

IONESCO'S 'THE CHAIRS' GETS STUNNING PERFORMANCE

by Lucy Komisar

American Reporter Theater Critic

("The Chairs." Written by Eugene Ionesco. Directed by Andrew Dallmeyer. Starring Bart Vanlaere and Louise Seyffert, with Shane Gelinas. New York: The Piano Store, 158 Ludlow St./below Houston. 212-420-1466. \$12. www.todoconnada.com. Through Feb. 15.)

NEW YORK -- This stunning performance of Romanian playwright Eugene Ionesco's classic, "The Chairs," is a tour de force for Bart Vanlaere and Louise Seyffert, actors from Belgium and Holland, whose Vanguard Productions has an international audience.

Their "Chairs," directed playfully by Andrew Dallmeyer of Scotland, was on the Theatre Hit list of the Edinburgh Festival last year

and, appropriate to its junction of tragedy and farce, plays here in a tiny Lower East Side storefront theater where hardly a dozen people can fit into tightly-wedged wooden seats.

Ionesco, who wrote for the French avant-garde theater, created "The Chairs" in 1951. It was staged in Paris the following year, at a time when European intellectuals were expressing their disillusion at the wartime horrors they'd just lived through. (That first performance played to only eight people.)

The play is part absurdist comedy, part sorrowful (Groucho) Marxian commentary on human illusion and failure, about the self-delusion that people embrace to give meaning to their lives.

Two old people in their nineties live isolated on an island where the man is a caretaker. We hear the sound of water lapping against the shore. The woman seems slightly blowsy in a housedress and tousled hair. The man wears a workman's coat and black beret. She reminds him of his lost opportunities: "If you only had ambition!"

He reverts into childishness, sitting on her lap while she comforts him: "I'm your wife; I'm your mommy, now." Distracted, he begins literally running circles around her and the two peeling wooden chairs on which they sit.

But then they enter into the game which has become the center of their lives. They are holding a grand meeting to which very important invited guests will come. Getting ready, they pull chairs from the closets, from behind doors, from an upstairs gallery. Do you doubt anyone will come to that island? Suddenly a doorbell rings, a boat horn sounds. Hurrah, the guests are arriving! Even "His Majesty."

While waiting for "the orator" who will make the speech, the old man gives his own message to the world: "Save the world!" "One truth for all!" "I have the absolute knowledge!"

Dallmeyer directs the play with sensitivity as wild, affectionate slapstick; circus music makes the frantic chair dispersion seem like a mapcap clown chase. Seyffert is nothing short of astonishing, as she moves from wheedling to flirtatiousness to bawdiness to wifely support. Vanlaere is a worthy partner, desperately vacillating between depression and fantasy.