

The Chairs

By Eugène Ionesco

Adapted by Owen McCafferty

Tinderbox Theatre Company

RESOURCE PACK

<i>Resource pack contents</i>	<i>Page</i>
• Introduction	3
• Background to the theatre of the absurd	4
• Writers of the absurd	5
• Relevance to today	7
• The absurd century: a chronology	9
• Producing a literal translation of <i>The Chairs</i> by Kerry Goyer	19
• French extract	20
• Extract from Kerry Goyer's literal translation of <i>The Chairs</i>	22
• Extract from Owen McCafferty's adaptation of <i>The Chairs</i>	24
• Discussion with Owen McCafferty	26
• Designing <i>The Chairs</i> by Stuart Marshall	29
• Ionesco vs Tynan	33
• Plays/Playwrights associated with the 'absurd'	35
• Programme Bibliography / Further Reading / Web-sites	37

Introduction

This resource pack is designed to compliment the pre-show workshop accompanying the Tinderbox Theatre Company staging of *The Chairs* by Eugène Ionesco, in a new adaptation by Owen McCafferty.

These resources will provide further background information on many aspects of the production. Teachers or group leaders are asked not to distribute this document in its entirety to individuals, think of the trees, but rather use appropriate sections.

If you have any comments about the contents of this resource please call John McCann at the Tinderbox office on 02890 439313.

BACKGROUND: THE ART OF THE ABSURD

Ionesco's play *The Chairs* is one of the plays central to what is called the 'Theatre of the Absurd'. The play's premise certainly lives up to the genre's 'absurd' tag. An old married couple are 93 years old and married for 76 of these years. They are waiting for a multitude of guests to arrive, as the Old Man has a message he wants to share with the world. He shall attempt to pass the sum total of his knowledge and life-experience to others in the hope that they will learn from his findings. The characters at present inhabit an old tower which is situated on an island. We are never sure if this is their home as there are no recognisable signs of domesticity. The relationship that exists between the couple gives further suggestion that all is not quite as it should be. The words and phrases they speak and the games they play are either a familiar 'code' that has developed through so many years of marriage or the writer is seeking to play with our expectations; to confuse, confound and contradict. As we hear boats arrive on the shore it soon becomes clear that the guests the old couple expect are invisible, yet they act as if they were very real; welcoming them by name, ushering them to hastily retrieved seats and engaging them in ceaseless conversation. The invisible élite of society soon fill the stage.

The final guest to arrive is the Orator, the person who has been employed to deliver the Old Man's message to the gathering. Proceedings can now commence or so we are led to believe.

The Chairs was first performed at the Théâtre Lancry, Paris, on the 22nd April 1952 to quite a poor reception. Often there were as many empty seats in the auditorium as there were on-stage. The actors hired the theatre and staged the production themselves with no backing from Parisian theatre managers who were unwilling to take what they believed was a grave financial and artistic risk. As with several of the major Absurd dramas, it took a number of years and a revival of the production before the public sat up and took any notice, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* being the prime example. In 1956 *The Chairs* was revived in Paris to much success. The critics, however, were still hostile though this production did have some literary heavyweights who rushed to defend Ionesco's work. Beckett and Arthur Adamov were among a host of writers who signed a letter in support of Ionesco and his play that was published in the magazine *Arts* after the initial staging. The Theatre of the Absurd had again proven its ability to divide the public and the critics.

Albert Camus was the first person to write about the notion of 'the absurd man' in his 1947 book *The Myth of Sisyphus*. In Greek mythology Sisyphus is the son of Aeolus, the King of Thessaly. Sisyphus was said to be a rogue and highwayman who allegedly chained up the God of Death so the dead could not reach the underworld. As punishment for his deeds he was taken by Hades to the underworld where he has ever since been forced to push a giant rock up a steep hill. When he reaches the hill-top the rock rolls back to the bottom and he must begin his task again, and again Sisyphus' punishment will last all eternity. For Camus this is the ideal image of the absurd man.

Camus was the first artist to use this word in the theatrical context with which we have been familiar for nearly forty years. The first line of *The Myth of Sisyphus* plunges us right into the middle of the existential quagmire mapped out by the Absurd writers who were to break through:

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.

The critic Martin Esslin was the first person to coin the term *The Theatre of the Absurd* when his seminal book of the same name was first published in 1961. It was Camus' explorations in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that provided Martin Esslin with the foundations for his later study.

In virtually every era there are discernable moments when the human race finds itself staring its own mortality in the face, brutally aware that one day we all will have 'shuffled off this mortal coil'. An ever increasing awareness of our precarious place in the world, the idea that our very existence is now thought to have come about more through happy chemistry accident than by divine command, upset a corrupt yet stable balance in how our forefathers thought and structured the pre- and early colonial world. 'God's will' had been the convenient answer to all the difficulties facing mankind: famine, natural disaster, war or plague. We must have transgressed in some way to be treated thus.

The philosopher Frederic Nietzsche pronounced the death of God in the late nineteenth century and the scales were tipped. Like the blaspheming Galileo who came before, risking death telling us that we were not in fact at the centre of God's universe, postulating that we revolved around the sun and not vice versa, it almost seemed that the knowledge we thought would one day bring us closer to God might instead cast doubt over his very existence.

Taking Nietzsche's words at face value there are some fundamental questions we may need to ask ourselves. If God does not exist then why should we continue to observe all moral and religious laws? Surely society as we know it would break down, collapse, cease to exist. Chaos and nihilism seem inevitable. Our actions count for nothing. There is no promise of a heaven and no threat of hell in Nietzsche's proclamation; the only certainties we now know are old age, death and nothingness.

Into this darkness comes the 'Theatre of the Absurd'. The central writers of the absurd; Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Eugène Ionesco and Arthur Adamov did not attempt to answer the burning existential questions posed by Nietzsche, they are after all playwrights - artists. They simply did what all playwrights worth their salt do: show us characters living and breathing these dilemmas and crises from day to day. With an acute awareness of these new certainties how should we expect the characters of Absurd theatre to behave? What value do human relationships have? Is communication and interaction of any benefit? We can now appreciate the full gravity of the opening lines of *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

At times the characters of the 'Theatre of the Absurd' inhabit a world, often fiercely personal and subjective, gripped by fear, or a seemingly post-apocalyptic world with a deep sense of their own mortality running through their veins. These people are living in extreme situations where the fabric of their reality has been ripped apart. Characters have little or no sense of their past, often the basest social skills to cope with their present and no capacity or ambition to see beyond their current situation. Hope is an alien concept. It is therefore not hard to believe that certain artists and thinkers came to see man's very presence on this earth as 'absurd'.

BACKGROUND: THE WRITERS

In 1965 Martin Esslin wrote;

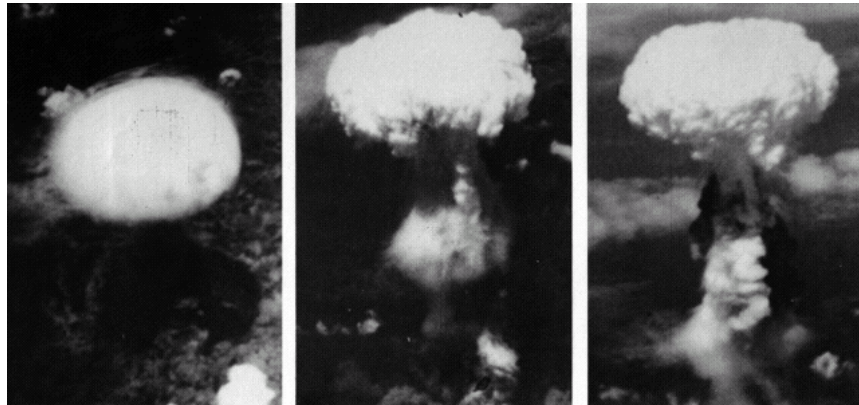
There can be no doubt: for many intelligent and sensitive human beings, the world of the mid-twentieth century has lost its meaning and has simply ceased to make sense. Previously held certainties have dissolved, the firmest foundations for hope and optimism have collapsed. Suddenly man sees himself faced with a universe that is both frightening and illogical – in a word, absurd.

