

THEATER REVIEW

THEATER REVIEW; Trying to Get the Last Word With the Grim Reaper

By CHARLES ISHERWOOD

Published: November 12, 2004

Looking like a Victorian banker in a trim black suit and bowler hat, the Grim Reaper proves to be an equally spiffy debater in "Death and the Ploughman," Anne Bogart's visually elegant staging of a daunting German text dating from the dawn of the Renaissance.

Written by Johannes von Saaz in 1401, "Death and the Ploughman" is a prose work divided into 34 chapters, alternating the viewpoint of Death himself with that of a humble farm laborer who has a grievance against him: Death has snatched away the ploughman's young wife. Michael West's translation was first staged at the Gate Theater in London in 2002, catching the eye of Ms. Bogart, who with her SITI Company has now produced her own version for Classic Stage Company.

The anguished ploughman, played with convincing intensity by Will Bond, is the prosecutor in this informal trial. He begins his denunciation of mortality with a shrill, bitter assault: "May fear, distress and lamentations follow you wherever you go!" (Perhaps an unnecessary imprecation, come to think of it.) This first monologue concludes with a call for retribution: "O Death, for myself and all mankind, I seek justice."

His opponent, imbued with an amusing, placid cordiality by the bowler-hatted, umbrella-wielding Stephen Webber, takes the high road, trying to frame the debate in less emotional terms. He imperiously points out that, after all, the choice was nothing personal. "We have swept many who were learned, noble, fair, mighty, upright, over the edge of the meadow of life," he says. "Many lands, many peoples have had their due lot of sufferings." He adds pointedly, "They are all silent."

But the persistent ploughman will not be. He continues to pursue his case against mankind's foe, detailing in long speeches the perfections of his bride and the accordingly profound depth of his loss. Death deflects his attacks with calm, rational responses flecked with mordant humor: "Behold the bears and the lions in the wilderness; the horses, valiant and proud; the men, forever skillful, surprising and wise. Behold all these creatures of the earth. How intelligent they are! How beautiful! How strong! How alive!" Then comes the kicker: "They will all die." There's no arguing with that.

Under the crisp, geometric lighting schemes of Brian H. Scott, the debate unfolds on a black lacquered stage bordered in white, the set designer James Schuette's abstraction of a chess board. Ellen Lauren, who moves with an eye-catching, contained forcefulness, joins the game as Death's handmaiden, clad in a white gown; later she will become God himself (or herself), rendering judgment on the contest.

Ms. Bogart's rigorously choreographed theatrical method emphasizes idiosyncratic physical gestures set to eccentric tempos. The actors deliver their monologues while moving between stylized poses at either an exceedingly slow or an unusually fast pace. This results in clean, visually powerful stage pictures that rearrange themselves according to undefinable rhythms.

The confined playing space and the repetitive movement schemes echo the hermetic qualities of the text. The implacable Death will not be gainsaid, after all. Rebuffing the ploughman's violent curses and complaints, he always seems to have the last, coolly logical word. When the ploughman blames him for his suffering, Death throws it back at him: "If you knew not love, you would know less pain."

But the visual allure Ms. Bogart and her collaborators supply cannot entirely surmount the text's intractable nature. Although Mr. West's adaptation is lively, eloquent and even scathing at times ("You air-corrupting, stinking carcass breath!" is one of the ploughman's more vivid ripostes), he cannot entirely disguise its origins in prose. And the staging has its own monotonous qualities. Even when they are exchanging contemptuous curses, the adversaries do not expressly interact, so the argument is never allowed to accrue much dramatic intensity.

The contest concludes with the arrival of God, who renders an even-handed judgment, after which the ploughman delivers an interminable prayer in praise of God's wisdom and mercy. But what's most intriguing about this curious theatrical enterprise is the subversively dark streak it reveals in a text dating back six centuries. God receives all the proper praise, and his great creation, man, leaves with his dignity intact, but the bad guy gets all the best lines.

'Death and the Ploughman'

Translated by Michael West, from an original work by Johannes von Saaz; directed by Anne Bogart; created and performed by SITI Company. Sets and costumes by James Schuette; lighting by Brian H. Scott; soundscape, Darron L. West; production stage manager, Elizabeth Moreau; SITI managing director, Megan Wanlass Szalla; production manager, B.D. White; general manager, Lisa Barnes. Presented by Classic Stage Company, Brian Kulick, artistic director; Jessica R. Jenen, executive director. At 136 East 13th Street, East Village. Running time: 85 minutes.

WITH: Will Bond (Ploughman), Ellen Lauren (Woman) and Stephen Webber (Death).

"Death and the Ploughman" continues at Classic Stage Company through Dec. 12.