INTRODUCTION

Six Characters in Search of an Author is now recognised as a classic of modernism; many would echo Felicity Firth's words, asserting that it is 'the major single subversive moment in the history of modern theatre'.[1] In 1921 its story of family strife and sexual horror, set within the philosophical context of relativism, and its self-conscious form provided a double-pronged challenge: to bourgeois social values, and to the accepted mode of naturalist theatre-making. *Six Characters* is a deeply disturbing play as well as an intensely exciting one. It was also very influential. Written and presented in Italy long before the word 'director' became part of the Italian vocabulary, it gained its early European and American reputation through the work of particular directors: Theodore Komisarjevsky, Brock Pemberton, Georges Pitoëff and Max Reinhardt. Georges Pitoëff's production in Paris in April 1923 was to be recognised as a major force in shaping subsequent French theatre. In other countries the influence is perhaps less distinct, and becomes blurred with that of other Pirandello plays. Certainly, Alan Ayckbourn, Samuel Beckett, Nigel Dennis, Michael Frayn, Harold Pinter, N. F. Simpson and Tom Stoppard in the UK bear affinities with Pirandello, as do Thornton Wilder and Edward Albee in the USA.

The man who wrote this European classic was born in a house called 'Caos' on the southern coast of Sicily near Agrigento in 1867, the second child (but first son) of six children. His father owned a sulphur mine, one of the few thriving industries in a declining island economy. Although he spent his working life outside Sicily, Pirandello never forgot his Sicilian origins nor the symbolism inherent in the name of his birthplace. After secondary education in the island's

capital, Palermo, he enrolled in the city's university, then transferred to the University of Rome in 1887, and moved again in 1889 to the University of Bonn, where he graduated with a thesis on the dialect of his native Agrigento. In Palermo there had been an erotic attachment to a cousin, Lina Pirandello; in Bonn he had fallen in love with a young German woman, Jenny Schulz-Lander, but in 1893, two years after his return from Germany, his family arranged his marriage to Antonietta Portulano, daughter of a business associate of his father's. The marriage took place in the following year. Three children were born: Stefano in 1895, Lietta in 1897 and Fausto in 1899.

After his marriage Pirandello settled in Rome, and in 1897 he took the post of professor at the Istituto Superiore di Magistero (a teacher-training institute) to supplement his father's allowance. Six years later disaster struck the family. Flooding in the sulphur mine led to the loss of Pirandello's father's capital and his wife's dowry, both of which had been invested in the mine. This disaster was a major turning point in Pirandello's life: his wife became mentally ill, developing persecution mania fed by obsessive jealousy, and financial concerns became acute. He had already embarked on a literary career but now, with a sick wife and three children to support, turned to writing with a frenzied earnestness. His first major work of this period was *Il fu Mattia Pascal* (*The Late Matthias Pascal*, 1904), considered a major example of European modernism. Between 1903 and 1915 nine volumes of short stories appeared and three further novels. In 1908, with a collection of critical essays that included the important and seminal 'L'umorismo' ('On Humour'), Pirandello won the competition for a permanent post at the Magistero.

Pirandello's outlook on life, which he refined in his essays, remained constant throughout his life and was formulated early.[2] It was already clear in a letter written to his elder sister in 1886 when he was a nineteen-year-old student in Palermo. He described meditation as 'the black abyss, inhabited by black phantasms and guarded by the most wretched despair, where no light penetrates but where the desire for light throws you into an even deeper darkness'. Human beings were

'a nobler type' of spider, snail or mollusc who cling, not to their webs or shells, but to their ideals, occupations, habits and feelings: protection mechanisms against an overwhelming sense of futility. Without these 'you are as a traveller with no home, a bird without a nest'. 'I write, and study,' Pirandello confided to his sister, 'to forget myself, to distract myself from despair.'[3] Seven years later, while he was in Rome setting up the matrimonial home, he told his fiancée, in his first letter to her, that he saw life as 'an immense labyrinth surrounded by an impenetrable mystery'. He wrote that it was impossible to know anything for certain, that human beings can never have a precise notion of life, but 'only a feeling, therefore continually changing and varied', nothing absolute. In this state of shipwreck, Art was his only rock of safety and he clung to it desperately.[4]

It is interesting to note that Pirandello expressed the same ideas, and with even the same language, in both his personal letters and his public writing. The phrases used in this letter had appeared three months earlier in the essay 'Arte e coscienza d'oggi' ('Art and Consciousness Today'), and the notion that we can have no knowledge of life, only a feeling, recurred in a number of his writings. Pirandello's fictional and dramatic works, most of which are set in his own time, carry a vast range of persons; beneath the articulate ratiocination of many of his characters lies this personally felt cry of anguish concerning the purpose of human suffering and, indeed, the purpose of life.

