

No mega-effects — just a message

BROADWAY STAR GEOFF HOYLE LEAPS AT CHANCE TO DO IONESCO AT STANFORD

By Mark de la Viña
Mercury News

Since the ever-elastic Geoff Hoyle came to San Francisco in 1973, he has established himself as the most acclaimed comic actor in the Bay Area.

He worked with Bill Irwin in the Pickle Family Circus, finding new audiences for the art of clowning. He landed golden roles at — and wrote some of his own for — Berkeley Repertory Theatre. And he answered the call of Broadway, where he originated the part of Zazu the Hornbill in "The Lion King."

Now, at 55, the British native is in rehearsal for a far lower-profile job: a role (as a 94-year-old woman) in the Stanford Summer Theater production of Eugene Ionesco's "The Chairs." It opens Thursday in the Pigott Theater, on a corner of the Stanford campus that few from beyond the Peninsula will ever visit.

"He's like a teenage actor who hasn't lost his enthusiasm," says the show's director, Aleksandra Wolska. "And for what? Only a few people are going to see it. There are no accolades, just the mere satisfaction of the work. And I so respect that."

Hoyle says one reason he'll be performing in the intimate 190-seat Pigott is that he is so enamored of the production's creative team, an international group of scholars and seasoned professionals that includes Wolska, an assistant professor of theater at the University of Minnesota; Polish National Theatre alumnus Jarek Truszczyński, the director of Stanford Summer Theater and Hoyle's co-star in "The Chairs"; and summer theater founder Rush Rehm, a Stanford professor of classics who has a bit part in the show.

And the whole atmosphere at the theater is "very retro in a way," Hoyle says. "It's what theater used to be like before market capitalism really stuck its ugly head out of the pond."

It doesn't take much to get Hoyle started on the evils of modern, commercially driven theater. ("I've got chips on my shoulder, I guess.") He can slip into a diatribe on regional theater's obsession with the box office, on Broadway's fixation on the blockbuster musical. And he's usually right.

THE CHAIRS

By Eugene Ionesco, produced by the Stanford Summer Theater

Where: the Pigott Theater, on the west side of Memorial Auditorium, Stanford University

When: 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 7 p.m. Sundays, 2 p.m. Aug. 11 Through Aug. 12

Running time: 90 minutes, with no intermission

Tickets: \$15, \$20; (650) 725-2787 or www.stanfordtheater.org

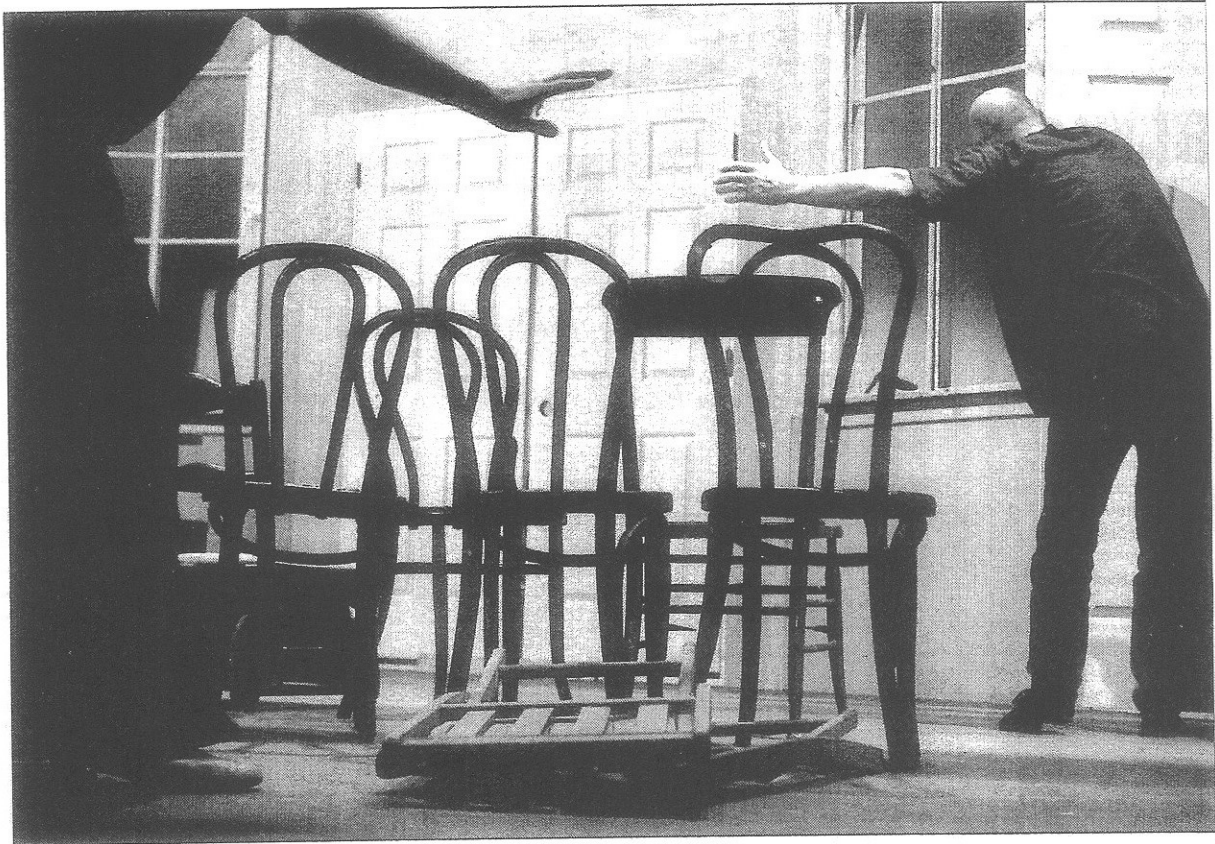
He feels that the theater's production of "The Chairs" is work as commentary as opposed to work as product. "It's great here because the bottom line isn't about selling T-shirts and stuffed animals. The bottom line is what you're saying, not what you're selling." Just as the Peninsula is known as a hotbed for research and development in the field of biotech, Hoyle sees Stanford Summer Theater as a "research and development arena, without those commercial pressures."

