

## Pirandello's Theater of Realities

By WILLIAM PACKARD

Today is the 100th anniversary of the birth of Luigi Pirandello, the Italian playwright who was one of the first of moderns to insist that the theater itself is an art form, something to be reshaped according to the requirements of the 20th century imagination.

Born in Girgenti, Sicily, Pirandello did his early studies in philology and the phonetics of language. He published poetry, short stories and novels long before he turned to the theater. And it wasn't until 1921 that he wrote "Six Characters in Search of an Author," whose first production caused so much of a sensation that the author and his daughter had to be rescued from an irate Rome audience. Subsequent productions, however, have established the play as one of the masterpieces of the modern theater.

In 1922 the playwright wrote his ironic "Enrico IV," and in 1925 founded his own National Art Theater in Italy. In 1934 he received the Nobel Prize for Literature. (In a largely insignificant and brief flirtation with Italian fascism, he actually had the Nobel medal melted down as a contribution to Mussolini's Abyssinian campaign.) He died in Rome in 1936 at the age of 69.

Almost all of Pirandello's plays are concerned with the problem of identity and with the inevitable and tragic lack of communication even within the most intimate family and love relationships. In fact, he believed it was foolhardy to try to define the truth, as there are always several different levels of reality functioning simultaneously within each individual. Behind the literal reality of the event, there is the psychological reality composed of fleeting feelings, defenses, intentions and rationalizations.

Of course this phenomenon is elusive and has always been notoriously difficult to represent in any art form. In the novel, Joyce managed to express various dimensions of psychological truth with his "stream of consciousness" technique. Pirandello tried to solve the problem for the theater by putting the audience in the role of author, to create and interpret the experiences on stage. He did this most effectively in his trilogy of plays about the theater itself: "Six Characters," "Each in His Own Way" and "Tonight We Improvise."

In these plays, Pirandello's principal technique is the play within the play. This allows the actors and characters to step out of the fixed form of the drama, and comment on the story line as it is being developed. Often the plays begin conventionally enough with the expected exposition of background material, but then Pirandello stops short and shows that the exposition was mostly false, nothing

but self-deception on the part of a character. And the audience is left baffled—or, more accurately, is made aware of the elusiveness of truth, in the theater as in reality.

In his preface to "Six Characters," the author tells of how he was visited by the imaginary persons of his play: "I can only say that, without having made any effort to seek them out, I found before me, alive—you could touch them and even hear them breathe—the six characters now seen on the stage."

"Tonight We Improvise" advances the idea that we must not only improvise our behavior but also our values, because life itself is a continual improvisation. Pirandello once commented: "Basically, I have constantly attempted to show that nothing offends life so much as reducing it to a hollow concept."

The note of pessimism is sounded strongly in Pirandello. For he does seem to be saying we are all locked within our own mysterious identities, unable to achieve meaningful communication beyond our own carefully contrived version of things (a theme skilfully worked by Tennessee Williams). Pirandello tells us himself that he views his own characters as: "... the most disgruntled tribe in the world, men, women, children, involved in strange adventures which they can find no way out of; thwarted in their plans; cheated in their hopes; with whom, in short, it is often torture to deal."

There is no easy answer to the charge of pessimism's lessening the value of Pirandello's "Cubist drama," but it can be seen that he develops his pessimism in the most comical terms possible. The critic Francis Fergusson refers to the playwright's "farfical-terrible vision" in which "the human is caught rationalizing there in the bright void." And many critics have acclaimed the fine balance of pessimism and comedy in Pirandello's work—as if the human condition were so preposterous it has to be laughed at.

In the end, Pirandello's great mission in the theater was to undermine our traditional, inherited views of reality. In his attempt to do this, his plays may sometimes strike us as overly intellectual, contrived, grim, circuitous, prismatic or merely argumentative. Yet they are all invariably thoughtful and satisfying to the imagination. At each new production of a Pirandello play (and there have been many first-rate ones in recent years), we are reminded of how much this playwright did for the modern theater simply by challenging the appearances of things—even those up on the stage.

