



66^e FESTIVAL D'AVIGNON

la **colline**
théâtre national

Six Personnages en quête d'auteur (Six Characters in Search of an Author)

adapted from **Luigi Pirandello**

adaptation and direction **Stéphane Braunschweig**

a production La Colline – théâtre national

Who are they, these six characters who enter a theatre disturbing a rehearsal underway? Six members of the same family, in search of an author who would like to finish the work started by a writer who had not “finished” them, and who therefore had not finished the narrative of their fictional adventures. This story, this unfinished story, has become the emblem of Pirandello’s theatre, this theatre that constantly questions itself, this “theatre in the theatre” that is built like a system of Russian dolls that are ceaselessly uncovered one after the other. The spectator barely believes that he has managed to unravel the true from the false, fiction from reality, when he is repudiated by successive dramatic turns of events, because the real, in Pirandello’s extremely humorous theatre, can “not be true but always be possible.” Stéphane Braunschweig returns to the Sicilian author to install him, with all his characters, in a theatre of today, and has him meet the actors of today, who raise questions on the theatre that is possible and necessary to do in this period of crises and upheavals. Based on improvisational work with his actors, he imagined rewriting part of the play and also taking his inspiration from the adaptation for the cinema that Pirandello wrote a few years later. Whereas in the play the author shines by his absence, in the script, it is paradoxically this figure of the author that becomes central, an author grappling with the figures of his imagination. A way for Stéphane Braunschweig to once again question the enigmatic hub of the play: so why did the author “reject” these characters who were however persuaded that they brought with them “a powerful, new and complex drama”? Would they be less “interesting” or less universal than they said? Or would they be “disturbing” for the author himself because they reveal, despite him, a secret part of his intimacy? Mysterious modesty of the author, vital immodesty of the characters; Pirandello’s “theatre questions” meet headlong our period of public overexposure of the intimate.

Jean-François Perrier (Festival d'Avignon)

It was in 1921 that **Luigi Pirandello** (1867-1936) published the first version of his *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, a play that he reworked several times until 1933. It develops a recurring theme in the Sicilian playwright’s work: the theatre in the theatre. It was a failure when it was premiered in Rome, before triumphing, a month later, in Milan, then New York. It subsequently became a major work in the career of the author who received, in 1934, the Nobel Prize in Literature “for his bold and ingenious renewal of the art of drama and the stage.”

“Because the only real cruelty [...] isn’t that a man wounds the other, or mutilates him, or tortures him, or rips off his limbs and head, or even makes him cry; the real and terrible cruelty is that of the man or animal that makes the man or animal incomplete, who interrupts him, like ellipses, in the middle of a sentence, who turns away from him after having looked at him, who makes, of the animal or man, an error of viewpoint, an error of judgement, an error, like a letter we began and that we suddenly crumpled just after having written the date.”

Bernard-Marie Koltès, *Dans la solitude des champs de coton*

A whole family of half-created characters, left stranded by a writer not very convinced of their interest, bolts into a theatre during rehearsal. To tell the truth, they are not all in search of an author. If two of them vociferously demand to be written – without being able in any way to agree on their version of the drama – two others fiercely resist their privacy being sacrificed; and the two children remain silent – we understand at the end, stupefied, that they are... dead. Because as the play unfolds, these phantoms of literature become fantastic beings who disturb the reality from which they have sprung. Unless their contradictory presence is in the end nothing other than that of the fantasies with which Pirandello fought, and that he is the one who is hidden behind the twists and turns of their story?

Whatever the case, the small troop that is rehearsing in the theatre that they burst into first takes them for madmen, then suspects that they are amateur actors, before finally deciding to take inspiration from their story. Pirandello sketches a satirical portrait of these actors and this director. What they represent in his eyes is obviously “the old theatre” with its ridiculous characters, its superficiality... and not to say its corniness. From the coquetry of the leading female role to the exasperations of the director before these new plays that “seem intentionally made so that no-one understands anything in them” (as by coincidence they were in fact in the process of working on a play by Pirandello!), it is clear that the people of the theatre staged here are as far from the modernity to which *Six Characters in Search of an Author* lay claim. Without doubt moreover it is, among other, reasons because it violently attacked the theatre of its period that the play created a scandal. This charge against the bourgeois theatre of 1920 however now seems dated, and that is why we imagined rewriting part of the play. Since Pirandello brought the question of the characters to the fore, it seemed interesting to us to have this family of fictitious beings in crisis arrive in the middle of a rehearsal today, in which a troop – also in crisis – ponders and discusses the theatre to be done: can we still talk about characters? Fiction? With such old tools, can the theatre be in sync with our period? With its art? With our new subjectivities?

At a moment when non-fictional, non-narrative, non-psychological theatre forms are multiplying on the stage – but in which, as well, stories of real life delight readers and TV viewers – what welcome will the Six and their inextricable family drama receive? What answers will be gotten from actors who no longer believe in characters? And what theatre inspiration can today’s stage find in the secret obsessions of the Sicilian author?

It is with these questions that we worked on the *Six Characters in Search of an Author*.

Anne-Françoise Benhamou
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