

***Six Characters in Search of an Author* by Luigi Pirandello**
Performed by The Court Youth Company
Wakefield Family Front Room
30 August – 13 September 2025

Review by Robyn Peers

I have long wanted to see this play, but reading it through last week I wondered how The Court Youth Company could pull off such a demanding piece of theatre. Conceptually Pirandello demands close attention from the cast and the audience. It is not easy subject matter, it's a play about drama, investigating reality, and the illusion of it created within the theatre.

I need not have worried. From entering the theatre with its fabulous recreation of the backstage of a theatre, littered with extravagant props and set pieces from past Court Theatre productions, it was clear that this was going to be a play to delight in. The cast drew us into the story seamlessly and held us spellbound to its unexpected climax.

First staged in 1921 this early absurdist drama seems light years away from Shaw, Ibsen or Chekov. *Six Characters* seems astounding for its time, until you place it within the post-World War One intellectual sphere. The twenties were a time of rebellion in the arts, the old orders of society had created the chaos which had seen so many of the young left dead on the battlefields of Europe. Jazz was hitting the nightclubs, Dada and Surrealism were the new orders in art, TS Eliot, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce were creating literature anew and Pirandello was carving out fresh pathways in drama.

In the theatre stagehands prepare for an upcoming rehearsal, actors arrive and begin to dress, chatting among themselves. The director scolds the leading lady for her tardy appearance, actors ready themselves to begin, when suddenly a group of black clad people emerge spectre-like from the set and take over the action. These are the Characters, their author has created them, and they are here to demand that their unfinished story be completed.

The actors are outraged. They have a play to rehearse, there is no time to waste on these ominous people, but the director is eventually persuaded and while the Leading Lady sulks the Characters tell their melodramatic tale of marital breakdown, desertion, grief, poverty, and incest. The story may be bleak but the pace is cracking, the dialogue sharp and entertaining, comic moments are found, and the Characters and their story engrosses. All the while we are reminded of the illusionary nature of what is taking place. "I am unrealised dramatically and remain silent," says one.

The Court Youth Company is to be commended on the integrity they bring to their roles. Direction from Jeremy Hinman is concise and effective. The Actors are consistently present, even when cleared from the stage to allow the Characters their places, they react, they comment among themselves, adding to the story without ever upstaging the action. While the grumpy stagehands add brilliantly to the comedy of the piece, behind the scenes, real stagehands and technical workers have been found from within the Company. Lighting and sound add effectively to the drama. The Director works with theatricality, and the Characters maintain their menacing presence throughout. In particular the work of the Father (Gem Baillie) and the Stepdaughter (Sienna Gutsell) was remarkable in its maturity.

Pirandello's play has a long history within drama in Christchurch. Ngaio Marsh, who saw the play in London in the early 1930s had been mesmerized by it. Eighteen years later she directed it with her cast of university students, a cast like The Court Youth Company, learning their craft under talented direction. In the 1960s she was awarded an OBE for her services to Theatre, and the Canterbury University theatre was named to honour her work. She directed *Six Characters in Search of an Author* on three separate occasions, here, in Australia and on an international tour of the Commonwealth Players.

Marsh writes in her autobiography of *Six Characters* "crackling with immediacy". Director Jeremy Hinman certainly achieves that in this production, it is a winner. The season is short but this production is a rare opportunity to see a classic of twentieth century theatre, one which laid the groundwork for many developments to come, and The Court Youth Company has achieved a remarkably mature and rewarding production of it.