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THEATER

Review: In 'Chess Match No. 5,' the Words of John Cage, Deconstructed

Chess Match No. 5 | Off Broadway, Play | Closing Date: April 2, 2017 | Abingdon Theatre Complex, 312 W 36th St. | 212-352-3101

By ELISABETH VINCENTELLI MARCH 28, 2017

For decades, Marcel Duchamp was busy “conspicuously playing chess, not visibly doing art.” Much the same happens in “Chess Match No. 5,” which quotes that remark by the composer John Cage about the conceptualist. The two people onstage are conspicuously playing chess; they also make toast, fiddle with a radio, drink tea and trade disconnected aphorisms and anecdotes. They are not visibly doing theater, if that means plot, traditional characters or singing cats.

Except, of course, that they are. You just need to recalibrate your expectations, just as Duchamp made audiences recalibrate their expectations of art and the show's subject, Cage, made them rethink music.

Conceived and directed by the longtime experimenter Anne Bogart, the SITI Company's opaque, mystifying “Chess Match No. 5” is built entirely from Cage quotations, arranged by Jocelyn Clarke into an exploration of the artistic process that tries to mirror the subject's own experimental practice. Ms. Bogart and Mr.

Clarke took the same approach to the director Robert Wilson in “Bob” and the writer Virginia Woolf in “Room.” Like its predecessors, “Chess Match No. 5” is a cerebral peek into an artist’s worldview.

Will Bond, displaying the impish smile of an eccentric scientist, and Ellen Lauren, whose deceptively detached inflections recall Laurie Anderson’s, putter around the stage in a manner that feels aimless and deliberate. They also play chess, just as Cage and Duchamp did in a 1968 public game/performance.

The point is philosophical and artistic: Throughout his career, Cage, who died in 1992, asked us to consider what constitutes music, sounds and silence, most strikingly in his piece “4’33”,” in which there is no actual playing. As you watch the show, you may find yourself noticing the crisp clicks of Ms. Lauren’s heels, the ring of a telephone nobody answers. (Darron L. West did the precise sound design.) Your ears prick up when an audience member unwraps a piece of candy or another trots up the aisle to flee the show, as happened at Saturday’s matinee. (The show can be taxing in its willful randomness.)

“Chess Match No. 5” is part of a larger project, “Theater Piece No. 1” (the name of an early collaborative piece by Cage), that will involve contributions from musicians and choreographers. One suspects that Ms. Bogart is just as interested in making us think about what theater means and what we want from it as she is in the composer. The first precept may be to go with an open mind — and ears.

Chess Match No. 5

Abingdon Theatre Complex 312 W 36th St. Midtown West | 212-352-3101
abingdontheatre.org: <http://www.abingdontheatre.org>

Category Off Broadway, Play

Credits Conceived and directed by Anne Bogart; Text arranged by Jocelyn Clarke from public conversations with John Cage created by SITI Company

Preview March 9, 2017

Opened March 19, 2017

Closing Date April 2, 2017

Upcoming Shows

Wednesday	March 29	7:00 PM
Thursday	March 30	7:00 PM
Friday	March 31	8:00 PM
Saturday	April 1	3:00 PM
Saturday	April 1	8:00 PM

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Chess Match No. 5

Through Sunday at the June Havoc Theater, Manhattan; 212-352-3101, abingdontheatre.org. Running time: 1 hour 30 minutes.

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