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Arts Review

By Barry Pineo

The End of Words: An Evening With Eugène Ionesco

play! Theatre, through Nov. 5

Where would we humans be without our words? Words are what we use to provide shape and form to our world, to express our most deeply felt emotions, to connect to others and to the world around us, and to assist us in performing the most mundane of daily tasks. Words make us what we are – and yet also *un*make us, for words just as easily can be used as a mask, a cover, a barrier to truth.

Eugène Ionesco was very much about the end of words, in terms of both their purpose and their futility. One of the primary purveyors of what became known in the mid-20th century as theatre of the absurd, Ionesco often built his plays around the arbitrary quality of words, the difficulty of communication and connection, and the conformism that pervades modern society.

Most important, he made them outrageously funny and, thus, eminently entertaining. In *Jack, or the Submission*, the first of the three Ionesco one-act plays being presented by Coda Theater Project, Jack's family is ready to disown him if he does not conform to their wishes. After putting tremendous pressure on him, Jack finally tells them that he loves hashed-brown potatoes, after which all is forgiven and he is introduced to his prospective fiancée, Roberta, a girl with three noses. In *The Bald Soprano*, Mr. and Mrs. Smith spend a quiet evening at home until their guests, the Martins, who were not invited, arrive. In a scene as surreal as anything that has ever been written, Mr. and Mrs. Martin discover that they not only know each other, but live in the same house, sleep in the same bed, and have a daughter, and after the arrival of the Fire Chief, who has come to see if they perchance have a fire, the play builds to a climax of assorted non sequiturs and letters from the alphabet. In *The Chairs*, an ancient couple have invited dozens of guests to hear the old man deliver his message to the world. The guests arrive, take their seats, and converse with the couple – but no one is actually there. Coda is presenting these works in repertory, with two of the plays on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday evenings, and all three back-to-back on Sunday afternoons.

Unfortunately, the directors – Eric Virkkala, Zac Crofford, and Rocky Hopson, respectively – more often than not require their actors either to emote excessively or attempt to provide objectives and motivations for the characters, and almost invariably these choices don't support the texts. For example, Ionesco subtitled *The Bald Soprano* "Anti-Play" because he meant it to be exactly that: the opposite of a play, a story in which there are no obvious reasons for what is happening or what is being said. While playing against the apparent intent of a text certainly can be a valid choice, it doesn't work here.

What do work are the plays themselves. Though he came to playwriting relatively late in his life, Ionesco proved to be a master of storytelling from his earliest attempt. At one point, Jack says, "Words, what crimes are committed in your name." But if these plays are criminal, then Ionesco, and Coda, deserve our most sincere pardon.

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