

# At Each Other's Mercy Pirandello and His Characters

by David Klarsa

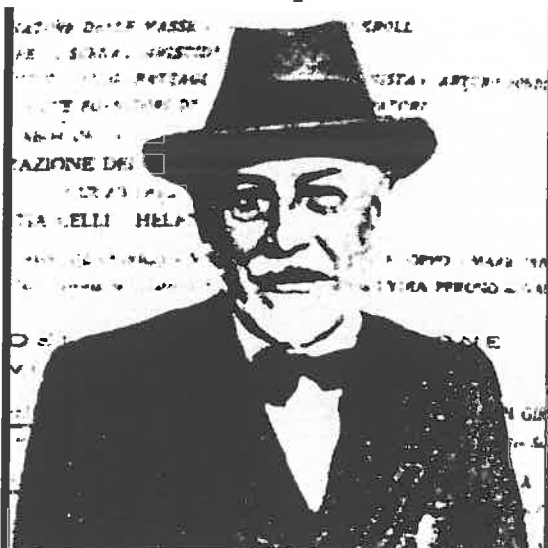
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n his 1913 novella, *The Tragedy of a Character*, Pirandello describes how on Sundays, from 8:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., he would grant the characters of his future stories an audience. They would cause a commotion, asking him unseemly questions and arguing among themselves. To make matters worse, often other characters from books he had read in the past, who had not been invited and with whom the author was sometimes barely acquainted, would burst into his study and interfere with the already

disorderly proceedings. Though characters have always had a propensity for assuming a will of their own, few have ever become as domineering as those that elbowed their way into the consciousness of Luigi Pirandello.

Of course the characters were not simply outsiders, nor, as supplicants and intruders, were they entirely unwelcome. Shadowy figures composed of memories (both good and bad), desires and fears, they were, as Pirandello himself was quick to point out, the lifeblood of his literary career. Still, by the time of the First World War (when Pirandello was in his late 40s), his life had become such a torture to him, that he began to consider turning six of these tormented "creations of his spirit" loose, to let them search for another author. Perhaps then they would stop pestering him.

In a sense, the six characters had been conceived when, in 1894, Pirandello received a letter from his father, Stefano, requesting that he return to Sicily to marry a woman he hardly knew. As Antonietta Portulano was the daughter of Stefano Pirandello's partner in the sulfur mining business, the arrangement was not unusual for the time, and Luigi Pirandello agreed. Soon, he and his new bride were on their way back to Rome.



Luigi Pirandello

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## Show #4

*Six Characters in Search of An Author* by Luigi Pirandello, English version by Robert Cornthwaite. Open February 8 and runs through March 3. Previews February 5, 6, 7. Direction and Scenic Design by Liviu Gulei; Costume Design by Smaranda Branescu; Lighting Design by Allen Lee Hughes; Sound Design by Steven M. Klein; Production Dramaturgy by Mark Bly. Cast: Ann Buchanan, Jeannie Carson, T. Scott Cunningham, Ted D'Arms, Rosemary DeAngelis, Funda Duyal, Woody Eney, Natalya Eyzaguirre, Katie Forgette, Lou Hetler, Laura Kenny, William Biff McGuire, Marjorie Nelson, Marianne Owen, Ken Ruta, Tom Spiller, Rick Tutor, R. Hamilton Wright, Wendell Wright, and Claire Zimmerman. Approximate running time: 2 hours, 45 minutes.

Their first years together were relatively untroubled, and they had three children, Stefano, Lietta and Fausto. Though Pirandello earned little as a writer, they were fairly well off. To supplement Pirandello's income, they had his father's financial support, and in case of emergency, there was always Antonietta's dowry to rely on, a considerable sum which Stefano Pirandello held in trust. Married to a stranger and living in a strange land, Antonietta derived a sense of security and independence from the sum held in her name.

However, with the arrival of the new century, the family mining business began to fail. To revive his fortunes, Stefano Pirandello invested heavily in a new sulfur mine, sinking into the venture not only his own capital but Antonietta's dowry as well. In 1904, the mine was flooded and he went bankrupt. When Pirandello heard news of the disaster, he returned home to find his wife lying in bed in a state of shock, her legs temporarily paralyzed.

Pirandello was forced to take a post as a teacher of rhetoric at a teachers college for women in Rome, a poorly-paid position which he despised. As her husband spent more time out of the house, Antonietta began to show signs of even more serious mental imbalance, with frequent hysterical attacks during which she accused Pirandello of infidelity and deceit. He did everything

