

Theatre of the Absurd - The Lesson

By Sean G. Doyle

That which we call 'theatre of the absurd' brings to mind the name of Eugene Ionesco, the French playwright who sought to present futility of human endeavor in a universe ruled by chance. Absurdity is that which is devoid of purpose, irrational and to Ionesco, characteristic of the bourgeois attitudes and values of his day. Ionesco's classic 'La Cantatrice Chauve', avant-garde in the early 50s, met with severe criticism in that the style seemed idiotic and contrary to that of traditional French theatre. Not only insulting to those raised on a diet of Molière and Racine, the plays used metaphor to insult upper and middle class French society.

Ionesco's 'La Leçon', written in 1951, is not one of the playwright's better creations. Criticized particularly for a weak attempt to make a political stab at Nazism and the assorted policies of that party, the play is rarely put to stage. Those who at-



photo: Julie Parna

tempt the complexities of Ionesco usually suffice with the more popular works; 'Rhinocéros' or perhaps 'Les Chaises'.

Director Steve Devine has therefore made a challenging selection in 'The Lesson' which played last week in our glorious Theatre Glendon.

In short, the play deals

with a teacher-student relationship which goes through a complete transition; the timid and eccentric professor becomes a violent mass murderer while an eager and confident pupil becomes weak and frightened. The action and dialogue, as we expect, is nonsensical, yet the play as a whole

serves as a metaphor which can be interpreted in many ways; a criticism of misguided educators, an attack on that which is taught or more probably a criticism of that which Ionesco hated, the traditional style of teaching. Devine's production suggests these themes as well as others, taking emphasis away from setting, costume and lighting, and leaving the actors with little more than the essentials; energy and talent.

The set is bare and many of the props are imaginary. This device is nothing new to theatre of the absurd where the lack of traditional settings and props tends to add to the absurdity of the play as a whole. Devine's crooked window in itself suggests the playwright's distorted view of the world.

Lynn Bridger succeeds in her role as the Pupil, although she lacks the sort of stage presence to hold audience attention. The transition into total fear is incomplete; as she is about to be murdered she appears more concerned over her toothache than the threat of the

Professor's knife. Since 'The Lesson' deals with extremes in behaviour, Bridger's apparent lack of emotion proves a considerable oversight.

Patty Meredith is more believable in her portrayal of the maid. Seeming collected and rational throughout the play, Meredith closes demonstrating the absurd complexities of her own character.

Edmund Thomas' portrayal of the Professor was excellent. The part requires an ability to portray extreme moods of irrationality, childishness, senility and behavioral irregularity. Thomas, perfect for the part, captured the audience and kept them laughing. His performance was first-rate and proves him a skilled character actor.

In all the production was entertaining and succeeded in holding the interest of the audience. Many productions of Ionesco seem to drag due to the repetition in the work itself. Steve Devine merits special congratulations for the successful direction of a cast and crew comprised of Glendon students. We look forward to more from him.

Pro Tem March 7 1980