

An absurdist play fails to withstand the test of time

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The Chairs, by Eugene Ionesco, directed by Benedict Andrews, Company B Belvoir, Belvoir St. Theatre, Sydney

The recent Company B production of Eugene Ionesco's *The Chairs* in Sydney provides an opportunity to reassess some aspects of absurdist theatre. An exhaustive analysis is beyond the scope of this review; it is rather a preliminary attempt to understand why a play that was once acclaimed for its innovation has lost most of its impact.

The Company B production of the play has remained faithful to the spirit of the original, with some minor alterations to the dialogue, such as references to property developers and banks to make it supposedly more relevant to contemporary society. However, these are minor things. The more relevant point is why Ionesco's play—first produced at the Theatre Lancy in Paris in 1952—doesn't resonate on a profound level with contemporary audiences.

The play opens with the Old Man (Peter Carroll) and his wife Semiramis (Lynette Curran) in their house, which is like a lighthouse surrounded by water. She sits on a chair in the centre of a sparse stage making a streamer to hang on the wall. He shuffles a cleaning cloth across the floor. They have been married for about seventy-five years. They engage in some banter and reminisce about their years together. She begs him to tell her the story about their early years, all the while reproaching him for his lack of ambition:

Semiramis: You're so clever. If you'd had just a little ambition in life, you might have become a General Editor, an Attorney-General, a General Postmaster-General ... Oh dear, all swept away under the bridge ... under the great black bridge of time ... swept away, I tell you ...

Old Man: And then we arri ...

Semiramis: Oh Yes! Go on with the story ...

Old Man: And then we arrived and we laughed till we cried to see the funny man arrive with his hat all awry ... it was so funny when he fell flat on his face, he had such a fat tummy ... he arrived with a case full of rice: the rice on the ground all awry ... we laughed till we cried ... and we cried and cried ... funny fat tummy, rice on a wry face, flat on his rice, case full of face ... and we laughed till we cried ... funny hat flat on his fat face, all awry ...

Semiramis: [By this stage both have worked themselves up into fits of laughter] ... arrived on his rice, face all awry, and we cried when we arrived, case, face, tummy, fat, rice ...

Together: And then we arri. Ah! ... arri ...

The dialogue continues in this vein throughout the play, increasing in intensity and absurdity. In the course of this conversation, which veers at first between melancholy and hysteria, the Old Man reveals to his wife that he has invited an Orator (Aurel Verne) to deliver an important message that he has been working on that will save the world.

The guests invited to hear the message are due that evening and this snaps the old couple out of their reverie and prompts some frenzied activity that lasts until the play's end. Semiramis darts in and out of the several doors at the back of the stage, lugging out chairs for the guests. As

the guests arrive they are greeted by the couple, who are the only ones who can see them—as the latter are invisible. Their presence is evoked by the proliferation of chairs on the stage.

The old couple and their guests exchange (one-sided) greetings and are in constant dialogue which consists of absurdities, contradictions and some sexual innuendo. As the stage fills with chairs, the elderly man and woman become separated. The King of Kings appears in the form of tinsel decoration that drops down on a string from the centre of the stage. The old man and woman are awed by this presence. The Old Man makes banal references to political ideologies, philosophy (he announces his belief in the inevitability of progress, for example) and other supposedly socially relevant and profound insights.

Finally the Orator arrives to deliver the message that will save the world. Believing their task is over, the old couple jump through the windows to their watery deaths. With the spotlight on him, the Orator stands in front of all the chairs and mutters some incomprehensible grunts. He continues grunting as the spotlight fades, ending the play.

Despite the spirited and energetic performances of the actors, the problems with the production are bound up with the play itself. There is only so much that a director or actors—no matter how talented and dedicated—can extract or produce in the way of something concrete and moving from a work that is largely moribund.

Yet Ionesco's plays in the post-war era were celebrated as a significant departure from previous theatrical form. In the post-World War II period, the absurdist or semi-absurdist such as Ionesco, Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter were heralded as the new avant-garde. It was not a tightly-knit group that was ideologically bound together, but rather a school of thought that was rather loosely associated through theatrical innovation. Their aim, more or less, was to demarcate themselves from the traditional realist form of theatre that had prevailed in Europe up to that period.

