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NEW YORK NOW:

OFF-BROADWAY REVIEW

A timeless work that takes its time

BY GORDON COX

Gordon Cox is a regular contributor to Newsday.

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Photos



Death and the Ploughman (Photo by - handout)

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DEATH AND THE PLOUGHMAN. Translated by Michael West from the original by Johannes von Saaz, directed by Anne Bogart. Through Dec. 12 at Classic Stage Company, 136 E. 13th St., Manhattan. Tickets \$15 to \$50. Call 212-279-4200 or visit www.ticketcentral.com. Seen at the matinee Nov. 6.

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Even before "Death and the Ploughman" begins, its three performers enact slow-motion tableaux. They stand on a spare stage and strike abstract poses, shifting infinitesimally at the irregular sound of a chime. When the play finally starts, their precise choreography becomes more vigorous, but its relation to the words being spoken isn't immediately obvious.

It'll seem pretentious and arbitrary, but give it a few minutes. Soon the production's illogical but resonant physical vocabulary will begin to take shape.

In "Death and the Ploughman," written by Johannes von Saaz in 1401, a farmer recently bereft of his wife rails venomously against the figure of Death, provoking a debate that only God can resolve.

The production presents Death as a dapper man with the bowler hat and an umbrella (Stephen Webber). Between Death and the modestly attired Ploughman (Will Bond) ricochets a woman in a simple white dress (Ellen Lauren) - the laborer's dead wife.

Like a ghost, she's often felt but rarely seen. Sometimes she silently perches on a bench behind her husband, but when he whirls around to catch a glimpse of her, she has already twirled away. Death owns her now, a victory he's happy to rub in by having her speak some of his lines, sometimes like a vaudeville ventriloquist's dummy.

"Death and the Ploughman" is directed by Anne Bogart and performed by members of SIT Company, the troupe she co-founded with Tadashi Suzuki. Bogart is best known by theater folk for her embrace of the "philosophy of movement" called Viewpoints, a theory of choreographic dynamics obviously at work here.

Every precisely modulated gesture causes a ripple of reaction, with the three expert performers creating quick-shifting pictures of synchronicity and dissonance. They move on a sleekly minimal stage (by James Schuetz, who also designed the costumes) that is geometrically subdivided by Brian H. Scott's chessboard squares of light and shadow.



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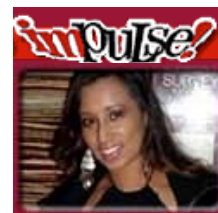
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Darron L. West's complicated, compelling sound design includes bursts of choral singing and old-fashioned blues. Most often, though, it produces an electronically enhanced echo of vastness that, along with the sparseness of the set, underscores the plain existential questions addressed by the play.

The script is, essentially, a philosophical debate composed of competing monologues. A little of that can go a long way, but Michael West translates from the German into a muscular English that helps the actors find emotional heft in each speech. The play wrestles with the mysteries of life, death and faith with such parable-like, trenchant simplicity that it can't help but stay with you, even after the show has ended.

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