

May 5, 2005

THEATER REVIEW | 'SCORE'

Doing Leonard Bernstein, in His Own Words and Acts

By [ANNE MIDGETTE](#)

New York is full of people who can still say, "I knew Lenny," meaning Leonard Bernstein. The show "Score" is not for them.

Not to say that Tom Nelis, the performer in this demanding one-man piece, doesn't "get" Bernstein. Handsome and dissolute, he is alternately brilliant, irritating, likable, superficial, profound and embarrassing. He drapes his jacket over his shoulders, flirts with the audience, feels his pockets for cigarettes, breaks into a hacking cough, repeats himself and segues into a brilliant, moving description of the closing bars of the Mahler Ninth.

And he speaks Bernstein's language - literally. "Score," which opened on Sunday at New York Theater Workshop, is one of a set of monologues about artists and their art by the director Anne Bogart and her SITI company, following "Bob" (Robert Wilson) and "Room" (Virginia Woolf). Like them, it is an adaptation of the subject's own writings, culled by Jocelyn Clarke. The idea is that Bernstein is delivering a lecture - perhaps from the concert stage - on music and his musical life. This is not a biography, but an artist's thoughts about his art.

Fortunately, Ms. Bogart has better ideas about how to incorporate music into the mix than simply having Mahler playing in the background. At the first notes of music, Mr. Nelis, without pausing in his speech, changed his entire body language - not merely into a crass pantomime of conducting, but into a stylized evocation of the way Bernstein's body "thought" about conducting. Music and words co-existed, as if this were a spoken opera; and the juxtaposition of Bernstein's speech and physical movements graphically illustrated how Bernstein could keep many different things in his head at once.

The show has many strengths and some flaws. The deliberate stylization is slightly overdone, driving home the point that this is an actor playing Bernstein rather than Bernstein himself. Those who knew Bernstein (and I am not one) might object, or note that Bernstein was so charismatic and magnetic that Mr. Nelis can only echo him. They could also note that Bernstein, though he desperately wanted to be a deep thinker, was often on shaky ground when he began philosophizing. The show seems to take his words a bit too much at face value as the thinking of a Great Man.

Lenny himself? He would have loved it.

"Score" continues through June 9 at New York Theater Workshop, 79 East Fourth Street, East Village; (212) 239-6200.