

# QUINTESSENCE THEATRE



EUGÈNE IONESCO'S

# THE CHAIRS

ADAPTED BY MARTIN CRIMP DIRECTED BY ALEX BURNS

SEPT 28 - OCT 23 2022

# EUGÈNE IONESCO'S THE CHAIRS

IONESCO'S THE CHAIRS IN TRANSLATION BY MARTIN CRIMP IS PRESENTED BY ARRANGEMENT WITH SACD AND JUDY DAISH ASSOCIATES.

## C A S T

**E. Ashley Izard\*** ... Old Woman

**Alex Olson\*** ... Orator

**Frank X\*** ... Old Man

## C R E A T I V E

**Alex Burns** ... Director / Set & Sound Design

**John Burkland** ... Light Design

**Kelly Myers** ... Costume Design

**Adrienne Maitland** ... Intimacy Coordinator

**Natalie Chernicoff\*** ... Stage Manager

**Cat Brennan** ... Assistant Stage Manager

**lydon frank lettuce** ... Wardrobe Supervisor

\* MEMBER OF ACTORS' EQUITY ASSOCIATION



EUGÈNE  
IONESCO

# EUGÈNE IONESCO

**EUGÈNE IONESCO** was born in Slatina, Romania, in 1912. His family moved to France when he was two, but they returned to Romania in 1925. He pursued a degree in French at the University Bucharest and returned to Paris for his doctorate. While he was teaching, he published essays and reviews in literary journals. After World War II ended, Ionesco worked as a proofreader for a publisher of medical and legal books. He would later claim that the jargon he encountered inspired the idea for *The Bald Soprano* (1950), based on manuals that taught how to speak English by the Assimil conversation method. The indifference of this antiplay's initial audience spurred Ionesco to quickly write short plays with the express purpose of rejecting theatrical conventions of the French boulevard theaters. **CONT.**



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# EUGÈNE IONESCO

It was through writing *The Chairs* (1952) that Ionesco began exploring the metaphysical side of his tragic farces, a contribution which separated him from his Absurdist contemporaries Samuel Beckett and Jean Genet. Ionesco would become known for his focus on wordplay, his paradoxical depiction of ideology, and the failure of communication. After he moved past his early Absurdist one-acts, Ionesco wrote indirect and comic critiques of fascism including as *The Killer* (1958), *Rhinoceros* (1959), and *Exit the King* (1963). The protagonist of his works (sometimes named Bérenger) often functions as an autobiographical stand-in for himself. While some consider these later works as continuations of Absurdist principles, Ionesco also was inspired by the surrealists exploration of dreams; particularly in *A Stroll in the Air* (1963) and his last play *Journeys among the Dead* (1980). His election to the Académie Française in 1970, was a surprisingly choice for the usually conservative institution. During the last two decades of his life Ionesco became an artist and art critic, creating water colors and lithographs that were exhibited in Switzerland, Germany, Italy, and Paris. Ionesco married Rodina Burileanu, and they had one daughter born in 1944 named Marie-France. He died in 1994 and is buried in Montparnasse Cemetery in Paris.

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# MARTIN CRIMP

British playwright **MARTIN CRIMP** was born in 1956. His play *Attempts on Her Life* (1997) established his international reputation.

Other works include: *The Treatment* (1993), a dark satire about the film industry, which won the John Whiting Award; *The Rest Will Be Familiar to You From Cinema* (2013), which was loosely inspired by Euripides' *Phoenician Women*; and *When We Have Sufficiently Tortured Each Other* (2019), "provoked" by Samuel Richardson's epistolary novel *Pamela*. Crimp has also collaborated with composer George Benjamin on three operas: *Into the Little Hill*, *Written on Skin*, and *Lessons in Love and Violence*. His many translations of French plays include works by Genet, Ionesco, Koltès, Marivaux, and Molière.



