

**Wellington District Theatre Federation  
2007 Full Length Play Festival**

**Group:** Butterfly Creek Theatre Troupe  
**Play and Author:** *Six Characters in Search Of An Author* by Luigi Pirandello, translated, adapted and directed by John Marwick

**PLAY**

Pirandello's *Six Characters In Search Of An Author* has intrigued academics, actors, directors and theatre goers ever since it was written in 1921, more however as a piece of writing to study than to perform as production's of the play since it was written have been rare. Not surprising then that we have seen few, if any in New Zealand leave alone Wellington (a University production in the early 1980's appears to be the only local production of this play).

Often labelled as the first of the existentialist writers such as Beckett, Ionesco and Genet, Pirandello's work is much more personal than their plays, focusing on events and characters from his own tragic life, thus soon being overshadowed by these writers when they came to prominence

As the title suggests six characters go in search of not so much an author but someone who can give them and their play a life, something their author has been unable to do. They stumble across a group of actors, supposedly rehearsing another Pirandello play, and insist that this group assist them in playing out what they believe is rightfully theirs – a life on the stage. They attack the foundation of what was regarded as a “good” play, don't follow stage directions and continually interfere with any assistance the director and his group of actors might want to give them.

Through this Pirandello challenges many concepts of the theatre including breaking down the fourth wall and breaking down the boundaries between truth, reality and illusion on stage.

A complex, challenging piece of writing that makes great demands on a group attempting to stage a production of the play successfully.

**PRESENTATION**

It is essential for this play to work that the audience sees the stage, and even the auditorium, when they come in, as it would normally be during any time when it wasn't being used for a production.

There are to be no wings, curtains or sets called for in the text, with what furniture that is needed stacked up back stage so that once the production does start it can just happen and materialise before the audiences eyes.

In this production this was very well achieved. In the opening there were tables and chairs with bits of scenery stacked up on stage left while the rest of the stage, across the back and stage right, was open and bare. The director's chair was set on the floor of the auditorium. Then once the play began the stage manager wondered about checking things out with the music still playing and then the actors wondering on nonchalantly setting out tables and chairs as if beginning a rehearsal, the prompt taking up her position, the director setting himself up down in the auditorium which all worked very well and gave a great sense of a play in rehearsal rather than in production.

Having the table and chairs set-up stage left for the “actors” worked well allowing the “characters” to use the large stage space centre and stage right unencumbered by sets or furniture. This also allowed plenty of space to set up Act 2 with the screen, door flat, clothes rack etc.

Lighting was good and gave a good sense of abandonment, an empty hollow space; although with so much black around it was at times almost too dark, especially across the front of the stage.

The use of the gauze when the “characters” first appear was very creative and worked very well. The back lighting of the tree and moon near the end of the play also worked well - very creative and evocative as was the ending of blue light backlighting the “characters” behind the screen as the play ended.

The music chosen and used to introduce each Act with voices under was most appropriate, setting the scene nicely and like the lighting very evocative –the opening of the second half was very evocative and the ending with the voices and music was also very good.

## PRESENTATION (cont)

Costuming was good – the “actors” in every day clothes as they would wear while coming to rehearsal while in contrast to this were the “characters” who were all dressed in black with whitish faces giving the sense of being outside the reality of the “actors” world. However although different they still needed to appear real and in this production they almost looked too ghost like. Mention however must be made of Madam Pace – her red dress, fan and hair contrasted with her black boa and gloves making her look every part the “Madam”.

## PRODUCTION

The opening worked well with the stage manager wandering around checking out the stage then the actors coming on setting up the table and chairs, the prompt getting into position and the director taking up his position on the auditorium floor. And while the opening dialogue was conversational and natural, with much humour coming through – the piece about the “egg” especially funny – it was almost too laid back and almost defeated the purpose of what was suppose to be happening so that rather engaging the audience in the intrigue of what was happening they tended to become alienated.

Very effective having the “characters” first appear as silhouettes behind the gauze – the “actors” reaction to this was also very good.

The difference between the “actors” and “characters” was very well established from the beginning – not only in the way they were dressed but the way the “characters” were grouped on stage, the fact that they where in a freeze when not speaking and the style of there language - slightly archaic, all contrasted well with the naturalistic dialogue and movement of the “actors”. The “actors” all to one side observing the “characters” was also very effective and worked well. However as mentioned with the costumes the “ghostliness” of the “characters” was almost over done so that they appeared almost like figments of the “actors” imagination rather that real beings imposing themselves on the “actors”.

Pirandello was quite adamant in his notes about the “characters” saying - *they should not, in fact, appear as phantasms, but as created realities, unchangeable creations of the imagination and, therefore, more real and more consistent than the ever-changing naturalness of the “actors”* - yet in this production they were almost too ghostly and imagined. Also the aspects of each, as set out by the playwright – Remorse for the Father, Revenge for the Stepdaughter, Contempt for the Son and Sorrow for the Mother, while being well played for the most part by the actors playing each of these parts, could have been established more at the beginning.

However the Stepdaughters song, done very seductively, the mothers anguish and the sons arrogance all came across well although physical stance of Son standing ridged with clenched fists at times appeared over done.

The confusion of the director and “actors” in trying to work out what was going on came across well through here.

Father’s long passages in retelling their story of how they came to be there and the background to there situation worked reasonably well – not easy through here to sustain the audiences attention as there is little inherent movement in the dialogue. There was a tendency from the actor playing the Father to say lines rather than feel them; vocal cadences were too similar lacking vocal animation thus the delivery becomes even and mono-tonal. More gesture and movement could have helped these long passages of dialogue to come alive and be more meaningful.