# THEATRE: SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR

The play by Luigi Pirandello, translated by Eric Bentley, presented last week at Brooklyn College. Directed by Bernard Barrow.

by William Packard

The more we explore the dialectics of the theatre of the absurd, the plays of Ionesco and Genet, and the more we engage in avant-garde experiments of audience participation, the more we come full circle back to the work of Luigi Pirandello, born 102 years ago. He was a ruthless iconoclast and a brilliant pioneer, although he's still a relatively unproduced playwright in America. Consequently any new production of a Pirandello play is an event of some interest and importance, and this is especially so when it's a major new translation of his most outstanding work.

"Six Characters" was written in 1921, and the first production caused such a calamity that Pirandello and his daughter had to be escorted out of the theatre and protected from an irate audience in Rome. And it's an interesting question, why did this play create as much consternation as the advent of cubism? Because, like cubism, it exploded a totally false view of the human "self." For centuries it had been taken for granted that "self" was a very real substance having a simple identity in time. Myself, yourself, himself, herself—these were all supposedly real things, like clocks and chairs and tables, fixed objects in the real world which could be located and looked at.

David Hume was the first person who had the instinct to level an attack on this simplistic concept of personal identity. Hume rejected the notion of "self" outright, and said that

personal identity was nothing but a pot-pourri of irrational passions. And modern psychology has complicated the insight by claiming that there are several levels of reality which function simultaneously within the individual. The so-called "self" as we know it is made up of states of mind, unconscious impulses, dreams and memories, ephemeral thoughts, fleeting feelings, subtle mechanisms, defenses, intentions, and extensive rationalizations.

But it still remained for modern art to express this multiple reality of the "self." Pirandello tried to solve the problem for the theatre by putting the audience in the role of the author, so it could actually experience the reality of the characters who were acting out their roles on stage. In the process, Pirandello developed certain characteristic techniques for representing the elusive nature of truth—his most famous device was the play within the play, but he also used circuitous and often deceptive exposition, a highly melodramatic structure, and long aria-like speeches which may remind us of Italian opera. But certainly his most remarkable technique is the "visitation" of the characters in the play, and their insistence on finding the form of their own reality.

The stage manager and some actors come on stage, and begin to rehearse a Pirandello play. But suddenly six characters—a mother, a father, a son and daughter, and two younger children—appear and interrupt the rehearsal. They insist on having their own story performed by the actors, and they assert themselves with all the urgency of a psychological obsession. They will not be at peace until there has been a ritual re-enactment of their own lives, in play form.

However, in trying to reconstruct the story of the six characters, there is a difficulty, since each character remembers only according to his own point of view. As the father tells the stage manager: "But don't you see that the whole trouble lies here. In words, words. Each one of us has within him a whole world of things, each man of us his own special world. And how can we

ever come to an understanding if I put in the words I utter the sense and value of things as I see them; while you who listen to me must inevitably translate them according to the conception of things each one of you has within himself. We think we understand each other, but we never really do." That is to say, we are all victims of language, and images, and the various roles that are already imposed on us. And as human beings we can't tolerate such an arbitrary condition, we have to try to create our own reality in time just as an artist labors to create a work of art.

Eric Bentley describes this existential urgency in Pirandello: "He believed that the essentially human thing was not merely to live, as beasts do, but also to see yourself living, to think." This accounts for the heightened

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self-consciousness, the lucidity of the characters in a Pirandello play. It's as if they had a demon in the back of their minds, and it was demanding that they unravel themselves until they achieved some degree of revelation and insight into their own identity as human beings.

This may sound pessimistic, but the only pessimism in Pirandello is his insight that man suffers in time. Francis Fergusson has called it Pirandello's "farcical-terrible" vision in which "the human is caught rationalizing there in the bright void." Pirandello is trying to dramatize the ultimate paradox, that the human psyche is dynamic and changing, and yet it must express itself through the fixed static form of art.