In a long blond wig and a shin-length dress, Hoyle looks like a weather-beaten Dust Bowl matron for his role in the play Ionesco described as "a tragic farce." Hoyle and Truszczyński play a couple in their 90s living on an isolated island. Their reminiscences are interrupted by the arrival of numerous invisible guests, from a stout, cantankerous general to a faded sexpot.

For each new person, they dash off to fetch another chair. As they arrange 70 chairs on the cramped stage, Hoyle and Truszczyński resort to physical gags that could have been mapped out by Buster Keaton.

At one point, Truszczyński, carrying three chairs in front of his face, struggles to squeeze past Hoyle, who has two of his own. They brush against each other. The jostled Hoyle looks up empty handed and stares blankly while the oblivious Truszczyński keeps moving along with his increased load.

"We're not really interested in mega-effects," Hoyle says. "There aren't going to be any



RICHARD KOCI HERNANDEZ — MERCURY NEWS PHOTOS

In "The Chairs," Jarek Truszczyński, above right, during rehearsal, and Geoff Hoyle, below, getting wig adjusted, co-star as a couple in 90s whose reminiscences are interrupted by the arrival of invisible guests.

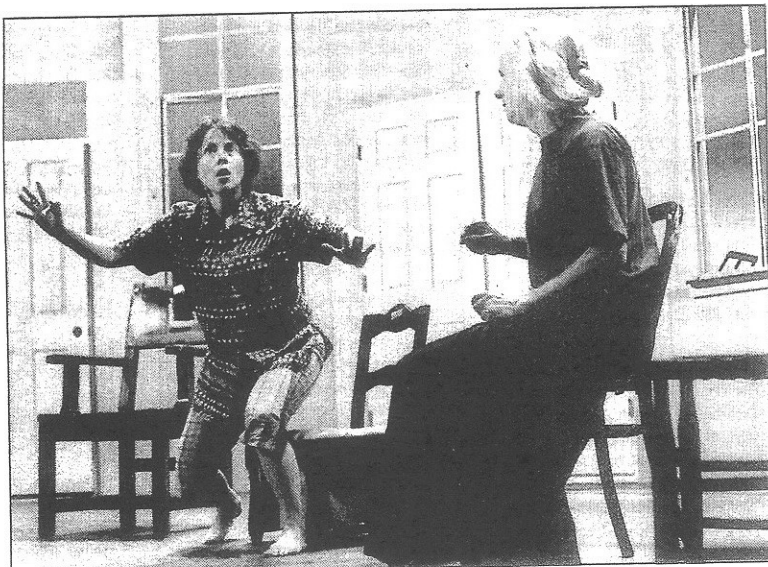


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— GEOFF HOYLE

helicopters arriving in this show. Live theater — that's the big effect."

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Aleksandra Wolska, left, directs Geoff Hoyle during a rehearsal of "The Chairs," which opens Thursday at Stanford's intimate Pigott Theater.