

AN ITALIAN PLAY IN SEARCH OF AN ITALIAN CHAMBER TO PRODUCE IT!

When we first decided to stage our production of Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* as part of *Italy 2010: Quality & Lifestyle*, I must confess that I was quite concerned as to whether we could meet the challenge this play presented. It was the first time a play had been part of *Italy Quality & Lifestyle* and the first time for Italian theatre of this kind in Hong Kong.

How did it all start...? Nicole Garbellini and I met at yoga class. Nicole has been involved in theatre in Italy and Hong Kong and I shared with her my interest in including a play in *Italy Quality & Lifestyle*, which stems from my drama school days in England in the late sixties. But where were we going to find an Italian play in a good English language version? We did not have to brain storm long. Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* seemed to present itself to us in the same way the six characters appear in the play itself, interrupting an ongoing production and demanding that their story be told! Outrageous as their demand is, these characters succeed in taking the spotlight centre stage and so did the play itself with the Italian Chamber.

Pirandello appealed to me since it is theatre of the absurd which can be done on low budget, with few props and no set (or so I thought!...). Rupert Goold and Ben Power had produced an English language version of the play which had been performed at the 2008 Chichester festival and a director also presented himself just as automatically and naturally as the play itself. Ahmed El-Alfy (Alfy) had performed a role in the play in his native Egypt and wanted to direct the play in Hong Kong! So the idea materialized and we booked the Hong Kong Arts Centre's McAulay Studio to stage the play. But then, as with the six characters in the play itself, the problems also started presenting themselves!

The Goold and Power English version of *Six Characters in Search of an Author* updates the play bringing it into the 21st century world of multi-media so it cannot be staged only on bare boards as the original Pirandello version can! In the original 1920s play, the six characters interrupt a group of actors rehearsing a play and demand that their story be performed. Instead, in the English version the six characters interrupt a group of film makers and actors reviewing footage of a docu-drama (or is it a drama documentary...?!). The characters demand that their story be filmed.

A video screen is needed in the English version of the play since part of the action is on screen. Filming is required in a hospital setting since the documentary, which is interrupted by the characters, is about the assisted suicide of a terminally ill boy in a Dignitas clinic. The English version also envisages a fairly complicated stage set, which changes from the desks and chairs of the production studio to a bedroom scene. Finally it requires a giant fish tank in which a girl can appear to drown, complete with breathing equipment so that she does not actually drown!

The recurring theme in Pirandello's plays is the relativity of truth and the way in which if two people face the same object or situation, they will both inevitably see something different. There are no absolutes in life, even though mathematics and science try to hoodwink us into believing it is so. The juxtaposition of my concept of a low budget abstract play performed on practically bare boards by actors without set and using mime instead of props and the reality of the Goold and Power version of the play was a perfect example of the relativity of truth which could have been the subject for a Pirandello play in its own right!

A meeting was held at the Italian Chamber with Nicole, Alfy and Ernie Corpus, the set designer. Ernie produced meticulous, detailed technical design plans for a set which switched from the

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production studio to the sinister “bedroom above Mr. Pace’s hat shop”. Alfie and Ernie explained that a video would have to be shot in a hospital setting, complete with white-coated doctors and hospital rooms. He gave us a list of furniture, fittings and equipment needed on stage, including a large video screen for the viewing of the documentary video and the giant fish tank with breathing equipment! With great regret I had to say that the Italian Chamber could not afford such a sophisticated performance and we would have to keep the production as close to my drama school days as possible, although the video screen and filming had to be kept as they were crucial to the modern version of *Six Characters!* We all felt devastated by the need to restrict the production, not least Alfie, who had the difficult task of revisiting how the girl would meet her end since there would be no fish tank, with or without breathing equipment!

And so it was that I became seriously worried about how the play would turn out. Not only was it a first for Italian theatre of the absurd in Hong Kong but the play would also have to succeed despite significant restrictions in its set and prop requirements.

All I can say now in hindsight is that it *did* succeed – with a vengeance! It was a truly spectacular performance, the most successful event of *Italy 2010: Quality & Lifestyle*. So for those of you who did not see it, I would like to try to give you a written snapshot of the action.

