

Of Magic & Masks:

Lyle Kessler talks about his life and 'Robbers'

By David Hlavsa

Lyle Kessler is a playwright, actor, director and screenwriter whose best-known work to date is *Orphans*, a play which Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre Company presented in New York in 1985 to great acclaim. The play was later made into a film starring Albert Finney.

Kessler's latest script, *Robbers*, will receive its world premiere as the second production in The Seattle Rep's 1989-90 Stage 2 season. The script deals with a young man named Teddy who is recruited by a mysterious detective named Mr. Feathers to infiltrate a canning factory where the workers are stealing merchandise from their boss. Going undercover, Teddy enters a world where people are never what they seem: the boss, for example, keeps changing his race and religion (we see him trying to be Japanese and then Jewish). Teddy turns out to be especially good at altering his identity. The employees quickly adopt him as one of their own, and things go well for a time. Ultimately, however, Teddy is forced to choose between his lucrative role as informer and his loyalty to his newfound friends.

This past summer, Kessler took some time out from pre-production meetings on the play to discuss his career and *Robbers*.

DH: I understand that you started your performing career as a magician and escape artist.

LK: Oh my God. Where'd you get that?

DH: I wondered how you got from there to playwriting.

LK: Well, I was a kid. I was 11, 12, doing good old-fashioned shows in

Philadelphia. Eventually I stopped that, but it's always been in my mind. I've always been intrigued by magic. In fact, in *Orphans*, Harold is sort of a magician. He loves Houdini.

DH: In fact, he does an escape.

LK: He does escape, right.

DH: Do you find yourself using magic in your work?

LK: Well, I think playwriting is magical. There is an illusion. It's different than just basic "magic." You play with emotions, too. But things — characters — appear and disappear. Also, magic is wonder, and I think that writers need to keep that element of wonder looking at the world.

DH: You were an actor and a director before you started writing.

LK: That's right. I studied acting in Philadelphia. Bruce Dern and I were studying together, and we did the Philadelphia premiere of *Waiting for Godot*. He played Estragon, and I played Vladimir. And then I went to New York and studied with Lee Strasberg. I went to the Actors Studio as a director, really. And then, looking for something to direct, I wrote my first one-act play.

DH: Your first full-length play, *The Watering Place*, enjoyed a meteoric rise.

LK: (laughs) Rise and meteoric fall. Tells you about meteors. I wrote it, it was picked up right away, and it was done on Broadway. It was just amazing. But it wasn't the best of all possible worlds: the original director was fired along with two of the four actors. I was this young playwright bombarded by this situation. It was terrible. Alan

Schneider took over and redirected it. He reblocked and essentially recast it. It should have been developed like plays are now outside of New York City. But the producer decided just to open it. It was a devastating experience. Survival in the theatre is just the most amazing thing. I know a lot of playwrights, they get bruised and they disappear. You gotta build up existential muscles in order to survive. That's what *Robbers* is about, too: surviving in this world where people are picking at you and stealing pieces of you. The world that Feathers is bringing Teddy into is one of total compromise for external things, possessions. In the world of commerce and communication, to survive, one has to know how to navigate through this world of sharks and not become a shark oneself.

DH: *Orphans*, on the other hand, has done very well in L.A., Chicago, New York, London — and was made into a movie, as well.

LK: It just amazes me. Translations of the play have been done in Japan and Iceland, and it's a big hit in Finland. I mean, every country where it's been done it's been a big success. For some reason there's something in that play. I guess you'd call it universal. I don't know. People relate to the feelings and the struggles. I mean, a guy who can't contain his emotions keeping his brother trapped in a house — there's something in there that people are identifying with in all languages.

DH: A lot of your characters are thieves, orphans, people who live on the fringe.

LK: I like these characters, these strange people. I just wrote a

information rather than knowledge to build up our defenses, our cover stories. **PRO** – *One thing that strikes me about Elliot Loves is that you're trying to capture how men and women truly differ. Are these inherent differences, or do they arise from our distinct society?*

JF – That's difficult. But I think that the spirit that moves it is inherent. The style is part of our culture and our times.

