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The Ionesco Festival by Steve Capr

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NEW YORK, NY: The Untitled Theatre Company, NYC, has curated an expansive event - The Ionesco Festival, opened in September and closed mid-December. They've produced the Ionesco's entire *opus*, and combined it with related films, seminars, and readings. It's reassuring to see that there's no lack of quixotic ambition in the fringe.

Ionesco, of course, is the flagship playwright of the theatre of the absurd. That the term "absurd" is overused is - or should be - a truism. My fellow critics use the term when they don't know what else to say. The French term for what we call the theatre of the absurd, *le theatre de derision*, is more descriptive, more specific, and applied more carefully - ie, to a smaller canon of work.

In fact, Ionesco's style is elusive, morphing from one play to another. In various ratios, realism, expressionism and *derision* mix so thoroughly that it's difficult even to isolate the components, like in a complex and awfully alcoholic cocktail. It sometimes suggests Jarry, sometimes Beckett, sometimes Cocteau. It is, above all, *French*.

The theatre component of the festival presented thirty-nine plays in over a dozen venues, produced by The Untitled and other companies. What I saw - about half - was strikingly uneven. Some of the stage work hardly rose to the level of *acting*, while other performances were mature and rewarding. Certainly this disparity comes from the nature of the material. Many American actors aren't trained to approach the *affection* of modern European drama. Indeed, some of the festival's younger actors seem never to have seen it.

Actors can't *Stanislavski* their way through this stuff, and the festival companies know better than to try. But many festival actors have drained themselves of the meticulous emotional life of *the Method*, and have nothing else to offer us. The resulting performances are curiously *blank* - as in these productions of *The Killing Game* (Caroline Jauch & Co.) and *A Hell of a Mess* (2B Theatre Company and Spotlight On). The latter leaves us cold with even such an aching exchange as this: Q: "Did anyone ever love you?" - A: "My mother...".

The leading man of "The Killer" seemed at sea with the lines, which he whimpered in a monotone. Brecht tells us that a singer must not merely sing, he must present a character singing. Similarly, there's a difference between whining and presenting a character whining. It didn't help matters that The Nighthouse Repertory Company had the temerity to present the piece in an unheated theater on a 45-degree evening. I walked out before boredom or exposure did me in.

In certain actors, as with the cast of *Foursome* (FHB Theater Company), we see emotional life seeping through. Spontaneity leaks through their hands. The fingertips, subtly flinching, want to play real people, to respond to emotion, while the actors are attempting cartoons.

The most successful productions were those in which actor and director scorn verisimilitude. The cast of *French Conversation and Diction Exercises for American Students* (Amnesia Wars Company) never stumble into sincerity because they can't - they script is complete nonsense. The characters identify themselves as doors and rooms! And so we have a terrific time watching a sort of Punch and Judy show.

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At any rate, the festival was fun. The opportunity to see these scripts staged outweighs the weaknesses of the productions, and the Untitled is to be congratulated