Ionesco in particular objected to what he disdainfully referred to as the "committed" theatre of Bertolt Brecht, Jean-Paul Sartre and other plays that contained social commentary. He considered this type of theatre mere political propaganda. He also loathed the American Broadway productions and the ideologically driven theatre of some realist American playwrights, as well as the "Socialist Realism" decreed by the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy.

What Ionesco sought to achieve through absurdism was a type of autonomous theatre, untainted by ideology and subordinate only to theatrical idiom, to create theatre sufficient unto itself. Most of his plays lack plot, characterisation and linear time frames. There are virtually no plays in Ionesco's oeuvre—with the exception perhaps of *Rhinoceros*, albeit in a limited way—that contains a single, psychologically developed character.

The absurdist outlook is encapsulated by Martin Esslin in his work *The Theatre of the Absurd*: "The hallmark of this attitude is its sense that the certitudes and unshakeable basic assumptions of former ages have been swept away, that they have been tested and found wanting, that they have

been discredited as cheap and somewhat childish illusions.”

Ionesco, born in Romania in 1912, rejected all political ideologies as equally dangerous and claimed that to provide explanations for horrific events such as the Holocaust was to excuse such actions. He rejected both the consumerist and intellectually vapid ideals that supposedly characterised American values in this period, and he loathed Stalinism, equating it, like many artists and intellectuals, with the inevitable outcome of a struggle for Marxism.

Ionesco’s propensity for introspection, nostalgia and melancholy seem to be a result of the horrific events he witnessed as a child, such as the brutality of the fascist Iron Guard and its supporters in Romania, as well as a dysfunctional family life. His father was apparently an outright opportunist in his personal and social life who, at one point, supported fascism, but was willing to accommodate himself to whatever regime came to power. His mother seemed to have been somewhat emotionally unstable; married to a man who was rather cold—and who wound up divorcing her without her knowledge while he was in Romania and she in Paris.

Ionesco spent much of his childhood in Paris—his happiest period according to his memoirs—with his mother and siblings, before returning to Romania in 1925 to finish his schooling after his father took custody of the children. He studied at the University of Bucharest and returned to France in 1938, remaining there until the end of his life in 1994. Having published some poetry and criticism, he did not begin writing plays until 1948.

Embarrassed by the “realistic” performances of actors, he was fascinated by the puppet theatre of his youth: “The spectacle of the *guignol* held me there, stupefied by the sight of these puppets who spoke, who moved, who bludgeoned each other. It was the spectacle of life itself which, strange, improbable, but truer than truth itself, was being presented to me in an infinitely simplified and caricatured form, as though to underline the grotesque and brutal truth.”

Absurdism, though, did have a history in theatre. It was first introduced by Alfred Jarry in the late nineteenth century. His *Ubu Roi* plays satirised the petty-bourgeoisie and the bourgeoisie. His grotesque and absurd characters committed gross, outrageous acts. The element of protest, however, was somewhat lost because of the extreme outrageousness of the characters and their situations.

Everything about Ionesco’s absurdist theatre seems to be subordinate to theatrical idiom or expression, and while a concern for theatricality is a necessary and vital preoccupation for any playwright, it suggests that technique can somehow make something grand out of the essentially limited and retrograde ideas that underlie most of Ionesco’s plays, including *The Chairs*.

Ionesco subordinates his unconscious processes of creation to the conscious striving for an absurdist theatre as he defined it. In other words, the spontaneity of life, the logical and organic trajectory of some situations or characters in his plays, is circumscribed by the limitations of the absurdist criteria as a form of theatrical innovation. Whatever effect his plays had at the time, and they were seen and interpreted as anti-establishment, their “anti-bourgeois” character is of a decidedly shallow variety. *The Chairs*, for example, as is the case with most of his plays, reproduces only the most superficial and external characteristics of social relations, mannerisms and attitudes. It does not probe beyond external appearances to reveal a deeper understanding or curiosity about the plight of humanity and its supposed absurd existence.

It is not difficult to see why such radical theatrical form had a certain appeal during the post-war, post-Holocaust period. Language was deliberately distorted and meaningless, episodes and objects were organised to show the impossibility of communication and, above all, Ionesco’s plays argue for the absence of any meaning or logic to mankind’s predicament. In limiting himself to theatrical innovation

without a more profound understanding of the historical and social processes that produced the traumas of the twentieth century, Ionesco settled for an immediate and visually and aurally startling impact, which is rather limited and short-lived.

