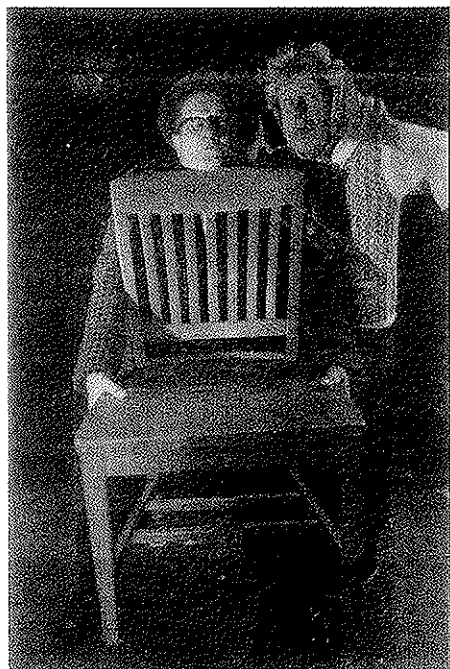


Performers face unseen challenges in Ionesco's *The Chairs*

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BY JOHN SANFORD

The *Chairs*, by Eugène Ionesco, features hundreds of characters. But most of them are invisible: This presents a special challenge for both the actors and director of the comic-absurdist play, which the Stanford Summer Theater is presenting on campus through Aug. 12.

"You have to move the invisible people somehow, and give them character and relationships and purpose and motivation," said director Aleksandra Wolska, an assistant professor of theater arts at the University of Minnesota who earned her doctorate at Stanford. "I first need to direct the invisible people; the visible people are responding to their actions.



Jarek Truszczyński (Old Man) and Geoff Hoyle (Old Woman) star in *The Chairs*, appearing through Aug. 12.

So, you see, it's just a reverse, strange, roundabout way of approaching character building."

But for the Stanford Summer Theater (SST), these kinds of thespian challenges are part of the fun. The theater group takes its craft seriously, even though *The Chairs* should result in plenty of laughs for the audience.

"We try to pick a play that is, for lack of a better word, great," said Rush Rehm, an associate professor of drama and classics here. Rehm said he and his SST collaborators gravitate toward established works that aren't often performed or, perhaps, were written by a playwright who has fallen out of fashion. The goal, he explained, is to be "rooted, but on the edge."

For its inaugural season, in 1997, SST staged Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*. In 1998, the group collaborated on an original play, *When the Shark Bites*, for the centennial of Bertolt Brecht. It was a cabaret piece built around the playwright's testimony to the House Un-American Activities Committee and one of his early plays, *Elephant Calf*. The group didn't produce a play in 1999 but returned in 2000 with *Waiting for Godot*, featuring the same cast that appears in *The Chairs*.

So far, the plays all have been modern, although the group is considering a Shakespeare piece or an adaptation of the Faust story, among other ideas, for next year.

"Alex [Wolska] has an idea for *The Tempest* which is pretty different, so it would be a very different Shakespeare when we do it," Rehm said.

Rehm and Continuing Studies Program Dean Charlie Junkerman hatched the idea for the theater group about five years ago. Wolska and Polish National Theater veteran Jarek Truszczyński joined Rehm in developing the summer theater project, and, since then, the three

have formed the production company's core creative engine.

The Continuing Studies Program subsidizes the summer productions and collaborates with SST to organize a one-day symposium. This summer, the symposium takes place July 28 and is titled "Fool's Gold – Ionesco and the Theater of the Absurd." (Space is still available; registration is through the Stanford Continuing Studies Program.) It will bring together nine renowned actors and theater scholars, including the cast and director of *The Chairs*, for a mix of lectures, discussions and performances. A French lunch will divide the day's events. The symposium concludes with a performance of the play.

This summer also marks the first year of the Stanford Theater Discovery Institute, a three-week program designed for high-school students interested in exploring theater, dramatic literature and performance practice taught by SST members and university staff.

Absurdist theater

In *The Chairs*, an elderly couple reminisce about their lives, greet a horde of invisible guests and, ultimately, throw themselves out of two windows and leave a third – but visible – character, the Orator (Rehm), who is charged with delivering the Old Man's supposedly revelatory message.

During a recent rehearsal in Pigott Theater, Wolska, along with Truszczyński, who plays the 95-year-old man, and Geoff Hoyle, who plays the 94-year-old woman, were figuring out how to stage one of the play's later sequences, in which the Old Woman begins to sell invisible programs to the guests. The couple is hemmed in by the unseen crowd and, more tangibly, roughly 50 chairs; maneuvering around the stage has become a feat of dexterity.

See IONESCO, page 5

Ionesco

continued from page 1

At one point, Hoyle's character drops some invisible change. Positioning himself upside down between two chairs with his feet above his head, Hoyle turned its retrieval into a contortionist sight gag. A long, maroon skirt he wore slid down his legs to reveal low heels, brown socks and white, hairy calves.

"There are tricks of the trade in terms of using space to create an invisible reality, and pantomime is one way that happens," Hoyle said. "But at the same time you have to maintain the relationship between the real characters. It's difficult. It's almost like the physical language is as tangible as the verbal language."

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Hoyle said.

And while the gymnastic ability displayed by the 55-year-old actor and clown (he served in the immortal Pickle Family Circus) may be rare among nonagenarians in the real world, in the Theater of the Absurd, where Ionesco

Performance Details

Performances are scheduled for 8 p.m. Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays and 7 p.m. Sundays in Pigott Theater, formerly Little Theater, next to Memorial Auditorium. A matinee is scheduled for 2 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 11.

Tickets are \$20 (general admission) or \$15 (with any valid student ID) and may be purchased at the Stanford Ticket Office, by calling (650) 725-ARTS or by going online to www.stanfordtheater.org.

made his creative home, it's not surprising at all. Like Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet and other luminaries of the genre, Ionesco, who died in 1994, eschewed logical plot lines; the overarching theme of his plays could be chirpily summed up as the meaninglessness of existence.

Later in the rehearsal, Wolska instructed Truszczyński, midstage, to move as though underwater through the unseen horde. He proceeded to weave around the chairs as though at a crowded cocktail party.

"Generally, you have to deal with other actors, but, in this case, we have to create their egos. They come alive by our actions," Truszczyński said. "You react to them, listen to them, make spaces for what they say. And, you know, they get angry – we fight. We have all sorts of things going on – love affairs, and memories." SR