The spacing and grouping of the characters through here however was good, using the stage space well with little masking or inappropriately taking the focus away from the speaker

The ending of the first half was a little weak - the Director needed to be more dynamic once up on stage talking with the “characters” which would have given the “actors” even more to react against once he’d left although they were all reasonably well animated with their lines.

## **PRODUCTION (cont)**

The opening of the second half worked well with every one wondering on naturalistically setting up the scene – the screen, door flat, clothes rack etc all adding much intrigue to what was going to happen in the second half, how the “play” was going to be played out.

The energy and pace of everyone through this second half opening had increased considerably from the first half, as if everyone on stage had gained a second lease-of-life during the interval.

Madame Pace’s entrance also helped to pick up the pace her costume and demeanour, and very animated performance adding much needed life to the sombreness of the production so far.

The Father character was much stronger through this scene but the Director needed to be more demonstrative in the way he moved about the stage trying to take control. There needed to be more tension between the “characters” and their play and the Director and his group trying to keep control. However the actor made good with throw away lines getting good reaction from the audience.

Boy and Girl were very good through the second half in that they were able to be continually part of the scene, even when not speaking, observing without ever losing interest.

The scene between Father and Stepdaughter in the bordello worked very well, good interactive exchanges, the Stepdaughter eliciting lots of animation from the Father.

The Mother also made much of her part through here, showing genuine moments of torment, a torched soul, without ever becoming melodramatic.

Again the interactive scenes between the Father and Director lacked energy and needed to be much more animated to sustain the pace and energy of the production.

In contrast the “actors” played out their imitation of the “characters” well, bringing out much needed humour to lighten the production up. There was very good interaction between the “actors” through here – the bitchiness of the Leading Lady especially good.

Again pace and energy feel away in the scene between Father and Director and while both interacted well more animation would have again helped to sustain this section.

Stepdaughter however managed to maintain energy through here becoming very animated and alive – “scream scream” between the two women very telling.

Scene two around the wishing well was well orchestrated with groupings and moves but vocally lost momentum and became hard to hear – actors had occasional “drys” through here which appeared to effect protection and inevitably the production lost it’s way a bit. Also this part was not helped by the staginess of the Director/Father interactions centre stage with both actors appearing to find it hard work holding the production together at this point and thus losing audience interest. The wordiness of this section appeared to be a major hindrance and could well have been cut in places.

However the production soon picked itself up for the final section with the energy and performance of the Stepdaughter telling the actors to go and leave them – the actor in this role being able to bring the production back on track.

The final moments of the play though where the “characters” interact was very good – poignant and heartfelt – with real and believable emotions – Stepdaughter with Girl, Mother with Son all adding much to the quality of the final moments of the play – the tableau of the Mother and Son particularly effective.

The Son, although vocally strong with good articulation and clear diction needs to watch posture and refrain from too much stiffness in his performance, straight arms and clenched fists tended to be distracting.

The Stepdaughter and Director calling for the garden and moonlight and the effect of the lighting through here was also very good and added much to the ambience of the scene.

## **PRODUCTION (cont)**

The final moments of the play with the gun shot and the Boy dying and falling out of the tree worked well but there appeared to be a very long pause of nothing happening after the Boy dies – it appeared a long time before the action resumed and maybe the actors should have been more animated to bring the play to a much more dynamic conclusion.

However the ending of the tableau at the end of the play of the “characters” behind the screen with the blue light and with the Stepdaughter racing across the stage and out into the audience with sound effects and music rising to a crescendo worked very well.

Overall the presentation of this play was well thought out, well put together and well rehearsed. The concept of a group of “actors” rehearsing a play being over taken by a group of “characters” in search of someone to tell their story and portray their life came across. The construction of the play with it’s simple setting which developed with more props and furniture as the play progressed worked well and the over all orchestration of moves and placement of actors and utilisation of the stage space was well thought out, never at times giving the impression that the production was being performed in a big black space or void.

However this is a complex many-layered play that makes great demands on both the actors and audience to not only understand what is going on but to understand the concepts that Pirandello is trying to convey. The sense of what is a character and how that character is portrayed on stage and how –to quote a line from the play – *one creates the perfect illusion of reality* – is not an easy task.

Therefore although the play suffered at times from wordiness, lack of energy and forward momentum and was too often played too evenly it was nevertheless a stellar effort to mount a production of such a difficult play.

## **ACTING**

Much has been referred to acting in the above section suffice to say that a key to any production of this play is a deep and thorough understanding not only the story line of who and what the “characters” are and how they interact with the “actors” but how this relates to Pirandello’s ideas and themes of existentialism and what is real and what is illusion and on what basis a character is developed requires hard work and detailed analysis from a cast to make this play work.

It was evident from this production that the cast had done just that and whether or not they fully understood every layer, is probably not an issue as they were able to equip themselves confidently with sufficient understanding to make most of the play work with solid and committed performances.

The wordiness and static nature of the play makes great demands on both the director of the production and the cast to bring it alive and while more work was needed on this in places, to give the dialogue more depth through a deeper understanding of what was being said, the cast for the most part were able to make their parts believable – in the context of Pirandello’s ideas.

## **THEATRICAL ENDEAVOUR**

As mentioned on numerous occasions through this report, Pirandello’s *Six Characters In Search Of An Author* is a deep and complex play that requires careful and thoughtful study needing lots of not only analysis but hard work from the actors to make it meaningful for an audience, and although parts of the production didn’t achieve this full credit must go to everyone involved in taking on a production of such a play and meeting its challenges head on. A special mention must also be made of the work done by the Director in not only directing the play but translating and adapting it from the original.

