"To the world, or rather to those who are left" A Director’s Journey into Ionesco’s The Chairs

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“To the world, or rather to those who are left”

A Director’s Journey into Ionesco’s The Chairs
“To the world, or rather to those who are left”

A Director’s Journey into Ionesco’s The Chairs

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts on Drama

By

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This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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Abstract

The following is a journal documenting my process directing Eugene Ionesco’s *The Chairs* at the University of Arkansas in Spring 2015.

The chapters include the script selection process, casting, analysis, design process, rehearsal process, and production evaluation.
Acknowledgements

To my parents, Ebtisam Al-Amin and Marwan Sawaf for their belief in me and ongoing support from afar.

To Anthony Tassa, the first person who recognized a theatre artist in me and started nurturing it.

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To the faculty and staff at The Department of Theatre at the University of Arkansas for providing an opportunity for me to grow artistically.

To Amy Herzberg & Bob Ford, for their ongoing love and support that never stopped one second since the day I met them.
Dedication

To a Damascus I knew, or to what is left of it… with my love.

The Chairs would not have been possible without the wonderful cast, crew, production team, family, and friends.
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I. The Production

The Chairs by Eugene Ionesco was produced by the University of Arkansas’s Department of Theatre in the Studio Theatre from April 2 through April 5, 2015, for a total of 4 performances as part of the Kimpel Studio production series. We started rehearsals on Sunday, March 8, 2015 and rehearsed 4 hours a day; during the week of Spring Break we rehearsed 8 hours a day.

The team included two graduate actors playing the roles of the Old Woman and the Old Man, an undergraduate in the role of The Orator, three graduate designers, a professional sound designer, a professional text coach, and undergraduates serving as stage manager, assistant stage manager, and assistant sound designer.

The Script

According to Ionesco’s Notes and Counter Notes, The Chairs was written in 1951 and first premiered at the Theatre du Nouveau Lancry on 22 April 1952. The first production was directed by Sylvain Dhomme. It was received poorly by the audience and closed after the minimum thirty-day run. According to reviews, the production was dull and indulged in the gloom that the text suggests. The director didn’t take many of the suggestions Ionesco had made regarding the script, including the number of chairs to use, the sobbing of the Old Woman Ionesco wanted in different parts of the play, and the use of an exaggerated style of acting.

A revival directed by Jacques Mauclair in 1956 was received more warmly by the audience and had a successful run. This production was able to capture the farcical sense of the play more and achieved what Ionesco asked for in The Chairs.
The Play Selection Process

When I proposed The Chairs as a title to direct, I didn’t know it was going to be my thesis production. I was proposing titles for a second year show as I didn’t have a regular second year production in grad school due to the civil war experience in Syria and its impact on my life.

I sent many proposals to my advisor Michael Landman, and one night I finally decided to propose The Chairs. I had delayed putting forth this title, for while I was passionate about it, I was also scared of it. I proposed two shows that were particularly important to me: The Chairs and Mother Courage. Each of them touched my heart in its own way.

During the season selection process Michael Landman asked me how I felt about directing the show as my thesis production in Studio 404. After much consideration, I was on board for The Chairs as my thesis.

After the show was selected, I felt nothing: not happy, not sad, just nothing. It was just a moment of stillness and not feeling anything, and not caring, as I was still sunk in war-related problems.

But then, during the summer, I visited my country, Syria, and took the script of The Chairs with me. One day in Damascus I went to a store that was closed; while waiting for it to open, I sat in a coffee shop nearby and started reading the play. I remember hearing in my head a specific part of the script in a totally new way:

The Old Woman: Paris never existed, my darling.
The Old Man: That city must have existed because it later collapsed into ruins. It was the city of light, but then it was extinguished, extinguished after four thousand years. There is nothing left of it now, except a song.
The Old Woman: a true song? That’s funny. What song?
The Old Man: A lullaby, an allegory. Paris will Always be Paris. (Ionesco 8)
Suddenly the play took a huge shift for me, and I had a new understanding of the old couple’s suffering and longing for their city of Paris. By the time I had finished re-reading the play, the store where I was originally going to shop suddenly exploded and I realized that I had just survived death by reading this play. One of the lines at the end of the play that made me sob uncontrollably as I witnessed this was “We leave a trace, because we are people and not cities” (Ionesco 79).

The play then to me became about leaving a trace and being remembered. I saw a parallel in the old couple and my city that was being destroyed. I remember at that moment that all I was wishing for was to survive this trip and be able to tell this story and direct this play.

**Preparation Process**

After I returned to the U.S. in June, I started reading everything I could find about *The Chairs*. I borrowed many books that covered Ionesco’s life and absurdist theatre. I knew I had to learn a lot about this world before I could even try to approach it. All of the reading I did was extremely helpful, but none was sufficient. I found myself spending time with readings that confused me intellectually and took me nowhere, since they didn’t cover ways to approach the style of the play. There was so much written about Ionesco and about *The Chairs*; I didn’t know how to digest it all.

It was great to have all summer to devote to reading and learning and meeting the play again. I spent several nights hearing the words of the play in my head, then laughing and crying at the same time. Knowing about Ionesco’s life, background, and his parents’ relationship (which in many ways resembled some elements of the old couple’s relationship) helped me a lot. I read about Ionesco’s first exposure to death when he lost a brother at a very young age. Knowing this
helped me better understand about Ionesco’s inclusion of death as a theme and why it’s repeated in his work. He wants his characters to be ahead of death and end their lives by choice.

Later on in his life, his mother sent him to live with family in the French countryside; his two years in La Chapelle Anthenaise (Mayenne) was the most peaceful time of his life. That place is arguably what Ionesco refers to as the garden in The Chairs.

The research I did about Ionesco and his life started creating points of understanding for much of the script of the play. In Lane’s, Understanding Eugene Ionesco, the author suggests that Ionesco wanted to write about nothingness in The Chairs, and that he wanted to express absence by expressing presence. For example: he juxtaposed many physical chairs onstage with the absence of people. I observed a variety of these kinds of juxtapositions in the play, including movement and stillness, and sound and silence. I started thinking about how I would work to achieve these dynamics in the production.

During part of the summer, I visited New York City for the first time and watched a tape of the 1998 Broadway production of The Chairs, produced at the Golden Theatre and directed by Simon McBurney. The production I watched was well-developed, beautifully designed, and wonderfully acted. It was exciting and greatly helpful to watch a strong production of the show since there were many bad ones available online. It helped even further that I had already developed my vision and understanding of the show before I watched that production, in that I wasn’t focused on recreating that production but rather on creating my own.

My preparation process also included reading reviews of previous productions of the show to learn what did and didn’t work. After reading many reviews, I realized that there were a number of unsuccessful productions of this play. One review in particular remained in my thoughts throughout the production process. It said the actors and directors did very well but the
script felt dated and there was nothing to be done to make it work. It also said that this was an opportunity to reassess the validity of absurdist theatre pieces and their ability to still work for a contemporary audience. This scared me and suggested a greater challenge; however, I didn’t share the critic’s opinion. I felt that the words and story still lived well and that it was my job, along with the artistic team, to awaken it in our theatre space.

I also contacted some artists who had worked on the show to see if they could offer any advice, one of whom was Annie Elias, the director of The Chairs at the Cutting Ball Theatre in San Francisco. She generously corresponded with me on several occasions. An important piece of advice she offered was “Make sure the actors are truthful moment to moment even if they contradict themselves later. Everything they say is truthful in the moment.”

I realized that because the play contains so many contradictions, we would have to establish a world where stories are told differently, where truth only lasts for a period of time because memory is selective, and where characters play games and tell stories to pass time.

