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Nov 11, 2004

NEW YORK

Death and the Ploughman

 Reviewed By: [David Finkle](#)


Ellen Lauren, Stephen Webber, and Will Bond

 in *Death and the Ploughman*

(Photo © Al Zanyk)

Anne Bogart, heading into the 13th year of the SITI Company that she co-founded with Tadashi Suzuki, has done something amazing. She's imagined and staged her newest theater piece, *Death and the Ploughman*, so exquisitely that she paradoxically comes close to suggesting its ideal realization might be impossible to attain. Yet, as an example of Bogart's beliefs about movement on stage, *Death and the Ploughman* is a work rich in elegant rewards.

The raw material for the 70-minute project is Johannes von Saaz's early 15th century opus as translated by Michael West, the playwright whose *Foley* was presented at the Irish Repertory Theatre several years ago. The manuscript is an emotional dialogue between Death and a farmer grieving over his deceased spouse. It was penned in 1401, a year after the author watched his young wife die. In those days, challenging the grim reaper to account for himself just wasn't done -- not when Gothic cathedrals were reaching higher to the heavens and the worshipers hunkering under their newly erected, vaulting roofs were expected to be profoundly awe-struck, respectfully silent.

But Von Saaz, a Bohemian writing in High German, couldn't suppress his inflammatory questions about death's dominion. He put his incipient humanism in the mouth of an affronted common man who's unable to keep his tart tongue still, countering the man's charges with a series of eloquent and insulting responses from Death. Outraged as the dramatist was, he was scrupulous about maintaining a balanced confrontation. When the ploughman curses Death by saying, "May horror and fear cleave to you whither you go," Death responds with "Don't fool yourself that you could even so much as touch the cloak of our magnificence." When the ploughman rants, "May God strip you of power and reduce it to dust," Death replies with "We will prove that the scales are just, that our judgment is just."

The extended exchange is such a fair, if vituperative, debate that the sustained verbal thrust-and-parry becomes the source of the piece's suspense. What will the ploughman say next to undercut Death's impenetrable bravado? How will Death deflect the criticism? Who will get the final word? In von Saaz's writing -- or is it West's treatment? -- there is some repetition. And there's one question that the ploughman never puts, ahem, to Death: "You're telling me how death has operated since before recorded time, but what is your explanation of why it must continue to operate in that manner?" Even though this isn't asked, von Saaz does find an opportunity to give the answer as the denouement nears.

To present the grand encounter in a manner equal to its weight, Bogart does her customary fusion of striking elements. Foremost is her use of three SITI regulars as Death (Stephen Webber), the ploughman (Will Bond), and the ploughman's wife (Ellen Lauren). In this piece, however, it may be inadequate to describe their on-stage behavior as simply "movement." More than ever, Bogart here ventures into the dance realm. She doesn't stage this *Death and the Ploughman*, she choreographs it. Watching the actors as they dart about and then hold themselves still or suddenly contract, some audience members will flash on Martha Graham's style or perhaps recall Edward Villella in Jerome Robbins' *Watermill*. (Others may conjure Bill Viola's Renaissance-painting-influenced videos.)

This is where the impossibility of mounting the perfect *Death and the Ploughman* according to Bogart comes in. For such a piece, Bogart needs dancers, which Webber, Bond, and Lauren -- for all their Suzuki-Bogart training -- aren't. They're committed to what they're doing but, occasionally, there's the fumbled gesture, the shift into position that's not as sharp as it ought to be. Yet if Bogart requires modern dancers for this endeavor, she needs dancers who can act, who can speak with the resonant conviction that these three almost always bring to their speeches. So, where could the intrepid director-creator find true dancers who have voices with the right kind of music in them to deliver these sometimes salty, sometimes honeyed arguments? (By the way, Bogart and West give many of Death's speeches to Lauren, who eventually also delivers God's conciliatory pronouncement.)

From set and costume designer James Schuette, lighting designer Brian H. Scott and sound designer Darron L. West, Bogart gets top-notch contributions. She's worked with these people long enough now that she probably has only to raise an eyebrow or cock her head for them to know precisely what she's after. Schuette's offerings are all black, white, and gray -- like the characters' attitudes. At the back of the playing area hangs a large-scale detail of a cathedral; the floor, on which two black benches sit, is composed of a white border and black and gray blocks that Scott often turns into a game board with his ever-changing light patterns. West, who is credited

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with the "soundscape," earns that designation with a nonstop soundtrack that incorporates ingredients as disparate as battlefront noises and 20th-century blues.

The cumulative effect of the work of these stage magicians is now a chess game, now a church service, now a bow to Picasso's *Guernica*, now a vaudeville sketch. If *Death and the Ploughman* never becomes exactly what Anne Bogart sees and hears in her head, it's close enough to deserve -- as the humbled farmer ultimately offers -- a thankful prayer.



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