The reference to the mid-twentieth century is quite crucial in our study. The life-paths of the four writers central to Esslin's book have some very striking similarities that we cannot afford to

overlook or underestimate. The *Chronology of the Absurd* in this resource pack tells us that only four short years separated the births of these men. It seems unthinkable that the major

events taking place in Europe at this time did not shape their early sensibilities and opinions. Europe was about to implode when they were born. World War I commenced when Adamov, Genet, Beckett and Ionesco were but young boys. Ten million died in a few short years, the largest death toll the human race has inflicted upon itself in a single conflict. We can only imagine the mental and sociological impact of this upon the survivors; the world left in the wake of battle.

The family background and childhood of each of these writers also yields some interesting information about their formative experiences. Upheaval in family life, either through parental separation or moving from one country to another, all without a considerable period of stability, gave rise to early feelings of confusion and isolation.



Mushroom cloud over Nagasaki, 1945

During Ionesco's mid to late twenties, the mid-twentieth century, World War II loomed. It had been threatening for a time and there had been suspicions concerning the treatment of certain sections of the German and Russian populations at the hands of their leaders. During this conflict an estimated 50 million people died. Somehow the rules had changed. War came home. In 1914, during the Great War, the poet Rupert Brooke could write:

*If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is forever England...*

In this conflict untold numbers of innocents would be killed as the combatants in turn attacked major European cities. The innocent people of London, Dresden, even our very own Belfast were to experience at first hand the horrors of what once seemed a far-off war.

Not coincidentally, three of the major Absurdist writers were present in France during World War II, as was the Nobel Prize winning writer Albert Camus. He, like Beckett and Jean Paul Sartre, also Nobel Prize winners, was actively involved in the Resistance movement against Nazi occupation.

The American Atomic Bombs that fell on Nagasaki and Hiroshima claiming 100,000 lives, part fuelled by a desire to test a new technology, proved that finally man was the architect of his own destruction. No longer could we say that the fate of man was at the discretion of a benevolent higher being. Now we can conceive of the entire destruction of the planet at the hands of a few mortals, a much more dangerous and frightening concept. The only outcome to a nuclear conflict

would be mutually assured destruction (MAD). And so the Cold War began. History will be the judge of whether MAD kept the Cold War from becoming hot.

RELEVANCE TO TODAY

So, what relevance has the theatre of the absurd for us today? Are we to see the plays of Ionesco and Beckett as historical documents, a faded and out of date diary entry from a different century?

Just as the Absurdists lived through the Atomic age each generation discovers new and potentially hostile threats. There seems to be an endless popular fascination with how we as a species might meet our end. It happened to the dinosaurs over 65 million years ago, so why should we feel so safe? Scientists tell us we are due a high-impact meeting with a meteor any time soon. Statisticians would have us believe that we have more chance of being killed by a falling meteor than we have of winning the lottery. Fact!

If the work of the Absurd writers can be seen as a reaction to war and the destructive capacity of man then we in the 21st century have our own demons to contend with: terrorism, global recession, environmental concerns and natural disasters.

In the heart of the African continent where there is famine, drought, civil war and disease, everyday life echoes the Absurd. Frantz Fanon's influential book *The Wretched of The Earth*, first published the same year as Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd*, defines the plight of Africa's colonised people; we can all too easily recognise the Absurd.

Certain viral strains, super bugs, are becoming increasingly resistant to drugs that designed to combat them.

It is the void created by this hole in our reality that the Theatre of the Absurd inhabits.

The characters you will see in *The Chairs* have different memories of their shared history. Relationships and roles become confused. Husbands and Wives become parent and child in the turn of a phrase. Not reaching their full potential, what might have been is a perpetual lament rather than what can be. The only sure thing in this life is that we will die. We are just clocking time until then. No faith or spirituality comforts these characters; they are like ghosts, empty shells. Values are worthless and language, once described by the linguist Max Weinreich as 'a dialect with an army and a navy', is now powerless, communication futile.

As audience members it is largely up to us as to whether we view these dramas as allegories for man's place in the world. A spectator at a post-show discussion for *Waiting for Godot* in New York described the play as a theatrical ink-blot test. By seeing these dramas performed we are not entertained but challenged. What are we witnessing on-stage? What is the message the Old Man wants to impart from the stage and how has he chosen to deliver it? Once you have seen *The Chairs* you decide that for yourself!

The setting for absurd drama can at times be non-specific. At times we see barren wastelands and buildings that do not root us in a particular time or place, with no sense of domesticity or familiarity. Beckett's theatre is a prime example of this. No longer is drama set in period houses with contemporary furniture and props. This is a nameless, placeless world, at once cold and unfamiliar.

The writers of the Absurd almost unanimously refused to be categorized as such. The Absurd in theatre did not begin with Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. There had been what we could call Absurd plays before; see August Strindberg's *To Damascus* or *A Dream Play* (1901), or *Ubi Rexi* (1896) by Alfred Jarry. These writers, like Genet, Beckett, Ionesco and Adamov, were communicating their subjective and personal view of the world. These plays were as much a rejection of the values and militarism of the decades that preceded them as of the theatrical

conventions prevalent at the time. If Nietzsche's God was dead, the Absurd writers significantly proclaimed the death of 'the well-made play'.

Strindberg wrote the following preface to *A Dream Play* in 1900:

In this dream play, as in his other dream play, To Damascus, the author has attempted to imitate the inconsequent yet transparently logical shape of a dream. Everything can happen, everything is possible and probable. Time and place do not exist; on an insignificant basis of reality the imagination spins, weaving new patterns; a mixture of memories, experiences, free fancies, incongruities and improvisations. The characters split, double, multiply, evaporate, condense, disperse, assemble. But one consciousness rules over them all, that of the dreamer; for him there are no secrets, no illogicalities, no scruples, no laws. He neither acquits nor condemns, but merely relates; and, just as a dream is more often painful than happy, so an undertone of melancholy and of pity for all mortal beings accompanies this flickering tale. Sleep, the liberator, often seems a tormentor, but when the agony is sharpest often comes the awakening and reconciles the sufferer with reality – which, however painful, is yet a mercy, compared with the agony of the dream.

Ionesco, speaking in 1959 said the following:

I personally would like to bring a tortoise onto the stage, turn it into a race horse, then into a hat, a song, a dragoon, and a fountain of water. One can dare anything in the theatre, and it is the place where one dares the least. I want no other limits than the technical limits of stage machinery. People will say that my plays are music-hall turns or circus acts. So much the better – let's include the circus in the theatre! Let the playwright be accused of being arbitrary. Yes the theatre is the place where one can be arbitrary. As a matter of fact, the imagination is not arbitrary, it is revealing. I have decided not to recognise any laws except those of my imagination, and since my imagination obeys its own laws, this is further proof that in the last resort it is not arbitrary.

We should see the *Theatre of the Absurd* not only as a litmus test of the individual sensibilities of these writers at a unique time in our recent history, but just as importantly exploring mankind's eternal struggle to come to terms with the certainties of old age, death and nothingness.

John McCann – January 2003

Did you know...?

As a child Ionesco dreamed of becoming a saint... 'reading the religious books available in the village, he realised that it was wrong to seek after glory. So he abandoned the idea of sainthood.'

Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 1961

the absurd century: a chronology

I believe that in the history of art and of thought there has always been at every living juncture a 'will of renewal' in the culture. This is not the prerogative of the last decade only. All history is nothing but a succession of crises - rupture repudiation resistance - and of attempts to return to positions that have been abandoned.... When there is no crisis, there is stagnation, petrification and death.

Eugène Ionesco, 'Reply to an Inquiry', in L'Express, June 1, 1961

1900

Max Planck formulates Quantum Theory

1905

Einstein proposes his theory of relativity

1906

Samuel Beckett is born in Dublin

1908

Arthur Adamov is born in the Caucasus

A meteor, believed to be the largest to strike the Earth in over 2000 years falls in the Tunguska region of Siberia

1909

Eugène Ionesco is born in Romania to a French mother and Romanian father

1910

Jean Genet is born in Paris

1911

Ernest Rutherford discovers the structure of the atom

1912

Aufust Strindberg dies in Stockholm of stomach cancer. He is sixty-three.

1914

At the start of the war Ionesco's family lives in Paris. The young Ionesco is fascinated by the Guignol puppet shows.

