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Bogart tries to revive a theatrically comatose dialogue

The Grim Sleeper

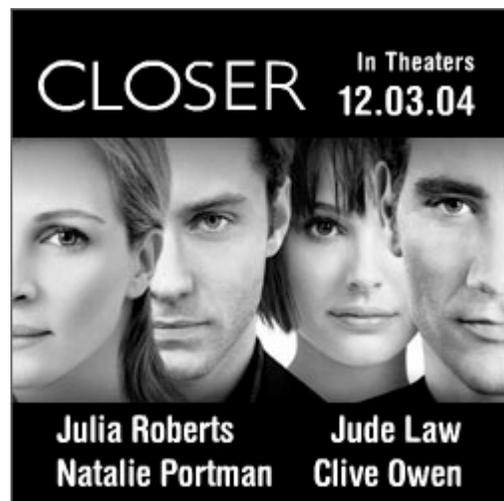
by **Alexis Soloski**
 November 16th, 2004 1:00 PM

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Death and the Ploughman

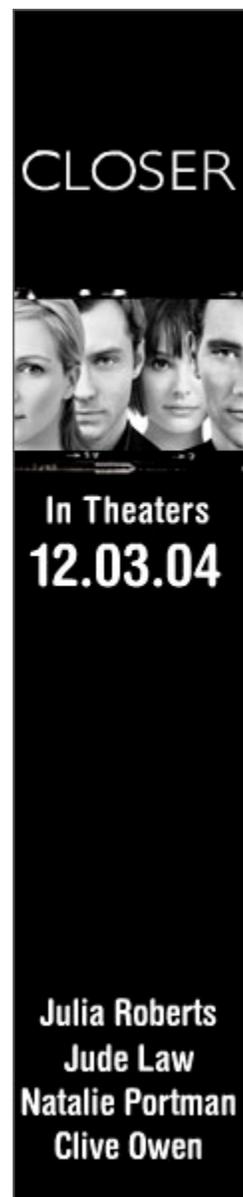
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The Greeks and Romans believed that the gods Sleep and Death were brothers. A recent matinee performance of the SITI Company's *Death and the Ploughman* suggested a near relation. Every moment that the character of Death smirked and stamped onstage, more and more audience members slipped into peaceful slumber. A hot theater and elderly spectators contributed to the torpor, but for an audience faced with remaining awake throughout the intermissionless 90-minute performance, sleep seemed indeed, as Ovid had it, "mildest of the gods, balm of the soul."

Certainly, *Death and the Ploughman* is a fascinating document. A dialogue written by Johannes von Saaz in 1401 upon the death of his young and beloved wife, it encompasses both sophisticated theological arguments and a moving description of a crisis of faith. Yet the text isn't in the least theatrical. Death (a dapper Steven Webber) and the Ploughman (Will Bond) trade protracted, liturgical arguments, unrelieved by the exigencies of action or character or much of anything.

As in most SITI productions, director Ann Bogart complements the language with an arcane choreography of gesture. Though lovely, the swoops and darts don't illuminate or even really punctuate the endless talk. The actors seem to enjoy the complex blocking, but it rarely encourages them to deviate from smugness (Death) or sorrow (Ploughman). Ellen Lauren, as the late and mostly silent wife vacillates between puzzlement and annoyance. Eventually, the quarrel reaches such a standstill that God himself must settle it. Yet even God can't



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much improve the inertia. He decides, "You have both fought well. Therefore, to you [Ploughman] goes the honor. And to you, Death, goes the victory." Since when does God give split decisions?

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Michael Musto will discuss the movie "Alexander" on "The Michelangelo Signorile Show" on Sirius radio's OutQ channel, Tues 11/23 at 430 pm.

Micheal Musto will be interviewed on VH1's "All Access: Awesomely Badder Fashion" Wed 11/24 at 10 pm.

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