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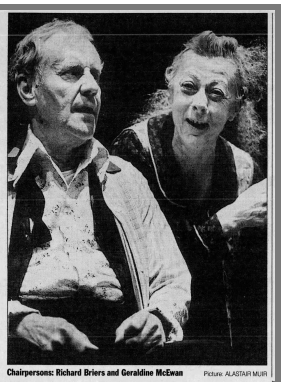

Chairpersons: Richard Briers and Geraldine McEwan Picture: ALASTAIR MUIR

Old man Briers sits in comfort in the weirdest French farce of them all

IT IS far and away the weirdest French farce of them all. The set for Eugene Ionesco's The Chairs may require even more exit doors than those needed in a Feydeau farce to save panicking adulterers from being caught in the act. But in this Eugene Ionesco play, the characters are stirred not by the drives of sexual desire, but by a dance of death. It's not, though, a piece to be taken altogether seriously, despite its sombre denouement — being possessed by a blackish, mad-cap humour and aptly described by Ionesco as a tragic farce. Sadly Simon McBurney's Theatre de Complicite production misses the tragic, over-emphasising the farcical.

McBurney is obviously determined to put fresh comic stuffing into The Chairs and to suppress its hard, tragical material. What a mistake! The play needs a delicate balance of both elements. Its ninety-something old couple, a caretaker and his wife living in a bare, circular room which is surrounded by water, are figures immersed in fantasy-land. They are admittedly comic in their preposterous imaginings: for they expect and then welcome a crowd of distinguished though always invisible guests to listen to a professional orator delivering the old man's message to humanity.

The play builds to a frenetic climax of excitement and agitation, with a chorus of bells, chimes and buzzers signalling the arrival of the visitors. The couple are then engaged in a rush to fill the stage with chairs, obsequiously engaging in the oddest party chatter. "D'you like my petticoat," simpers Geraldine McEwan's lurid Old Woman, with her wild whisps and plaits of hair, who has already put her petticoat and pelvis in far too public view. The arrival of the Field Marshal — "What a heavenly uniform," drools Miss McEwan — is only surpassed for excitement when the Emperor himself arrives in a blaze of light.

The Quay Brothers' stage design, a dilapidated set of doors and high brown walls powerfully evokes a sense of emptiness and decay. Ionesco deals with the pathos of a senile couple surprised by time, trying to redeem their empty, futile lives with last fantasies of glory. Richard Briers's vain Old Man, with blank eyes, deferential manners and the flustered enthusiasm of an elderly school boy out of his depth is always endearing. But he crucially misses the senile fellow's sense of pain at a life which has rushed by like a train with nothing in it.

FIRST NIGHT

by Nicholas de Jongh

The Chairs
Royal Court ★

Miss McEwan, artificial, arch and affected in voice and manner, swoops upon the role and tortures it out of shape, like a cat playing cruel games with a mouse. The Old Woman becomes a grotesque turn, her wistful longings ignored, her affectations overdone. McBurney's production, helped by the jaunty Nineties swing of of Martin Crimp's new translation, is dynamic, physically exuberant and spectacular, with startling scenic surprises. But it's too frivolous.

Ionesco's play is a prime, post-war example of that now highly unfashionable movement — the Theatre of the Absurd — which saw the world darkly as a limbo from which human communication, reason and God had all vanished. The Chairs is a tremendous though terrifying vision of old age and senility, and the dreams within it. Not that you would know from this production.

Ratings: – ○ adequate
★ good,
★★ very good,
★★★ outstanding,
● poor

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