

*The Chairs*  
By Eugene Ionesco  
Golden Theatre  
45th Street and Broadway  
239-6200

BY MICHAEL  
FEINGOLD

YOU WOULD THINK the same might be true of *The Chairs*, 40 years old and infinitely familiar. But you would be reckoning without Simon McBurney, whose Theatre de Complicite is currently presenting the noisiest, shoddiest, most overblown, and most relentlessly overexplained staging Ionesco's modest, mordant little parable is ever

likely to receive. Normally running about an hour, and presented as half of a double bill, *The Chairs* has been padded out with elaborate sound effects, trick settings, ornately unfunny comic business, and smarmy updatings (courtesy of Martin Crimp's ungainly, verbose new translation) till it runs nearly half again as long, crawling past six or seven false endings before it finally reaches a finish not called for by Ionesco.

An ancient couple lives in isolation in a tower on a barren island. The husband has invited the world to invade their loneliness long enough to hear his final "message" to mankind, as delivered by a professional orator. Though the invited throngs arrive, the Orator is the only other character we see; the eager guests are represented by rows of empty chairs, hauled onstage by the faithful, supportive wife. Having greeted their prestigious guests, the old couple swear eternal love and then throw themselves out of the tower's two windows into the sea, leaving the invisible crowd to the Orator, who turns out to be a mute, making only meaningless sounds.

However you read this prickly and disturbing text, the one thing it obviously isn't is an evening of raucous, lowbrow fun. The challenge for the two actors who play the old couple is to make us believe in the constantly expanding crowd, with every increase in its size expanding their self-aggrandizement and simultaneously increasing their jitters. McBurney's erratic rhythms and gadget-cluttered movement—requiring not only chairs that arrive of their own accord but a double for the old lady—overload the action with so much superfluous junk that the double suicide hardly seems different from any other event—just more jumping around and shrieking.

Even actors of the highest integrity wouldn't stand a chance against collaborators this eager to grind the sense of a play into hamburger. If I approve, marginally, of Richard Briers, it's because he at least tries to make the inanelly disparate things he's asked to do seem to emerge from one persona present throughout the performance, which puts him several miles ahead of Geraldine McEwan, whose shrill and seemingly random sequence of variety acts is a dismal display on the part of someone who used to be an actress. I am old enough to remember McEwan's *Lady Teazle*, which was a soundly conceived and thoroughly delightful performance; she's apparently old enough to have forgotten how such things are done.

Incidentally, *The Chairs* is a fairly common phenomenon everywhere but Broadway. The Pearl Theatre's '96-'97 season closed with it, and another production, by Anglo-Dutch visitors, is currently on an extended run at NADA. Anyone interested in seeing what Ionesco actually wrote would be better advised to look downtown. □

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BY EUGENE IONESCO

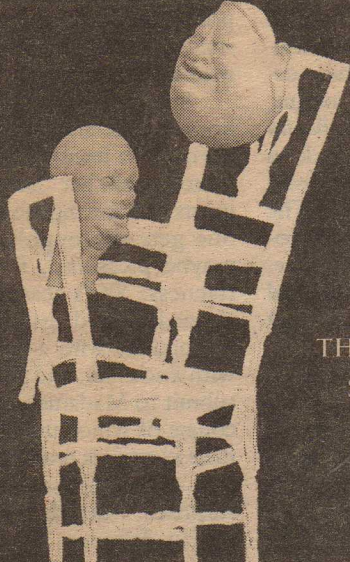
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# THE CHAIRS

BY EUGENE IONESCO  
VAGABOND PRODUCTIONS

Directed by Andrew Dallmeyer

with: Bart Vanlaere, Louise Seyffert and Shane Gelinas

VILLAGE  
VOICE  
↙