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# ESSLIN ON ABSURDISM

*In 1961, Martin Esslin grouped the plays of Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Eugène Ionesco, and Jean Genet using the term Absurd as a way to describe how playwrights were rethinking approaches to plot, character, and theme in post-World War II France. Questions about Esslin's application of Absurd to these (and other) playwrights have increased as new productions explore the search for meaning central to these classics. Returning to Esslin's thoughts about *The Chairs* provides a valuable glimpse into the dramatic potentials of the period that inspired this distinctly modern genre.*

The simulation of a crowd of invisible characters is a tour de force for the actors involved, which, if it is successfully carried through, is bound to be a most impressive scenic spectacle. A play like *The Chairs* is a poetic image brought to life—complex, ambiguous, multi-dimensional. The beauty and depth of the image, as symbol and myth, transcends any search for interpretations. Of course it contains the theme of the incommunicability of a lifetime's experience; of course it dramatizes the futility and failure of human existence, made bearable only by self-delusion and the admiration of a doting, uncritical wife; of course it satirizes the emptiness of polite conversation, the mechanical exchange of platitudes that might as well be spoken into the wind. There is also a strong element of the author's own tragedy in the play—the rows of chairs resemble a theatre; the professional orator who is to deliver the message, dressed in the romantic costume of the mid-nineteenth century, is the interpretative artist who interposes his personality between that of the playwright and the audience. But the message is meaningless, the audience consists of rows of empty chairs—surely this is a powerful image of the absurdity of the artist's, the playwright's, own situation.

# ESSLIN ON ABSURDISM

All these themes intertwine in *The Chairs*. But Ionesco himself has defined its basic preoccupation: "The subject of the play," he wrote to the director of the first performance, Sylvain Dhomme, "is not the message, nor the failures of life, nor the moral disaster of two old people, but the chairs themselves; that is to say, the absence of people, the absence of the emperor, the absence of God, the absence of matter, the unreality of the world, metaphysical emptiness. The theme of the play is nothingness... the invisible elements must be more and more clearly present, more and more real (to give unreality to reality one must give reality to the unreal), until the point is reached—inadmissible, unacceptable to the reasoning mind—when the unreal elements speak and more...and nothingness can be heard, is made concrete..."



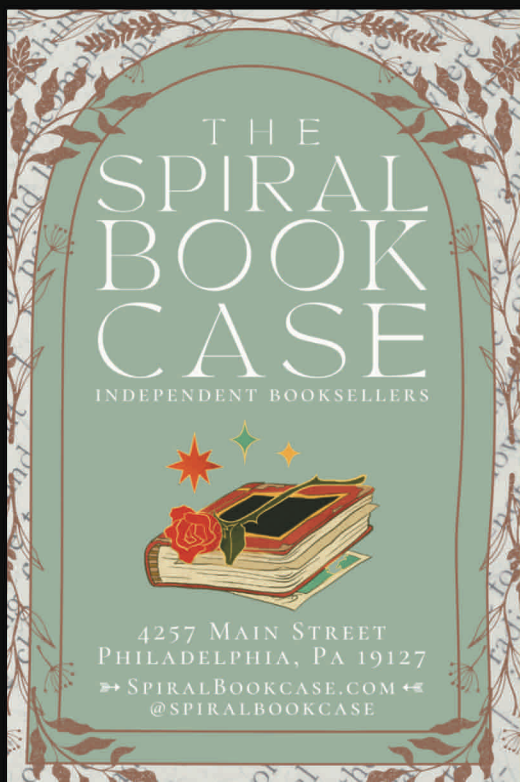
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# ESSLIN ON ABSURDISM

*The Chairs* was Ionesco's third play to reach the stage, and it did not do so without the greatest of difficulties. It took Sylvain Dhomme and the two actors of the old couple, Tsilla Chelton and Paul Chevalier, three months to find the style of acting suitable for the play—a mixture of extreme naturalness of detail and the utmost unusualness of the general conception. None of the established managements in Paris wanted to risk putting on *The Chairs*, so in the end the actors themselves hired an old unused hall, the Théâtre Lancry, where they opened on April 22, 1952. Financially the venture proved a disaster. Only too often the empty chairs on the stage were matched by empty seats in the auditorium, and there were evenings when only five or six tickets were sold. Most of the critics slated the play, but, on the other hand, it did find some distinguished supporters. A defense of *The Chairs* published in the magazine *Arts* was signed by Jules Supervielle, Arthur Adamov, Samuel Beckett, Luc Estang, Clara Malraux, Raymond Queneau, and others. At the end of the last performance the poet and playwright Audiberti was heard, in the almost empty auditorium, shouting "Bravo!" at the top of his voice.