Archduke Ferdinand assassinated

World War I begins

1915

The German Army first use poison gas as a weapon

1917

USA enters World War I

1919

The Treaty of Versailles ends World War One. Approximately 8.5 million are dead

1920

Ionesco's Father is believed to have died in Romania during the War, his family having heard no news of his whereabouts. During this year and next Ionesco writes his first two plays. He is 11 years old. Both texts are now lost

1922

Ionesco's Father resurfaces in Romania and is later granted a divorce from his Mother

Mussolini enters Rome

1923

Ionesco begins school in Romania where he will remain for the next four years

Hitler jailed after a failed coup attempt

1924

V.I. Lenin dies

1925

Hitler publishes Mein Kampf

Penicillin is discovered

1931

Auguste Piccard reaches the stratosphere

1932

Scientists split the atom

1933

Adolf Hitler becomes chancellor of Germany
First Nazi concentration camps established

1935

Germany issues the anti-Jewish Nuremberg Laws

1936

Playwright Vaclav Havel born

Spanish Civil War begins

1937

Japan invades China

1938

Ionesco receives a grant to undertake literary research in Paris. He decided to move to France permanently

'The Theatre and its Double' by Antonin Artaud is published

'War of The Worlds' broadcast on American radio causing panic
Hitler Annexes Austria

1939

German-Soviet non-aggression pact signed
World War II begins

1940

Battle of Britain

1st August 1940

The world is changing by the hour. It seems to me that a growing number of things have been disappearing but there was always the radio. Then one day, Vienna went off the air. Then Prague. So for a while we listened to Warsaw. Then Warsaw went dead. Copenhagen and Oslo began broadcasting only in German. Now, Paris has gone. Of all the Western democracies, only London remains. For how long?

Bertolt Brecht

1941

Japanese forces attack Pearl Harbour
The Manhattan project begins developing the atomic bomb
Siege of Leningrad

1942

'The Myth of Sisyphus' by Albert Camus is published. He is the first person to use the word 'absurd' in its now familiar theatrical context

Battle of Stalingrad

1944

D-Day
Hitler escapes an assassination attempt

1945

World War II ends. Over 50 million are estimated dead
Hitler commits suicide
United Nations founded
US planes drop atomic bombs on Nagasaki and Hiroshima

1946

Nuremberg trials of war criminals
Recession around the world
The political map of Europe is re-drawn in the aftermath of the conflict

1947

Chuck Yeager breaks the sound barrier

1948

Big Bang theory formulated
Apartheid begins in South Africa
State of Israel founded

1949

NATO established
Soviet Union has the Atomic bomb

1950

Korean War begins
US president Truman orders the construction of the Hydrogen bomb

1951

'The Lesson' by Ionesco

Colour TV introduced

1952

'The Chairs' is first performed at the Théâtre du Nouveau, Lancy

1953

Samuel Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot' (En Attendant Godot) is first performed in a 75 seat theatre in Paris on January 5th

DNA discovered
Stalin dies. His regime is responsible the death of at least 20 million individuals

1957

World premiere of Beckett's 'Endgame' (Fin de Partie) at the Royal Court Theatre, London

'Waiting for Godot' is performed before 1400 inmates at San Quentin penitentiary by performers from the San Francisco Actor's Workshop

Soviet satellite Sputnik circles the earth thus beginning the space race

1958

Beckett's 'Krapp's Last Tape' is first staged in London

1960

'Rhinoceros' by Ionesco first produced

1961

'Theatre of the Absurd' by Martin Esslin published in 1961. It is the first major critical work exploring these collected writers and their common attitudes

'The Wretched of the Earth' by Frantz Fanon is published in France. The book details the effect of imperial rule on native people in colonial Africa.

Not so long ago, the earth numbered two thousand million inhabitants: five hundred million men and one thousand five hundred million natives. The former had the Word; the others had the use of it.

Jean-Paul Sartre in his preface to 'The Wretched of the Earth'

Berlin Wall built

Soviets put the first man in space, cosmonaut Yuri Gargarin

1962

Cuban missile crisis brings the world to the brink of nuclear war as Russia places missiles on Cuba, 90 miles off the Florida coast

1963

'The Garden Party' by Vaclav Havel is first performed

1965

USA sends troops to Vietnam. The average age of the American soldier is just nineteen

1966

Mao Zedong launches the Cultural Revolution in China

1967

First heart transplant takes place

1968

'Prague Spring', when an attempt to draw back from extreme Communist policy in Czechoslovakia is crushed as thousands of Warsaw Pact troops invade the country

'Tet offensive' by 70,000 North Vietnamese soldiers against American forces. A turning point in the Vietnam War

1969

Neil Armstrong walks on the moon

1971

Ionesco becomes a member of the Académie Française

1973

US forces pull out of Vietnam

1974

Pol Pot becomes Communist dictator in Cambodia. His regime wipes out an estimated 20 per cent of the country's population

1978

Vaclav Havel writes 'The Power of the Powerless' from his prison cell.

I am unwilling to believe that this whole civilisation is no more than a blind alley of history and a fatal error of the human spirit. More probably it represents a necessary phase that humanity must go through, one that man – if he survives – will ultimately, and on some higher level (unthinkable, of course, without the present phase), transcend.

Vaclav Havel, 'The Power of the Powerless'

First test-tube baby born

1979

Nuclear accident on Three-Mile Island

1981

Personal Computers launched by IBM
New plague is identified as AIDS

1983

Between '83 and '86 Ionesco voices his support for the cause of Human Rights. He speaks out against the dictatorship of Nicolae Ceauşescu in his native Romania

'Star Wars' missile defence programme is announced by President Ronald Reagan of the USA

1985

Famine in Ethiopia
A hole is discovered in Ozone layer
Mikhail Gorbachev first champions Glasnost and Perestroika in Russia

1986

USSR launches MIR

1987

DNA first used to convict criminals

1989

Samuel Beckett dies in Paris

Playwright Vaclav Havel is elected president of Czechoslovakia after what is termed the 'Velvet Revolution'

Berlin Wall falls

1990

The Gulf War as allied forces seek to remove Iraqi troops from Kuwait
Nelson Mandela is freed from prison in South Africa

1991

Collapse of the Soviet Union
South Africa repeals Apartheid laws

1992

Official end of the Cold War

1993



Vaclav Havel is elected the first president of the Czech republic

World Trade Centre in New York is bombed

1994

Eugène Ionesco dies in Paris on March 28th

Nelson Mandela elected President of South Africa

Genocide in Rwanda claims at least 500,000 lives between the months of April and July

1995

Ebola virus in Zaire

Gas attack on Tokyo subway

Oklahoma City bombing

Yitzhak Rabin assassinated in Israel

1996

NASA claims to have discovered fossilised extra-terrestrial bacteria in a Martian rock.

1997

Scientists clone sheep

1998

India and Pakistan test nuclear weapons

I thought that it was strange to assume that it was abnormal for anyone to e forever asking questions about the nature of the universe, about what the human condition really was, my condition, what I was doing here, if there really was something to do. It seemed to me on the contrary that it was abnormal for people not to think about it, for them to allow themselves to live, as it were unconsciously. Perhaps it's because everyone, all the other are convinced in some unformulated, irrational way that one day everything will be made clear. Perhaps there will be a morning of grace for humanity. Perhaps there will be a morning of grace for me.

Eugène Ionesco, The Hermit, 1973

Did you know...?

*There was little money for publicity (*The Bald Prima Donna*), so the actors turned themselves into sandwich men and paraded the streets with their boards for about an hour before the performance. But the theatre remained almost empty. More than once, when there were fewer people in the theatre, they were given their money back and the actors went home. After about six weeks they gave up.*

Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 1961

Transcription of an early meeting with Simon Magill, former Artistic Director of Tinderbox Theatre Company

Monday 9th December, 2002

Why 'The Chairs'?

It was initially Owen's idea. I knew of the play and as I read it I was interested obviously because Owen is one of the playwrights here that I like, and I also like the way he uses language. Primarily it's the style of the piece that I like. It's non-naturalistic. When I read Owens adaptation of *The Chairs* I see it as a comment upon the stasis in the peace process. There's a tangible political stagnancy into which comes all these people to hear the old man's message, and of course there is no message. I read that as an analogy of what's going on here at the minute.

Why does the style of 'The Chairs' appeal to you?

