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THEATER REVIEW | DEATH AND THE PLOUGHMAN

Troupe gives play fresh life

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THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

People deal with death in different ways, but the end result is the same. While ancient Orpheus descended into the underworld to win back his beloved, a medieval ploughman raged and argued against Death.

Such battles are worth waging because life is worth living, even if love does not conquer all.

New York's SITI Company conquers difficult material to explore poignant matters of mortality in *Death and the Ploughman*, Irish writer Michael West's resonant translation of a 1401 German drama.

At Wednesday's opening in the Wexner Center for the Arts performance space, the latest SITI world premiere in Columbus wowed the crowd with the brilliance and confidence of its staging.

Director Anne Bogart has given fascinating shape and persuasive form to a timeless theme of ineffable beauty, sadness and spirituality.

Here is a prayerful and surprisingly playful marriage of the medieval and the modern.

With the sculptural intensity of a precisely choreographed dance-theater experiment, *Death* recasts timeless questions into a meditation on the ravages of life and loss.

Though strikingly contemporary in its stylized tableaux and dreamlike movements, this ritualistic performance piece honors the Christian metaphysics of a medieval morality play.

Like Orpheus, Will Bond's *Ploughman* is a tragic hero, valiant in his doomed struggle. As he argues with Death (Stephen Webber) over the return of his beloved wife (Ellen Lauren), the *Ploughman* works through a devastating crisis of faith.

Bond's wiry intensity gives palpable force to his grief.

More than the husband, the wife is caught in the middle of the dialectic, which ranges from Shavian debate à la Man and Superman to cocktail banter.

Ellen Lauren's chameleonic Woman shifts from a statue of frozen grief to a wistful ghost of desires past.

Webber's Death — in a black suit and black derby and brandishing an umbrella like an old-fashioned European lawyer on his way to work — projects an aura of debonair mystery. If he weren't Death, he'd be the life of the party.

From the opening moments in which the three actors remain virtually frozen through a series of subtle movements, Death mounts in intensity.

Given the subject and the rigorous style, the surprise is the humor that pops out in freely associative monologues on marriage and the ways of all flesh.

As always, Bogart's distinctive vocabulary of movement, gesture, posture and accented dialogue can evoke mysteries beyond any immediately obvious meanings. That approach works especially well in *Death*, a play about eternal mysteries.

Like other SITI signature pieces but with far more complexity of movement, *Death* comes to life by emphasizing the physical and the cerebral over the emotional.

Under Brian Scott's clinical lighting, no detail is missed — not a glance nor hand gesture.

Darron West's vivid sound design reinforces the action with the driving beat of industrial techno-sounds and Felliniesque melodies evoking a circus of the mournful and the macabre.

In its fifth creative residency at the Wexner Center for the Arts, Bogart's SITI Company approaches its best.
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- The SITI Company will present *Death and the Ploughman* at 8 tonight, 3 and 8 p.m. Saturday and 3 p.m. Sunday in the Wexner Center for the Arts performance space, 1871 N. High St. Tickets cost \$20, or \$16 for Wexner Center members, \$10 for Ohio State University students. Call 614-292-3535.