At the heart of Pirandello's pessimism lies a tragic paradoxical tension between life and form. Form gives a lasting quality to aspects of life but in so doing arrests its essential movement and spontaneity; thus art, which is form, and life are fundamentally opposed. Pirandello's ideas concerning identity and knowledge are closely related to this opposition, and are central to his writing. For him identity is a collection of masks, forms imposed upon the life within us by ourselves and by others. A contemporary dramatist, Luigi Chiarelli, called his best-known play *La maschera e il volto* (*The Mask and the Face*), but for Pirandello there was no face behind the series of masks. The overall title he gave to his collection of plays was the sinister

and terrifying phrase *Maschere nude* (*Naked Masks*). The title of his last novel, *Uno, nessuno e centomila* (*One, No-one and a Hundred Thousand*), finally completed and published in 1926, states this theme succinctly: we are one physical body, we have no self, and we comprise a multiplicity of *personae*, depending on the situations in which we find ourselves. Like identity, knowledge is relative. The *raisonneur* character, Lamberto Laudisi, in *Cosí è* (*se vi pare*) (*Right You Are!* [*If You Think So*]) – another emblematic title – can recognise himself as brother to his sister but cannot say who he is. It is the expression of the pain that derives from these two areas of identity and knowledge that distinguishes Pirandello's approach – the 'pena di vivere cosí' (the pain of living like this), as the title of another story expresses it.

Pirandello considered this revolution in the perception of identity and knowledge as devastating as the Copernican discovery of the place of the earth in the cosmos. One of his major achievements, however, is to make comic creations from such a profoundly pessimistic vision. Humour comes from situation; in the short story 'Il capretto nero' ('The Little Black Kid') of 1913, the young English lady who visits Sicily discovers that the little goat with which she has fallen in love is a hairy monster by the time it reaches her in London. Humour also comes from characters. Pirandello is master of the grotesque caricature; for instance, the two inquisitive ladies in *Right You Are!* (*If You Think So*), or Dr Gennoni, the psychiatrist in *Enrico IV* (*Henry IV*); and he has a fine line in grumbling housekeepers and landladies. But his humour is blended with compassion, as the poetics of the long essay on humour maintain that it must be. To be aware of discrepancy and incongruity provides material for the comic; to reflect on them and feel them leads to the humorist's vision. The example given in the essay is of an elderly lady (one of his many caricatures), overdressed and heavily made-up. The effect is incongruous and therefore laughable; but think of her possible situation – trying to please a young man friend, or to deceive herself in the face of encroaching death – and the laughter becomes suffused with compassion.

Distinct from his dark unchanging vision of the universe, Pirandello's attitude to theatre changed and developed over the years.

Letters home during his student days in Palermo and Rome testify to his intense interest and hopes for the performance of his texts. His first student attempt at playwriting, *Gli uccelli dell'alto* (*The Birds on High*) ended up with several others in the incinerator. He then composed two plays for Eleonora Duse, who went to Palermo in April 1887. Newly arrived in Rome in the autumn of that year, he wrote home to his family that he might not be returning to Sicily for Christmas as his new play *La gente allegra* (*The Happy People*) would be staged at the Valle Theatre at the end of December. In the following January he wrote *Le popolane* (*The Women of the People*) for Cesare Rossi's company. None of these ambitious attempts bore fruit, however, and Pirandello's first published work in 1889 was a volume of poetry.

There is no doubting, though, the almost hallucinatory compulsion the theatre held for the young writer. In early December 1887, two months after taking up residence in Rome, he wrote to his family about his enthusiasm.

> Oh the theatre! I will succeed in it. I cannot go inside a theatre without experiencing an intense emotion and a strange sensation, without the blood rushing through my veins. That heavy atmosphere you breathe in there, laden with the smell of gas and paint, inebriates me; and half way through a show I always feel taken over as if by a fever and I'm on fire. It's that old passion that gets hold of me, and I'm never there alone, but always accompanied by the phantasms of my mind, persons that agitate in a centre of action, not yet stilled, men and women of dramas and comedies, alive in my brain, and who want to leap straightaway onto the stage. Often I don't see or listen to what is really happening on the stage because I am seeing and listening to the scenes that are occurring in my own head.[5]

After an eighteen-month respite from the theatre when he transferred his philological studies to Bonn, Pirandello's return to Rome saw the old enthusiasm return, but again none of his various attempts to stage his plays resulted in performance.