Basically it's not kitchen-sink drama or a soap-opera where characters sit on a sofa drinking endless cups of tea only to be tormented by their past. It's like *Caught Red Handed* (previous award-winning Tinderbox production), using elements of European theatre style to comment upon our society. I think this piece does it quite well and it's also funny, but it's ultimately a tragedy I suppose.

What interests you about Owen's writing?

He has a lyrical way with his language, a 'Belfastese', if there is such a word, that's lyrical and of the people and therefore readily recognisable and accessible. If you mention to Joe Public we're doing 'The Chairs' by Ionesco they might run a mile whereas Owens adaptation will be more accessible. It also reflects a certain cultural confidence. We are good at theatre and storytelling and I suppose we are looking towards other societies or European writers and putting our stamp and interpretation on certain works that speak to our experiences. We are also asking whether Northern Ireland is destined to be a boring regional backwater or emerge as a vibrant cultural hub? Hopefully Tinderbox and the wider artistic community can contribute in some way to the creation of the latter.

Tell me a little about Owen's previous work for Tinderbox.

He was commissioned to contribute to *Convictions* which was staged at Crumlin Road Courthouse in 2000. He produced a very elliptical piece set in a kind of limbo and for my money the best one of the playlets. You could see a thematic link connecting all his writing for the company. *No Place Like Home* (2001) deals with people in stasis, people who are separated from their place of birth, with no sense of home.

Owen has room to play around with what he wants to write about. Even in his most recent play, *Closing Time* (National Theatre, London, 2003), people are on the brink of a second chance. He

did philosophy at Queen's so that's maybe why he's playing around with ideas as well not just political but the bigger ideas of life and what's it all about.

Can you speak to us regarding the specifics of adaptation?

The Chairs was written in French initially. Martin Crimp has translated the piece which was performed a number of years ago by *Complicite*. There is also the Gallimard version, and both are very 'English'. What Owen is doing with the text is partly adapting the work to our vernacular and our sensibilities. The themes within it are universal and could be performed anywhere, however, I do think there is a particular relevance here that hopefully people will respond to.

In terms of the adaptation and what the Ionesco estate will actually let you do, are there certain imposed limits?

It's not like the Beckett estate where one must present it as it was written. We are keeping the play in the spirit of what Ionesco intended, for example, at the end of the recent *Complicite* staging where the orator speaks nonsense that nobody can understand, Owen states that we can cut elements or do things differently. There's a greater degree of freedom. Hopefully when we send it to the Ionesco estate they will approve. I wonder will they have to translate the text back into French. Didn't Beckett do that quite a bit for his own amusement, translate his work from French to English and from English back into French?

Can you give us some examples of how the language will change from the original?

The literal translation provided by Kerry Goyer was very thorough. In the opening bit there's 'ma chou' which in French means literally 'my cabbage' and it's a term of affection. Owen has called it 'plops', 'my little plops'. Apparently 'chou' also means 'rabbit droppings'. He has called it plops. The Old Man hangs out of the window and the Old Woman says, 'You better be careful or it'll be plip plop my plops'. It just playing around with the non-sensical rhyming slang, with words and associations.

How much collaboration is there between yourself and the writer? How much has it been a collaboration? Has your vision for the piece dovetailed with Owen's vision?

They both work in tandem actually. We had a great wee stand up row not so long back about it. I was talking about the analogy of the Good Friday Agreement and he was determined not to make specific references to here. I think he was reacting against the parochialism. His text is definitely not a parochial take on it. Instead he makes the play a little more relevant to here while still dealing with the big ideals. Interestingly, he has refers to the Titanic, and Paris has now become Belfast. It works.

Can you tell us a little about the acting style associated with 'The Chairs'?

The characters are timeless, ageless. They are supposed to be very old so they will be one minute moving very slowly and the next minute they will be headless chickens bringing chairs on here there and everywhere.

I think people have certain preconceptions because *Complicite* staged *The Chairs* and therefore this sends alarm bells meaning that it's an extremely physical Pina Bausch piece. But physicality is precision really, it's conjuring up the photographer, it's conjuring up the tall person, and how the old couple react to seeing these people will allow us to see them. I think of the first incarnation of *Weddings, Weeins and Wakes* that *Charabanc* did, *Hard to Believe*, the one man show by Conall Morrison, *Hurricane* and *A Night In November*, where actors are conjuring up characters and other people. This kind of theatricality is the style and not expressive dance.

What makes this a Tinderbox show?

I believe *The Chairs* is a reflection of the stasis we are experiencing in society at the moment, both politically and socially. We are in limbo, hoping society won't slide back into violence and wondering what will come in its place? Since the institutions were suspended the figures filling vacant ministerial roles are largely nameless and faceless. How many people can actually name these people? For those of us experiencing self-governance for the first time, losing the promise

and potential of the executive twice made the sense of being cut adrift even more acute. Be prepared to witness many nameless and faceless characters in *The Chairs*!

What are the central themes of The Chairs?

There's quite a simple story on the surface. The Old Man has a message he wants to share with the world. This message amounts to the sum total of his life experience, his words of wisdom to the people of the world. He feels that he doesn't have the skills to convey his thoughts sufficiently so he hires a professional orator instead and the guests are due to arrive at any moment. The Old Man and his equally aged wife have to prepare the room in which the guests will assemble to hear the message. Believing that his presence will get in the way of the message being heard he makes the ultimate sacrifice. The biblical connotations should become clear in performance. *The Chairs* also questions how art can reflect society, and how language can encapsulate moods and thoughts. Is language ultimately a limited means of communication?

It is also the story of a man and a woman who have been together for so long, their shared memories and the memories that they tend to discriminate. They refer to a son. The old man refers to not having a son and the old woman refers to having a son, so the audience could interpret certain aspects of the relationship and what they say as representing the situation in Northern Ireland where people have different takes on history. Somebody would choose to remember something and the other side perhaps tend to remember something else, using these selected memories or events as weapons. They pair do have singular shared memories but it is the differences that predominate. I hope audiences will come to it and be able to make up their own mind.

There is a truth to these characters, they are ageless, they are timeless and to a certain degree they are placeless.

What do you mean when you use the word 'truth'?

Ultimately one talks about truth in terms of actors and so on it's what is causing one person to do something else so...

There are different types of 'Truth'?

Absolutely, and what is the truth of this play? You decide that for yourself. In the interplay between these two characters where one says one thing and disagrees with the other the truth there is possibly that their relationship is one big contradiction but somehow something else is holding them together. Be it the predicament or the place.

You mentioned earlier about there being as truth to these characters, what do you mean by that and how would you apply that in practice?

They are a couple who have lived together with each other a long time. Who is telling the truth who is not? Do they get irked with each other? Do they love each other? Why do they stick together? It's also about ambition. The Old Woman constantly says he could have been someone. She does everything for him, she gets the chairs. In the Martin Crimp version or in Ionesco's version it seems she happily does that but in ours we're introduced to the fact that she asks why does it have to be me that does everything all the time. We've got to believe that she believes all

these people are coming here. Or is she just doing this to indulge his fantasy? People can bring to it what they will and to see if it does touch a chord. Hopefully it does. You've got to empathise with these two people so that you go along with them.

Hopefully they will be that one will respond to them on an emotional level while watching this play.

The Chairs was first performed in 1952, the same year as *Waiting For Godot*. It was overshadowed by *Godot* though they are dealt with the same themes; the aftermath of

WW2 where we have seen there is no God and that we are a rather cruel race. Before, art and literature assumed that God was central in all things.

Do you think 'Waiting For Godot' is a more accessible play?

Ionesco's absurdism is maybe what alienates the audience at the time possibly pushing Beckett to the fore a little bit. *Godot* is the ultimate classic. It's a very fine play as is *The Chairs* and both deal with the same themes. When you think of Lucky's speech in *Godot* which is complete nonsense and you go there you go language is nonsense and thoughts and ideals and all the rest of it and the notion of truth. I was watching *The Sky at Night* last night. Patrick Moore and the Astronomer Royal were discussing the big bang and how we can pinpoint our universe and its history to a second after the big bang but we don't know what happened before, so there's only so much that we know even though we've made great strides as a race in such a short space of time.

Few are you minded at present in terms of what you think the ending will be? Is there optimism or pessimism? Could political events between now and performance have an impact upon the ending that you choose.

