a little too superficial for its own good.

The contributions of Bogart's regular designers are, as always, first-rate. Schuette has dressed the stars attractively. **Brian H. Scott**'s lighting shifts between white and color washes fluently, and **Darron L West**'s sound design includes a montage of radio programs and musical accompaniment for the dance. (I think he also provided some reinforcement in the scene, referenced above, about a world full of noises.)



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In any case, *Chess Match No. 5* has clearly been conceived with love, plus a desire to make Cage's ideas known to a wider audience. The worst thing you can say about it is it's not unpleasant. Whether you leave the theatre with a better understanding of Cage's ideas about art and life is an open question. I fear that you are more likely to remember the likable stars and their clever staging gags. -- **David Barbour**

(23 March 2017)

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