In the case of *The Chairs*, the proliferation of empty chairs and absurd dialogue with invisible guests is juxtaposed to the old couple’s reality as a means of conveying the vacuity of everyday existence. Absence or emptiness seems to be more concrete and meaningful than the absurd flesh and blood characters.

Ionesco himself provides an interpretation of what his theatre aspired to: “It was not for me to conceal the devices of the theatre, but rather make them still more evident, deliberately obvious, go all-out for caricature and the grotesque, way beyond the pale irony of witty drawing-room comedies. Comic effects that are firm, broad and outrageous. Everything raised to paroxysm, where the source of tragedy lies. Avoid psychology or rather give it a metaphysical dimension. Drama lies in extreme exaggeration of the feelings, an exaggeration that dislocates flat everyday reality. Dislocation, disarticulation of language too.”

Ionesco’s mouthpieces are lacking in social and historical context. The characters are interchangeable, not only within a given play, but virtually within the entire body of work. Ionesco attempts to reconcile the old couple’s rootlessness and sense of isolation with their meaningless existence, but it is difficult to transmit these sentiments and feelings through such vacuity. Empty characters cannot genuinely arouse sympathy or compassion. In the final analysis, what is captured is not the lifeblood of the couple and their spiritual angst, but the mere idea of anguish: and it can only be Ionesco’s idea, not theirs.

Language and props facilitate change in Ionesco’s plays, but this also signifies little because “all these differences are nothing, since naught multiplied by any number is still naught. And Ionesco’s people are at bottom just that: just blanks, emptinesses moving eerily amid a stage full of furniture which is far more real than they; voids or deadnesses temporarily galvanised into action, temporarily decked out with clothes and faces and ‘personalities’” (“Eugene Ionesco: The Meaning of Un-Meaning,” in *Aspects of Drama and the Theatre*, University of Sydney Press, 1965, p.23).

Ionesco presents human beings through his artistic prism as simplistic caricatures, at their most petty, brutal and ugly, unaware of their own absurd existence. The pessimism or cynicism is not relieved by any strong sense of protest or belief in the possibility of change. On the contrary, Ionesco’s personal opinion about the struggle for progress and human emancipation contains a world weariness that finds expression in almost every one of his plays.

The playwright says: “[D]o not attempt, by means of art or any other means to improve the lot of mankind. Please do not do it. We have had enough of civil wars already, enough of blood and tears and trials that are a mockery, enough of ‘righteous’ executioners and ‘ignoble’ martyrs, of disappointed hopes and penal servitude. Do not improve the lot of mankind if you really wish them well” (E. Ionesco, *Notes & Counter Notes*, p. 110).

What did Benedict Andrews, the director of the recent Sydney production, hope to reveal to his audience? The production had an aura of quaintness about it. The sentiments expressed seemed to belong to a bygone era and the theatrical devices also seemed to lack freshness. In short there was little new, either in ideas or technique, to capture the spirit or imagination of the audience. In part this may be because we are now in a period of extreme social and political upheaval in which people are seeking answers to the many complex and serious problems confronting humanity. *The Chairs* suggests that all social and political problems are an eternal, inevitable and unsolvable riddle. How can this help, or even appeal strongly?

In an otherwise glowing review in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Bryce

Hallet concludes by commenting that “*The Chairs* may not be as startling or as confronting as it once was but it remains imaginative, amusing, inquisitive and sad.” Similarly John McCallum in the *Australian* ends with: “But, overall, Andrew’s revival of this 52-year-old classic of the so-called theatre of the absurd shows that it lives on in its silent moments and not in its talk. *The Chairs* was always a great idea rather than a great play.” If the play sheds no new artistic light on the human condition, if it fails to sensitise the audience to its own situation, then what are its outstanding aesthetic merits?

Whatever elements of opposition and non-conformity *The Chairs* may have possessed, even if only through its radical form, have now been drastically muted. An abundance of chairs and deliberately meaningless conversation no longer shock or provoke. There seems to be little correlation between the ideas expressed in the play and the problems or situations that confront us today. There is a sense of resignation, a lack of intensity in *The Chairs* that reduces it to something of an experiment in form that seems sadly passé.



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