As the play opens we find the documentary’s Executive Producer letting the Producer and production team know, in no uncertain terms, that he is not at all happy with the result of their filming. As the team reviews their work, Moe Moss gives a fantastically accurate imitation of the very special English accent of the Italian doctor in the documentary, played by Nicole. Also truly noteworthy is the part where the action in the production room is played back in “fast rewind” mode, as if it were part of filming itself. The production team all repeat their previous actions and words as if they were on a film reel being rewound in fast mode. Their fast speed actions included opening and spilling bags of crisps to prancing around the stage discussing the documentary, while speaking in the high pitched twitter which is synonymous with tapes rewinding at high speed! It was done impeccably and with incredible synchronization among the many cast members involved.

Just as the team find themselves not knowing how to move forward with the documentary, there is a knock on the door. Adam, the serious Editor, says “*that must be the pizzas*”. Famous last words because in fact it is something quite different! It is the six characters who come through the door, demanding to have their story told by the documentary’s Producer, since their author has abandoned them! The team are outraged at the interruption and try to remove the characters by force but the characters will not go and in the end get their own way. They even oust the actors who are supposed to portray them and insist on performing their roles themselves. The story they tell is the devastating tragedy of a dysfunctional family, but there is plenty of humour too.

So who are these six characters? There is a Mother and Father and their Son. In addition there is the Step-daughter, Girl and Boy who were fathered by the mother’s lover, the father’s secretary. After the death of her father (the mother’s lover), the Step-daughter prostitutes herself in the room above the hat shop of her pimp, Mr. Pace. The Father (her step-father) becomes one of her clients, only to be discovered with the Step-daughter in flagrante by the Mother. The audience gets a real shock when Mr. Pace, hatter and pimp, is conjured up by the characters with the help of a variety of hats. Since Mr. Pace is a hatter (and a mad hatter at that!) he is naturally more easily called upon to appear when there are plenty of hats around! Mr. Pace suddenly materializes, like a stroke of lightning, from under the bed in the room above his shop, much, much larger than life and to the amazement of the audience since the bed had been on stage for sometime with no sign of Mr. Pace under it! Gerome Samonte, who played Mr. Pace, gave an exceptional performance

as a horny pimp pursuing the Step-daughter and somewhat reluctantly handing her over to her client, the Father.

The Father eventually takes the family back under his wing, to the outrage of his Son who does not accept the intrusion of this second family. The Mother continuously pursuing the Son to forgive her and the Step-daughter, continuing her illicit relationship with her step-father, leave the children, the Boy and Girl, unattended resulting in their death. The two child actors were amazing. The Boy, played by Jake Gilchrist, fell to his death with a thud that was totally authentic. Isabella Snow gave a great performance as the (almost) completely silent Girl and her death scene was in no way impaired by lack of fish tank – she drowned just as well using her own acting skills on the dry boards! (I would never have let her be put in a fish tank anyway!)

The documentary Producer, played by Tammy Rhee, tries to save the dying Boy as she realizes his death exists in her own reality and is not just part of the story the six characters are acting out. She takes the Boy outside, through the door exiting the McAulay Studio, at which point the video picks up to show us Tammy carrying the boy up the Arts Centre stairs, even stumbling into a dress rehearsal of Hong Kong Singers' *Oliver* still carrying the Boy, making the action part of our own reality as we sit watching in the McAulay Studio, Arts Centre, Wanchai. When Tammy returns on stage, having been unable to save the Boy, she faces her own death by a Dignitas clinic type injection at the hands of the Father and Step-daughter. The characters have finished their story and silenced the Producer, the conduit for their recital.

Louisa Ward was exceptional as the Step-daughter. The role gave her an opportunity to show what she could do and she used that opportunity to the hilt. Her performance, including her raucous laugh (contrasting with the primeval screams of the Mother), was humorous and poignant all at the same time. Louisa's physical portrayal of this character sped between Clockwork Orange mechanical postures and super-flexible moves, including an amazing cart-wheel returning to standing position, pointing her upturned hand exactly towards the door, in a pose reminiscent of an ancient Egyptian carving. Louisa fleshed out every facet of the Step-daughter, making her a truly three-dimensional character. The Step-daughter is conceited, selfish and outrageous but at the same time she is also the product of her own tragic history. Louisa portrayed the conceit and egoism of the character, with humour, while also showing us the pathos and vulnerability underlying these traits.