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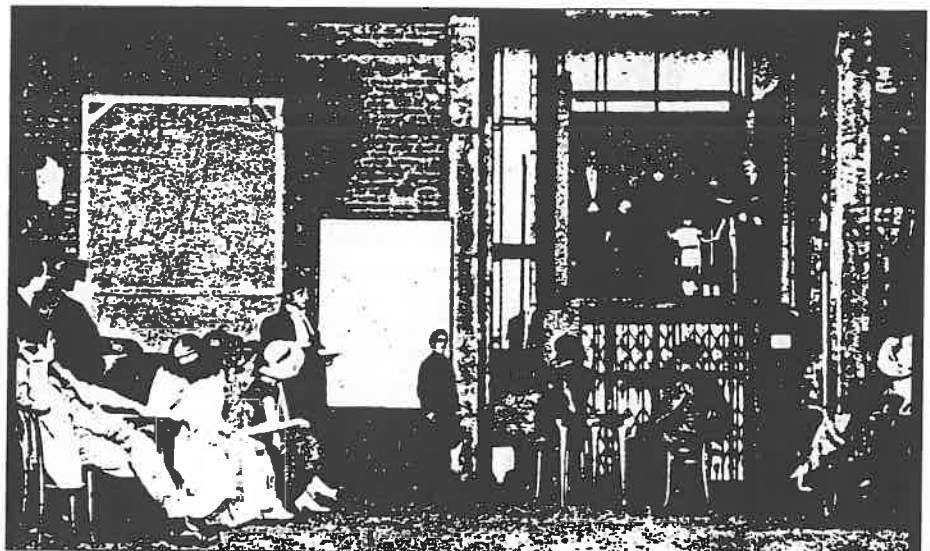
possible to soothe her and allay her fears: he gave up his friends, stayed at home as much as possible and, when he did have to go out, made sure Antonietta knew exactly where he was going and when he would return. Pirandello even turned over his salary to his wife, leaving himself only enough change for the tram and his

newspapers and cigars.

Still Antonietta continued to suspect him and, in fact, seemed so convinced of the truth of her delusions that Pirandello soon felt he was living a kind of double existence. As he wrote in his short story, *Her Husband*, He felt the atrocious absurdity of his tragedy: to be

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"Six Characters in Search of an Author"  
 directed by Georges Pitoëff, Paris 1923



screenplay on the homeless. A middle-class black man loses everything, and he meets a schizophrenic in a shelter in New York, and they struggle to get back to society. It's a friendship between two people who are certainly fringe.

**DH:** Of course, the whole concept of fringe implies that there is a center. I don't know how true that is.

**LK:** Fringe may be the center and center may be the fringe. The center may be people cut off from their real feelings. Maybe that's why they go to the theatre, to see people expressing feelings they can't express.

**DH:** Tell me about The Imagination Workshop.

**LK:** It's a group that was started by my wife, Margaret Ladd. We bring in professional writers and actors to do structured improvisations with hospitalized psychiatric patients. These people, some of whom are diagnosed as incapable of functioning on any level, create their own plays. The medical staff is always incredulous because they only deal with the pathology; they don't know that the patients have a sense of humor. We don't see ourselves as therapists at all — we deal with the patients, not with the pathology.

Whatever the reasons are, the patients are frozen in these sick, limited selves that stop them from functioning. We give them the clothes of a magician or of a race car driver. When they play these characters, suddenly you see this extraordinary energy. A very repressed patient sitting there with his arms folded suddenly, without even thinking, starts to behave with the energy of a race car driver. He doesn't know he's not supposed to. And suddenly he's able to express desires and needs and fears that he could not as himself.

**DH:** Have you used any of this material in your own writing?

**LK:** I've never used particular patients' problems and made them into a naturalistic thing. Mainly, I'm interested in shifting identities.

What is the self? What is the personality? What are the masks? *Robbers* deals with masks: the characters are always shifting identities. There are many actors who can hide behind the mask and do things that they wouldn't ever do as themselves. The same thing holds true for the patients. So, what is personality and what is sickness? What's been limiting them? That part of it is fascinating.

**DH:** You ever been robbed?

**LK:** (laughs) Not of money. They tried to in New York, but I wouldn't give it to them. No, I've never been robbed. You know, it's funny, the patients have been robbed. These people, it seems as if they've been robbed of who they are. They sit there and they don't function. A robbery has occurred; hard to say who did it. Is it the family? Is it genetic? But in a way, these people who have been robbed are closer to their own true selves.

*Robbers* is a fable, a story of this kid's journey. He robs and he gets robbed. All these horrible things are happening to him. Doing the play here at The Rep, hopefully I'll be able to see where it goes.

**DH:** But it's still a very funny play.

**LK:** Hilarious, hopefully.

**David Hlavsa heads the Drama Department at St. Martin's College in Lacey and teaches playwriting at the Northwest Actors Studio.**

***Robbers* by Lyle Kessler. Previews December 2-5; opening December 6 and running through December 23 in the PONCHO Forum of the Bagley Wright Theatre. Directed by Daniel Sullivan; Scenic Design by Ralph Funicello; Costume Design by Rose Pederson; Lighting Design by Paulie Jenkins; Sound Design by Michael Holtén. Cast: Paul Benvictor, Michael Champion, Loren Dean, David Margulies, William Biff McGuire, Martha Plimpton and Lisa Zane.**

**The performance lasts approximately 2 hours.**

## Courtesy Card Update

The businesses listed below offer the following special values to Seattle Repertory Theatre subscribers holding Rep Courtesy Cards. Values are good anytime, except as noted. Courtesy Cards were mailed out to subscribers with their season tickets.

### Cafe Europe

Center House, Second Floor  
728-2221

Complimentary wine with meal or espresso with dessert.

### Caffe Minnies

1st Ave. & Denny Way  
448-6263

Buy any dinner entree or appetizer and receive the second of equal or lesser value free. Open until midnight, nightly.

### Chicago's Restaurant

351 1st Ave. North  
282-7791

Two dinners for the price of one.

### Mediterranean Kitchen

4 West Roy St.  
285-6713

Free Turkish coffee with meal. Mediterranean Kitchen is located a half block from ACT Theatre, within walking distance of The Rep.

### Two Dagos from Texas

2600 1st Ave.  
441-7714

Complimentary dessert with entree purchase. Featuring Southwestern, Cajun and Italian cuisines.