

DRAMA

Summer Theater of the Absurd

ON A STAGE FILLED with empty chairs, two archetypally old people entertain their party guests. Or do they?

"Is anybody really there?" muses associate professor of drama and classics Rush Rehm in an interview. "Who's sitting on whom?"

The Chairs, Eugène Ionesco's comic existentialist romp, opens July 19 for a four-week run in Pigott Theater, formerly the Little Theater. This year's offering from Stanford Summer Theater reunites San Francisco actor and mime Geoff Hoyle, who plays an old woman, with Jarek Truszczyński, a veteran performer with the Polish National Theater, as her really, really old husband. Rehm, PhD '85, rounds out the cast as an orator hired by the elderly couple to help deliver their message, and the production is directed by Aleksandra Wolska, PhD '00, an assistant professor of theater at the University of Minnesota.

Now in its fourth season, SST showcases a different playwright each year, staging one play and organizing a daylong symposium in collaboration with the Continuing Studies program.

Professor emeritus Martin Esslin, who coined the phrase and authored the book *The Theater of the Absurd* more than 40 years ago, is flying in from England for the July 28 symposium. Joining him is pal Herbert Blau, MA '49, PhD '54, founder of the San Francisco Actors Workshop and former director of the Stanford Repertory Theater of the late 1960s and early '70s. They'll lead a Stanford faculty discussion on "Fool's Gold—Ionesco and the Theater of the Absurd." Lest it become too dry and academic, members of *The Chairs* cast will intersperse snippets from *The Bald Soprano*, Ionesco's sly take-off of his attempts to learn English from a phrase book. "He who sells an ox today, will have an egg tomorrow," one character declares. "In

real life, one must look out of the window," comes the response.

Does SST aspire to, say, grow into a repertory company? Not exactly. "We had to take a break for a year because cabaret almost killed us," Rehm says about a Brecht-Weill production SST took to China in 1998. "By the time we got to Shanghai, we'd cut 30 minutes of the show and learned why Broadway try-outs are a good idea."

PULL UP A CHAIR: At the suggestion of Hoyle, right, Truszczyński grabs one.

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