

'Hour,' 'Rhino' are worlds apart

By Michael Phillips

Tribune theater critic

A town square offers infinite dramatic possibilities. To exiles, particularly — such as the much-traveled Austrian playwright Peter Handke, or the late Romanian-born Paris fixture Eugene Ionesco — it can set off memories of the place left behind. It can also be a place of strange, volatile unfamiliarity.

At the National Pastime Theater, there's a small, beautifully directed Midwest premiere of Handke's wordless 1992 play, "The Hour We Knew Nothing of Each Other," in which hundreds of characters intermingle in a square. Meanwhile, Ionesco's 1959 parable "Rhinoceros," which starts out in a square threatened by a thundering rhino before taking its concerns behind closed doors, is getting a revival from The Hypocrites.

"Hour" marks the Chicago debut presentation of T.U.T.A. (The Utopian Theatre Asylum), formerly of Washington, D.C. A decade ago, director Zeljko Djukic and his wife, actress and designer Natasha Djukic, emigrated from the former Yugoslavia.

The eight-person "Hour" ensemble is uneven, but director Djukic's goings-on offer a taste of genuine comic poetry.

The text itself is, in effect, one long stage direction. Here's an excerpt: "The piercing sounds of jackdaws in high mountains. Afterwards a seagull. Someone with a blind man's glasses feels his way in without a cane. . . ."

T.U.T.A.'s production is lighter, more antic than Handke's original. It uses the text as an advisory. Gone are Handke's literary references, the figures from "Peer Gynt," "The Magic

"The Hour We Knew Nothing of Each Other"

When: Through June 30

Where: National Pastime Theater, 4139 N. Broadway St.

Phone: 847-217-0691

"Rhinoceros"

When: Through July 7

Where: The Hypocrites at the Athenaeum Upstairs Studio Space, 2936 N. Southport Ave.

Phone: 312-902-1500

Flute" and the Bible wandering through the square.

This production, however, honors Handke's mixture of human darkness and lightness, images of wartime (soldiers, dead bodies) co-mingling with kindness and beauty. The cast standouts keep the scene shifts nice and sharp. I especially liked Allegra Hollenbeck, who has the spark and the technical chops for all manner of comedy.

"Hour" is a world away from the blunt, rhino-like intentions of "Rhinoceros." As the citizens of an unnamed town turn into rhinos, one by one, the parallels to rising Nazism in World War II-era France become increasingly clear. It's a sturdy fable.

Yet you rarely hear of a truly successful Ionesco revival in this country. Most tend to resemble director Sean Graney's lively but exhausting attack. Rightly, Graney believes in speed and escalating craziness, but he lets his actors get away with shrieking. Absurdism isn't just another word for "loud." It's not a bad show, just a hammering one.

Even so, Graney is someone with ideas to spare. And Djukic, who has directed in Chicago before but not under the T.U.T.A. banner, may well be a major director in our midst.

RECOMMENDED

THE HOUR WE KNEW NOTHING OF EACH OTHER: Featuring more than 200 characters, but centering on one character in a town square, this play explores the human connection and how we come to be

connected to some people but not others. ; 8 p.m. June 7, 8, 13; 3 p.m. June 9; \$18; T.U.T.A. at National Pastime Theater, 4139 N. Broadway. Through June 30. 847-217-0691.