We must remember that the ending is inherently non-sensical. I suppose the point of this play is the failure of language and the failure of communication through language. Once again this reflects the current political crisis; the politicians sat down and agreed what they agreed, but in fact they agreed what they thought they agreed. There were different approaches accommodated in an almost contrived political language with extreme pressure to agree to something. At the moment *The Chairs* is at the first draft stage. I think we need to look at it again. I'm a bit unsure of how the ending works at the moment. It also questions what you've just seen. Hopefully it has made you laugh. It just asks all those kinds of questions. It's not a soap-opera. It requires a little bit more thought than that.

Is it essential that the actors are from Northern Irish?

We had talked about this initially and we were toying with casting southern actors but we were concerned that this might move away from the initial premise of why we wanted to stage *The Chairs*. Also, a southern inflection has a different sense of place whereas the Northern Irish accent brings that with it. Hermeneutics! The Northern Irish voice brings with it that breadth of experience. There are turns of phrase that if done in a southern tongue would be evocative of something else whereas in a Northern Irish tongue or accent they are more evocative of this place. This version is more earthy than the Martin Crimp version and familiar to our audience and evocative of something.

Did you know...

In 1938, Ionesco obtained a government grant to enable him to go to France to undertake research for a thesis he planned on 'the themes of sin and death in French poetry since Beaudelaire'. He went back to France but is reputed never to have written a single line of this great work.

Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, 1961

Producing a literal translation of 'The Chairs'

By Kerry Goyer

My regular work is translation of factual documents for European institutions and companies: reports on development projects and speeches on practical subjects like health and social security. Translating *The Chairs* from the original French for Tinderbox was my first venture into the translation of literature. Yet it wasn't exactly literary translation. Owen McCafferty needed a literal – i.e. straightforward, word-for-word – translation of Eugène Ionesco's play. My job was absolutely not to put my own spin on this story but to be an intermediary between Ionesco and Owen.

When I read the play in French for the first time I was very apprehensive. Not only is it full of zany word-play based on the sounds and different possible meanings of French words but it is also very "French" in terms of the dramatic situation – a soirée given by a very old caretaker and his wife – and the nature of the interaction between the characters. There is a formality to French social life that doesn't really have an equivalent in Irish and British experience. (Just think, for example, of the importance of "vous" and "tu", the two different ways of saying "you".)

I knew that what Owen needed was a neutral text, conveying the meaning of Ionesco's words and nothing more, but that was not altogether easy to supply. In the normal course of my work, when I translate a speech (for example by a Member of the European Parliament at an international conference) I try to imagine what an English speaker would say to get that particular message across in that situation, and I know what sort of English speaker I am thinking of because I can read other speeches by Irish and British MEPs. But who are the Irish or British equivalents of Ionesco's Old Man and Old Woman? The job of caretaker in an apartment block is very much less common in Ireland or Britain than it is in France because fewer of us live in apartment blocks, so this person, who may be a generally recognisable type in France, is not so here. I had to remind myself that it wasn't my problem to imagine who the characters might be: Owen would do that. I just had to put their words into English.

It sounds easy, yet without the sort of ready equivalence I have with my MEPs, it took a lot of thought. For example, should I use "that is" or "that's"? "Do not" or "don't"? I consulted Owen about questions like this and about how to deal with the puns, rhymes and double meanings scattered throughout the play. For translating this word-play we decided that I should put the most obvious meanings in the text but should add footnotes explaining the other possibilities, and why certain sentences might sound ridiculously funny in French. I had to be careful not to introduce any "feel" to the text that came from my own imagination rather than what Ionesco had put on the page. The exercise of policing myself in this way made me realise just how much "feel" can go into even very ordinary factual translation.

It was only after I had finished my draft of the text that I read the two existing published translations by Watson and Crimp, which were produced as scripts for performance of the play in English. I had not read them earlier because I had not wanted to be influenced by them. What I was doing now was simply checking that I had not missed anything. I was interested to find that one of the translations was reasonably close to what I had done. The other had a more modern, idiomatic feel to it but also a more distinctly "English" (rather than any other sort of British, or Irish) accent.

I enjoyed the job and doing it has made me more confident about the prospect of translating other plays or stories – whether as texts for performance or as raw material for someone like Owen.

French Extract

From Ionesco's original text of *The Chairs* that was the source document for Kerry's literal translation

La Vieille Vas-y alors, raconte ton histoire... Elle est aussi la mienne, ce qui est tien, est mien! Alors, on arri...

Le Vieux Alors, on arri... ma crotte...

La Vieille Alors, on arri... mon chou...

Le Vieux Alors, on arriva près d'une grande grille. On était tout mouillés, glacés jusqu'aux os, depuis des heures, des jours, des nuits, des semaines...

La Vieille Des mois...

Le Vieux Dans la pluie... On claquait des oreilles, des pieds, des genoux, des nez, des dents... il y a de ça quatre-vingts ans... Ils ne nous ont pas permis d'entrer... ils auraient pu au moins ouvrir la porte du jardin...

Silence

La Vieille Dans le jardin l'herbe était mouillée.

Le Vieux Il y avait un sentier qui conduisait à une petite place; au milieu, une église de village... Où était ce village? Tu te rappelles?

La Vieille Non, mon chou, je ne sais plus.

Le Vieux Comment y arrivait-on? Où est la route? Ce lieu s'appelait, je crois, Paris...

La Vieille Ça n'a jamais existé, Paris, mon petit.

Le Vieux Cette ville a existé puisqu'elle s'est effondrée... C'était la ville de lumière, puisqu'elle s'est éteinte, éteinte, depuis quatre cent mille ans... Il ne reste plus rien aujourd'hui, sauf une chanson.

La Vieille Une vraie chanson? C'est drôle. Quelle chanson?

Le Vieux Une berceuse, une allégorie: "Paris sera toujours Paris".

La Vieille On y allait par le jardin? Était-ce loin?

Le Vieux *rêve, perdu*. La chanson?... la pluie?...

La Vieille Tu es très doué. Si tu avais eu un peu d'ambition dans la vie, tu aurais pu être un Roi chef, un Journaliste chef, un Comédien chef, un Maréchal chef... Dans le trou, tout ceci hélas... dans le grand trou tout noir... Dans le trou noir, je te dis.

Silence

La Vieille Alors on arri...

La Vieille

Ah! Oui, enchaîne... raconte...

Le Vieux

tandis que la Vieille se mettra à rire, doucement, gâteuse; puis, progressivement, aux éclats; le Vieux rira aussi. Alors, on a ri, on avait mal au ventre, l'histoire était si drôle... le drôle arriva ventre à terre, ventre nu,

le drôle avait du ventre... il arriva avec une malle toute pleine de riz; par terre le riz se répandit... le drôle à terre aussi, ventre à terre... alors, on a ri, on a ri, on a ri, le ventre drôle, nu de riz à terre, la malle, l'histoire au mal de riz ventre à terre, ventre nu, tout de riz, alors on a ri, le drôle alors arriva tout nu, on a ri...

La Vieille

riant. Alors on a ri du drôle, alors arrivé tout nu, on a ri, la malle, la malle de riz, le riz au ventre, à terre...

Les deux vieux

ensemble, riant. Alors, on a ri. Ah!... ri... arri... arri... Ah!... Ah!... ri... va... arri... arri... le drôle ventre nu... au riz arriva... au riz arriva. (On entend.) Alors on a... ventre nu... arri... la malle... (Puis les deux Vieux petit à petit se calment.) On a... ah!... arri... ah!... arri... ah! arri... va... ri.

La Vieille

C'était donc ça, ton fameux Paris.

Le Vieux

Qui pourrait dire mieux.

At a performance of *The Lesson* in Brussels the audience demanded their money back and the leading actor had to escape through the back door.

Literal Translation (extract)

By Kerry Goyer

Old Woman Go on then, tell your story ... It's my story too, what's yours is mine! Well, we laughed...

Old Man Well, we laughed ... sweetiepie ...

Old Woman Well, we laughed ... pet ...

Old Man Well, we arrived¹ near a big gate.² We had been soaked, chilled to the bone, for hours, for days, for nights, for weeks ...

Old Woman For months ...

Old Man ...In the rain ... Our ears, our feet, our knees, our noses, our teeth were chattering ... that was eighty years ago now ... They wouldn't let us in ... they could at least have opened the garden gate ...