Four years later, when Jacques Mauclair revived *The Chairs* with the same actress, Tsilla Chelton, in the part of the old woman, the climate of opinion had changed; the performance at the Studio des Champs-Élysées was a great success. The leading conservative critics, like J.-J. Gautier, of *Figaro*, still held out against Ionesco, but Jean Anouilh himself came to his defense, calling the play a masterpiece, and adding, "I believe this to be better than Strindberg, because it has its 'black' humor, à la Molière, in a manner that is at times terribly funny, because it is horrifying and laughable, poignant and always true, and because—with the exception of a bit of rather old-fashioned avant-garde at the end that I do not like—it is classical." Ionesco labeled *The Chairs* a "tragic farce."

Excerpt from *Theatre of the Absurd* by Martin Esslin, copyright © 1961.

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# CAST BIOS

## **E. ASHLEY IZARD\* ... OLD WOMAN**

Quintessence: *Wizard of Oz*, *Syngé Festival*, *Kind Lear*, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, *Happy Days*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Mandrake*, *Hamlet*, *She Stoops to Conquer*, *Arms and the Man*, *The Misanthrope*. Regional: Arden, CCTC, Theatre Exile, Gretna, Philadelphia Shakespeare Theatre, Act II, Lantern. Ashley is the recipient of two Barrymore Awards.

## **ALEX OLSON\* ... ORATOR**

Alex is thrilled to be working with Quintessence Theatre. Born in Fairfax County, VA, he grew up learning ASL his whole life. He studied Stage & Screen Acting at University of Nevada, Las Vegas. His Recent Theatre Credits are: Billy in *TRIBES* at the Actor's Theatre of Louisville, Mr. Kraler in *THE DIARY OF ANNE FRANK* at JET Theatre, Bottom in *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM* at Nevada Conservatory Theatre, & Ross & Joey in *FRIENDS: THE MUSICAL PARODY* in Las Vegas. He was a member of Sign Design Theatre Company, based in Las Vegas which focuses on Performance Art with ASL. He won the Best Male Performer Award for his work in the company. Much love to you all.

## **FRANK X\* ... OLD MAN**

Frank was last seen as "Sir Thomas More" in the Lantern Theater production of *A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS*. Originally trained as a dancer and playwright, he has appeared on stages around the country. Favorite roles have included: "Estragon" in *WAITING FOR GODOT* (Quintessence Theatre), "Malvolio" in *TWELFTH NIGHT* (Seattle Rep), "Hector" in *THE HISTORY BOYS* (Arden Theatre), "Molina" in *KISS OF THE SPIDER WOMAN* and "Sterling North" in *PERMANENT COLLECTION* (both at InterAct Theatre), "David Gavin" in *AFTER ASHLEY* (Humana Festival, ATL), "Berenger" in *RHINOCEROS* (Theatre Exile) and "Sam" in *MASTER HAROLD...AND THE BOYS* and the title role in *KING LEAR* (both at Lantern Theater). Mr. X is delighted to be returning to Quintessence where he appeared as "Mr. Lawrence" in *LITTLE WOMEN* last season.

# CREATIVE BIOS

## **ALEX BURNS ... DIRECTOR / SET & SOUND DESIGN**

This is Alex's 43rd production at Q. REGIONAL: *Romeo & Juliet* (Trinity Shakespeare Festival), *Hamlet* (Shakespeare Theatre Company DC @ Carter Barron), *Henri Gabbler*, *Diabolique*, *The Maids* (Exigent Theatre). PHILADELPHIA: *Macbeth* (Arden Theatre). Alex was a Directing Fellow at the Shakespeare Theatre Company in Washington, DC. Training: Northwestern University, LCT Director's Lab, the Jack O'Brien Directors Lab.

## **JOHN BURKLAND ... LIGHT DESIGN**

With QTG: *The Cure at Troy*, *Diary of a Madman*, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, *Three Musketeers*, *Uncle Vanya* and *Waiting for Godot* among others. Nationally: Theater Under the Stars, The John F. Kennedy Center, Signature Theater, DR2, La Mama E.T.C., HB Playwrights Studio, Guggenheim Arts and Process, NYC Fringe, New York Musical Theater Festival, The Summer Play Festival, Engeman Theater, North Shore Music Theater, Paper Mill Playhouse, Northern Stage, Studio Theater, Theater Alliance, Luna Stage, Williamstown Theater Festival, The Actors Theater of Atlanta, Big Apple Circus, among others. As the lighting director for the Howard Stern Show he's lit performances by artists as diverse as Kelly Clarkson, Kid Rick, Brandi Carlile, Metallica, Def Leppard, and Lady Gaga. John won a Helen Hayes Award for his work on *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* and a Surya Bonaly Award for his work on *Uncle Vanya*. Education: North Carolina School of the Arts. -  
[www.Johnburkland.com](http://www.Johnburkland.com)



