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Off-Broadway Review: "Chess Match No. 5" at Abingdon Theatre Company's June Havoc Theatre

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Off-Broadway Review: "Chess Match No. 5" at Abingdon Theatre Company's June Havoc Theatre (Through Sunday April 2, 2017)
Conceived and Directed by Anne Bogart
Reviewed by David Roberts
Theatre Reviews Limited

Now, we don't want to say, "Where do we come in?" or, "Where do we go out?" Because we would like, I think not to leave, but to stay here, now that we're here. – He

There is nothing like watching theatre directed by SITI Company's Anne Bogart. Her attention to detail is unparalleled and her signature staging that includes crisp and precise movement (choreography by the Company's Barney O'Hanlon) is transformative. Ms. Bogart's collaboration with Jocelyn Clarke results in a remarkable production "Chess Match No. 5" (the name of the composition by Darron L. West) currently playing at the Abingdon Theatre Company. This metaphoric world premiere gives Will Bond (He) and Ellen Lauren (She) the opportunity to hunker down (for a time) and – using the powerful trope of the chess game – "talk" the audience through a cathartic "rebirth of wonder" (Lawrence Ferlinghetti).

In the midst of the current political discussion about the possibility of espionage and "foreign" hacking of elections, it is chilling to hear a Cold war numbers station counting in Spanish at the beginning of "Chess Match No. 5" (repeated later in Russian) and be reminded how fragile freedom and safety are in the present and future of the nation and the world.








What might save us is conversation, the "turning with or turning together" two or more individuals, the back and forth of thoughts and words, precisely the kind of words gathered and arranged by Jocelyn Clarke from a variety of conversations John Cage had with the many who "came to speak with him." "Chess Match No. 5" offers a kaleidoscope of the iconic composer and theorist's words that equip the listener to appreciate and navigate the "great variety of musics" extant in the inner and outer environments.

One could spend pages dignifying the delicious set designed by James Schuette (who also designed the efficient and splendid costumes) and delineate the care given by Mr. Schuette to dignify the text and its visceral impact as the audience uses eyes and ears to consume John Cage's sounds of silence. Or one could revel in Brian H. Scott's lighting design that shines with impeccable discrimination on objects and actors. Many of those objects (a radio, a wall telephone, a toaster, an electric coffee percolator, spoons, coffee mugs) emit wondrous sounds at precise moments (and are amplified to perfection) through the sound direction of Darron L. West. However, it is the cumulative sensual assault of these skillful attributes that ultimately matters.

That "assault" is a bristling invitation to reimagine the importance of sound and silence and how those concepts differ – and how they are equivalent; to reimagine the importance of human interaction; to reimagine the possibility that "a time will come when [things] could get better;" to reimagine "the opportunity" "to find new surprises" as we "listen to the sound of the environment, whether it comes from the conveniences in the house or from the traffic outside;" and to reimagine a time when again the center will hold and a future is possible.

With smiles and precise gestures here, a few dances there, and with scintillating words everywhere, the remarkable talents of Will Bond and Ellen Lauren open the door to the possibility for members of the audience to rehearse their own conversations and create their own entrances and exits and the possibility of discovering places they choose not to leave. The number of chess matches is endless. No. 5 is just the beginning. "Chess Match No. 5" encapsulates a life-time relationship into one night and gives the audience member the opportunity to reflect on his or her own journey through significant encounters and the power words have had on those important passages.

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In "Off-Broadway"

Abingdon Theatre Company, under the artistic direction of Tony Speciale, presents the world premiere of "Chess Match No. 5," conceived and directed by Anne Bogart, with text arranged by Jocelyn Clarke from the words of John Cage. The cast features Will Bond and Ellen Lauren.

The production includes choreography by Barney O'Hanlon, scenic and costume design by James Schuette, lighting design by Brian H Scott, and sound design by Darron L. West. "Chess Match No. 5" was developed with support and insight from The John Cage Trust. Production photos by Maria Baranova.

"Chess Match No. 5" runs March 9-April 2: Tuesdays-Thursdays at 7:00 p.m.; Fridays and Saturdays at 8:00 p.m., plus matinees Saturdays at 3:00 p.m. and Sundays at 2:00 p.m. (with the following exceptions, opening on Sunday, March 19 at 5:00 p.m.) at Abingdon Theatre Company's June Havoc Theatre (312 West 36th Street, between 8th and 9th Avenues). Tickets are \$55.00. For tickets, visit abingdontheatre.org or call 212-352-3101. Running time is 90 minutes without intermission.

Photo: Ellen Lauren (She) and Will Bond (He). Credit: Maria Baranova.