

OFF BROADWAY

Not Your Grandma's Theatre

Death and the Ploughman

Theatre Review by [Matthew Murray](#)

In a world of blacks and whites, greys can make all the difference. A slight change in perspective, the subtle shading of a phrase, inflection, or emotion can be all that stands between understanding and confusion, between hope and despair. Other times, those boundaries might not be distinct; in Johannes von Saaz's *Death and the Ploughman*, they're hopelessly blurred.

All that exists is that which can be found in the high-pitched peal of an anguished cry, one of the few sounds capable of traversing the vastest distance known to humankind: the chasm between life and death. It's through the horror, anger, and possibility echoing within this sound that the ploughman of the title confronts Death and questions everything from his methods to his relationship and responsibilities to the human race and even God.

Opposing forces locked in a titanic struggle for understanding - this is eminently theatrical territory. And as translated from the original German by Michael West, von Saaz's writing even proves sharply effective as stage dialogue, at least in its rawest form. But the sleekly detached show at Classic Stage that has resulted from the work of SITI Company, under Anne Bogart's direction, doesn't find all the emotion or biting humanistic commentary it promises.

There are even times when none of the three central characters seems at all human. That might matter little in the case of Death (Stephen Webber) - he's less a physical presence than the ultimate agent of change, one of the universe's few true inevitabilities. But should the ploughman himself be, at heart, a cool figure? As played by Will Bond, he's less a steadfast block of ice than a slowly drifting glacier, temporarily melting into rage or disgust with each new battle with the indefatigable nemesis that has stolen his youthful, loving wife, but always reverting back to his original role of Everyman questioning the universe.

This leaves us somewhat cold, and Bogart provides little ancillary heat; the production registers primarily as an intellectual exercise rather than a dramatic one. The third character onstage, identified only as Woman (played by Ellen Lauren), even sounds like a university professor, glancing and glaring as though over drooping spectacles and intoning grand pronouncements in sonorous, affected tones. She's ostensibly equal parts the ploughman's wife and Death's intermediary (possessing first-hand experience of both sides of their argument), but doesn't register firmly as much of anything.

That might be as much Bogart's fault; she exquisitely filled every second of the production with movement or sound but has been less careful in filling those seconds appropriately. Only during the pre-show minutes do the characters stand still for any significant length of time, and then they're frozen in a tableau - life (and death) at any given moment. The rest of the time, whether executing sweeping arm gestures, twists of the torso, fast-paced cat-and-mouse games, or other near-choreographic movement of less scintillating varieties, the actors barely rein in their bodily manipulations long enough to convince you to listen to their words.

When the performers drop out of dialogue and into song, or when Darron L. West's almost continuous soundscape gives way to underscoring of a whimsical or comic variety (with the actors' vocal tones changing slightly to accommodate), the words receive hardly more focus; it all plays as gimmickry rather than honest expression. Equal - if not greater - enlightenment may be obtained from careful observation of the intricately geometric lighting design of Brian H. Scott, which can define the playing space as a chessboard, a boxing ring, or a prison; James Schuette's set (primarily featuring a greyscale cathedral backdrop) and costumes (of roughly 19th century designs, in varying shades of white, black, and grey) make similarly cohesive thematic contributions.

The actors' declarative line readings and Bogart's overactive determination to hit the audience over the head with the text's meaning allow little room for understatement. Bogart also doesn't encourage much thoughtful contemplation, and assaults the audience with a continual barrage of sights and sounds (ooh, a car alarm; here come more waving arms) without the intensity that might connect it to the questions van Saaz and West ask about the biggest and most uncertain issues human beings face.

Of course, Bogart's director's note in the Playbill refers to the work's historical context as pre-Renaissance writing, pointing out how it "was written...when the theretofore accepted medieval sensibilities were suddenly called into question." Schuette's backdrop and the text's references to God and His powers aside, little of this greater meaning comes through in this production; perhaps Bogart was too busy

staging the forest to see that the trees within were bare?

Classic Stage Company

Death and the Ploughman

Through December 12

Running Time: Under 90 minutes with no intermission

Classic Stage Company, 136 East 13th Street

Schedule and Tickets: 212.279.4200

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