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## KELLY MYERS ... COSTUME DESIGN

Design: *A Man for All Seasons* (Lantern Theater Co), *The Wizard of Oz* (Quintessence Theater Group), *The Last Match* (Lantern Theater Co), *Matilda the Musical* (Limelight PAC), *A little Night Music* (Pittsburgh Opera Theatre), *The Farnsworth Invention*, *Saving the World* (Throughline Theatre Co), *Deepchurch Hollow* (Edinburgh Festival Fringe).

Other Costume Work: Costume Supervisor (Lantern Theater Co), Asst Designer (American Players Theatre), Crafts Artisan (Opera Theatre of St. Louis), Draper (Walnut Street Theatre), Costume Advisor (Harrilton High School) Training: MFA in Costume Design at Ohio University, BA in Theatre at Slippery Rock University.

## NATALIE CHERNICOFF\* ... STAGE MANAGER

QTG debut! Natalie got her start in stage management with Newtown Arts Company's 2007 production of *Our Town* at the Newtown Theatre in Bucks County, PA. Selected NYC: *Macbeth* (Vulcan Theatre Company, PSM), *RENT* (Secret Theatre, PSM), *Sleep No More* (Punchdrunk/Emursive, ASM), *One Night With the Stars* (MSG Theatre, PSM), *Happy Birthday Wanda June* (Wheelhouse Theatre Company, ASM). Selected

Regional/Tour: *Menopause the Musical™* (US national tour, ASM), *City of Angels* (Theatre Raleigh, PSM), *Our Town* (Barnstormers Theatre, PSM), *The Soap Myth* (2019 tour w/ Ed Asner, PSM), *Elf the Musical* (LTOTS, ASM), *Wigs & Wishes Annual Gala* w/ Paula Abdul (PSM). Proud member AEA. All my love to ALC, Phoebe, and Hecate. Twitter: @NatKatNYC; Instagram: @natkat613; nataliechernicoff.com



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# CREATIVE BIOS

## **CAT BRENNAN ... ASST. STAGE MANAGER**

Cat (she/her) is a Philadelphia based theatre artist, and is thrilled to be joining Quintessence for *THE CHAIRS!* Previous ASM credits at Q include, *THE CURE AT TROY*, *THE WINTER'S TALE*, *THE ALCHEMIST*, *FLYIN' WEST* & *CAMILLE*. Cat has worked in many facets of the theatre world, including acting, playwriting, stage management, directing, design, and administrative work. She is a graduate of Arcadia University, where she received her BA in Theatre Arts. Since graduation, she has had the pleasure of working on stage with Hedgerow Theatre (*THE TWO GENTLEMEN OF VERONA*, Launce) and Untold Play Festival (*NIGHT RIDE*, Sarah), backstage with InterAct (*EUREKA DAY*, *MAN OF GOD*) and Cannonball Theatre Festival (CirqueUs: *RAGTAG*, *ARTIFACTS OF NO CONSEQUENCE*), and has had her play *HUDSONLAND* produced as part of the Class of 2021 Senior Capstone Projects at Arcadia University. A huge thank you to Quintessence for the opportunity, and much love to Alex, Melissa, Maggie, and the cast! For Grandpop, always.

## **lydon frank lettuce ... WARDROBE SUPERVISOR**

Lydon Frank Lettuce is an artist, writer, and performer from rural pennsylvania. they plant poems in your garden and dig diagrams into the sand.

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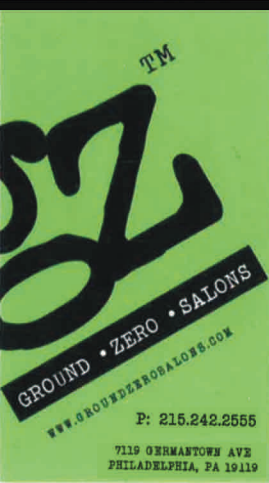
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