

# Unmoving search for an Author

This play does not move the heart despite the lovely set and lighting design

## REVIEW/THEATRE

SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR

Theatre de la Ville/Singapore International Festival of Arts  
Victoria Theatre/Thursday

### Corrie Tan

A frustrated Director and a group of Actors are rehearsing another absurd Pirandello play when six Characters, shrouded in black, materialise on stage.

As the title suggests, they are in search of an author to finish their story and they have decided that this gang would be the ones to do it.

While the idea of meta-theatre – where characters in a play are aware of their own theatricality – stretches back as far as Shakespeare (Hamlet's play within a play, for instance), Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello took things to a new level with this aggressively self-reflexive play.

In this contemporary take, French director Emmanuel Demarcy-Mota stays relatively faithful to Pirandello's 1921 text in his attempt to recreate a modern classic from a roundabout academic treatise.

The stagecraft is spare but absorbing – a knot of trees descends from above at one point and there is plenty of clever shadow play as characters loom and shrink behind a billowing white cloth. Entire sets-within-a-set disappear and reappear.

But these lovely trappings of set and lighting design cannot paper over my suspicions that this work is fundamentally less of a play than an intellectual exercise, although the director or performers do their best to lure the audience into their world.

The Characters, led by the Father, are wrapped up in a soapy melodrama mostly involving him unwittingly copulating with his Step-daughter in a brothel. This is much to the perpetual horror of the Mother, who has three other children,



including the Father's only legitimate Son. The Director, and eventually the Actors, are intrigued by their convoluted tale, but are shocked to realise there is no script.

"The tragedy is in us," booms the Father, "we are the tragedy!"

Therein lies the play's central conflict: Can an actor truly portray the tragedies of the living on stage? Will the actors' performance always be a facsimile of the real thing, doomed to be a moment's entertainment to an audience while the characters relive each painful moment in excruciating detail?

This production suggests that there is ultimately little difference between the "fiction" of the characters and the "reality" of the actors.

Both sides are made to perform their roles in a formalised,

deliberately dramatic manner, so that the audience is always aware that the show the performers are creating for them is an illusion.

The Characters are archetypes, shoehorned into a narrow scope of existence – they are aware of only their own traumas, paying no attention, even dismissing, the emotional worlds of others.

But the Director and Actors are also stereotypes: the former is a pretentious ringmaster waving his arms, shouting opaque instructions and micro-managing the cast; the latter are an annoying troupe of prima donnas, refusing to follow stage directions and basking in their moment in the spotlight.

Pirandello's theories still hold water and were ground-breaking in their time, but his decision to spell

out the paradox of the theatre in every possible way makes the Characters a thinly veiled mouthpiece for a lecture on practical criticism.

The best moments emerge when the Characters replay their tragic tale and the Actors attempt to re-enact it, failing laughably in the process. These scenes demonstrate the gulf between the two camps and flesh out the bare bones of Pirandello's discussions of the theatre, which can often spiral out of hand, turning from rigorous argument into repetitive tail-chasing.

In making fun of the pretentiousness of some aspects of the theatre ("dialectic pitfalls", "casuistry"), the play has no choice but to give this pretentiousness a long and unpleasant airing. And the flip side of the "failures" of theatre, that per-

formance can indeed be some sort of cathartic therapy, is lost in the process. This play may stretch the mind, but it does not move the heart.

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Spare but absorbing stagecraft in Six Characters In Search Of An Author.

PHOTO: JEAN-LOUIS FERNANDEZ

## BOOKIT/SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR

WHERE: Victoria Theatre

WHEN: Today, 8pm

ADMISSION: \$25 to \$75 from

Sistic (excludes booking fee; call 6348-5555 or go to

www.sistic.com.sg)

## Dream a little dream

### REVIEW/THEATRE

TAIWAN DREAMS EPISODE 1: DREAM HOTEL

Creative Society Theatre Group  
72-13, Thursday

### Ho Ai Li

Issues of history and identity, both personal and collective, made for a rich and heady brew in this Dream Hotel concocted by Taiwanese theatre director Wei Ying-chuan, based on Taiwanese author Luo Yi-chun's novel Western Xia Hotel.

A photographer named Tu Nick goes in search of his loved ones and ends up in a rabbit-hole called the Western Xia Hotel, meeting creatures real as well as fantastical, such as a talking badger and snarling goats named after leaders Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong.

Along the way, he is told the story of the demise of the Western Xia dynasty (1038-1227), a non-Han Chinese tribe that invented its own writing script to protect its identity.

This desert kingdom offers an interesting prism through which to view Taiwan's identity problem –



the island has long been plagued by conflict between the natives and immigrants who fled to Taiwan from Mainland China in the late 1940s when civil war broke out.

When the Democratic Progressive Party, which represents the native Taiwanese, came to power in 2000, it tried to assert the identity of the natives by removing place names associated with the previous Kuomintang regime and pushing for the use of the Minnan dialect.

In the play, characters tear at one

another, screaming so loudly that audiences were warned beforehand of the high decibels, in a reflection of the sound and fury surrounding the battle over control of the historical narrative.

In a fable told by one of the characters, the two bickering heads of a double-headed eagle tried to trick each other into eating a poisonous fruit – without realising that they share a body and a common destiny.

The production, a three-hour

version of the six-hour original shown last year in Taiwan, weaves together theatre, video, photography and music to transport audiences to realms from China's north-western desert to the alleys of modern-day Taipei.

In Theatreworks' intimate 72-13 space, audiences sat on three rows facing one another across a long passageway that served as the stage, with photos and videos projected onto walls and screens.

Director Wei, also a photographer and film-maker whose credits include the lesbian-themed film Candy Rain (2008), delves into how, as male rulers come and go, women often end up as sacrificial lambs – mothers and wives get butchered by a barbarian despot; a wife gets killed by a jealous husband and a girl gets stabbed in the eye by a mentally unstable beau.

The play is one of two halves, yang (male) and yin (female).

While the first half is drawn from Luo's novel, the second represents a "herstory" of sorts drawn up by

Wei, who tries to fill the silences left by the omission of female narratives. The protagonist also turns out to be a hermaphrodite and is played by an actor and an actress.

In searching for his/her parents and tracing their life stories, the protagonist goes on a journey to locate his/her own sense of self and identity.

Thoughtful and at times playful, this expansive play travels from the Western Xia period to the present and beyond, and invites the audience to dream a little dream about their own selves and histories.

## BOOKIT/TAIWAN DREAMS EPISODE 1: DREAM HOTEL

WHERE: 72-13 Mohamed Sultan Road

WHEN: Today, 8pm

ADMISSION: \$45 from Sistic (go to www.sistic.com.sg or call 6348-5555)