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A *CurtainUp* Review Death and the Ploughman

by [Les Gutman](#)

Death is not a kingdom you can choose not to enter.
---Death



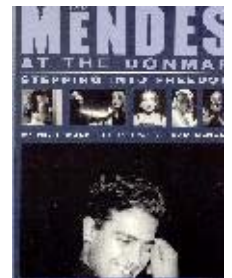
S. Webber, E. Lauren and W. Bond (Photo: Al Zanyk)

The year is 1400 (or thereabouts), and the Renaissance is aborning. Johannes von Saaz, a Bohemian humanist, goes for the jugular, writing a play about that most confounding and immutable fact of life: death. Six hundred years later, we are the beneficiaries of innumerable advances brought on by the Renaissance, yet death -- though sometimes delayed by medicine and science -- remains as inevitable and as perplexing as it was then. Thus, the resonance of *Death and the Ploughman*, said to be having its American debut in this production, persists unabated.

Von Saaz's original play also has a linguistic significance: it is one of the earliest works written in Modern High German. It is nonetheless a work of



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medieval density. Michael West's translation does a crafty job of converting it into quite understandable modern English, without losing its arcane qualities.

Framed as a debate between a simple farmer (Will Bond), whose wife has died young, and the Grim Reaper (Stephen Webber), the play consists largely of aphoristic volleys presented in a series of short scenes (or perhaps long sound bites, if you prefer). The fundamental philosophical, religious and what will later come to be known as psychological meanings of death come into high relief as the certainty of death confronts the uncertainty of "why?" Between the two poles, a woman (Ellen Lauren) speaks, sometimes displaying remarkable clarity and at others a sort of comic relief.

Though this production opens Classic Stage's season, it is in essence a production of SITI, director Anne Bogart's company. All three actors are also members of that company, as are the show's designers. As such, it has all of the hallmarks of SITI's work -- finely disciplined acting, highly stylized images and movement and a procession of powerful effects.

I wish I could say that the overall result is riveting, because there are many elements of it that are, but the emphasis on style over substance becomes repetitive, and the mind starts to wander. Here we have a true language play that needs to be nurtured, not obscured.

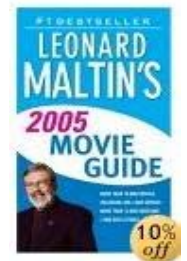
Will Bond is extraordinarily effective. The brilliance of von Saaz's choice of character is underscored by the humanity evident in Bond's portrayal: an unsophisticated man voicing common sense and human nature rather than intellectual argument. In the end, he will win the battle but lose the war: Death ineluctably prevails.

Wound tight and oozing in condescension, Stephen Webber's Death, sporting a bowler hat and black suit, is a study in affect-free superciliousness. Ellen Lauren is solid as the wise but more peripheral voice identified in the program as "Woman". It's not terribly clear who or what she represents: at times, it seems, the wife; at others, a more generic voice of the dead; and at still others, Death's accomplice.

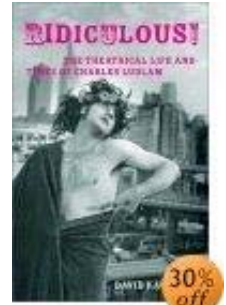
James Schuette designs both set and costumes here. The former is especially fine -- an architectural backdrop scrim in front of which the action plays out on a clean empty surface: a black stage bordered in white on which Brian Scott's lights dance. Darron West's soundscape is exceptional, mixing everything from electronic sounds to medieval choral music.

DEATH AND THE PLOUGHMAN
by Johannes von Saaz, translated by Michael West
Directed by Anne Bogart

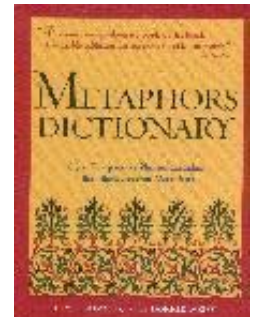
with Will Bond, Ellen Lauren and Stephen Webber
Set and Costume Design: James Schuette
Lighting Design: Brian H. Scott
Sound Design: Darron West
Running time: 1 hour, 30 minutes with no intermission
Classic Stage Company, 136 East 13th Street (3/4 AVS)
Telephone (212) 279-4200
Opening November 10, 2004, closes December 12, 2004
TUES - SAT @8, SAT @2, SUN @3, additional performance 12/12 @7, no



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performances 11/24-5; \$15 -50

Reviewed by [Les Gutman](#) based on 11/04/04 performance



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