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PRO – *Elliot Loves, like much of your work, has been described variously as "biting," "searing," and "acidic." Do you see this as compliment or a misrepresentation?*

JF – You know, the plays I loved as a young man were the plays that challenged me. They often sent me home unhappy and made me rethink a lot of stuff. That's what I thought theatre should be. Of course, I also think theatre should be entertaining and theatre should be fun. But the theatre that I respected most, that most moved me was theatre that made me confront my own life, or my own politics, my own visions. So, yes, I deliberately try to write something that will be confrontational, but not confrontational in the '60s style where you stand in front of the audience and tell them what shits they are. I think that there has to be a two-way communication between the audience and what happens onstage, an underground dialogue. But while I may confront an audience's expectations, I'm not out to tell them what creeps they are, to rub their noses in it. And I'm *not* out to tell them that I'm smart and they're stupid, which is what a lot of writers like to do. And frankly, I'm not dealing with issues that I've necessarily solved. I'm in no better position to lecture my audience than anybody else.

PRO – *Then we shouldn't expect a resolution at the end of each play . . .*

JF – I don't think there are resolutions to most of life's problems. Resolutions are what you expect in adolescence.

PRO – *So you're posing questions rather than providing answers?*

JF – Yes, but it's not as if the questions

don't lead to insights — which may, or may not eventually lead to answers. I can't solve their problems for them, but maybe [with some insight] they can.

PRO – *Still, while you're challenging your audience, do you still endeavor to have them see themselves onstage, to empathize?*

JF – Oh yes, if there isn't any empathy then I think the art has somehow failed. But it has to go beyond identification. It can't be just "Oh, my Uncle Harry talks just like that" or "that's my husband up there." Identification is just a starting point. From there, hopefully you move onto a higher ground.

PRO – *Who is Elliot? Could you describe him?*

JF – That depends on how he's cast! He's either in his 30s or his 40s. He's a poll-taker and he's somebody who, in many ways, has backed off from the challenges of his life. He's been a continual disappointment to himself - but he covers it up very well.

PRO – *Is he, perhaps, Willy Loman's second cousin?*

JF – Maybe in some ways. But Willy Loman is someone who is the master of self-deception. Elliot has a clear sense of who and what he is. And Willy Loman didn't sell himself short. He had an exaggerated sense of his own self-importance. Elliot *does* sell himself short.

PRO – *Is there hope in this play?*

JF – I think there is. You find it in the last scene of the play. Elliot and Joanna have finally come together in a way. It doesn't mean that they're going to succeed, that there will be sunshine and roses, but it does mean that they've learned something about each other, and they can go on from there.

PRO – *They have an understanding of reality.*

JF – They have an understanding of each other's reality. And how that works in terms of what they do to each other. One of the important things he says is that you try to do what you think is right and then you find out how it was received. It turns out that what you said was interpreted in an entirely different way. That happens all the time between parents and children. It happens between couples. It happens at work. But Joanna says at the end of play that you make mistakes and when it's all done, you pick up. That's what it's all about, you just pick up and move on. □

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Pirandello

(Continued from page 7)

the target of madness, to suffer martyrdom for imaginary faults, for faults that were not faults and which he had never even dreamt of committing . . . so as not to give her the slightest excuse. But he seemed to commit them unconsciously, who knows how and when. He was obviously two people: one for himself, another for her. All the time Pirandello was denying his wife's accusations, he was also taking them to heart. However untainted his intentions might be, the imaginary crimes had left an indelible mark on his consciousness.

Antonietta begged her husband to let her move out and live on her own, but Pirandello would not let her go. To forestall the chance she might leave him, Pirandello contacted her father—whom she always obeyed—and in deference to his will, she remained at home. During World War I, the situation deteriorated even further. Both of Pirandello's sons enlisted in the Italian army; Stefano was taken prisoner, and Fausto fell seriously ill. Pirandello was beside himself with worry, and his wife's paranoia was growing worse.

Lietta, by now in her late teens, tried to ease the burden by helping her mother around the house, but Antonietta soon became convinced that her daughter was out to replace her, not just in her household duties, but in her physical person as well. As Pirandello isolated himself in his study, his wife became more and more certain that he and Lietta were plotting against her. Finally, she accused Lietta outright of committing incest with her father. Mortified, Lietta attempted to shoot herself.

Fortunately, the ancient revolver she had somehow got hold of was too rusty to function properly. She ran from the house, resolving, instead, to drown herself in the Tiber. However, as she had led an extremely sheltered life, Lietta Pirandello had no idea where the river was and soon got lost. She wandered the streets until she stumbled on some friends of the relatives who took her in and notified her parents. Subsequently, Pirandello placed her in a boarding school run by nuns, and then sent her to stay with family until the situation with Antonietta could be resolved.

