

A fresh horror in the family

SIX CHARACTERS LOOKING FOR AN AUTHOR ★

Young Vic

Nicholas de Jongh

THE sight of a trembling hand, smeared with blood, imparts a climactic shudder of eeriness to this exciting production of Luigi Pirandello's eternally mysterious puzzle-play from the 1920s. For the blood comes not from a human being, but a dummy replica of a child who has just committed suicide with a revolver. This was not what Pirandello specified, nor did the translator of this new version, the young playwright David Harrower, dream up such a twist. But at least, the director, Richard Jones, was invoking the play's spooky spirit, its obsessive concern with the fine lines between reality and illusion.

Six Characters in Search of an Author, as they usually translate the title, is still regarded as one of those challenging, dramatic experiments that changed the way we see the theatre. The Six Characters of the title constitute an unhappy family. They interrupt some professional actors in rehearsal, explaining that they have been abandoned by the writer who created them, and beg to be brought to full dramatic life. This bickering, traumatised family wants, or needs, to be worked up into a play. It's an absurd situation, a fantasy that Pirandello treated with complete seriousness. And ever since its premiere, Six Characters has been treated with deadly reverence, as if it pierced to the very essence of a debate about the nature of truth.

Richard Jones has, I fancy, taken a refreshing decision not to take Pirandello's own estimate of his philosophic importance. He converts Six Characters into a chillingly ironic, sometimes comic, ghost play and Harrower's elegantly pruned text dispenses with plenty of dead theatrical wood. In Jones's version, Pirandello's actors and director are given a terrifyingly graphic lesson by the Six Characters about their nightmare existence, their compulsion to re-enact scenes from their own unhappy life forever.

The first moments of Jones's impressively acted



In search of a life: Darrel D'Silva, Liza Sadovy and Dale Rapley

production abound with characteristic strokes of invention and excitement. The Young Vic is transformed from theatre in the round to a conventional proscenium stage that vividly harks back to the Italian 1920s. The actors whose rehearsal the Six Characters interrupt, are hectic with theatrical spirit, whether performing or not: Liza Sadovy's leading lady arrives late with flowers, blowing glib air-kisses. Darrel D'Silva's blustering, authoritarian director is giving his actors a film lecture on Pirandello, one of whose plays they're rehearsing, when the six characters literally burst through the screen on which the picture show is being given.

None of the six characters wear light masks, as Pirandello required. But Stephen Boxer's anxious Father wears a

glazed, far-off expression as if he were not quite all there — in a spiritual rather than a mental sense. Leah Muller, not quite fraught enough as the impassioned step-daughter, raises the emotional temperature when she enacts the brothel-scene seduction by her own step-father. Jones then inexorably heightens the tension as the Six Characters are caught up in the painful enactment of their family tragedy. Matthew Richardson's beautiful film noir lighting casts the play in a deeper glow of fantasy. The play's climactic shocks hit home, while Darrel D'Silva's director discovers that the line between reality and make-belief has been pierced. Cerebral Pirandello is revived with the shock-horror treatment. I like it.

●Until 17 March. Box office: 020 7928 6363

Gossip you can sink your teeth into

MAPP AND LUCIA ★

Jermyn Street Theatre, SW1

Rachel Halliburton

EF BENSON — author of the Lucia novels — was the son of an Archbishop of Canterbury, whose life in the cathedral close evidently gave him a devilish eye for the social pretensions, sexual ambiguities and afternoon-tea-hypocrisies that permeate his acidic narratives. This musical, which sweeps up in its wake a dead budge, a strategically aggressive jumble-sale and epic demonstrations of poisoned politeness, is taken from the last three novels, where Lucia's calculated socialising is almost thwarted by her formidable opponent, Mapp.

Thousands of devoted Benson fans could tell you today that Tilling, the village where two ladies pitch their battle in bossiness, is in fact the picturesque East Sussex village of Rye. More than 70 years after the first Mapp and Lucia novel was written, it is obvious the staging of this play is going, partially, to be an act of nostalgia, although a delightful enduring quality to the bitchiness means that even in the 21st century, the words still leave their toothmarks.