Choosing The Translation

Choosing the right script translation was a little tricky, especially since English is my second language. I chose a translation by Donald M. Allen and asked for the scripts to be ordered. However, as I continued my research process, I came upon a new translation that I liked even more. The translation was unpublished and had been written specifically for the 2013 production of The Chairs at The Cutting Ball Theatre in San Francisco. I contacted their artistic director, Rob Melrose, who was also the translator of the script, and finally got an okay from him.

However, this started a long process of contacting the Ionesco estate and waiting a couple months before we were given permission to use Melrose’s translation. In my eyes, his translation
was more successful than other scripts in capturing Ionesco’s wordplay. Ionesco intended to mold and play with the language and to explore all of its ups and downs, and the successes and failures of words.

**Text Work**

When I first picked this play, I had a conversation with Kathy Logelin, an actor and a text coach in Chicago, whom I met through her work at TheatreSquared in Fayetteville. Kathy heard about my passion for *The Chairs* and was interested in being part of the process. She offered to be my text coach, doing so without compensation. Naturally, I thought this would be a great opportunity. I didn’t know at that time how much text work would be needed, but I thought having a voice like Kathy’s in the process would be helpful. Kathy and I started chatting almost daily about the play. Sometimes we would chat for two or three hours at night about one section of the script. It was great to have a sounding board to hear my ideas and thoughts, and to laugh and cry with me about the play. We would read some sections aloud and discuss them. Kathy’s experience with text helped cover my lack of knowledge in that area, especially regarding English grammar and punctuation. Later in the process, Kathy was a great help in working with the actors (particularly Nate) to unlock some of the text. She helped him find the beats and rhythms to clarify events, and she helped him discover and emphasize the rhymes and verbal wordplay.

It was helpful that Kathy and I had already been communicating so extensively because she knew what I was looking for. She understood that I wanted some sections to play as humorous, and she was able to identify how to work with the actors and find techniques for approaching the text to achieve the desired results.
While I was working with Kathy on the English translation, I also asked some French language experts for help. I was in close touch with Kaitlyn Butler, a student of French, whom I asked many questions about the French text. One of the main questions that the actors and I had was whether ellipses in French had the same meaning as they did in English, which is an unfinished thought. Kaitlyn inquired with some of her professors and did some research to confirm that ellipses in French had exactly the same meaning as in English.

I also asked an acquaintance, the actor Jaime Patriarca, who lives in France and speaks French fluently, to translate some of the interviews with Ionesco that I thought could be influential in understanding his ideas and themes. I found out that Ionesco emphasized that he wrote plays about learning to live rather than waiting to die, and that his work was always about fighting death and not waiting for it. This made me strive to find hope in the text of *The Chairs*.

**Directorial Approach**

The fact that I had advanced actors helped a lot in giving me confidence to tackle this process and script. However, I still needed to come up with a strong plan for what I needed to work on with each of them individually and as a duo.

There were many questions living with me at the beginning of the process, such as: Who is the Orator, and how do I approach his character? How do I find the balance between the clown elements of the characters while also keeping them grounded and humane? What is the appropriate style of acting in this show and how do we get there?

A piece of advice that Amy Herzberg, the Head of Acting, gave me in approaching the style of acting was: “Create the world of the play and establish clear rules, be specific with it, and ask the actors to live truthfully in that world.” Doing so would get us to the style of acting
that we needed. Amy also suggested I read a book called *Acting with Style* by John Harrop and Sabin Epstein. The book helped me find a way to approach the needed style of acting. It suggested giving permission to give into the emotional journey of the work and follow the experience of the play rather than trying to find a straightforward arch:

> Absurd drama is not concerned with the representation of events, the telling of a story, or the depiction of a character as much as it is the presentation of individuals within a situation in such a way as to communicate their experience of existence. The plays tend to be many-layered poetic images that have to be intuited in depth rather than rationally followed through a linear development in time. The situation is full of activity, none of which, however, changes the situation in the least. (Harrop and Epstein 249).

Reading this about the style of the show gave us permission to focus on creating the experience of the characters and keeping the truthfulness of the situation, while letting go of trying to make logical sense of all of the text or finding a typical arch for the play.

I also planned to recruit people to stand in for our invisible guests. For the most part, this was a big help to us to have specificity for dealing with invisible guests.

I played some improvisational games with the two main characters to help bring about more trust and knowledge of their partners. One of those games included hiding an object in the room and having one of them blind-folded while they looked for it together. It was moving to see them protecting and taking care of each other while they looked for the object. Later on the focus of the game shifted to telling them there was an object to find - even though I hadn’t actually hid anything - and having them look until they lost hope of finding the object and their focus shifted to entertaining themselves and each other, which is an integral part of the play. I also read some books with improvisational games and talked to improv teachers who recommended helpful games. The hard task was finding the right games and connecting them to what the characters needed in the script.
II The Process:

Auditions and Casting

During the initial auditions, at the beginning of the Fall 2015 semester, I watched many wonderful young talents. However, I doubted that many of them could actually carry a show like The Chairs. I similarly started doubting my show choice in an educational environment and worrying beyond words about casting the main two roles.

In callbacks I was able to figure out who could handle the dense text, who could play the improvisational games, and who could do the extensive movement work. I had a callback that dealt with a challenging section of the script as well as a fun section that dealt with the invisible guests and movement. I also started throwing diverse elements at the actors auditioning to test their abilities to multitask and put their focus in different places. Even the best actors in the department were struggling to handle the text, talk to the invisible guests, and keep the humor on the surface while having a sense of tragedy alive in them. I started to think outside the box and considered hiring professional actors if I wasn’t going to be able to cast the right student actors.

I was happy with the work of a few of the M.F.A. actors who were able to handle many or all of those elements. There were many who were great individually on stage but the challenge was to find a couple with the chemistry I was looking for, who could also be sensitive to their shared history. I needed two actors who could really feel safe with each other, pay attention to each other, and pick up each other’s cues.

I was also looking for a contrasting casting choice for The Orator, relative to the old couple, because I saw The Orator as someone who didn’t belong to their world. I looked at a pool of undergraduates and Colin Bennett was my first choice because he is much taller than the
lead actors I had in mind and I thought that would be a fun physical dynamic with which to play. During the callback he offered strong, bold choices that stood out to me.

This was without a doubt the hardest casting process I had in my grad school experience. Because my show wasn’t on the main stage, it didn’t have the same priority weight as those shows. However, I repeatedly reminded the other directors that this was my thesis show. I was extremely worried about this casting process, during which the two shows on the main stage requested one or both of the two actors I most wanted.

I found a charming chemistry in Laura Shatkus and Nate Stahlke. I thought they would be an interesting couple due to their fun energy. I similarly thought Jason Shipman would be fun to cast with Laura. I was also looking at casting Britney Walker-Merritte. The choice was difficult and finding a good couple was extremely tough.

When the casting negotiations started I hoped for the best. A few days into the callbacks I learned that I’d be able to get my first Old Woman choice of Laura Shaktus, and then I was just looking for a man who could match her abilities and have good chemistry. Both Nate and Jason were under strong consideration for the main stage show The Cherry Orchard, so I started looking for a way to hire a professional male lead. I knew that the role of the Old Man would be a big challenge and a crucial element to the success of the production. During the negotiation period, Amy contacted me saying that she had spoken with Kate Frank (director of The Cherry Orchard) and confirmed that I would be able to have Nate for The Chairs and that I would share him with The Foreigner.

On that same evening I saw both Laura and Nate; Laura said she was excited and scared and wouldn’t want it to be any other way for her last show in graduate school. Nate walked up to me, shook my hand and said, “I’m ready to change the world with you. I know it will be hard but
let’s do it.” At that moment I was sure that this would be a very special process for me and for everyone involved.

