

Tragic farce where nothing is everything

First night

Michael Billington

The Chairs
Royal Court Downstairs

NOTHING, said Lear, will come of nothing. Not true in the case of Ionesco's *The Chairs*. "The theme of the play," said the author, "is nothingness." But Simon McBurney's brilliant new production, jointly presented by Theatre de Complicite and the Royal Court,

shows how Ionesco's vision of life's essential meaninglessness is itself exuberantly theatrical.

That is the paradox at the heart of this classic of fifties Absurdism. A nonagenarian couple live in a circular island tower. They fondly reminisce, play games, pass the time much like Beckett characters. But the Old Man has a message to deliver which hordes of guests, existing only in the couple's fevered imagination, assemble to hear. And the message itself is entrusted to an orator who turns out to be mute and who inscribes senseless words on the wall.

Ionesco's philosophy is bleak and debatable: that existence is a void, religion and ideology useless and communication impossible.

But Ionesco contradicts his argument both by transmitting his despair and by showing the old couple bound together by a touching, indissoluble loyalty. Above all, he makes his vision of emptiness abundantly theatrical.

McBurney seizes on this to give us 90 minutes of sheer theatrical bravura. The Quay Brothers' design, Paul Anderson's lighting and Paul Arditti's sound conjure up a complete world: we hear

constantly lapping water, the old couple occupy a metallic, multi-doored, mouldering room and the arrival of the guests is a superb display of orchestrated frenzy. Bells, hooters and klaxons sound while panels and doors disgorge tangled chains of chairs in surreal profusion. It is the most startling *coup de theatre* since Daldry's *An Inspector Calls*.

But McBurney's production, Martin Crimp's agile new translation and Richard Briers' and Geraldine McEwan's performances also bring out the play's paradoxical humanity. Briers is no se-

nile grotesque but a solemn, overgrown baby swivelling his head in dismay at mention of the word "geriatric" and petulantly stamping his foot at the need to deliver his message.

McEwan meanwhile endows the mothering Old Woman, for all her wrinkled stockings and mane of profligate hair, with a wonderful friskiness: imagining herself seduced by one of the guests, her hands caress her waist in a sensual reverie.

Ionesco called his play "a tragic farce", and this production perfectly captures that paradox.

Chairs Billington Guardian



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