Silence.

Old Woman In the garden the grass was wet.

Old Man There was a path that led to a little square; in the middle, a village church ... Where was that village? Do you remember?

Old Woman No pet, I have forgotten.

Old Man How did we get there? Where is the road? The place, I think, was called Paris ...

Old Woman Paris never existed, my little one.

Old Man That city did exist, because it fell into ruins ... It was the city of light, because it went out, went out, four hundred thousand years ago ... There is nothing left of it today, except a song.

Old Woman A real song? That's funny. What song?

Old Man A lullaby, an allegory: "*Paris sera toujours Paris.*"³

Old Woman You got there through the garden? Was it far?

Old Man (*dreaming, lost*)The song? ... the rain? ...

Old Woman You are very gifted. If you had had a little ambition in life you could have been a king-in-chief, a journalist-in-chief, an actor-in-chief, a marshal-in-

¹ See note 5.

² The French is "une grille" – it means a substantial (though not solid) metal gate and can also mean "railings" or "bars". Watson's "great iron gate" seems good.

³ "Paris will always be Paris". The song was first sung by Maurice Chevalier in 1939 and evokes the city in wartime.

chief ... Down the hole, all that, unfortunately ... down the big black hole ...
Down the hole, I tell you.

Silence.

- Old Man Well we arri...⁴
- Old Woman Oh, yes, go on ... tell the story ...
- Old Man *(while the Old Woman begins laughing, quietly at first, in a doddering way, then gradually in great bursts; the Old Man will laugh too.)*⁵ Well, we laughed, our bellies ached, the whole thing was so funny ... the funny guy arrived flat out, bare-bellied, he had a bit of a belly ... he arrived with a trunk full of rice; the rice spilled over the ground ... the funny guy on the ground, too, belly to the ground ... well, we laughed, we laughed, we laughed, the funny belly, bare rice on the ground, the trunk, the whole thing was flat-out rice ache, bare-bellied, all of rice, well we laughed, so the funny guy arrived with no clothes on, we laughed ...
- Old Woman *(laughing.)* Well, we laughed at the funny guy, arrived then with no clothes on, we laughed, the trunk, the trunk of rice, rice in the belly, on the ground ...
- Old Man/Old Woman *(together, laughing)*
Well, we laughed. Oh! ... laughed ... arri... arri... Oh! ... Oh! ... laughed ... go⁶ ... arri... arri... the funny guy with the bare belly ... with the rice arrived ... with the rice arrived. *(We hear)* Well, we ... bare-bellied ... arri... the trunk ... *(Then the Old Man and Old Woman gradually settle down.)* We a... ah!... arri... ah! arri... ah!... arri... ved... laughed.⁷
- Old Woman So that was it, your famous Paris.
- Old Man Exactly!

⁴ See note 5. The French here, "On arri...", means "We arri..." but sounds the same as "On a ri" ["We laughed"].

⁵ This speech is packed full of wordplay: "ri" [laughed] and "riz" [rice] sound the same, as do "mal" [ache or pain] and "malle" [trunk]; "ventre à terre", translated here in its normal sense as "flat out", literally means "belly to the ground", and "drôle" appears both as an adjective, meaning "funny", and a noun, which I have translated as "funny guy", although it could also be "kid" or "rascal". So the speech (and Sémiramis' reply) is a sort of game with the words for rice, laughed, funny, ache and belly. The translation supplies only the literal meanings of the words.

⁶ More wordplay. "Va" means "go" [as the imperative form of the verb, addressing one person] or "goes", but it is also the second syllable of "arriva" [arrived], the first part being "arri", which sounds the same as "a ri" [laughed].

⁷ See note 5.

Adaptation (extract)

by Owen McCafferty

This is an extract from Owen McCafferty's adaptation of *The Chairs*. Try to discover any changes Owen has made. Discuss why you think he has made them and consider how they will affect the audience's experience. What are his motives for making certain changes or adding particular references?

Old Woman the story - your story – our story – what's yours is mine (and what's mine's me own) tell the story - well we roared

Old Man well we roared – my pets

Old Woman well we roared – my little plops

Old Man well we – well we moored along side a screaming hoard – soaked right through to the onions we were – chilled to the very core of our drenched little beings – hours – days – nights – weeks

Old Woman months

Old Man yes – we moored – it poured – ears eyes feet toes knees teeth eyelids brains – all chattering like there was no tomorrow – must be a lifetime ago now what – they wouldn't let us in – the man with the long chin spewing rubbish with his kin and collecting money in a tin – they wouldn't let us in
Silence.

Old Woman on the riverbank the grass was wet

Old Man there was a towpath that led to the centre – in the middle of the centre was a big rock clock beside a dock– where was that village ? - do you remember ?

Old Woman do i remember ? – i remember i have forgotten my little plops

Old Man how did we get there – what river did we follow – the place i think was called belfast

Old Woman belfast never existed my little plops

Old Man that city did exist – it fell into ruins so it must've existed – it was a city of light – but light years ago it went dark – so many light years ago – there is nothing left of it now except a song

Old Woman that's funny – a real song – what song ?

Old Man as real as song's can be – a lullaby – my lagan love

Old Woman as gifted as gifted can be – what a little ambition might have yielded – you could've been a king-in-command – a journalist-in-command – an

actor-in-command – an officer-in-command – all that scrubbed though –
totally scrubbed – that's unfortunate – sad – a damn waste

Silence.

Old Man so we moored

Old Woman yes – that's it – tell the story – we need the story

Old Man *(the Old Woman begins laughing, quietly at first, in a doddering way, then gradually in great bursts; the Old Man will laugh to.)* Well we roared – a man with a board shouting about the lord and waving a sword – he ate an apple cored – the lord and the sword – there was no accord – he was floored – the lord – the sword – an apple cored with no accord – we roared after we moored

Old Woman we roared – and we roared until our spirits soared

Old Man the floored accord – the lord floored – we roared and roared – eating an apple cored – we roared – we roared – not bored – flat on his sword – the lord - cored

Old Woman *(laughing)* - we roared at the man with the board sword and no accord – roared at no accord – the lord with a sword – the board floored – no shouting about the lord – our spirits soared – we roared at the hoard – no accord

Old Man/Woman *(laughing)* – well we roared – oh roared – moored – roared – we adored – we roared – the man with a board shouting about the lord and waving a sword – with the sword cored – back on board with no accord – *(we hear)* – well – we –floored – sword – moored- the lord *(then they gradually settle down)* – we –mo ah – moo – ah – moor – ah – moor – ed – roared

Old Woman so that was it your famous belfast

Old Man precisely – exactly – on the nose - ly

Discussion with writer Owen McCafferty

25th Feb 2003

JMC What interested you in *The Chairs*?

Owen To begin with it's very funny. There's a nice mixture of styles in it. It seems to have a language that is in some way naturalistic and then at certain times it feels quite stylised and very theatrical. I also think it's a very good subject matter. Basically it's about two people looking over back their lives and that appeals to me in general.

JMC Are there any themes that speak particularly to an audience from Northern Ireland?

OWEN In a very specific sense I don't think there's anything that appeals to a Northern Ireland audience and not elsewhere. In places like Northern Ireland where there has been a certain amount of conflict due to a lack of communication the play is about the lack of communication or rather the seeming inability to essentially communicate with one another. Without hammering everybody over the head about that I imagine an audience will either pick up on that or not. I would be surprised if they didn't. One of the reasons why I wanted to do something like this is to make the work more accessible for an audience who might not normally get the chance to see it.

JMC Kerry's translation. What were you expecting or hoping to receive.

OWEN That's an awkward question because I have never written a version of anybody's work before.

JMC She had spoken about her own work and incorporating what she perceives to be the speakers intention and emotion in her translation. The correct stresses and intention.

OWEN I wouldn't have known that but apparently the norm is you get what is called a flat translation and then the playwright puts his or her interpretation on that. I imagine it would be an awkward situation if the person who was doing the literal translation was also putting their interpretation on it.

JMC She had been in contact and had discussed the use of commas and whether or not she should write something as seemingly mundane as 'that is' or 'that's' in her translation. Were there any particular points where you both discussed your respective roles?

