

Ionesco play makes theatre history after 50 years on stage

By John Lichfield

in Paris

A world theatrical record was set last night in a small, scruffy theatre in one of the most tasteless streets in Paris. Every day, except Sundays, for the past 50 years, the curtain has risen

on "Mr and Mrs Smith", an (allegedly) typical English couple. Mr Smith smokes his English pipe. Mrs Smith darns her English socks. "There is a long moment of English silence. The English clock strikes 17 English chimes."

These are the opening stage directions of *La Can-*

tatrice Chauve (The Bald Prima Donna) by Eugène Ionesco. The play has been performed in the tiny Théâtre de la Huchette, with the same scenery, the same director and, intermittently, three of the original cast, since 16 February 1957. This is, according to Guinness World Records, the

longest continuous run of a play in one theatre, anywhere in the world.

The only possible rival is *The Lesson*, also by Ionesco. This short play has been shown immediately after *La Cantatrice Chauve* in the same small theatre every night (except Sundays) for the same period of time.

Both plays are now recognised as masterpieces of the theatre of the absurd, shown all over the world in dozens of languages. The Huchette versions are the original productions, first directed by Nicolas Bataille in 1951 with the assistance of the playwright himself.

They moved to the Rue de la Huchette in the fifth arrondissement in 1957 and have been performed there ever since. The street was then a quiet alley in the student-infested Latin quarter. It is now a street crammed with tourists, kebab houses and trashy souvenir shops.

Bataille, 81 – who has played Mr Martin in the play on and off for 50 years – said: "At the beginning, we hoped for six months. We have lasted half a century. Ionesco has gone in that time from the extreme avant-garde, sometimes booed off the stage, to a contemporary classic."

Jacques Legré, 69, the director of the 90-seat theatre (and also sometimes seen onstage as Mr Martin) said: "We rarely have an empty seat. Most of the audience is young, but there are also people who were brought along by their parents and now come back with their own children."

Despite the packed houses, the theatre, run by 23 actors as a cooperative,



Jacques Legré, right, director of the tiny Théâtre de la Huchette, in *La Cantatrice Chauve* PIERRE VERDY/AFP

struggles to break even. *La Cantatrice Chauve* is the story of the Smiths, who remember, after eating, that they have invited another English couple, Mr and Mrs Martin to dinner. An awkward evening is interrupted by the Captain, a fireman, who looks like a cross between a Gestapo officer and an English policeman.

He relates a series of portentous but meaningless anecdotes and aphorisms. The last is: "The bald prima donna always does her hair the same way."

Originally it was supposed to be a "blonde school-teacher" who did her hair the same way. The play was then called "English Without Tears". One of the actors in Bataille's original

1951 production, forgetting his words, ad-libbed – and the play got a new name.

In the second play, *The Lesson*, an ambitious schoolgirl turns up for a private lesson with a kindly, pompous professor, who tries, unsuccessfully, to fill her mind with absurd theories and partially incorrect information. He becomes so frustrated that, in the end, he stabs her. She turns out to be the 40th victim that day.

Ionesco, born in Romania, and naturalised French, died in 1994, aged 85. He once said: "A big success in a small theatre is better than a small success in a big theatre and much, much better than a small success in a small theatre."

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