

The Chairs

Review by Nigel Munro-Wallis 612 ABC Radio, 28 June 2010

Eugene Gilfedder and Jennifer Flowers shine in this fast-paced piece of absurdist theatre.

Eugene Ionesco is popularly grouped with Samuel Beckett and Jean Genet as being at the forefront of the movement known as 'Theatre of the Absurd'. Ionesco himself rejected this label however, preferring to call his style 'Theatre of Derision'. Whichever term you prefer his plays are characterised by outrageous comedy incorporating elements inspired by clowning and vaudeville and attack quite serious subjects like conformity, totalitarianism, death and despair. He loved to challenge his audiences with his view of the absurd and often painful nature of the human condition.

Even now, many years after *The Chairs* was first staged, it is still a play that challenges. It challenges its audience, certainly. But perhaps more so it challenges the performers. It is a fast-paced and quite manic romp through the farcical world of two isolated people that requires a level of theatrical skill to perform that would make many actors quake.

Perhaps it might be viewed, in one sense at least, as an actor's play, or perhaps a serious theatre goer's play, rather than a piece of theatre designed purely for entertainment. Not surprising then that La Boite's Artistic Director David Berthold decided to include it in the 2010 season - a season in which he has clearly set his sights on challenging Queensland theatre practitioners and audiences alike and which, in that sense, is proving to be quite a success.

I would be hard pressed to think of two better local actors than Eugene Gilfedder and Jennifer Flowers to cast in a play like *The Chairs*. Between them they have a wealth of theatrical experience as well as immense talent and it is these qualities that are needed to make a production of this play work.

The pace of this production never flags - it really is quite manic from beginning to end and without the strong narrative line found in most conventional plays the actors need to have complete command of the text and total trust in each other. Gilfedder and Flowers bring all this and more to the production and under the very careful and intuitive directorial hand of Brian Lucas the play really is a rare theatrical treat.

Perhaps because it is such a difficult text and one for the more theatrically literate it will not appeal to everyone. I noted one or two walk outs on the night I attended and that is a pity because it really is such a fine production. It is a production that demonstrates that Brisbane audiences have reached a level of maturity and that Berthold clearly has his hand firmly on the pulse of the Brisbane community that he has chosen this, among others, for his season and is willing and able to challenge us with it.

To put it succinctly I supposed this will not be everyone's cup of tea but it really is very, very good. If you don't know what absurdist theatre is, or have never experienced it then you are in for a treat. Eugene Gilfedder and Jennifer Flowers are simply breathtaking to watch and if you find that you usually enjoy their work then this really is some of their best work. Don't miss it!