Not really to be honest. We had three or four conversations talking about the play and what it was about. I don't think that this was of a specific nature, maybe it was. I don't know how a translator works. I know from my point of view, and this didn't happen, but in linguistic terms I wouldn't be as precise as a literal translator.

JMC Your short work *The Damage Done* has nameless characters, Him and Her, and is quite similar to an absurd piece in it's style and construction. Are their absurd origins or tendencies in your work?

OWEN Not necessarily in content but I'd imagine in style, reading people like Ionesco definitely frees you up from being totally naturalistic all the time and therefore free's your language up. I have never written with the same philosophical tendencies as the absurd writers. *Freefalling* was another play that had no names in it, just Him and Her inventing a whole load of characters. Mojo Mickybo was the same even though they had names. I imagine,

maybe its tenuous maybe it's not, but the link between those plays and absurd theatre is that the staging tend to be non-specific. Absurdists don't like the idea of definitely plonking

you and placing you somewhere. They like the idea that things are abstract and don't have to signify a specific place, it can be any place in a way that appeals to me. It makes things more amenable, to be universally true.

JMC You talked about the philosophical background of the absurd writers. In your play *Shoot The Crew* there is a character names Socrates. Is there any philosophical significance in this?

OWEN I worked as a tiler for a while and I was actually given that name because they knew I had studied philosophy.

JMC I was thinking there was some great meaning behind the use of the name.

OWEN No. Not at all.

JMC Is this your first time adapting a work for the stage?

OWEN Yes.

JMC How contrasting have you found the adaptation process from your normal way of producing a script?

OWEN In a very obvious sense it's different because you're not creating something from nothing. You're starting out with somebody else's thoughts so I imagine the first thing you do is try and weed your way through those. You basically need to find out for them what the play was about and then try not to tamper with that at all. No matter what you do you should never interfere with the sense of the play, with the feel of it. I think all I was doing was making the thing more accessible. My part was to change the language of it. I didn't change the internal structure, that was his (Ionesco's). The play works. There was no reason for me to go down that route. I didn't change every word. There are chunks of it that are Ionesco's. When you read them the words are excellent in their own right. There's no point touching them in my point of view.

JMC In terms of the language you use in *The Chairs* you have included references to Belfast and Northern Ireland.

OWEN At the start I didn't want any. The only thing I wanted to do was to make it more accessible. I didn't want the audience to think I had taken a play and made it about Belfast. It's not about Belfast. We did throw references in here and there. It makes people think that they're on familiar terms with things and that's a far different matter for me then having to go down the road of changing nearly every aspect of the play to make it truthful if it was set in Belfast. I was apprehensive about that notion. Then I thought because it was written in a heightened Belfast language that there was no harm in throwing in a few references here and there. It would be wrong to think this is a direct comment about here.

JMC Was there a freedom in playing around with the language you have put in the mouths of the characters?

OWEN It's clear when you read the play that Ionesco was having a bit of fun with language and once you take that on board it allows you to do that as well and sometimes he was having

a bit of fun in the way things can be nonsensical. It does free you up to a certain extent and it is fun to make things up in a nonsensical absurdly jokey type of way.

JMC You have heard the actors playing the script?

OWEN It comes across very well. The internal structure, nearly all of Ionesco's stage directions are exactly the same. I didn't touch them except for maybe at the end. The fact that the play works before I ever got my hand on it means that it's going to work again. That aspect isn't changing. It does have a more accessible feel to it now to be coming from here.

JMC Finally, what should the audience expect when they come to see *The Chairs*?

OWEN Ionesco is very clear about what people are coming to see. They are coming to see a tragic farce. In a way I don't like talking about these things because there is no such thing as absurdist theatre or absurdists. This is just a guy on his own trying to work out how to write a play and this is the way he's done it this time round. I expect them to have a laugh to begin with on a very basic level. Thematically the play seems to scream about old age for me, about people living their lives together and about shared memories and how, when two people look back over their lives, how aspects of it might differ. Really that's all I think he's writing about and he's gone about it in a strange way and sometimes a very wonderful way but it doesn't seem to me to be anymore complicated than that. There's no trick to it. You start out with two old people and follow their journey. There are other philosophical aspects to it but they don't carry the weight of the play. The weight of the play is about the relationship between two old people and that's what we follow.

JMC The immediacy of that is something that participants will latch on to. This will carry them through the piece and whether other elements hit them or not it will either come out through their participation in the workshop, or maybe they are going home and secretly reading Sartre or Camus under their mattresses...

OWEN If they are tell them to go out and get a life.

Designing 'The Chairs'

By Stuart Marshall

The basic layout of the set is described in the introduction to the original play. It should be circular, and have 7 doors, 2 windows, a large central door and 2 hidden doors. Ionesco also supplies a diagram to make this clearer [1]. As the action of the play involves heavy use of many doors for bringing chairs on, it would be unwise to alter this general plan. For this production however, there were constraints that meant that the number of doors had to be reduced. The production is touring, and some of the venues are of limited size, and as a useable door has to be a certain minimum size (both for a person and a chair to come through), there just wasn't the room to include the specified number. In addition, there needs to be enough room offstage for both the storage of the chairs and the physical moving of them through the doors, so in this design there are only 5 doors, 2 windows, the central door and one hidden one.

There is no guidance given by the author as to the look of the set, other than it should be "very bare". (This is to contrast the look at the end of the play when it is full of chairs).

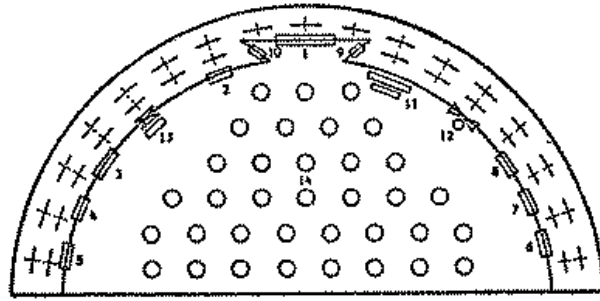
I had some meetings with the director and the adapter of the script to talk about what look the set might have. I was keen to keep this idea of emptiness, but was trying also to give it some interest as well. We felt that it should have some elements of domesticity, but that it should also be slightly odd, maybe antiseptic, in feel. I wanted to give the feel of being by the seaside (as they are supposedly living in a tower on an island), so I looked at some photos of piers and lighthouses [2]. I also investigated images of old asylums [3], but it was felt that this was too realistic and literal. There perhaps should be some doubt as to whether the two old people are crazy or not, but this shouldn't be obviously spelt out in the scenery. I was also interested in doing something vaguely surreal [4] as the spirit of this type of art was an influence on the later dramatists. I worked for several weeks using different ideas and sources, making several rough models [5], to try and come up with something that worked for the staging of the play, and also had some intrinsic appeal for the audience. At first I just used white cardboard, and once I had a basic layout finished, I could add colours and textures.

The final result [6] is a mixture of by-the-seaside colours (and evocative, homely louvre blinds), matt-painted tongue-and-groove boards (like bathing huts) with gloss-white antiseptic doors (and institutional-type handles). The doors at the back are gold because they are important. The author makes a point of saying they should be grand, so there's no reason not to paint them gold and make them look special.

The chairs were originally all going to be exactly the same, but for various reasons (some of them practical – it is hard to find 40 chairs all the same for very little money; others more conceptual – why would there be 40 chairs all the same? Wouldn't it be more visually interesting if they were different? Wouldn't they put out the best chairs first?) – it was decided that they could be a mixture of styles. The two chairs that start the play needed to be larger to help the actors do some things required of them by the script. I painted some of them to give a range of tones that would combine to create an interesting yet unified look.

