

'The Chairs' lives up to genre, theater of the absurd

By Keith Kreitman
CONTRIBUTOR

It is difficult to believe that any one, including directors and actors, fully understands Eugene Ionesco's play "The Chairs." It truly lives up to its genre: theater of the absurd.

Nevertheless, as presented by the Stanford Summer Theater and directed by Aleksandra Wolska, this 1952 two-character, one-act play is a knockout, if only for the stunning performance of Geoff Hoyle as the Old Woman.

A short advertisement for this production could read: "See Geoff Hoyle outdo Alec Guinness in facial expressions! See Geoff Hoyle match Buster Keaton for pratfalls! See Geoff Hoyle's impeccably controlled movements and gestures."

Hoyle's eyes alone speak a global theatrical language of their own and, in combination with all of his other mime talents, justify his growing reputa-

IF YOU GO

"The Chairs"

■ **Presented by:** Stanford Summer Theater

■ **Where:** Pigott Theater, next to Memorial Auditorium, Stanford University

■ **When:** 8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday, 7 p.m. Sunday, 2 p.m. Aug. 11; closes Aug. 12

■ **Tickets:** \$15-\$20

■ **Call:** (650) 725-2787

tion as one of the greatest comic performers in the Bay Area and one of the best in the nation.

This does not detract one iota from the performance of Jarek Truszczyński as the Old Man. He is a veteran of the famed Polish National Theater in Warsaw, who manages to hold his own in the brilliant light of Hoyle's stage persona.

Settling in Paris in 1938, Romanian-born Ionesco became convinced of the absurdities both of bourgeois values and the way of life that they dictate.

His plays reflect his views that humans live futile and ridiculous lives, inevitably subject to unpredictable forces out of their control. Additionally, the playwright is obsessed with the conviction that humans cannot really communicate with each other.

Much of this is reflected in "The Chairs." What is most interesting is how Ionesco does not allow these themes to become morbid. This is a genuinely witty and upbeat work.

True, it opens with a sleep-inducing introduction to an elderly married couple living out their days alone on an island, filling up the emptiness in their lives with memories of events, imaginary or real, chances at greatness, missed or not.

The play then moves on to a side-splitting invasion of invis-

ible guests, who may or may not have come at the husband's invitation to hear his final message before dying. Burlesque humor is unleashed.

Struggling to accommodate the unseen guests (or ghosts, if you will) including his mother, a lover and even the Emperor, the elderly pair struggles and staggers to bring in enough chairs to accommodate the invisible hordes pouring through the doors. Soon, the stage is filled to the overflow.

"Who are all these people?" the wife pleads as she staggers across the stage with a new load of chairs.

One of those interventions of fate that concerns Ionesco occurs here, when the Orator, who the husband may or may not have hired to present his final words, can't even get on to the stage through the crush of invisible guests in order to vocalize his document and the pair depart this world blithely believing that the mission had

been accomplished.

Great plays require great actors and directors in order to communicate with sophisticated audiences and that is what we get here in this production by the Stanford Summer Theater.

"The Chairs," will never garner the huge audiences of a "Grease" or "Death of a Salesman," but it is still a very rewarding experience for those who wish to stretch their intellect and imaginations and experience the work of a great playwright.

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