

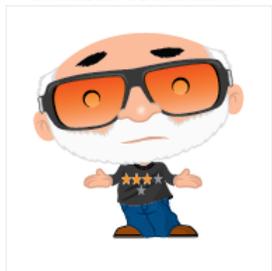
THEATRE'S LEITER SIDE



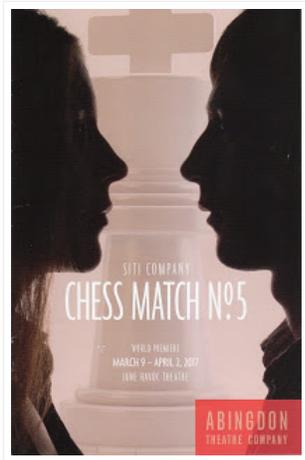
Sunday, March 19, 2017

156. Review: CHESS MATCH NO. 5 (seen March 15, 2017)

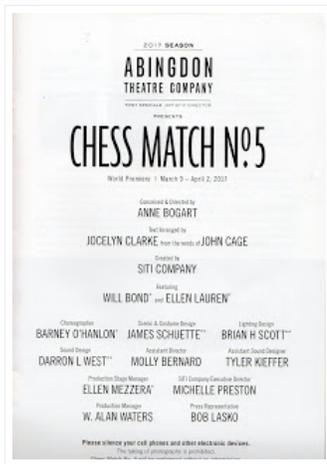
“Sounds of Silence”



S



Chess Match No. 5 is a 90-minute, intermissionless play –or “theatre piece”–about John Cage (1912-1992), perhaps the most renowned and influential avant-garde composer of the 20th century. It was conceived and directed by another famous experimentalist,



Anne Bogart, a co-

artistic director of SITI Company, cofounded in 1992 with famed Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki. It has a text “arranged by” Jocelyn Clark from Cage’s own words. In her program notes, Bogart says that Cage’s “many conversations with friends,

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musicologists, fellow artists and scholars who came to speak with him form the basis of this play.”



Will Bond, Ellen Lauren. Photo: Maria Baranova.

Designer James Schuette has exposed the brick walls of the June Havoc Theatre's stage and painted them glossy black. There is a door upstage. An off-white carpet covers the floor, wall to wall. A folding table with a coffee maker and related implements occupy the upstage right area. A bridge table with a chess set and two chairs is at center. A radio sits down left. Overhead, lighting designer Brian H. Scott has hung dozens of varisized bulbs, some halo shaped. These go on and off in carefully selected ways throughout.

There are two characters, He (Will Bond) and She (Ellen Lauren). He is a trim, middle-aged man, with high cheekbones, in a well-tailored, gray suit. Bond is a reasonable Cage facsimile, although better groomed. She is a middle-aged, bespectacled, schoolmarmish woman in a plain, flowered frock.



Ellen Lauren. Photo: Maria Baranova.

She serves mainly as an interlocutor to get the philosophically inclined Cage, who's more than willing to do so on his own, to talk about his ideas. In fact, since all the words spoken are presumably Cage's, she's probably also another aspect of Cage himself. She serves as a conversational foil and chess partner, sometimes delivering parable-like stories that end with punch lines that suggest Zen koan. (Zen is one of the play's minor subthemes.)

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About Me



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(Theatre), Brooklyn College and the Graduate Center, CUNY. Author/editor of 27 books, including: *THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE NEW YORK STAGE, 1920-1930, 1930-1940, 1940-1950; SHAKESPEARE AROUND THE GLOBE; FROM BELASCO TO BROOK; FROM STANISLAVSKY TO BARRAULT; THE GREAT STAGE DIRECTORS; FROZEN MOMENTS; ENCYCLOPEDIA OF ASIAN THEATRE; KABUKI AT THE CROSSROADS: YEARS OF CRISIS, 1952-1965; HISTORICAL DICTIONARY OF JAPANESE TRADITIONAL THEATRE.* “Back-translations” of *THE LION KING, AIDA,* and *WICKED* for Tokyo productions. Drama Desk Awards Nominator: 2012-2014. Assoc. Editor: *CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF JAPANESE THEATRE.* Blogs: *KABUKI WOOGIE* and *THEATRE'S LEITER SIDE.* (star icons in *THEATRE'S LEITER SIDE* by Justin Leigh Leiter)

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Ellen Lauren, Will Bond. Photo: Maria Baranova.

There's no plot per se although He and She play a lot of chess, using a timer. Although they make it look more or less natural, the actors' movements are generally in straight lines, giving their blocking a precisely timed, directorially manipulated feeling. There are various unrealistic interjections, like a scene in which He and She don pointed party hats or when She delivers amplified lines into a handheld mic. Occasionally they prepare and drink coffee. Sometimes they dance, including a fully choreographed, Broadway-style number (staged by Barney O'Hanlon) to a song on the radio sung by Doris Day.



Ellen Lauren, Will Bond. Photo: Maria Baranova.

Much of *Chess Match No. 5* touches on Cage's controversial theories about the music that exists in the silence around us, exemplified in his most famous works. Silences, often lengthy, particularly during one of the chess sequences, occupy a considerable amount of stage time. The actors continually create from their behavior a quotidian soundscape composed of popping toast, pouring coffee, snapping sugar packets, tinkling spoons, thudding footsteps, scraping chairs, zipping handbags, and the like. Sound designer Darron L West busily adds other sounds, like a ringing phone, radio broadcasts, outside traffic, and so on. When the upstage door opens, a memorably potent blast of outside noise invades until the door is shut.



Ellen Lauren, Will Bond. Photo: Maria Baranova.

The restrained style suggests Beckett (Bond more closely resembles Beckett, in fact, than the actor playing him across town in *Sam & Dede*). Rarely dramatic and primarily intellectual, yet usually accessible, the dialogue covers Cage's thoughts on his work process, aesthetics, music, art, and life; it can now and then be stimulating, even funny. Because of its patchwork structure, the conversations jump around in subject and manner. But since everything spoken exists in a theatrical vacuum where the speakers, regardless of how well acted, are essentially intellectual abstractions, their words frequently become like the sounds that Cage considered music.



Ellen Lauren, Will Bond. Photo: Maia Baranova.

Both Bond and Lauren are exemplary. They make their fuzzy characters pleasant company, providing them with charm and naturalness, giving even Cage's most airy-fairy concepts a sense of clarity and conviction. Still, it's hard not to resist She's repeated admonition: "If anyone is sleepy, let him go to sleep," which is in the script but I now can't recall hearing. Could I have taken her at her word?



Ellen Lauren, Will Bond. Photo: Maria Baranova.

At one point, He and She discuss boredom.

HE: Boredom is not so bad and not really boring, you know.

SHE (to HE): In Zen they say: If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, try it for eight, sixteen, thirty-two, and so on.

Eventually one discovers that it's not boring at all but very interesting.

HE: 75. People are constantly complaining. Every day somebody tells me that things are boring.

SHE: Things aren't boring.

HE: The only one who can speak of boredom is the one who isn't really paying attention.

I thought I was paying attention. Really.

OTHER VIEWPOINTS:

Show-Score.com

Chess Match No. 5
Abingdon Theatre Company
312 W. 36th St., NYC
Through April 2

Posted by **Samuel L. Leiter** at 5:05 PM

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