Innis Lammins gave a powerful performance as the guilt-ridden Mother. Her physical characterization and make up drew upon horror movies, with stark black eyes protruding from a powder white face and wraith-like twisted, agonized postures reminiscent of Edvard Munch's painting, *The Scream*. Reuben M. was equally strong as the Father and we are particularly grateful to him for filling in on this role after rehearsals had already started.

Although the Goold and Power version of *Six Characters* was developed in the UK, still the essence of Pirandello's play was preserved in our production and many Italian characteristics were skilfully integrated into the play. The Mother has an Italian accent and Nicole plays an Italian doctor. Through the play's many twists and turns in what is and what is not reality, Pirandello himself appears on stage. Pirandello was played by Joe Fiorello (American of Italian descent) with a great Italian accent and cadence. Pirandello is exasperated because he is unable to finish his play and his characters are demanding his attention. He finally gives in to his German (Italian-speaking) maid who calls him to dinner, telling her: "*Non posso resistere al suo stuffato... I miei personaggi possono aspettare....*" ("I can't resist your stew... My characters will have to wait...")

The show even lands up in the Italian Chamber office where Jim Brockman plays our General Manager, Manuele Bosetti, while Alfy (playing himself as director of the play) tries to convince Manuele to take the play to Macao. (If only we could!) Jim came to the Chamber to study Manuele during rehearsals and he managed to capture the essence of Manuele's physical and vocal features when under stress, including his low slung trousers with protruding shirt, raised collar and arms supporting his head, saying MA-DON-NAAAA feverishly under his breath! The Chamber scene also evoked our pivotal meeting with Nicole, Alfy and Ernie, including quips about the play having to be low budget and streamlined on props and equipment! During the Friday night performance, which was my favourite, in the scene at the Italian Chamber, Alfy even managed to say something like "but after all, this is *Italian June*". I, for one, could not help applauding this line which I would never dare to say myself but which speaks for itself!

Our production also incorporated local Hong Kong elements. Cast and crew are Hong Kong residents from a wide variety of backgrounds, the video was filmed in Tai Po (acting as "somewhere in Italy") and an audio was even included of RTHK Radio 3's Phil Whelan interviewing Tammy, the Producer of the documentary on his regular *Morning Brew* show! During May and June in the lead up to the opening night, Phil had kindly interviewed Alfy and Isabella, and me on a separate occasion, talking about the play and other *Italy 2010: Quality & Lifestyle* events. So, in true Pirandello fashion, the audio of his voice brought Phil from being an outsider discussing the play to being part of the action itself.

I have not been able to mention everyone in the cast and crew individually or this article would be far too long (it's already too long!) but I want to say that everyone is to be complimented for what they have done and the empathy between all of them which has cemented and synchronised this marvelous production. I would also like to thank the event sponsor, **Fedrigoni Asia Ltd**, and event supporters, **La Piazzetta**, **Unicredit**, **Crown Worldwide Group**, **Intesa Sanpaolo** and **Camelot** for making the event possible.

If I have one regret after the show, it is not that we did not have a fish tank or fancy furniture because the strength of the direction and acting made such things redundant, but I do regret that this extraordinary production does not live on. It is worthy of a tour or at least a replay. This show represents the advent of Italian *theatre of the absurd* in Hong Kong, appreciated and welcomed by the Hong Kong audiences that saw it. In this respect it has deepened Hong Kong's theatre culture to a new level and shown that European theatre, even thought provoking theatre such as Pirandello's, can fill Hong Kong theatres.

I am sorry that many more people did not have the opportunity to see this show. I feel these six characters are still haunting me, asking, as they deserve, to be seen and heard and seen and heard again and again....

Susan Lavender
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