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Death and the Ploughman: The Eternal Question: Why Does Death Take Who He Does, When He Does?

ATW Review

11/12/2004

Classic Stage Co.

Given the world in which we live, where death can seem, at best, an eventuality that we all must face, and at worst, a horrible and capricious fate, one can understand director Anne Bogart's attraction of Johannes von Saaz' *Death and the Ploughman*, which opened last night at the Classic Stage Company in an SITI Company production. In this medieval drama, a simple farmer, enraged by the passing of his wife, confronts Death, asking why he took this woman prematurely. What ensues is a 90-minute linguistic cat-and-mouse game where the two participants attempt to outsmart the other.

As with all of her productions, Bogart melds the playwright's words (here, a new translation by Michael West) with a distinctive (and often stylized) physicality. In "Ploughman" the trio of performers are found on a square black platform that is edged in white. Behind them, a sepia-hued daguerreotype of Gothic arches looms, seeming to place these three in some sort of ancient hall. This austere design by James Schuette is complimented beautifully by Brian H. Scott's almost lush lighting design that divides the platform into smaller geometric squares in the most intriguing and subtle ways.

As the audience settles into their seats, Death stands upstage clad in bowler hat while the Ploughman and the Woman sit downstage. Each time a chime is heard in Darron L. West's evocative soundscape, the performers break from their motionlessness and assume a new position. Thus, one sees the "death" of the Woman before the play begins in earnest.

Once the debate between Death and the Ploughman does begin, Bogart will continue to have the characters shift between what might be called "normal movement" such as walking, and stylization, running with outstretched arms as if in pain, assuming uncomfortable looking poses. At times, the differentiation admirably underscores the undeniably strong emotions of a moment: for example, the Woman's resignation or gratitude for passing to the next world or the Ploughman's deep grief. More often, though, Bogart's staging feels as if it is simply something to pass the time as the debate (which is ultimately what the play boils down to) languorously unfolds.

While West's translation holds some gorgeous turns of phrase and the company performs with a true commitment to Bogart's vision (Ellen Lauren in particular can be mesmerizing as the Woman), it's difficult to not find "Ploughman" a wearying experience after 30 minutes or so. This is unfortunate as its difficult to not agree with Bogart's program note which compares the changes in philosophy and worldview that took place in the thirteenth century to ones with which we grapple today. One suspects that there is taut drama to be found in the juxtaposition and longs for the tension in "Ploughman."

Death and the Ploughman continues through December 12 at Classic Stage Company (136 East 13th Street) with performances Tuesday through Saturday at 8:00pm. Student matinees are scheduled for November 17 and December 1 and 1pm. Tickets are \$15-50 and can be purchased by calling 212-677-4210. Further information is available online at www.classicstage.org.

-- **Andy Propst**

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