By now it was becoming clear to Pirandello that his wife would have to be

institutionalized, but because he was reluctant to make such a decision on his own, he waited for his eldest son's return from the war before taking any action. Stefano agreed that the insane asylum seemed to be the only solution for Antonietta, but he and Pirandello were at a loss as to how to get her there peacefully. Finally, Pirandello told his wife that he would grant her a separation but that, in order to make it official, she would be legally required to undergo a psychiatric examination. She readily assented and, in 1918, was committed to a neurological clinic not far from the Pirandello household.

"After the 'treachery' used to get her into that prison," wrote Stefano, "we were like a family devastated by mourning and guilt. And Father's frenzied eagerness to have her back began at once . . . for she was as necessary to him as the air he breathed."

But Antonietta would remain in the clinic for the rest of her life. The plot to commit her had only confirmed her worst suspicions about her husband's duplicity. Soon what was once her "prison" became her refuge. In the next few years, her husband would often try to convince her to come back to him, but she would either refuse to see him or would receive him like an enemy. Finally, Pirandello gave up hope.

Just as the author began to try to put his past behind him, the six characters began to assert themselves with ever-increasing insistence. As if urging him to take the sordid melodrama his life had become and to give it new form, new life in art, one character took on the aspect of his wife, one of himself, one of his daughter, and so on. Still, the correspondence was not exact. Rather, it was oddly transposed and rearranged — this character assumed another's voice, that one exchanged habits with a third, and so on. It was as if Pirandello's (and Antonietta's) worst nightmares had all been realized: the father had unknowingly made sexual advances towards his daughter; though incest had narrowly been averted, the mother's suspicions had proved justified; some of the children had met mysterious violent deaths by shooting or drowning while the others had lived to bear their father a perpetual and poisonous ill-will.

But the author had had enough. "Perhaps you can understand," he wrote to his son. "Six characters in a terrible

situation who follow me, to be composed in a novel, an obsession, and I want to have nothing to do with them. I tell them it is no good, that I don't care about them or about anything else. They show me their wounds and I chase them away . . ."

But of course it was no more possible to chase them away than it was to erase any other bitter memory. Finally, Pirandello came up with a compromise solution, a plan that encompassed both the characters' need to live and his own reluctance to give them life: he would present the characters in dramatic form but disown them at the same time.

"Can one present a character while rejecting him?" he later wrote in his preface to *Six Characters*. "Obviously, to present him one needs, on the contrary, to receive him into one's fantasy before one can express him. And I have actually accepted and realized the six characters: I have, however, accepted and realized them as *rejected* — in search of *another* author. What have I rejected of them? Not themselves, obviously, but their drama, which doubtless is what interests them above all, but which did not interest me . . ."

In leaving the drama of the characters unexplained and unexplored, Pirandello expressed a vision of the world far darker than if he had (as, for example, O'Neill did) fully accepted and accounted for their predicament. As conscious characters, aware of their entire existence from exposition to denouement, they have been born into the most painful of all possible worlds. Never will they be able to ignore or forget the fact that, in the grand scheme of things, their motives, their best intentions, have been and will always be overshadowed by their tragedy. There is a horror in the characters' situation, one they themselves make very plain to all who will listen: they are free to live in the present, but nothing they do will alter their past. Like insects preserved in amber and conspicuously displayed, their sorrows and transgressions are forever fixed and on view.

Six Characters in Search of an Author was Pirandello's greatest popular suc-

cess. Post-war audiences, mourning the senseless slaughter of thousands of young men, identified with the immutable despair of Pirandello's unfortunate progeny. To Pirandello's generation, as his biographer Gaspare Giudice explains, "Every good intention had failed and the prevalent current of feeling in the world seemed to be hatred." "Mine has been a theatre of war," wrote Pirandello. "The war revealed the theatre to me: when passions were unleashed, I made my own creatures suffer these passions on the stage."

Ironically, the author made a considerable profit from condemning his creatures to perpetual duration. After a shaky start in Rome (the play's unusual form provoked the audience to riot), the play went on to resounding success in Milan, and, between 1922 and 1927, was per-



Improvised theatricals on the terrace of Pirandello's lodgings in Rome.

formed in all the major cities in Europe, as well as New York City, Buenos Aires and Tokyo. Finally, Pirandello was able to quit his teaching job and devote his full attention to his literary career.

Luigi Pirandello won a Nobel Prize in 1934. Though success brightened Pirandello's future, it did nothing to alter the reality of his past, nor did it banish the insistent shadows from his study. "I must soon start writing again," he told his daughter. "I can see no other solution to all the damage done me by life." □

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