**Design Process**

I was excited and anxious to start the design process. I met with most of the designers one day for lunch, and we just talked about the play. They had many thoughts and ideas and were filled with excitement to hear my thoughts and interpretation of the play. I felt blessed to work with designers who were filled with so much enthusiasm. I had many mock production meetings with my mentor, Michael Landman, and my directing colleague, Brandyn Smith, and I kept adjusting and re-adjusting until I was ready.

I finally had the first production meeting on November 26, 2014, which happened to be a day before Ionesco’s birthday, which I personally considered to be a sign of good luck. I made some Syrian food and brought it to the meeting because I wanted to create a friendly environment and celebrate the coincidence of the playwright’s birthday. The meeting went very well; I thought everyone was excited and looking forward to the process. I talked about my passion about the show and I listened to the designers’ responses about the play. The meeting was a recap of our discussion during lunch and an expanding on some ideas and bringing the mentors into the process. They shared their collages and their reflection to the play and we brought the mentors into what we had discussed before. I requested we stick to Ionesco’s ground plan as much as possible, despite the inherent challenges of the small Studio 404 space.

I shared with the team that the play felt to me like the couple was surrounded by a womb-like world, and that they left/got birthed at the end of the play when they committed suicide. I wanted the set to hug them and the audience as well. I also shared that the play has a circular feel.
due to the repetition of text/themes in the play. The old couple lived forever on earth and the world collapsed around them; they have only each other left. Both Nicole and I imagined lots of layers for their costumes, as if the layers represented their lives in years past, or what was left of those years.

The first visual responses from the costume designer included steam punk elements that were inspired by my description of the Orator as “non-human, non-real.” I felt these elements were taking the show into a direction that I didn’t really see. The steam punk design suggested a futuristic feel that was far from the show in my mind’s eye. I talked to Nicole and we started over, in hopes of taking it a different direction, more in alignment with the emptiness and simplicity the play asked for.

Jacob Hofer, the lighting designer, was so excited to work on this show. During the design process he had many great and wild ideas with which we toyed. One of them was to use a triboluminescence lighting method. This was based on manifesting light through rubbing crystals and included salt lamps. The idea sounded exciting and new to me; I wanted to explore it more. We were thinking of incorporating this method by lighting through the stones of the house. As we proceeded, though, we thought that using such practical lighting might create a moody environment and bring an emotionally dark feeling to the production.

As we went on with the process, a lot of the designers’ visual responses and sketches suggested such a dark environment, which was inspired by my relationship to the play. The play was extremely funny to me but it was also extremely painful. It was the dark humor that made me cry every time I laughed.

The designers started bringing different ideas to the table. Jacob suggested another really nice idea, which was to create shapes through lighting. Each shape would represent one of the
themes, ideas, or memories that the old couple visited over and over again throughout the play. The idea sounded really good when we discussed it, but of course we needed to talk about it more and try it on stage to make sure it was the right approach.

I was also collaborating with Will Eubanks, a professional sound designer who works at TheatreSquared. I talked to Will about The Chairs during the summer, and he was excited to design the show even if we weren’t able to pay him. Will was one of the artists with whom I had really hoped to work. We met and talked after he read the script, and we shared a lot of feelings about how we saw the world. We were already on the same page on many sections of the script and how we viewed them. We struggled with a few sections including creating the illusion of a room filled with people. There was a stage direction that suggested a big upheaval created by a mob of people separated the old couple until the end of the play. Will’s opinion (and I agreed with him) was that we wanted to avoid using human voices through the speakers until the last sound cue, which in the text is very specific that it is the first time we hear recorded human voices.

Another challenging section we had questions about was when the old couple brought in groups of people along with many chairs. Will wanted to wait to see what the actors would be doing on stage and how much sound support he needed to provide, which I appreciated and respected. We brainstormed across the musical spectrum for the show, including Tom Waits, some Middle Eastern music, and classical music. As we proceeded, we found that classical music was the way to go. Will came up with a perfect sound cue for the top of the show: an orchestra tuning their instruments. When Will watched the tech run-through he felt that the actors were carrying and creating many of the show’s moments and that they didn’t need a lot of sound support. We felt that adding a lot of sound cues might take away from and comment upon
too much on the actors’ work. Instead, he decided to only cover the sections that specifically called for sound: doorbells; waves; a movement piece; the suicide with fireworks; and the final sound cue with human voices.

At some point during the design process, we were moving further towards a dark feeling when Michael Landman brought up in a production meeting that a dark design could take away the audience’s permission to laugh. He reminded us that the show is a farce. I knew the show ought to be funny, but for some reason I didn’t make a connection between a dark environment and laughter. The second production meeting ended with us all wanting to go back and visit the script again, taking it in a lighter, more fun direction while keeping all the technical requirements, such as doors and windows. It was always good to remember that Ionesco called The Chairs as a “tragic farce”.

The third production meeting took place when we returned from Christmas break, at which time I felt we were getting closer to the show I had been imagining. The set design really captured my feelings for the show. It included all the doors I needed and that Ionesco suggested and had the circular feeling I wanted. It also had the look of stone/brick wall that I had hoped for which reflected history of a space that had been there for a long time.

In the costume world I thought we were also very close to what we wanted; Nicole had captured the characters of the Old Man and The Old Woman. The layers that she had them in, and the sense of time and history of their costumes reflected my feelings towards these characters. It was as if they have lived on earth forever and they are wearing the layers of those years.
Sketch of The Old Woman’s Costume by Nicole Thompson

Sketch of The Old Man’s Costume by Nicole Thompson
We were still not finding a shared understanding of The Orator. Even though Nicole brought in many wonderful choices for the character, I wasn’t yet feeling that we had a strong grasp on his character. We continued to bounce ideas and discuss his character and presence in the show. We had several meetings where we just sat and talked through the section with The Orator. Who was he? What was his purpose and importance to the play?

Sketch of The Orator's Costume by Nicole Thompson
Later in the design process we got an email from Weston Wilkerson, the technical director, who wrote that the set was over the dedicated budget and that the curved walls wouldn’t be able to be built within our allotted building time of a week and a half. I had another moment of freaking out, thinking this design was not going to happen, just after I had begun feeling the design was just right.

Kiah and I met to brainstorm, and she informed me that the chair of the department, Michael Riha, had approved a little more money for the show’s budget. Kiah had already figured out a way to adjust the design, keeping close to her original idea but changing the curved walls to straight walls. I was sad to lose the wall’s circular feel, and felt pushed to adjust an important element, but I also had to compromise in order to make the design work within our timeframe. I
had some concerns about the placement of two of the doors and aspects of the windows, so she adjusted those. The ground plan became the following:

Final Ground Plan for The Chairs by Scenic Designer Kiah Kayser

I met with Nicole again regarding the Orator and I told her I still thought he was not sufficiently exaggerated in his appearance and that he still felt too realistic. I showed her some inspirational pictures, and she said she would work on approaching the feelings evoked from those images, while also keeping him in the same world as the Old Man and the Old Woman. Here are images I shared:
The final results for both the costumes and the set were great:

Old Man in *The Chairs*, actor Nathaniel Stahlke, costume by Nicole Thompson
Old Woman in *The Chairs*, actor Laura Shatkus, costume by Nicole Thompson

The Orator in *The Chairs*, actor Colin Bennett, costume and inserted comments by Nicole Thompson

There are two different color bowties and two different flowers. I like the top option the best.

