



Jarek Truszczyński (left) and Geoff Hoyle star in "The Chairs."

Come sit down

Stanford Summer Theater presents a solid performance of
'The Chairs'

by Laura Reiley

Many of them are no-nonsense bentwood café chairs. Several are fussy cane-seated ladder-back chairs. There's one Louis XV upholstered number that looks worse for the wear. These are the co-stars, hoards and interlocutors of "The Chairs," Eugene Ionesco's 1952 tragic farce and this summer's offering from Stanford Summer Theater.

Aided and abetted by the furniture, Geoff Hoyle and Jarek Truszczyński tell the story of the loss of memory, loss of momentum and the loss of dreams that circumscribe old age for so many people. Hoyle, as Old Woman (in a brilliant and understated drag performance), and Truszczyński, in the role of Old Man, struggle through a single evening, awaiting the Orator who will explain and perhaps dignify their long lives to the assembling crowd, played solidly by the chairs.

With the tics and shorthand of a longtime married couple, Hoyle and Truszczyński eloquently spin out the allegory of human life wasted that seems common to so many absurdist plays (the same troupe explored similar ground last summer in "Waiting for Godot"). They ruminate, cast about in their memories, blame each other for past failures (Old Woman, wistfully: "You are very gifted, if only you'd been ambitious.") and, finally, wait.

What saves "The Chairs" from high-minded tragedy is director Aleksandra Wolska and the actors' devotion to physical comedy. As the invisible crowds assemble, doors flap open and closed like something out of "Poltergeist," and Hoyle and Truszczyński perform a hilarious *pas de deux*, dragging out more chairs and arranging them to suit their guests, all the while maintaining a light banter with the visitors and keeping careful track of each other.

Like Old Man and Old Woman, the guests remain largely unnamed — Mr., Mrs., Belle, General — and none is given any flesh, physically or metaphorically. They represent the machinery that Old Man has set in motion, unable to stop if he wanted to. At the end of their lives,

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tucked away on a remote island, Old Man needs desperately to deliver his message to the world, and Old Woman needs him to do so just as desperately to justify her own lifelong dedication to her husband.

As one waits with the crowd for the Orator to come and deliver his message, one can't help but hope the revelation can in some way redeem Old Man's professional disappointments.

Of course, you can't be too hopeful. In the course of the play, Old Man's words range from the banal — "I betrayed my mother" (isn't that a condition of being an adult human?) — to the ridiculous — "In order to prevent the exploitation of man by man, we need money." Despite Old Woman's adoration, Old Man doesn't seem sharp as a tack.

Unfortunately for him, the Orator comes too late, arriving when the chairs are all "empty" and Old Man and Old Woman have gently extinguished their long lives by backing out of two open windows. The Orator (Rush Rehm) rushes in with his briefcase and papers and looks out over the chairs, silent.

What would he have said? That is left for the audience to sit and wonder about. ■

What: "The Chairs," presented by Stanford Summer Theater

Where: Stanford University's Pigott Theater (formerly Little Theater), situated next to Memorial Auditorium on Memorial Way

When: Through Aug. 12. Performances are 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday; 7 p.m. Sundays; 2 p.m. Saturday matinee on Aug. 11.

Cost: Tickets are \$20 general admission; \$15 students.

Info: For tickets call (650) 725-ARTS or order online via www.stanfordtheater.org.