

The Chairs



Some works of art have no beginning and end, they just keep going around and around. Eugene Ionesco's absurdist play "The Chairs," is such a work, in which an Old Man and an Old Woman try to tell a story that appears to have no introduction or ending, beginning (and terminating) with the phrase "then at last we arrived."

A Noise Within's recent production of "The Chairs" features the talents of Geoff Elliott and Deborah Strang, providing an ambience of a play with no absolutes, no definite conclusions, no real ending, but an entertaining and indeed absurd milieu in which the audience can immerse itself.

For a play that doesn't really start, the audience merely feels a compulsion to get into the state of mind of the characters. The Man (Elliott) and Woman (Strang) are telling themselves the same story day after day, and when he thinks he remembers the end about "the end of the end of the city of Paris," neither of them remembers what happens in the road to that end. He later calls this endeavor "the further one goes, the deeper one sinks."

The Man has an inflated sense of what he is trying to do. On one hand he has the grand design to give the great message to humanity that will answer everything, but on the other hand, he can't take care of his son Aramis, and let his mother die in a ditch and instead went to a ball. He acts like an Orphan with the Woman and repeatedly calls her his "mama." His big ego came up with the name of "general factotum" for himself, but he has no idea where he is going since being "cast out of the Garden." Elliott is masterful in recreating the deranged yet all too human 95 year old. He is able to give the big grand speeches about learning much and absolute certainty that makes those endeavors seem naive and absurd, but he is also childlike in his air of demanding more and more from the Woman and from his guests. In many ways, Elliott's portrayal is that of a spoiled child, which is what this play is suggesting modern human beings are.

Although the Woman's chief role is to tell her husband how great he could have been if he had been more ambitious, she also has to get his ego up by telling him that his life fascinates her. Of course, she also takes salt to forget all the stories told to her the day before so she can remain in the eternal cycle of going nowhere. Strang has a wonderful knack for making imaginary things seem real. She brings chairs to the stage by going through various doors, and is able to provide a sense of stability to counteract the ever exuberant Elliott.

As the "plot" moves forward, we are introduced to more invisible characters like the Lady and the Colonel, to whom the Man laments of "the snows of yesteryear." Then Belle arrives with her husband the Photo-Engraver. While the Man pronounces renewed love for his former lover Belle, the Woman flirts with the Photo-Engraver, who brings a "painting" to the gathering. The Emperor arrives to great fanfare (from the Man and Woman) with his dog, as the Man obsequiously kneels before him. Even journalists come to await the arrival of the Orator (Andy Stokan), who is to tell the crowd the Message that is to by itself save humanity. Stokan's performance is superb as well, as he gives the gibberish in a most serious way, taking autographs and writing on "angel food blah blah" on a chalk board.

Soon after, the play ends, and you'd barely noticed that it even started. Those invisible guests,

however, have become real thanks to the constant prodding of Elliott and Strang. A play seemingly without beginning and end does possess one thing: its own flavor.

"The Chairs" is performed at A Noise Within (<http://www.anoisewithin.org/>) in Glendale, California, until 21 of May, 2011.