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Death and the Ploughman

by [David Drake](#)



PS - Death and the Ploughman - Ellen Lauren - Will Bond

The Classic Stage Company lives up to its mission to make everything old new again by kicking off their 37th season with director Anne Bogart's wildly theatrical and politically relevant production of Johannes von Saaz's 600-year old *Death and the Ploughman*.

Telling the tale of a farmer whose young wife has died suddenly, the play follows the grief-stricken journey of the widower as he demands some answers from the "Lord Death," himself. And while the story of devastating personal loss is one of the central human dilemmas, it's von Saaz's accosting of the religious hierarchy--in a passionate and intellectually stimulating adaptation, translated from the original German by the Irish playwright Michael West--that makes *Death and the Ploughman* such a pertinent contribution to our country's dialogue on the

cultural and literal wars of our tumultuous time. Furthermore, with director Bogart and her SITI Company's arsenal of stage techniques--dance-driven dialogue, complex soundscaping and meticulously chic set, light and costume design--*Death and the Ploughman* receives the kind of dazzling investigation that probably would've had old von Saaz scratching his head, muttering, "Uh...I wrote that?"

As the audience is seated around the three-quarter-thrust playing area of the CSC, the three actors are already posed on James Schutte's stark black, white and gray set, a daunting projection of medieval cathedral arches hovering over the square-shaped stage. Though not exactly "frozen," the actors seem "caught" in progress--with Death, the Ploughman and the soul of his just-deceased Wife locked in the wake of their separate yet intertwined destinies. This tense stillness will be the only time movement ceases to occur in the play until its final epilogue, when the Ploughman's marathon debate with Death is complete, and he stands before God to make his exhausted prayer for peace.

What ensues between those two bracketing moments of stillness in the 90-minute play is a tour de force of theatrical wizardry. Tumbling, gliding, skipping and kicking through the swirl of words with an endless barrage of mercurial movements, the show is exquisitely performed by SITI veterans Will Bond (Death), Ellen Lauren (the Wife) and Stephen Webber (the Ploughman). Alternately disorienting and soothing, humorous and haunting, the physical language and vocal dexterity of the performers is really a marvel to behold. But that's a hallmark of Bogart's work; it's all in the employment of making the ideas in the story come to life in a visceral manner.

In the end, what lingers throughout the play--as Death makes every effort to defend "our work of grace" while belittling the Ploughman, scraping and clawing his way through all the religious "examples of antiquity" he can in order to make sense of the senseless loss and prepare himself to build a spiritual bridge back to life--is the timeliness of *Death and the Ploughman*. As the humble farmer quests, one wonders anew--with the recent Evangelical victories in the elections tearing away at the freedoms of millions of Americans, not to mention the body bags streaming out of Iraq every week, are these institutions to which we seek a higher guidance really worth praying to?

Death and the Ploughman

Classic Stage Company

Written by Johannes von Saaz, Translated by Michael West

Directed by Anne Bogart

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