

At St. Lawrence Centre

Ten characters have found a worthy author

By MICHAEL CHRIST

"Theatrical" means simply, "of the theatre", yet when we refer to someone as seeming "theatrical" we are usually not being complimentary. We are probably pointing to some extravagance of gesture, some degree of exhibitionism, and a great deal of artificiality.

Modern psychology uses the theatre as a ready metaphor to explain people playing roles, wearing masks, and adopting to social conventions. With an awareness of how people can play roles to their advantage, using guises and personas as conditions demand, one may question what is real and what is illusory.

This subject is the theme of the play *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, now in performance at the St. Lawrence Centre. Its author, Luigi Pirandello has written an insightful essay into the illusions of life and the stage, and in the process has also maintained an intertaining and dramatic play.

Pirandello believes that the stage has given birth to living beings more alive than those who

breathe, wear clothes, and ordinarily attend the theatre as spectators. He states that a dramatic character is less real perhaps, but more true than either you or I. A character is rigidly defined within the text of the play. His behaviour follows a predestined course and usually builds to an expected conclusion. A character is more true in Pirandello's reasoning because he is definable and resistant to both contradiction and time. Ourselves, we are creatures of the moment, ever-changing, contradictory, our futures are indefinable, our pasts are clouded by indefinite memories, and the memories themselves are a function of our unconscious which constantly redefines and reweaves the fabric of our existence.

The characters in *Six Characters in Search of An Author* all remain in conflict because their understanding of reality keeps them from understanding each

other. A central conflict occurs when a delinquent father encounters his long-lost daughter professionally in a bordello. Prevented from committing incest by the timely intervention of his wife, he is, however, haunted with shame at meeting his daughter in a place she had no right to have ever known, had it not been for his abandonment of his family. The family chooses never to forget the moment, but the father suddenly finds himself locked and pillared to that one shameful moment. He has become a character, dehumanized, locked in time to one masterfully dramatic occasion.

While a stage role is unavoidably twice-removed from reality (firstly because it is an artistic conception and therefore a representation, secondly because it is grafted onto an actor who bears little resemblance to the literary ideal), it shouldn't mean that theatre becomes the domain

of the false and the insincere. A great deal of truth can be



Denise Assante, Wenna Shaw, and John Evans.

salvaged in the theatre if more attention is paid to the human component in the theatrical synthesis is we are forced to graft an actor onto a role, let him be recognizably human and let him possess some sense of taste and decency.

Toronto Arts Productions produced a first-rate play in their usual competent manner, a play which I would encourage everyone to see; however, the play is seriously compromised by Stephen Keep's portrayal of the director which typifies everything that is wrong with theatre. When you take the fakery, exhibitionism, narcissism, and self-indulgence which comes readily to some actors and combine it with the painfully wrought, and disciplined vision of a gifted playwright, you do nothing to improve the quality of experience, theatre, or the reputation of a worthy author. Is it any wonder that "theatrical" has come to suggest all that is artificial and insincere.

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