

Chess Match No. 5

Theater, Experimental

June Havoc Theatre (at the Abingdon Theatre Arts Complex) (/newyork/theater/june-havoc-theatre-at-the-abingdon-theatre-arts-complex), Hell's Kitchen

Until Sunday April 2 2017 \$\$\$★ ★★☆☆☆ ★★★★★ (1)



Photograph: Maria Baranova

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Theater review by Helen Shaw

The SITI company is an odd place to find a tribute to composer John Cage. SITI (as an extension of its legendary director Anne Bogart) favors rigor, training and long rehearsal periods; Cage was interested in serendipity, turning randomness into method. SITI's style is full of choreographed gesture, finely executed angles, exact articulations; Cage was an iconoclast who thought noise was music. Bogart meets Cage! It could be a battle of the postmodern masters. Watching *Chess Match No. 5* now at the Abingdon Theatre, the hope is that Cage will be a bull in SITI's china shop, that a bit of chaos will break up the company's marmoreal aesthetic. But even as it quotes Cage, *Match* resists him, and the resulting performance is respectful, warm-hearted, lovely...and inert.

James Schuette's set is an elegant room: midcentury chairs and tables, a telephone on one wall, a dense cloud of lightbulbs overhead. On one table near the rear are a coffeepot and a toaster; sound designer Darron L. West hangs microphones low over them, so that we can hear the machines' cheerful little aures and nons. A shinning radio murmurs in English and Spanish, sometimes slewing down the dial into dance tunes. Otherwise,

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but it's somehow moving towards the ambient stuff you hear at the yoga studio.

The 85-minute long *Chess Match No. 5* is in the vein of SITI's other homage dramas, joining *Bob* (on Robert Wilson), *Hotel Cassiopeia* (on Joseph Cornell) and *Score* (on Leonard Bernstein). These works address the worship-object with collage techniques; here, the dramaturg Jocelyn Clarke assembles quotations from Cage's many interviews and turns them into a kind of ur-conversation between He (Will Bond) and She (Ellen Lauren). The two share Cage's text, though She often seems to be a friend or academic drawing He out. She also interjects little one-minute fables of Zen-inspired charm (many taken from Cage's 1959 work *Indeterminacy*), and they play chess, seemingly "for real."

There should be an interesting tension between Bogart and Cage—there's so much that's different, they should come together in a crash. But the SITI method sands and polishes and burnishes 'til there's no salient edge left. Though the piece is about Cage, it doesn't *use* Cage: aside from the chess games, all of Bogart's structures are rigid; the actors always hit their marks; the radio's "random" signal reveals itself as a pre-set recording. "Any training in art is at least a partial training in anarchy!" He says, and laughs. But Bond, a precise and dapper performer, has no anarchy at all in him. (That laugh—you can hear it—was calibrated to the microdecible.) Lauren is also a preternaturally controlled actor, and in the right material these two can seem like gorgeous, oiled machines. But *Chess Match No. 5* is supposed to be about the patron saint of messiness, a quality deeply antithetical to either performer.

"One never reaches a point of shapedness or finishedness," She says, and you know Cage said it just before whipping another metaphorical hammer at some old way of doing things. Meanwhile, you've never seen something so shaped in your life, nor something so bound to a method that was worked out long ago.

June Havoc Theatre (at the Abingdon Theatre Arts Complex). Conceived and directed by Anne Bogart. Text arranged by Jocelyn Clarke. With Will Bond and Ellen Lauren. Running time: 1hr 25mins. No intermission. Through Apr 2.

BY: HELEN SHAW

POSTED: THURSDAY FEBRUARY 23 2017

- Close full review

DETAILS

Venue name:

June Havoc Theatre (at the Abingdon Theatre Arts Complex) (<https://www.timeout.com/newyork/theater/june-havoc-theatre-at-the-abingdon-theatre-arts-complex>)

Address:

312 W 36th St
New York

Cross street:

between Eighth and Ninth Aves, first floor
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DATES AND TIMES

March 2017

TUE
MAR 21

June Havoc Theatre (at the Abingdon Theatre Arts Complex) (https://www.timeout.com/newyork/theater/june-havoc-theatre-at-the-abingdon-theatre-arts-complex?locale=en_US)

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USERS SAY (1) ★★★★★

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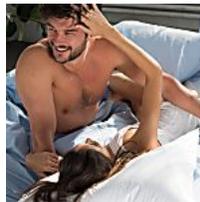
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