By 1899, at the age of thirty-two, he had published four volumes of poetry and a collection of short stories and completed two novels. His theatrical phase was over, it seemed, except for a few reviews and

short articles. Advised by Luigi Capuana to concentrate on prose, it looked as if Pirandello was set to become a writer of fiction. And during the next decade he wrote and published an impressive number of short stories and novels, particularly after the family disaster of 1903. Pirandello was anxious at this time to turn his hand to any form of writing that would pay, and it was in that spirit that he accepted a commission to refurbish some short theatrical pieces for Nino Martoglio, a fellow Sicilian. Martoglio had established a theatrical company in Rome – Teatro Minimo a Sezioni – that offered each evening a selection of one-act plays – hence the title *a sezioni* (in sections). Both Pirandello's *La Morsa* (*The Vice*) and *Lumie di Sicilia* (*Sicilian Limes*) were presented in December 1910. Three years later Lucio d'Ambra and Achille Vitti presented another one-acter, *Il dovere del medico* (*The Doctor's Duty*), in Rome.

But success continued to elude him. Encouraged by Marco Praga, a well-known dramatist, critic and theatrical company manager, his first full-length play, *Se non cosí* (*If Not Like This*) was staged in April 1915 at the prestigious Manzoni Theatre in Milan. It was a resounding failure, leaving Pirandello with a large advance to pay back to the Italian Authors' Society. Disappointed but undaunted, Pirandello continued to persevere in the world of theatre. From mid-1915 to mid-1916 Angelo Musco, the talented Sicilian dialect actor and theatre company manager, presented four plays in Sicilian dialect by Pirandello during his company's visit to Rome. Pirandello, who had hitherto shown little interest in the theatrical presentation of his plays, attending until then, it seems, no rehearsals or performance, was present at the first night of *Sicilian Limes*.

From then onwards Pirandello was to write plays with an impressive speed and engage himself fully in the process of seeing his plays on to the stage. The Italian version of *Pensaci, Giacomino!* (*Think About It, Giacomino!*), first presented in Sicilian the previous year, was ready in early 1917. By April 1917 he had completed *Right You Are!* (*If You Think So*), his first play set on the mainland since *If Not Like This*, which was staged in the following June by no less a theatre manager than Virgilio Talli. Pirandello had hoped that the much-respected

actor and theatre company manager Ruggero Ruggeri would take it on, but instead Ruggeri's first Pirandellian role was to be Baldovino in *Il piacere dell'onestà* (*The Pleasures of Respectability*) in November of the same year. Pirandello was to write and have successfully staged eight further plays in Italian before *Six Characters in Search of an Author* in May 1921.

By 1924, after the presentation of yet eight more plays, including *Henry IV* in 1922, so intense had his renewed interest in drama become, that Pirandello agreed to head a group of people who were preparing to launch an art theatre in Rome. Though initially there were no plans to privilege Pirandello's own plays, requests from abroad to stage them (from C. B. Cochran in London in the first instance) meant that a number of the Teatro d'Arte's most memorable productions were of Pirandello's plays. In 1928, however, government funding lapsed and the company was forced to disperse, without achieving in full the reform of Italian theatre that had been its aim. Pirandello had long inveighed against the prompter for colluding with the laziness of actors in relation to their scripts, but he himself was forced to employ one. He had complained bitterly about the competition for playing places and lack of funding, and fell foul of both issues. Nevertheless, the achievements of the Teatro d'Arte over its three and a half years of life were impressive: a varied and ambitious repertoire (fifteen world premieres and nine Italian premieres of foreign plays); the fostering of new talent among his actors and stage designers, in particular Marta Abba and Guido Salvini; the introduction of innovatory lighting, and a high standard of acting based on careful attention to the text.[6] From 1928 until his death, Pirandello continued to write plays and follow their fortunes in his self-imposed exile in Berlin and Paris. When he died, in Rome in December 1936 during one of his intermittent stays in Italy, he left an unfinished play, *I giganti della montagna* (*The Mountain Giants*).

Nearly forty years earlier, at the turn of the twentieth century when he had temporarily stopped writing plays, Pirandello published some essays on theatre. In the first of these, 'L'azione parlata' ('Spoken Action', 1899), he quoted for the first time from Heine's

poem 'Geoffrey Rudel and Melisande von Tripoli'.[7] Each evening the figures in the tapestry illustrating the legend leave the tapestry; the troubadour and his lady stir their ghostly limbs from sleep, come down from the wall and move around the room. 'Through the miracle of art', Pirandello wrote in that early essay, 'characters should step out from the written pages of the play, alive in their own right, just as the Lord of Blaye and the Countess of Tripoli stepped down from that ancient tapestry.'[8] Pirandello's concern in this essay is with playwriting. It is his first explicit statement about character autonomy. Dialogue should not be assigned to characters; rather, the character's language should be born with the character. Characters, Pirandello stated, are central to the concept of the play. 'The play does not make people; people make the play. And therefore one must have people before anything else, living, free and active. In them and through them comes the idea of the play.'[9]