For makeup, I was thinking something closer to Charlie Chaplin.
Colored model for The Chairs by Kiah Kayser
The design process was going very well; however, there were festivals and workshops for the designers during this process that took them out of town or occupied their time and created a little delay in our communication and the start of the build of the set. For example, they couldn’t watch a run of the show until two days before tech and in Nicole’s case not until the first dress rehearsal. Not having the designers in the room to observe the shape and rhythms of the show made us unsure about some potential choices until we could try them out during tech.

Rehearsal Process

Rehearsing this show was both an extremely difficult and amazingly rewarding process. I did everything I possibly could to select the right personnel and make sure I established the right environment for creating this show. As much as I insisted on the cast, I also insisted on Danielle Walsh being the Stage Manager for the show. Michael Landman was worried that Dani had too many shows that she was stage managing this year, and that one more show would be too much for her. Besides, he wanted a new stage manager to be trained for the next season. I said that stage managing The Chairs required someone experienced as it included tracking doors and chairs for exits and entrances, tracking the blocking of the invisible guests, as well as other challenges. As this was my thesis production I needed to make sure it was in the hands of someone I trusted, and I knew from working with Dani before that she was experienced enough to handle the show’s needs. With the short rehearsal period I couldn’t risk having someone do this as their first stage management experience.
I started meeting individually with the two leads earlier than the official rehearsal schedule, as I wanted them to digest the script over a longer time period. Also they were both committed to other shows, which reduced our official rehearsal time period to three weeks. We met once a week for a couple of hours to read and talk about sections of the script. Sometimes we did movement work and characterization exercises. We had a copy of the French script with us at all times, and we often referred to it, making slight adjustments to our translation. It helped that both Laura and Nate had some French background and it benefitted them to refer to the original French text to make adjustments to the intentions of some of their lines.

Part of the difficulty of the process was that their focus was divided until we were officially in rehearsal (March 8), which gave us a short time period to mount a show like The Chairs. I knew I would be faced with this challenge going into the process, but I chose that path over casting beginning actors. I asked Laura and Nate to be off-book the first day we were officially in rehearsal. As we approached that date, they both expressed memorization struggles due to the absurdity of the text and words. As it turned out, getting off-book was one of the hardest aspects of the process for them, which I understood, although there wasn’t much I could do since there was a layer of movement that I couldn’t create until they were comfortable with their lines.

To me, The Chairs was about being remembered, about leaving a trace in life. How does an ancient, low-class couple leave life confident they’ll be remembered? That was the question that I wanted to answer in the journey of this play. My personal relationship to The Chairs and my connection to it regarding my own country made this question even more important. I felt that I was doing this piece of theatre for Damascus, to keep that city alive in me and somehow share it with others. I had many nights where I doubted my ability and my team’s ability to successfully
navigate this path. We were all trained with Stanislavsky-based realism techniques, and the script kept shifting ground under us. We didn’t know what to hold on to. This struggle made us all very vulnerable and challenged us to figure it out. We were trying something new almost every day to grapple with questions like: what happened before the play started? What is the initial event of the play? What is the super objective of each of the characters? Who is the Orator to them and who is he to the story? Whom do we believe when both are relating different realities about the same topic? Our inability to know these answers and find another way to approach the text was repeatedly frustrating; we knew that there was something yet to be unlocked. While there were plenty of references to explain the play intellectually, none of them was helpful to the actors to figure out what their characters wanted, and how they should go about getting it.

The show was hard enough to drive everyone out of their minds and put us all on the edge of breakdowns. We spent hours and hours trying to figure out small sections of the play with many failed attempts. I tried to keep a light spirit in the room; I established a friendly space with a table of daily snacks and coffee. I also tried to be sensitive to actors’ personal needs moment-by-moment and adjust accordingly. Dani, as our stage manager, was also an extremely positive force; she always had a way to cheer everyone up, to make sure everything was in control, and to maintain a friendly environment in the room.

I tried to start each rehearsal with physical and spiritual warm-ups. Sometimes warm-ups were led by the actors, and we all committed to them, including the stage management team. I wanted to create a feeling of ensemble and togetherness in this: we were all doing this together and struggling and solving it together. I gave the actors permission at the top of each rehearsal to move in the space and say random lines from the script and play with those lines. Much of the connection of the play’s ideas and themes came through and was discovered by doing this on a
daily basis. The actors also had fun saying each other’s lines and playing games with each other which brought more liveliness into the room.

I felt that my focus on the old couple delayed my helping Colin develop the character of The Orator. I felt that I needed to get their characters clearer before we could set The Orator’s character in stone. Colin was excellent at bringing something new every time and trying it. He was also an extremely smart actor who was very careful at making sure the character was fully developed and that he had answers to all the questions related to his character. We kept trying new approaches to the work until we landed on the right path for him, which was not until a couple days before opening.

I knew the result I was looking for but I wasn’t able to get there with an approach that we might use for any other play. Launching the play was an extremely hard task; if at the beginning of the show the couple knew their lives were going to end tonight that would bring us to a very dark beginning. However, if they didn’t know they were going to die and they were just going through their daily routines and games then the actors would be playing with really low stakes. I asked for advice constantly from my advisor, Michael, and from Amy, the head of acting, to find ways to achieve my desired results; I was living in fear of failing to do so.

I observed Nate’s and Laura’s transformations in their understanding of the script and their characters. The process started with them so far away from the characters, which manifested in the birthing energy and over breathing, or acting out words or sections physically. Those were signs to me that they were still lost in those sections, and I needed to give clearer direction. The more time we spent trying different choices and exploring, the closer they were to grasping those characters and to the script and the story. It was so beautiful and moving to push
these two actors in the direction the show demanded and to witness their transformation happening.

The later sections of The Chairs weren’t by any means less daunting, but offered different challenges. The section with the invisible guests needed to be rehearsed with actual guests in order to find the needed specificity. I tried to step in a couple of times to give the actors something to work with; however, it was hard to be part of the scene and also direct it. I started inviting a few actor friends to rehearsals to stand in for the guests. It was a good experience but also extremely time consuming. Each invisible guest section needed to be rehearsed with a visible person independently and then rehearsed without the visible person to see what we could keep from the found specificity. Every time we had people in the room standing in for our invisible guests it brought a new energy and heightened the actors’ excitement. It was always delightful to see Laura and Nate interact with these actors as their guests, inviting them over, taking care of them, seating them, and creating meaningless conversation with them. The guests were always supportive of our work. Many of them expressed their perception of the impossibility of the show and the difficulty of its many elements. On several occasions after visiting our rehearsals many of the grad actors said to Laura and Nate “Wow, thank God it’s you and not me. This way I get to watch such work and I don’t have to figure out how to do it.” This brought another level of challenge and stress to the room, but it also made the production team even more supportive, protective, and loving to each other.

The sections that needed fifty people or more in the room were the most challenging since I wasn’t able to get that many people to come to our rehearsals. I stuffed as many guest actors as we had into the corners of the room to help bring specificity to the actors’ movement for those sections that required crowds. I think some sections of the production were successfully created
doing so, such as the “upheaval movement” indicated in the script, which suggests there’s a mob that separates the couple into opposite corners. We rehearsed this with a group of about twelve people, and we recorded the movement we created. This was one of the sections where I thought the actors maintained the specificity very well. Dani noted the blocking of the old couple and tracked the invisibles to help maintain staging consistency. There were still sections in the interactions with the invisible guests that were yet as not specific as I would have liked, but I had to be selective with the work that needed to get done in the time we had and I chose for the most part to focus on the text.

