

REVIEWS

Chess Match No. 5

Abingdon Theatre Company gives the inscrutable work of composer John Cage a theatrical form.

Hayley Levitt • Off-Broadway • Mar 19, 2017



Will Bond and Ellen Lauren in *Chess Match No. 5*, conceived and directed by Anne Bogart, at Abingdon Theatre Company's June Havoc Theatre.

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When (or if) you think of John Cage, the one cocktail party anecdote that may have survived your time in Music History 101 is his composition *4'33*. "Written" in 1952, the three-movement piece instructs its players to set down their instruments for four minutes and 33 seconds, leaving only the sounds of the surrounding environment to fill the concert space. From there, audiences can engage in heated debates over whether his non-composition qualifies as a valid work of art or whether it's all a bunch of avant-garde hooley.

own documented words and shapes them into a conversation between an anonymous "He" (presumably representing Cage) and "She" (a longtime friend of the composer), played with impressive self-assurance by Will Bond and Ellen Lauren.

They brew coffee, make toast, play chess, and engage in several other acts of meaningless stage business while debating the purpose, shape, and proper interpretation of music and art. In the same way that Cage's work has been widely criticized, Clarke's finished product onstage is — in the most objective sense of the word — boring. And yet, it's so Cage-like in spirit, you almost can't fault Clarke or director Anne Bogart for crafting *Chess Match No. 5* in just this meandering way. It's the thought-provoking catch-22 that keeps you on the hook of this theatrical homage to Cage. It may not compel you to seek out his work, but it will lead you to an understanding the intentions behind it — those intentions largely being to create work devoid of intention.

"I do not want a sound to pretend that it's a bucket or that it's a president or that it's in love with another sound," He says, quoting Cage. "I just want it to be a sound." This face-value approach to artistic interpretation is one of the hardest things for frequent consumers of art to wrap their brains around. After all, why seek out an artistic experience if not to take in new ideas or glean some kind of *meaning* from it? For Cage, however, music is sound and sound is music — from the droning noises of street traffic to the seeming silence of an audience.



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Whether you agree, a nice side effect of this idea that life and art are one and the same is that sound designer Darron L. West's work does not go unappreciated. Noises that are typically lost in the background of a story come to the forefront of our consciousness, as does Brian H. Scott's lighting design, which features a variety of multicolored hanging bulbs. While shifting in conjunction with the play's many randomized sound effects, they effectively reinforce the play's self-referential statement, "Theater is the use of both eyes and ears."

Nevertheless, this sensory stimulation can't bear all the weight of keeping us engaged for the entirety of the plotless conversation between He and She. We can be grateful, however, that *Chess Match No. 5* is far more compelling than the chess match that inspired it — a game between Cage and his artistic idol Marcel Duchamp presented as a widely panned performance piece titled *Reunion* in 1968. And yet, you leave the theater seriously questioning whether boredom is a fair basis of criticism. After all, Cage himself offers a simple caveat in a single lilting refrain: "If anyone is sleepy, let him go to sleep."

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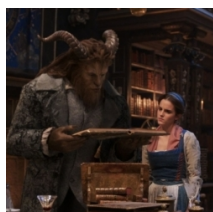


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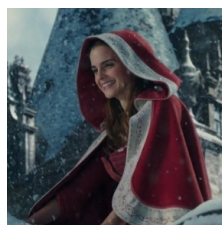
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