In his later essay of 1908, 'Illustratori, attori e traduttori' ('Illustrators, Actors and Translators'), Pirandello uses the same quotation from Heine's poem, not only to prescribe how each character's language should be unique and born with the character, but also to focus on the unsatisfactory nature of illustration, acting and translating. On dramatic art he had this to say:

> Unfortunately, there always has to be a third, unavoidable element that intrudes between the dramatic author and his creation in the material being of the performance: the actor. As is well known, this is an unavoidable limitation for dramatic art. Just as the author has to merge with his character in order to make it live, to the point of feeling as it feels, desiring as it desires, so also to no lesser degree, if that can be accomplished, must the actor.
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> But even when one finds a great actor who can strip himself completely of his own individuality and enter into that of the character that he is playing, a total, full incarnation is often hindered by unavoidable facts: for example, by the actor's own appearance. This inconvenience can be improved slightly by the use of make-up. But we still have what is more an adaptation, a mask, than a true incarnation.[10]

An actor gives material reality to a character, but in so doing makes that character less true. The actor, by the very nature of his art, removes the abiding truth from the character 'because he is translating him into the fictitious, conventional reality of the stage'.

> [T]he actor gives an artificial consistency, in an illusory, artificial environment, to persons and actions that have already received an expression of life superior to material contingencies and which are already alive in the essentially ideal characteristics of poetry, that is, in a superior kind of reality.[11]

Here, in 1908, is one of the seeds of *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, the play that took European theatre by storm by insinuating that theatre was an 'impossible art'. These ideas could be seen as the bitter notions of a man frustrated by his lack of success in the theatre. However, unbeknownst to Pirandello at the time, those very ideas were to be at the heart of theatrical debate in Europe, finding echoes in Strindberg, Craig and the French Symbolists, and were to challenge the prevailing mode of naturalism. Mallarmé, Maeterlinck, Lugné-Poe and Jarry all made statements indicating that for them theatre held within itself an insoluble contradiction.[12]

Pirandello's notion of the actor doomed to failure because no human being can produce exactly the image of the character sprung from the author's mind is a naturalistic concept and recalls the French theatre practitioner André Antoine's quip that the dramatic action is interrupted each time the actor is visible behind the character. For all Pirandello's utterances about the uniqueness of the character, however, it is clear from his working practices that he wrote plays for specific actors, notably Ruggero Ruggeri and Marta Abba, 'borrowed' speeches from characters of previous plays and interchanged speeches between the characters in individual plays. Pirandello's method of creating characters left visible the process of construction: a form of montage, a collection of parts that could be put together or dismantled at will. Though he clung to his provocative ideas about the impossibility of true mimesis, repeating them in an interview published in

1925 in Paris when his company was performing there,[13] his experience as a playwright and man of the theatre prompted different approaches to his work. These were also influenced by the presence in the Teatro d'Arte of Marta Abba, who took the leading roles and for whom Pirandello wrote a number of plays. In Marta Abba, Pirandello found the actor best able to produce on stage the effects he wanted: the impression of a suffering puppet, a being of passionate intensity whose actions and speech delivery were fragmented and staccato. Claudio Vicentini posits that at this stage of his thinking and theatrical practice, Pirandello thought actors should not aim to represent the character, nor try to be the character; rather, they should make themselves available to the character, attracting the character to themselves.[14]

A hint of this is caught in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, when the Stepdaughter encourages the Mother to scream, but is best seen in Sampognetta's 'death scene' in *Questa sera si recita a soggetto* (*Tonight We Improvise*), the third play in Pirandello's theatre trilogy (the second was *Ciascuno a suo modo* (*Each in His Own Way*). During an 'improvisation' (fully scripted by Pirandello), the Comic Actor, given the role of Sampognetta, finds himself unable to act out a good death scene. He cannot get the mood right, no one responded to his cue, and as a comic actor, he has no training to do a death from cold. So why don't they cut the build-up to his death? He lies down on the sofa and declares, 'I'm dead!' The Director interposes; the Comic Actor begins to justify himself, describing how he had constructed the scene, explaining his character and his reactions to members of his family and to the director, working himself into the situation to the extent that he defends himself as if he were being contradicted; inserting the actions, smearing blood on his face from his wounds, trying out his last fluttering whistle (for which he was known), and finally, with one arm round the Singer's neck and the other round that of the Client, he lets his head drop and falls on the ground. The Singer cries out 'Oh God, he's dead, he's dead!' and his daughter throws herself on to her father crying 'Daddy, daddy, oh my daddy'