I followed many of Ionesco’s stage directions, yet there was one stage direction that I struggled to break free of, when the Old Man and the Old Woman moved to opposite sides of the stage, from the upheaval separation until the end of the show. That section felt too long to keep them isolated and without much blocking. I tried moving them closer to each other again, and it felt wrong; I tried moving the Old Man and keeping the Old Woman stationary, and it also felt wrong. I attempted many blocking changes for that section, even after the first dress rehearsal, yet I still knew instinctually that we hadn’t yet found the right solution.

Tech Rehearsal

During paper tech, I noticed that Jacob had many internal light cues that I wasn’t sure we needed. I asked him how subtly he saw those shifts, and he said many of them were just a drop of intensity or a change of feeling, so we could return to the initial, established look later and create a circular pattern. I thought tech would be a good time to try out many of those cues to see how well they worked. On Saturday, March 28, we started teching the show. My instinct was telling me that many of those light cues were commenting on the events on stage and creating drastic
shifts that weren’t needed. I talked to Jacob, who was very receptive of the notes, and he tried to
make the shifts less drastic but kept them happening throughout. We agreed that we wanted to
see the shifts in the context of a run through before we judged them fully. There were sections in
the script where I felt that the light shifts affected the actors’ performances; I felt that the actors
started creating an “event” of such moments because of light shifts, and that these took away
from intentionally monotonous moments between the couple. I took notes and communicated my
concerns to Jacob.

There were also moments that I felt weren’t going to live the way I had hoped until we
had the sound cues for them. Teching sound was a little tricky because the designer was in tech
for a TheatreSquared show at the exact same time. I knew going into process that his show at
TheatreSquared would get priority during tech since it was a paid job and he was designing The
Chairs for free. The movement piece in particular lived untruthfully from what I had originally
imagined and I was worried about it. I didn’t want to change it until I had the sound, as I am a
director who usually starts with music and choreographs movement accordingly.

On the second day of tech, Sunday, March 29 (coincidentally, the anniversary of Ionesco’s
death), I wanted to focus on a few particular moments. One of them was the movement piece
with all of the chairs and another was the section where the Old Man addresses the invisible
character of His Majesty. This was probably one of the most successful days of our process, and
where I felt the show took a huge leap, becoming the shape I had in mind for months. Will was
with us during his lunch break and we worked on the movement piece, with him finding and
applying some fun ideas for sound. The room was bursting with excitement and repeated
laughter. We finished teching all of the problematic and tech-heavy sections and were still able
to have a run in the evening. After that run, I remember looking at everyone in the room and
asking with excitement, “How did we manage to pull off a show like this in a time frame like this?” I thought, “Today, and not until today, I feel like we did it. This is the show. We did the work that needed to be done and we are on our way. Thank you Ionesco for your wonderful piece of art and your wonderful spirit that was with us.”

**Dress Rehearsals**

The first dress rehearsal was on Monday, March 30. Usually in our school tech processes this evening is off to give everyone a break. However, the actors requested that we have a dress rehearsal rather than a night off. They felt that squeezing in another run would get them more comfortable with the work.

Many faculty members attended the first dress rehearsal, including all of the mentors, Les Wade, who was leaving town for show weekend, and a couple of guests who wouldn’t have another chance to watch the show. I felt this was our weakest run, probably because the actors were dealing with the costumes and an audience for the first time, and the presence of the mentors in particular made everyone anxious. That run confirmed my belief that we had too many lighting cues, and afterwards I asked Jacob to cut many of them. Jacob was receptive of the notes and able to find moments where we wanted to create a different visual world rather than keep the established look. Our second dress rehearsal went much better and was closer to what we wanted to create and achieve. With the help of the crew I adjusted some of the movement effects that we created with the doors, and with each dress rehearsal I continued adjusting until the effects was as close as possible to what I wanted to achieve. I felt the text was starting to be owned by the actors and lived truthfully; yet, while some wonderful moments were living well, I felt the pace of the show was getting slower and slower. After the second dress, I
worked with the actors on cue pick-up moments and gave notes on some of the moments with the invisible guests that were losing specificity. On our third dress the slow pace was problematic at times, so I ran a quick speed-through with the actors of those sections until they found the appropriate performance pacing.

Performances

The show grew every night. Opening night had a small crowd and mostly a young audience. I was curious to hear and see their reactions to the show, and I thought they met it with excitement and interest. The second performance was well done. We had a larger house and the actors took the show to an even higher level of playfulness and excitement. Both Laura and Nate were extremely present and provided fine performances. Colin Bennett, who played the Orator, provided something new, fresh, and detailed every performance. After the second night the excitement of the show made me unable to sit still. It was one of those moments of feeling as if we were flying with joy, and that the artistic team was all on the same journey over the clouds. At the end of the show, the stage management team looked at me and said, “Wow, this was just amazing.” This night I felt was the reason we did this show, and I thought how amazing it would be if we had at least a week-long run where it could grow every night. On the third night, sadly, it didn’t go quite as well. The actors weren’t as present in the moments and the pacing dragged a little. However, the audience still liked the show and gave a standing ovation at the end of the performance. Closing night was another performance where I felt the show flew over the clouds. Part of that was because the house was full with our fellow theatre students and friends, who knew us and were biased to rooting for us. I think the actors gave fine performances and had a
great time and the show had another standing ovation on that night. I couldn’t have been more proud of this show.

**Personal Assessment**

This is by far the hardest and most rewarding piece I have ever worked on. I loved the process, including the franticness, the doubts, the worries, and the trust. This is a piece of art that takes everything to be done well, and it took everything I had: sleep, sanity, health, focus, time, and effort. It is easy to do this show badly but we did it well, and I was extremely proud and pleased with the work. I witnessed the piece take away our strength and our ability to control and ask us to be molded by it. I saw the play work on us while we worked on it. I loved seeing those wonderful actors be excitingly vulnerable and giving everything they had. I saw them grow with this piece and stretch to get to what it asked of them. I had many doubts that we would be able to accomplish what we achieved with our limited time and have it ready for an audience, but somehow it happened. There was a lot I would have still wanted to explore further; for example, at the beginning of the show, the first few lines could have been more specific. I wish I could have explored the blocking of the “His Majesty” section more. I also wanted to explore faster and more frantic movement and be even more specific on the movement of the doors.

However, overall I was proud and happy beyond words that we all felt we accomplished something satisfying for our artists’ souls. The feel of ensemble that I wanted in the room was created very successfully and the artists all invested in the show as a piece of art. This led me to believe that the process and the show achieved what I desired and that we did something meaningful, maybe even leaving a trace of ourselves with the audience and with each other.
Cast & Stage Manger Feedback

All of the cast members reported in their evaluations that they felt like they were part of the artistic process. They were delighted with the personal passion I had for the show, which carried throughout the process. A couple of them were frustrated with the short rehearsal process, which made them feel rushed and unconfident in some choices. They felt that we maintained a positive, energetic, open, and joyful rehearsal environment.

One of the cast members was hungry for solutions when I pointed out that a section that we just worked on wasn’t yet on the right track. Another felt that he was asked to try many new choices in the rehearsal process without enough reflection on what he had just tried.

Another cast member considered this experience to be educational and artistically fulfilling. He felt that it stretched his ability as an actor in new ways and helped him grow.

Faculty Feedback

The feedback from my mentor and the faculty was so helpful to hear and constructive. Not all faculty members got to see the show due to the limited number of performances and their busy schedules. Some of them got to see a dress rehearsal and many got to see a performance and the feedback was very positive overall.