The dusty intimacy of the Jermyn Street theatre makes it one of the few venues in London suitable for the reincarnation of the duelling duo. Gaye Brown radiates formidability as Mapp, the mistress of gossip, whose undisputed rule ends when she lets her house to Lucia, played with silky-voiced cattiness by Aimi McDonald.

To the spirited accompaniment of a piano quartet, they sing lyrics such as,



Catty: Gaye Brown and Aimi McDonald in the title roles

"a spiteful look will turn your face into a landing-place for crows". William Hetherington's music falls somewhere between Gilbert and Sullivan and Noel Coward, reinforcing that sense of garden-party wit and giving an edge to this elegant sketch of Benson's work.

Sometimes the dust becomes too evident, but an appropriately eccentric and musical cast ultimately creates an appropriately effervescent production. That lengthy Benson fan list may find itself adding a few new recruits as a result.

●Until 3 March. Box office: 020 7287 2875.

Norwegian boogies with the best

BUGGE WESSELTOFT ★★

Jazz Cafe

Jack Massarik

OSLO is suddenly basking in the international music spotlight. Previously noted only for its surreal exchange rates (cup of airport coffee, £5) and licensing laws even more repressive than ours, the Norwegian capital now produces sounds as absorbing, creative and, indeed, funky as any in the techno-jazz world.

The pioneer of the Oslo Sound, keyboarder/sound-mixer Bugge (say "boogie") Wesseltoft, spelt out his agenda to wide acclaim at last November's London Jazz Festival. Last night he returned to consolidate that success and introduce two other bands from his Jazzland Records stable, Audun Klieve and Beady Belle, equally steeped in this fruitful new approach to group improvisation.

Klieve, the first hand-leading keyboarder up, found it hard to follow his brilliant opening line, "Good evening, Birmingham!", but eventually managed it with a spacy set in which every sound-source, including Arve Hendriksen's plaintive trumpet, was radically remixed on the spot. It was good to see live human agency involved, unlike some electronic programmers who load everything beforehand.

Wesseltoft followed with some eloquent keyboard work that exposed him as a closet Chick Corea admirer, cushioning the eerie howls of Haakon Kornstad's tenor and soprano saxes with ambiguous synth chords and jittery hip hop beats. It was fun, and Beady Belle even more so. A cool blonde in an art-deco dress and headset-mike, she twiddled with her patch-bay before delivering some soulful vocals in a simple, sweet voice that effortlessly surfed the scratching and bumping beats beneath. The Oslo Sound is definitely here to stay.

Before they were famous

CITY RACING 1988-1998:

A PARTIAL ACCOUNT ★

Institute of Contemporary Arts

Nick Hackworth

IN 1988, bored by their inability to secure shows in London galleries uninterested in young British artists, five artists and a friend — John Burgess, Keith Coventry, Matt Hale, Paul Noble and Peter Owen — squatted in an ex-betting shop (hence the name City Racing) near the Oval cricket ground and began a series of cheap and cheerful art shows. It proved a wise move. A year after its first show, the recession hit, the art market contracted and many artists came to rely on alternative spaces to show their work. Initially funded by the founders, City Racing later secured grants from the London Arts Board. But the grants stopped, and so did City Racing.

On display at the ICA is a selection of works from the 51 shows at City Racing. The first thing most will notice is how many of the artists on display have made the transition from unknown artists to fully fledged art stars, and the speed with which fame has come.

Gillian Wearing, who subsequently won the Turner Prize with a piece involving actors dressed as policemen standing still for 60 minutes, is represented with two large photos of masturbating people staring at mirror images of themselves. Sarah Lucas had her first show at City Racing in 1991, charmingly entitled Penis nailed to a Board, and here shows Sod You Gits, one of her now familiar series of enlarged sections of sexist tabloid pieces. Several of her pieces occupy space in the Tate Modern's show, Century City.

From unknown to a place in art history in less than a decade is quite an achievement and mirrors that of City Racing in becoming crystallised, courtesy of this exhibition, as a crucial part of Britain's cultural history. If this exhibition illustrates anything, it is that history is a tale told by the victors.

●Until 11 March. Tel: 020 7930 3647

Ratings: ○ adequate ★ good, ★★ very good, ★★★ outstanding, X poor

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