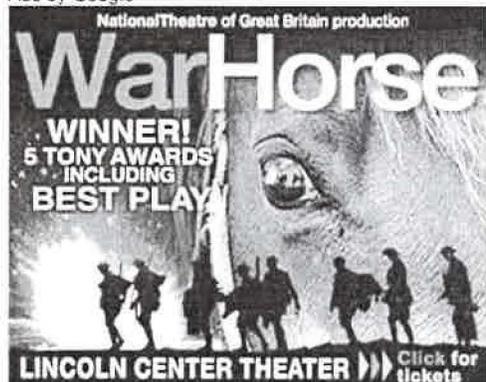


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STAGE REVIEW

## Pairing and unpairing in Anne Bogart's 'Café Variations'

April 18, 2012 | By Patti Hartigan

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She's willing to wait 15 minutes or five years for that certain someone to walk into the cafe and change her life. He falls for her instantly — and literally, tray flying and table toppling.

Girl meets boy, over and over and over again in "Café Variations," director Anne Bogart's highly stylized, sometimes beguiling, and sometimes jarring musical theater piece that is making its world premiere at the Cutler Majestic Theatre.

The book is a pastiche of fragments from the plays of Charles L. Mee Jr., Bogart's longtime collaborator. The subject, of course all its trite sweet nothings and ferocious partings. Thirty actors inhabit the stage, uncoupling to a score of reinvented old standards from the Gershwin canon. The constant sense of longing in the air, but there is also an undercurrent of violence a bouquet of flowers is a token of affection; the next moment, it's a weapon.



Hannah Lehman, Minnie Mottishaw, Greg Bernier, Christopher, Ray Marston

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Working from various Mee plays, Bogart interweaves a series of scenes, all of wh in a cafe. This isn't your tall-double-shot-no-whip-mocha-cash-and-carry cafe, b a set designed by Neil Patel, with lighting by Brian H. Scott — an elegant place w orchestra behind a shimmery curtain and a drop ceiling that changes hue to refle The ladies wear poufy frocks (costumes by Caitlin Ward) with starched petticoat: coordinated shoes. The men are in suits. The atmosphere evokes the high-society Gershwin era, yet the romance is punctuated with an aura of menace and alienat talk of love, the suitors sometimes barely look each other in the eyes.

It's nothing if not ambitious. Bogart and actors from her New York-based SITI C trained 22 Emerson College performing arts students, who share the stage with t They've done their teaching job well, as the young actors are polished and slick. I is played by three people, highlighting the various aspects of the same person. Tl

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with a linear plot, but rather a collection of overheard conversations. It's small tea and raspberry tarts — with full-blown production numbers sprinkled in.

Two of the pairings, however, stand out. One is the bittersweet tale of Tilly (Debra Messing) the gal in the blue dress waiting for someone to watch over her, and the stiff-backed Tom Nelig (Tom Nelig) who volunteers for the part. The other is the saga of Andrew (Leonid Kornyakov) and Edith (Ellen Barkin), an unlikely couple who meet, quarrel, and seduce each other in a ferocious game of cards. (Enough said, but it's jaw-dropping.)

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What's Gershwin got to do with it? Rachel Grimes's new arrangements of tunes like "I Got a Crush" and "They Can't Take That Away From Me" add an extra dose of bitterness and anger simmering in the delivery, even as the actors perform Barney O'Hanlon's sassy choreography.

The juxtaposition of opposites can be jarring. When an actor utters some clichéd line like "Oh, happiness," she spits out the words like too much bitter coffee. The feeling of "Rough" is like a kiss with a fist. Some of the dialogue aspires to the existential — "I want to take to the other side?" "Why can't you find all people in one person?" — flat. Bogart has written that Mee is exploring "the notion that we become who we are through our relationships to other people and the environment," and the environment here is certainly sparkling, and the ensemble is tight. But as one character says, life is just a "constellation of moments," and that is what the piece ultimately is — a "bunch of moments," some convincing, some not. Even so, the final tableau will break your heart.

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