My mentor, Michael Landman said that he was moved by the exponential growth of the show between the runs that he saw and the actual show. He said this was a result of the many layers that we worked on in the process as a team and the group effort that was put in the show. It is also a result of a short process where a show takes big leaps as it did. Michael said that the joy that lived in the couple was delightful to watch and made the subtext very clear. All of this helped the audience understand that these people were there for eternity and had a close
relationship. Michael said that he was able to laugh and cry that “the production was explosively, deliciously, violently, and appropriately connected and sad and moving.” He also felt that the designers produced the work of invested artists that made the design live as if it was their personal artistic statements and not just work to be done for a show. He thought it was the strongest work he had seen of every one of the artists who were involved. He encouraged me to keep doing shows that I’m as madly in love with as I was with The Chairs and trust that this kind of passion will bring these kinds of results.

Jeannie Lee, a musical director in the Theatre and Music departments, said that she was impressed and moved with how we were able to tell the story from the heart and not from an intellectual point of view. She said absurd theatre could be a big trap to go to the intellectual ideas and that she walked in expecting to stand back and see it happening, but instead she felt the audience was sitting in the chairs with the actors, as they watched a very clear relationship shift and change color and tone and power in a joyful and lively way. She also felt that the gravity that the Orator had endowed made his inability to speak strong and moving. Jeannie thought that the vision of the play was bigger than the space and she wished it was in a larger theatre while keeping the intimacy we had in Studio 404.

Andrew Gibbs, previous Chair of the department, who currently teaches many classes including Theatre Appreciation, said that he had watched three productions of The Chairs before this production and they were all dark and sad and dull. He felt that our production was very hopeful and joyful to the extent that it made him forget that this was a sad play about the meaning of life. He thought the actors handled the text very well and the design was extremely successful.
Gail Leftwich, a dance instructor, said that it took her a while to let go of trying to understand the play and be able to enjoy it. She tried hard to find logic in the play, but once she let go of wanting to understand it and gave in to the ride she was able to enjoy it. She felt that the Orator’s movement, as if he was floating, and his inability to speak, were very powerful and moving but also created really funny moments.

Shawn Irish, Head of Lighting Design and the lighting designer’s mentor, watched a first dress rehearsal and he thought that the show was strange and he didn’t understand all the time. He liked the joyful moments better and felt there was a lot of darkness in the show. His favorite part was the chaos scene when the couple brings in all the chairs. With the way the space was laid out, he felt that he missed some moments and wished it were in a space where he could have had a little bit more distance and be able to see everything all the time.

Shawn felt that the process was very good; it was open and collaborative and brought out a great result from the entire team.

Jenny McKnight, an acting teacher and a professional actor, said that she was really happy that there was an absurd play done on campus and done successfully, too. She said it presented a good challenge for the student team educationally to work on such a piece of theatre and figure it out. She wished that she could watch the show again or that she could watch a rehearsal to take another look at some moments. Her favorite section was the Majesty section and she felt this was the most inclusive of the audience. The presence of The Orator was also very provocative and raised many questions for her. She thought that his character was both ambiguous and very specific. She said that what remained for her from the play was the desperation to be remembered and to leave a legacy after death.
Amy Herzberg, the Head of Acting, said that the show was imaginative and moving, and that it was the type of show that affected each individual personally. It had an excellent pace and movement between beats and sections. It had a great sense of humor while maintaining significant depth. It offered detailed and specific character work by all of the actors. She felt that the central event of the play (the moment where we know which force in the play wins) could use more clarity.

Weston Wilkerson, the Technical Director, felt that relationship between the couple was very sweet and moving. He thought that the Old Woman went along with the Old Man’s fantasies to show her love for him. He felt that the routine between them happened possibly five times a week and this time the rules got broken. He was both sad and hopeful at the end of the show, during the double suicide, because he thought that they were getting out of the monotonous routine. Going in to the show, Weston thought he was going to watch a confusing play about the meaningless of life but instead he actually followed a story and enjoyed the way it was told.

Mavourneen Dwyer, Voice and Speech professor, watched a run of the play early in the process and thought that it wasn’t funny yet. She later on watched the performance and she thought it was hilarious and well crafted. She said, “The Chairs is a notoriously difficult script and requires the sharp and persistent eye of an informed director.” She thought that when I picked the play, I did not fully comprehend what I was undertaking but that I ultimately succeeded in climbing the mountain, helping the actors to mine the grotesque and brutal truth underneath the comedy.

Bob Ford, Artsitic Director of TheatreSquared and previous head of playwriting, said that the production of The Chairs was superb across the board. He said that absurdist drama is
already difficult and that The Chairs in particular could easily be tedious and repetitive. Our production, though, was funny, delightful, meaningful, and illuminating. Bob said that the play could easily lead to a trap of exclusively following Ionesco’s brilliant language, but instead we presented characters in true need living truthfully moment-to-moment. He thought the artistic team was able to transform the space of 404 and present a landmark production of The Chairs.
Appendix I

Play Analysis

1. Ideas and themes of the play with the author’s perspective.

- Repetitive present and inaccessible past: the lives of the old couple seem to be repetitive; they seem to be stuck in the current present and unable to reach their past or move forward to the future. They spend their time telling the same stories and playing the same games to pass the time.

- Identity: the Old Man and the Old Woman identify each other as spouse and sometimes as a parent. They are each other’s everything in life. There is a mixture in the identity expressed by the couple. At some points the Old Man identifies the Old Woman as his mother. Later in the play, the Old Woman acts as a support to the Old Man’s voice and ideas, even echoing his words. The Old Man only is titled as the Old Man in the play, while the Old Woman is named Semiramis. My research revealed that Semiramis was the name of the queen of Assyria during the Assyrian Middle Empire period. I thought it was ironic of Ionesco to choose this particular name for the Old Woman in that it was the name of a historical figure who left a trace in life.

- Status: there is anger about the way their lives have turned out. The old woman constantly reminds her husband that he could have done better and that he could have been something more important in life and society than a Marshal of Lodgings. Had he been able to achieve something, they’d both be remembered and they could have left life knowing someone would remember them.
• Love and sex: the old couple pursues capturing their missed opportunities in love. The Old Man has a romantic affair with an old love (Belle) and the Old Woman has a sexual affair with Belle’s husband. Each of them lives moments of romance with an invisible person and by doing so, they also play games with each other.

• Responsibility towards life and the message of life: the absurdist theater deals with individuals trying to find meaning in life by taking responsibility for the greater good. The Old Man has wasted the years of his life without doing so and therefore the old couple is suffering the consequences of meaningless lives and are now trying to find opportunities to achieve something. At the end of the play, the couple leaves life knowing that the Orator will deliver the Old Man’s message and that they left a legacy.

• Country, belonging to a country and a country belonging to us. The old couple seems to have different ideas and memories about their city Paris. It’s a topic that they disagree on and avoid. This is one of the topics where stories are remembered differently and memories of a place are different for each of the characters.

• Isolation: they are isolated on an island; we learn that they are surrounded by water. The water around them is stagnant which means it has not moved for a long time, it is still. No one has crossed it to get to them. This suggests that they are the last people on earth and there is no one else; however, it was more tangible for us for them to be a couple who was just forgotten by society. They are not part of anyone’s lives anymore and they haven’t achieved something significant in life. They are shadows in life rather than sources of light. If they die, no one will miss them. This helped create a need in the actors to have this party/fantasy to invite the world in order to leave a legacy, in order to leave a trace.
- Time: stuck in the present, they’re unable to remember a clear past or access that past and they’re unable to move to the future. They keep searching for ways to create excitement in their lives.

- Illusion: escape from the real world to a created illusion. Both characters have a crucial need to escape from their real world and create another where they can peacefully exist with themselves and each other. This could be due to guilt and/or pain coming from the past. It manifests in a whole new world created of invisibles.

- Mortality: Life and death: Absurdist theatre deals with taking responsibility in life and accepting death as inevitable, confronting it rather than shying away from it. (Eslin 152). Both the Old Man and the Old Woman commit suicide to be ahead of death, to get it before it gets them.

