



SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR

**By Luigi Pirandello
Adaptation by Robert Brustein**

Saturday, April 16, 2016
A Noise Within, Pasadena

KNOW BEFORE THE SHOW

- *Six Characters in Search of an Author* is a 1921 play known for innovatively exploring “metatheatre” (or theatre within the theatre).
- Playwright Luigi Pirandello (1867–1936) won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1934.
- At the 1921 premiere of *Six Characters* in Rome, the audience was split between people who loved the play and those who vigorously opposed it, with some chanting, “Manicomio! (Madhouse!)” Later productions were more enthusiastically embraced, and *Six Characters* is now understood as a turning point in the history of theatre.

SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR

Six Characters in Search of an Author is a 1921 play by the Italian writer Luigi Pirandello, an important innovator of 20th-century drama. The tale of a family of characters abandoned by their author, *Six Characters* subversively introduced “theatre within the theatre,” or metatheatre, and was an important precursor to Theatre of the Absurd. One of the key works of modern theatre, *Six Characters* both pushed forward dramatic form and mined fundamental questions of human existence and reality.

As the play unfolds, *Six Characters* seems to constantly reveal a new and different dimension of identity and reality. Art and life, real and unreal, the complicated and shifting nature of identity—these themes of *Six Characters* were core concerns of Luigi Pirandello’s entire, vast repertoire.

In his preface to *Six Characters*, Pirandello described the six characters as “vainly” seeking a “universal meaning”: “. . . in the strife of their bedevilled souls, each of them, defending himself against the accusations of the others, expresses as his own living passion and torment the passion and torment which for so many years have been the pangs of my spirit: the deceit of mutual understanding irremediably founded on the empty abstraction of the words, the multiple personality of everyone corresponding to the possibilities of being to be found in each of us, and finally the inherent tragic conflict between life (which is always moving and changing) and form (which fixes it, immutable).”

In many productions of *Six Characters*, the actors playing the six characters wear masks to indicate their fixed state. The use of masks to indicate an eternally fixed character dates back to ancient Greek theatre, but the practice was most common in the Italian tradition of commedia dell’arte, a theatrical form characterized by improvised dialogue and colorful stock characters that was popular in Italy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

LUIGI PIRANDELLO

Luigi Pirandello (1867–1936) won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1934. Pirandello is known for being both inventive and prolific—he wrote dozens of books, including novellas, novels, short stories, and plays.

Pirandello was born in Girgenti, Sicily, and studied philology in Rome and Bonn. From 1897 to 1922, he was a professor of aesthetics and stylistics in Rome. The 1923 production of *Six Characters* in Paris made Pirandello famous.

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A fifteen-volume collection of his plays published between 1918 and 1935 is entitled *Naked Masks*, reflecting Pirandello's ongoing interest in identity, which he perceived as defined largely by relationships with others and thus constantly in flux. Pirandello's questions about the complex and shifting nature of identity came to a brilliant head in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*.

Pirandello said of his own art, and of life, "I think that life is a very sad piece of buffoonery; because we have in ourselves . . . the need to deceive ourselves constantly by creating a reality . . . which from time to time is discovered to be vain and illusory . . . My art is full of bitter compassion for all those who deceive themselves; but this compassion cannot fail to be followed by the ferocious derision of destiny which condemns man to deception."

Pirandello supported Mussolini and Italian Fascism, famously saying, "I am a Fascist because I am an Italian." At one point he donated his gold, including his Nobel medal, to support the Italian campaign into Ethiopia. And yet the playwright's relationship to Fascism was not simple; he had conflicts with various Fascist leaders and was reportedly under surveillance by Fascist secret police.

Considered a progenitor of Absurdism, Pirandello was a major influence on playwrights including Jean Anouilh, Eugene Ionesco, and Samuel Beckett.

A NOISE WITHIN

A Noise Within is a nonprofit organization dedicated to producing great works of world drama and fostering appreciation of history's greatest plays and playwrights. ANW is the only theatre in Southern California and one of only a few in North America to exclusively produce classical dramatic literature year-round, from master works by Euripides, Molière, and Shakespeare, to modern classics by Arthur Miller, Henrik Ibsen, and Samuel Beckett. The company was formed in 1992 by Geoff Elliott, Julia Rodriguez-Elliott, and Art Manke.

A Noise Within has garnered over 500 awards and commendations, including the Los Angeles Drama Critics' Circle's Polly Warfield Award for Excellence and the Margaret Hartford Award for Sustained Excellence. More than 27,000 individuals attend productions at A Noise Within annually. In addition, the theatre draws over 10,000 student participants to its arts-education program, Classics Live! Students can enjoy workshops, conservatory training, subsidized tickets to matinee and evening performances, post-performance discussions with artists and more.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- In *Introduction to Modernism*, Pericles Lewis writes, "Pirandello plays with the traditional goal of the theater—'to create a perfect illusion of reality'—and asks the audience to consider the different levels of reality present in a stage production: the theater as a physical space, including sets constructed by a crew; the written text of the play; the actors' performance; and the represented reality of the characters' lives, which of course is usually fictional. In *Six Characters*, however, the fictional characters come to life and insist on their own rights, seeking to dismantle the illusion of reality in favor of reality itself, or rather in favor of illusion itself, which is their only reality."
- Pirandello was interested in psychology. Beyond a simple binary of "real" and "unreal," *Six Characters* represents different layers of identity and existence. In the words of Brandon J. Ortiz, dramaturg and translator for the 2010 Harvard-Radcliffe Dramatic Club production of *Six Characters*, "At their lowest level of consciousness, they are the fictional family of their potential play that was never completed by the author. They are also characters that would have been billed in that would-be drama, had it made it to the stage—characters who are now appearing in 'real life' during a company's rehearsal. Here are these characters being told by actors that they're not playing themselves right." Even beyond the examples given by Ortiz, in what other ways does Pirandello complicate identity and reality?
- Pirandello wrote of "the inherent tragic conflict between life (which is always moving and changing) and form (which fixes it, immutable)." Do you think it is true that form, or art, is always fixed and immutable? Are there art forms that are more fixed or more mutable than others?