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Theater review



Jarek Truszczyński and Geoff Hoyle play a married couple in Eugene Ionesco's absurdist farce "The Chairs."

STANFORD SUMMER THEATER

Ionesco

according to Hoyle

VERSATILE ACTOR EXCELS IN STANFORD'S 'THE CHAIRS'

By **Karen D'Souza**
Mercury News

Go ahead. Just try to wrench your eyes away from the stage as Geoff Hoyle transforms himself into a piteous old woman. I dare you.

His spine stooped, his wrists coiled primly in his lap, Hoyle's characterization starts with the body and then goes deeper. It's as if his whole being trembles with wordless beseeching. Whatever the alchemy at work, this consummate local actor turns in a hypnotic performance in "The Chairs" at Stanford Summer Theater.

If there's a role this actor can't play, it's beyond all reckon-

ing. Over the years, the chameleon has leaped from a tramp ("The First 100 Years" at Berkeley Rep) and a talking bird ("The Lion King" on Broadway) to, now, an archetypal, 94-year-old matron.

His sublime bit of shape-shifting lights this macabre game of musical chairs, a 1951 masterpiece from the father of the theater of the absurd, Eugene Ionesco. Welcome to an existential limbo where claustrophobia can engulf an empty space.

It all starts harmlessly enough with two waxy elderly figures sitting in chairs staring

THE CHAIRS

By Eugene Ionesco

The upshot: Run, don't walk, to snag a seat for this sublime dispatch from the theater of the absurd.

Presented by: Stanford Summer Theater

Where: Pigott Theater, 511 Serra Mall, Stanford University, Palo Alto

When: 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays and 7 p.m. Sundays (with one additional 2 p.m. performance on Saturday Aug. 11)

Through: Aug. 12

Tickets: 1 hour, 35 minutes (no intermission)

Price: \$20 (\$15 seniors and students); (650) 725-2787, www.stanfordtheater.org

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out the window into the looming nothingness. But little by little, anarchy leaks onto the scene and their relationship starts to unravel.

She carps. He cringes. They cling together. Night after night, they sing the same duet of futility, loneliness and despair. If only the old man (Jarek Truszczyński) could speak his peace to the world, he could change the course of history.

Alas, when company finally starts to arrive, chaos breaks out. One by one, the old woman hoists chairs into the room until the couple can barely catch sight of each other in the tangle of furniture.

Of course, all the guests are invisible, but that doesn't mean they don't exist. The visitors represent society and the predatory demands it makes on the individual. Obstacles between people spring up in an instant but soon become immovable. Pretense rules.

While the characters make reference to Paris, where the exiled Romanian playwright made his home, the themes are universal and the time period ambiguous. As Ionesco once said, "It's not a certain society that seems ridiculous to me, it's mankind."

Director Aleksandra Wolka plumbs this dark farce for every bit of insanity and humanity. No matter how warped the plot gets, how bizarre the events unfolding, she keeps the play firmly grounded in the reality of how people behave.

Hoyle and Truszczyński, a Polish theater veteran, seem to tap straight into the psyche of these characters. They find truths that hold even in this twisted void and lose themselves in the rhythms of an old married couple that happens to pull up front-row seats for the decline of civilization.

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