2. My perspective as a director:

Coming from Damascus, the world’s oldest inhabited city, and living in the U.S. while Syria and Damascus were going through a civil war, the themes of the play resonated with me profoundly. I saw parallels in the couple in the last phase of their lives and not having done anything significant in life with my old city of Damascus, which its people hadn’t accomplished much in life to offer to the world. People of Damascus failed to make their old city remembered by offering to the world something significant.

I heard the words of the Old Man as if they were spoken on behalf of my city. I was telling this story while often thinking of being an individual who left that city, who got out, who
escaped, and I thought of my role and responsibility as keeping my city’s legacy. I had a strong desire to tell something, to deliver a message, and to leave a trace.

3. What central dramatic question will you use to focus the action of your production?

In a big loss, how is the smallest thing important? In the loss of a country, how’s the individual important? However, dramatically speaking I think the play is trying to answer the question “Will the couple die alone?” This gets answered when the Orator shows up, played by an actual actor, with the couple announcing they can now die, as someone will carry on their legacy.

4. What major obstacles challenge the resolution of your dramatic question?

The absurdist theatre suggests and asks questions that are big life questions. The play asks us to think about unfathomable things. How do we make sense of life after we have lost everything? In the loss of a great thing how do we believe in the importance of anything, including ourselves and our value and our ability to make a difference?

One of the challenges we faced in tackling this piece of theatre was how to play all those ideas? How does an actor play: I’m searching for the meaning of life after the world around me collapsed? Or, that I lost everything and how do I find meaning of my existence? How can I answer these questions for my team, myself, and therefore my audience in a fathomable way? This was certainly the biggest challenge of this process, which we tackled by making choices that were informed by research and lived in the truths of the characters moment-by-moment.

5. What are the main events of the play?

A. Daily routine.
• Waiting, longing.
• Month of February.
• The story that the Old Woman asks the Old Man to tell every night “And then we laughed”

B. Invisibles:
• Individuals: lady, Colonel, Bell & Photoengraver.
• Small groups (journalists, families). ---- the event is getting bigger.
• Mob of people
• His Majesty

C. Orator:
• Thank you to all who came.
• Talk about what’s important (leaving our trace).

D. Suicide:
• Duel suicide of the old couple.

E. Message:
• The Orator trying to deliver the message and failing to do so.

F. Emptiness:
• The emptiness of chairs and breaking that emptiness by sounds of the world for the first time.

6. What are the play’s genre and style?

The play is an Absurd theatre piece and it’s a tragic farce.

7. Why does it have this particular title?
I think *The Chairs* in this play are symbols for hope and salvation. With each new guest and chair there is the possibility that maybe this time things will change. When the Old Man and the Old Woman run out of chairs it’s like their acknowledgment of failure and running out of hope. The empty chairs are a reflection of empty presence of the world, of the people who didn’t come.

8. What’s the historical relevance of the play? Importance of the play in its original time (what was the energy behind the original production and its response?)

*The Chairs*, originally titled, *The Orator*, was written in 1951 and produced first on April 22, 1952. The first production was at the Theatre du Nouveau-Lancry and directed by Sylvain Dohmme, who also played the Orator.

It took him and the two actors of the old couple, Tsilla Chelton and Paul Chevalier, three months to find the acting style suitable for the play— a mixture of extreme naturalness of detail and the utmost unusualness of the general conception. (Eslin 152).

According to Lane’s *Understanding Ionesco* the play was met by rejection from the audience; the opening night had only 8 audience members. Some runs had only Ionesco and his wife and their daughter in attendance. The play closed after the minimum thirty-day run.

In the program of this production Ionesco wrote:

At certain moments the world appears to me emptied of meaning, reality seems unreal. It is this feeling of unreality, the search for some essential reality, nameless and forgotten—and outside it I don not feel I exist- that I have tried to express through my characters who drift through incoherence, having nothing of their own apart from their anguish, their remorse, their failures, the vacuity of
their lives. Human beings saturated in meaningless cannot be anything but grotesque, their sufferings cannot be anything but derisively tragic.” As the world is incomprehensible to me, I am waiting for someone to explain it. (Ionesco186).

The play was later revived in 1956 at the Studio des Champs Elysées under Jacques Mauclair’s direction. Jean Anouilh, whose play was being shown next door to The Chairs, wrote:

Every Parisian who loves theatre… will blush one day…when he’ll have to admit at a social gathering that he missed seeing The Chairs.”

9. Language of the play: what do you notice about the language of the play? Examine it in detail. What’s the overall rhythm of the play?

The language is poetic. It’s repetitive like the play; it’s inventive and funny. There is a lot of wordplay that is lost in the English translation. For example, when the Photo-engraver offers a gift to the Old Woman, she wonders, “Is it a flower, sir? Or a cradle?” In French these two words rhyme and so do many other words, which creates musical rhythm in the script and playfulness. (Lane 52)

The beauty of the language in The Chairs is that it’s a perfect mixture of poetic language, everyday life, and wordplay all of which provide a musical rhythm to the play that accompanies the telling of the story and the emotional roller coaster. A lot of critics would say the language of Absurdist theatre is nonsense; however once one finds a lens to view the story of the script, the words carry the story and the audience throughout the journey.

Even though The Chairs has contradicting facts, it is important to refer to that as a past remembered differently, or as a story told from a different point of view or remembered vaguely.
The script is filled with contradictions, illogicalities, clichés, puns, and other playful uses of language; however, the play is not about the failure of language to communicate like many other plays by Ionesco. This could be something within the play but not the whole message of the play. (Lane, 52) The play is about absence and creating that absence by bringing presence. The playfulness and the poeticism of language serve to create the effect of the absence or failure of language.

10. About the playwright (and lyricist, composer and translator if applicable)

Eugene Ionesco was born on November 26th 1909 in Slatina, Romania. His father, a lawyer, was also called Eugen Ionescu. His mother, Therese Ipcar, was the daughter of a protestant French engineer who had settled in Romania because of his work. When they married Therese converted to the Orthodox religion. Their son Eugene was baptized and remained Orthodox until his death, in spite of long periods of metaphysical doubts he went through. Shortly after Eugene’s birth the family moved to Paris, where his father continued his studies and eventually became a doctor of the Faculty of Law in Paris.

His sister Marilina was born two years after him, and a year later came a younger brother, Mircea, who died of meningitis at the age of 18 months. This exposed the whole family and certainly the child Eugene to facing death at an early age.

In 1914, the family lived on the Square in Vaugirard, Paris, and at the age of four Eugene was already a great fan of puppet shows. He says, however, that at the age of three he wanted to sell roasted chestnuts because they smelled good. At three and half he wanted to be an officer, and at the age of four he wanted to be a family doctor, but he always liked writing.
His father went back to Bucharest in 1916 just when Romania entered the First World War. But his wife and two young children remained in Paris and had to manage by themselves. After the war there was no news from their father and they thought he had died at the front. The mother and her children lived in a hotel; Eugene’s health being fragile, his mother sent him to live with a family in the countryside in La Chapelle Anthenasie (Mayenne). He stayed there from 1917 to 1919 with his younger sister. In Ionesco’s writing, this period is depicted as the most peaceful and harmonious of his life.

He and his sister returned to Paris to live in a small, dark apartment with their other members of family and their grandparents. In this apartment he wrote a “heroic” play in two acts and a comic scenario. These texts were unfortunately lost.