[1]

THE CHAIRS



[2]



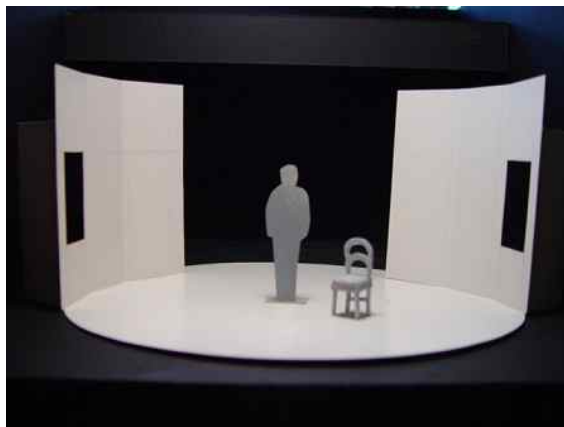
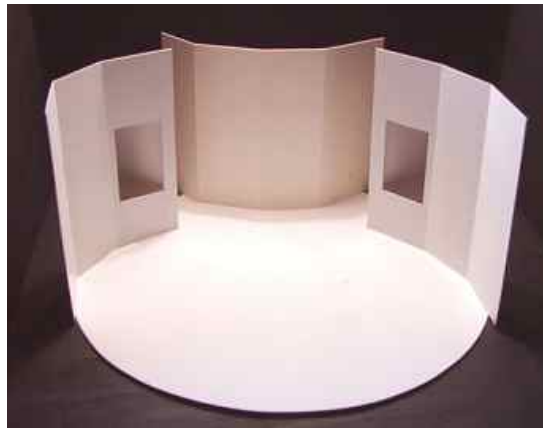
[3]



[4]



[5]





[6]



You can see more of Stuart's designs for theatre on his website

Ionesco vs Tynan

During a few short months in the summer of 1958 a battle raged across the theatre columns of the Observer Newspaper in London. The critic Kenneth Tynan and Eugène Ionesco locked horns over the playwrights work and the function of art. Below you will find a number of the critical blows that were exchanged as well as thoughts from other individuals.

Here at last was a self-proclaimed advocate of anti-theatre: explicitly anti-realist and by implication anti-reality as well. Here was a writer ready to declare that words were meaningless and that all communications between human beings was impossible.

Kenneth Tynan

A playwright simply writes plays, in which he can offer only a testimony, not a didactic message...Any work of art which was ideological and nothing else would be pointless...inferior to the doctrine it tried to illustrate, which would already have been expressed in it's proper language, that of discursive demonstration.. Any ideological play can be no more than the vulgarization of an ideology.

Ionesco in 'The Playwright's role', Observer, 29 June 1958

No society has been able to abolish human sadness, no political system can deliver us from the pain of living, from our fear of death, our thirst for the absolute; it is the human condition that directs the social condition, not vice versa.

Ionesco

If only Monsieur Ionesco were able to put some of its clarity and wisdom into his own plays, he might yet become a great playwright!

HF Garten (Translator) speaking in relation to Ionesco's response to Tynan in the Observer

Art and ideology often interact on each other, but the plain fact is that both spring from a common source. Both draw on human experience to explain mankind to itself...They are brothers, not child and parent.

Ionesco

Whether M.Ionesco admits it or not, every play worth serious consideration is a statement addressed in the first person singular to the first person plural, and the latter must retain the right to dissent...If a man tells me something I believe to be an untruth, am I forbidden to do more than congratulate him on the brilliance of his lying?

Tynan, 'Ionesco and the Phantom', Observer, 6 July 1958

Shortly after my arrival in my second homeland, I saw a man, still young, big and strong, attack an old man with his fists and kick him with his boots...I have no other images of the world except those of evanescence and brutality, vanity and rage, nothingness or hideous, useless hatred. Everything I have since experienced has merely confirmed what I had seen and understood in my childhood: vain and sordid fury, cries suddenly stifled by silence, shadows engulfed forever in the night.

Ionesco, 'Lorsque j'écris'

Formal experiment in art thus becomes an exploration of reality more valid and more useful (because it serves to enlarge man's understanding of the real world) than shallow works that are immediately comprehensible to the masses. Since the beginning of our century there has been a great creative upsurge of such creative exploration, which has transformed our understanding of the world, particularly in music and painting. In literature, and above all in theatre, this movement seems to have come to a stop since, perhaps, 1925. I should like to be able to hope to be considered one of the modest craftsmen who have taken it up again. I have, for example, tried to exteriorize the anxiety...of my characters through objects; to make the stage settings speak; to translate the action into visual terms; to project visual images of fear, regret, remorse, alienation; to play with words...I have thus tried to extend the language of the theatre...Is this to be condemned?

Ionesco

All the best plays he has written are one-act plays, but he knows they are hard to sell, so he pads them into three acts. Whereas on the other hand you have Beckett, who has brought everything down to a minimum, you read Ionesco adding on stuff.

Jack MacGowran (Actor)

Plays/Playwrights associated with the 'absurd'

Aristophanes (448-380bc)

Lysistrata, Birds, Frogs, Clouds

Georges Feydeau (1862-1921)

Pig in a Poke, The One That Got Away, Heart's Desire Hotel, Sauce for the Goose

Alfred Jarry (1873-1907)

Ubu Roi

Ivan Goll (1891-1950)

Methusalem

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980)

No Exit, Huis Clos

Samuel Beckett (1906-1989)

Endgame, Waiting for Godot, Happy Days, Krapps Last Tape

Arthur Adamov (1908-1970)

Professor Taranne, The Parody, The Invasion

Eugene Ionesco (1909-1994)

The Bald Prima Donna, The Lesson, The Chairs, Rhinoceros

Jean Genet (1910-1986)

The Maids, The Balcony

Dario Fo (1926-)

Accidental Death of an Anarchist

Edward Albee (1928-)

The Zoo story, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, 3 Tall Women

Fernando Arrabal (1932-)

The Two Executioners

Vaclav Havel (1935-)

The Garden Party, The Horse, Memorandum

Witold Gombrowicz (1904-1969)

Princess Ivona, The Marriage, Operetta

N F Simpson (1919-)

One Way Pendulum, Was He Anyone?

Alan Bennett (1934-)

Kafka's Dick

Milan Kundera (1929-)

Jacques and his Gentleman, The Owners of the Keys

Harold Pinter (1930-)

The Birthday Party
Homecoming
Mountain Language

Tom Stoppard (1927-)

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead

Jean Tardieu (1903-1995)

The Keyhole, The Ticket Office, The Contraption

Tadeusz Ryzewicz (1921-)

Card Index, On all Fours, The Old Lady Sits Waiting

Joe Orton (1933-1967)

What the Butler Saw, Loot

Sam Shepard (1943-)

True West, Buried Child, Fool for Love

Peter Weiss (1916-1982)

Marat Sade

Athol Fugard (1932-)

Siswe Bansi is Dead, Valley Song, The Island

Wole Soyinka (1934-)

Madmen and Specialists, Death and The King's Horsemen, The Beatification of Area Boy,
A Play of Giants

Programme Bibliography / Further Reading

The Myth of Sisyphus, Albert Camus, Penguin Classics, London

The Theatre of the Absurd, Martin Esslin, Penguin, London

The Field of Drama, Martin Esslin, Methuen Publishing Ltd

Games for Actors and Non-Actors, Augusto Boal, Routledge

How To Be Alone, Jonathan Franzen, Fourth Estate

The Wretched of the Earth, Franz Fanon, Penguin

The Age of Extremes. Eric Hobsbawm, Abacus

After Apocalypse, Four Japanese plays after Nagasaki and Hiroshima, David Goodman, Columbia University Press

The Beckett Actor: Jack MacGworan, Beginning to End by Jordan R.Young

Web-sites

These recommended web addresses will help students in further research relating to *The Chairs* and *Theatre of the Absurd*.

http://newman.baruch.cuny.edu/digital/2008/e_n_c/e_09_modern_drama/rejection_realism.htm

Excellent resources on theatre history with an extensive article on absurd theatre and the rejection of naturalism.

www.philosophycircle.com

Find out more about existentialism and the writers of the absurd.

www2.arts.gla.ac.uk/Savonic/Absurd.htm

A comprehensive essay on the absurd in Eastern and Western Europe.

www.teachernet.gov.uk

Unlimited educational resources for teachers.

www.complicite.com

Site for this internationally acclaimed theatre company who recently staged *The Chairs*.

www.theisticgroup.com

Theatre company that specialise in performing new and controversial works in the style of the absurd

www.members.regers.com/saadat_saeed/Article/a_splendid_source_of_absurd_theat.htm

Excellent essay on the birth of absurd theatre.

www.learn.cc.uk/default.asp?WGCJ=Unit%20WCU=2010-29k-22Feb2003

www.gradoserver.com

This site has a selection of works that were influenced by earlier absurd works e.g. Pinter's Homecoming and Pirandello's Henry IV.

www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/speech/mccafferty.shtml