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Friday, March 24, 2017

## Review: Pawn Down

By Michael Block

John Cage was an American composer, music theorist, writer, philosopher, and artist. He seemed like the perfect subject for a work of theatrical art. Presented by Abingdon Theatre Company, SITi Company's *Chess Match No. 5* finds the world of John Cage live on stage. Conceived and directed by Anne Bogart and text arrangement by Jocelyn Clarke, *Chess Match No. 5* maintains your attention for some time until it just becomes a superfluous examination of what else can be thrown at the wall.

Adventurous to say the least, *Chess Match No. 5* brings the words of John Cage to the stage in an array of movements to create a grand symphony of music, dance, and conversation. An exploratory work of art, *Chess Match No. 5* is most exciting when it comes to the theatrical vision rather than the content of the material. If you're not a Cage aficionado, you're likely lost. Trying to ingest the words and make sense of them in the grand scheme of the piece is like finding a needle in a haystack. But if you open your mind to the nearly five senses production, there's something to take away from *Chess Match No. 5*. But no matter what, it went on a little too long. Anne Bogart ensures the specificity of her work in this piece. Bogart maintains a consistency in theatrical vocabulary in her staging. When the door opens, the sounds of the world flood in. The chess match is riveting each time the pair plays. We find the musicality of everyday objects as a highlight in the piece. It's easy to appreciate the individual moments but as a whole composition, *Chess Match No. 5* is sadly unsatisfying. If the experimental elements of SITi Company is not for you, the production design will keep you enthralled at least. This piece cannot exist without sound. And the sound design from Darron L. West is out of this world. Between the placement of microphones to the incorporation of atmospheric sounds, West's design is just another example of how important sound is to live theater. Pairing it with Brian H. Scott's lighting design, Anne Bogart told a story in this art piece. Scott introduces the audience into his light show by dousing the big bright open stage in light when the house opens. At first, it may be a bit much. Scott used the various exposed bulbs regularly as the focal point of light but when he brings in the colors, *Chess Match No. 5* becomes more stimulating. But those moments are far and few between simply due to the structure of the narrative. Bogart and scenic designer James Schuette strategically placed every piece of random furniture on the open stage. And yet with only two performers, Will Bond and Elle Lauren got trapped at times. *Chess Match No. 5* is fun for the first five minutes. Then it seems to drag on and on. Having an appreciation for SITi Company and John Cage is nearly essential for this show to be invigorating.



photo by Maria Baranova

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