His father hadn’t died in the war after all. He hadn’t even been a soldier, but had obtained a post as inspector of safety in the Bucharest police. In 1917 he remarried, and the same year he was appointed general inspector. He had always managed to be on the side of the current authority in power because he thought the power was always right. By using and misusing his position in the police and pretending that his wife had settled abroad, he had been granted a divorce and even the custody of the children. Eugene therefore returned to Romania in May 1922 with his sister. He learned Romanian and attended the college Sfantul Sava (Saint Sava) and eventually passed the baccalaureate at the secondary school in Craiova in 1928.

The relations with the father’s family were very bad, especially with the stepmother who did not like the children and who ended up driving out Eugene’s sister. She moved in with her mother, who had moved to Bucharest. Her father, although rich, never agreed to pay any maintenance for her. Eugene also moved to his mother’s place in 1926 who was working at a bank at that time.
He was writing some minor work including articles when he got married in 1936 to Rodica Burileanu. His mother died three months later of a stroke.

Statement about his father:

The last time I saw him, I had completed my studies and was married. [He] believed in the State, no matter what it represented. I didn’t like authority. I detested the State. In short, at the end of our meals together, we were at sword’s point with each other. At one time in the past he had called me a Bolshevik; this time he called me someone who sided with the Jews. I remember the last sentence I ever said to him: ‘It is better to be on the side of the Jews than to be a stupid idiot. (Lane 19)

In his theoretical essay, "Experience of the Theatre," Ionesco challenged the traditional premise of theater in plain terms. He claimed to have hated going to the theater as a child because it did not provide an interactive experience--or, at least, not as interactive an experience as he preferred. He described his view of an "imagined truth" that can be much more interesting than realistic theater. In criticizing realism and Brechtian theater, he separated himself from many contemporaries, including Kenneth Tynan, with whom he shared an ongoing, heated debate.

11. Commentary by the playwright on this play/productions

Ionesco has said that the origin of The Chairs was a single image of a room being filled up by empty chairs:

When I wrote The Chairs, I first had the image of chairs, then of someone carrying chairs into the empty stage at top speed. I had this initial image, but I had no idea at all of what it meant. (Ionesco 189).

Upon reflection, he says, he realized that the meaning or theme of the play was “total absence” “nothingness” and as some critics saw it, the failure of the old couple.
Ionesco makes clear in a note to the French text that it is essential that a very large number of empty chairs (“at least forty, more if possible”) be used. “The stage is invaded by these chairs, this crowd of absent presences”

They express the proliferation of material things. The obtrusive presence of objects expresses spiritual absence. (Ionesco 132). Absence can be created only in opposition to what is present. What is needed is plenty of gesture, almost pantomime, light, sound, moving objects, doors, that open and close and open again, in order to create this emptiness, so that it grows and devours everything. (Ionesco 189).

While the first plays (of Ionesco) had exposed the emptiness and vacuity of language through dizzying proliferation of sound and sense, The Chairs goes a step further by representing the ontological void through proliferation of matter. The chairs invade the stage in a mounting crescendo that stakes on a rhythm and volition of its own, such that the human characters are overwhelmed and eventually expelled by their sheer mass and density. (Lane 52).

He asks the director to not minimize or doubt the exaggeration that is in the script whether that’s the number of empty chairs on stage, the number of doorbells that announce guests, and so on, or the emotional journey of the characters:

The laminations of the old woman, who should be like a weeping woman in Corsica or Jerusalem (Ionesco 189).
Appendix II

Production Team

The Chairs

PRODUCTION /CREATIVE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kholoud Sawaf</td>
<td>Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weston Wilkerson</td>
<td>Tech Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiah Kayser</td>
<td>Set Designer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob Hofer</td>
<td>Lighting Designer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole Thompson</td>
<td>Costume Designer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will Eubanks</td>
<td>Sound Designer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesus Rivera</td>
<td>Assistant Sound Designer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathy Logelin</td>
<td>Text Coach/Dramaturge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danielle Walsh</td>
<td>Production Stage Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah Gill</td>
<td>Assistant Stage Manager</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CAST

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Colin Bennett</td>
<td>Orator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathaniel Stahlke</td>
<td>Old Man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura Shatkus</td>
<td>Old Woman</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Rehearsal Schedule

## March 2015

### The Chairs Rehearsal Plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mon</th>
<th>Tue</th>
<th>Wed</th>
<th>Thu</th>
<th>Fri</th>
<th>Sat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5 (Full Moon)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opening of Foreigner (no rehearsal)</td>
<td>SETC (no rehearsal)</td>
<td>SETC (no rehearsal)</td>
<td>SETC (no rehearsal)</td>
<td>SETC (no rehearsal)</td>
<td>SETC (no rehearsal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13 (3rd Quarter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rehearsal 5:00 - 10:00</td>
<td>Rehearsal 6:00 - 10:00</td>
<td>Rehearsal 6:00 - 10:00</td>
<td>Rehearsal 6:00 - 10:00</td>
<td>Rehearsal 6:00 - 10:00</td>
<td>Rehearsal 6:00 - 10:00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20 (New Moon)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rehearsal 2:00 - 7:00</td>
<td>Rehearsal 6:00 - 10:00</td>
<td>Rehearsal 6:00 - 10:00</td>
<td>Rehearsal 6:00 - 10:00</td>
<td>Rehearsal 6:00 - 10:00</td>
<td>Rehearsal 6:00 - 10:00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>27 (1st Quarter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rehearsal 2:00 - 7:00</td>
<td>Rehearsal 12:00 - 4:00 (no rehearsal)</td>
<td>Rehearsal 12:00 - 4:00</td>
<td>Rehearsal 12:00 - 4:00</td>
<td>Rehearsal 12:00 - 4:00</td>
<td>Rehearsal 4:00 - 8:00</td>
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<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00 am</td>
<td>10:00 pm</td>
<td>First Dress</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4 (Rehearse)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Tech 10:00 am 10:00 pm*
April 2015
The Chairs Rehearsal Plan

Sun  Mon  Tue  Wed  Thu  Fri  Sat
29  
30  
31  
1  Second Dress  Opening  Second Performance
2  
3  Third Performance
4  Full Moon
5  Easter Sunday  Closing
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  3rd Quarter
12  
13  Thomas Jefferson’s Birthday
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  New Moon
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  1st Quarter
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
1  
2  
May 2015

3  4  5  6  7  8  9
10  11  12  13  14  15  16
17  18  19  20  21  22  23
24  25  26  27  28  29  30
31  

May 2015
Appendix III

Costume Collage

Inspirational collage of The world of the play created by Nicole Thompson
Inspirational collage of The Old Man by Nicole Thompson

The Old Man in The Chairs, actor Nathaniel Stahlke, costume by Nicole Thompson.
Inspirational collage of The Old Woman by costume designer Nicole Thompson

The Old Woman in The Chairs, actor Laura Shatkus, costume by Nicole Thompson
The Orator in *The Chairs*, actor Colin Bennett, costume by Nicole Thompson.
Appendix III

Scenic Collage

Inspirational collage of the world of the play by scenic designer Kiah Kayser
Colored model for *The Chairs* by Kiah Kayser

Inspirational collage picture from Pinterest website.
Appendix IV

Production Poster

I, Gustav Carlson, give Kholoud Sawaf permission to include the artwork I provided for the University of Arkansas production of The Chairs in her Master of Fine Arts thesis.
Appendix VL

Production Photos

The Chairs production, photo by Kiah Kayser
The Chairs production, photo by Kiah Kayser
The Chairs production, photo by Kiah Kayser
The Chairs production, photo by Kiah Kayser
The Chairs production, photo by Kiah Kayser
The Chairs production, photo by Kiah Kayser
The Chairs production, photo by Kiah Kayser
The Chairs production, photo by Kiah Kayser
Appendix VII

Works Cited


