

Contemporary Theatre Studies: Volume 3



**LUIGI
PIRANDELLO
IN
THE
THEATRE**

**A DOCUMENTARY
RECORD**



**EDITED BY
SUSAN
BASSNETT
AND
JENNIFER
LORCH**

LUIGI PIRANDELLO IN THE THEATRE

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A Documentary Record

Edited by

Susan Bassnett

and

Jennifer Lorch

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Introduction to the Series

Contemporary Theatre Studies is a book series of special interest to everyone involved in theatre. It consists of monographs on influential figures, studies of movements and ideas in theatre, as well as primary material consisting of theatre-related documents, performing editions of plays in English, and English translations of plays from various vital theatre traditions worldwide.

FRANC CHAMBERLAIN

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Susan Bassnett
Jennifer Lorch

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(Photographs by courtesy of the Museo d'Attore, Genoa)

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- Document 2:** Illustrators, Actors and Translators ("Illustratori, attori e traduttori" in Luigi Pirandello (1973) pp.207-224).
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- Document 20:** Letter from Silvio d'Amico to Virgilio Talli.
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- Document 25:** The Constitution of the Teatro d'Arte (in A.C. Alberti (1974) *Il teatro nel fascismo*, pp. 123-6. Rome, Bulzoni).
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PREFACE

This collection of documents is the first attempt in English to bring together a body of material on Luigi Pirandello as multi-faceted man of the theatre. Because relatively few of his works have been easily available to English language readers, he is thought of most frequently as a playwright, the author of *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and *Henry IV* in particular, and his contribution to theatre, both in theory and in practice, has tended to be overlooked.

As this collection of documents reveals, Pirandello was far more than just a dramatist. Coming quite late in life to the theatre, after years of prose writing that had earned him a literary reputation of considerable merit, Pirandello became fascinated by the process of creating plays, from written text through to scenic representation, and took his inspiration from a range of European masters, from Copeau, Rouché, Pitoëff, Reinhardt, Fuchs, Stanislavsky and Evreinov among others. He began to work in the theatre after the First World War, inheriting problems that afflicted the Italian theatre of the day and which he set out to try to solve - the tradition of individualism, which meant that actors had little or no concept of working as an ensemble; the tradition of the prompter, whose task it was to read the text aloud during the performance, so that at times the actors' voices were all but obliterated, leading them to develop an over-elaborate gestural style of playing to compensate; the lack of repertory theatres with stable companies and of course, the absence of a serious, middle-class audience.

Pirandello tried to tackle some of these problems by creating his own company and by founding an Art Theatre in the tradition of other Art Theatres elsewhere in Europe. In 1924 he set up the Teatro d'arte, and attempted to bring a greater rigour to both the training of actors and the choice of repertoire. Contemporary accounts of his rehearsal techniques stress the importance that he attributed to discipline on the part of the actors and his insistence on the idea of a company working together. He resolutely opposed the tradition of the prompter and has sometimes been credited with the responsibility for ending the power of the prompter in Italian theatre. Having begun as a writer, he began later to incorporate

some of the practical theatre techniques he acquired into the writing of plays, and some of his most ambitious and structurally most innovative works were written in the late Twenties and early Thirties when he had begun to work closely with actors and to manage and direct his own company.

The international acclaim that Pirandello gained with the success of *Six Characters in Search of an Author* directed by Pitoëff in 1923 and with the early tours of the Teatro d'arte company died down towards the end of the Twenties, and Pirandello's letters show a growing sense of disillusionment. He went for a time into voluntary exile in Germany, returning to Italy with some reluctance. Perhaps because of this sense of not being appreciated by his own nation, Pirandello's tendency to destroy notes and records seems to have increased, and in assembling this collection of documents we have noted with regret the lack of much material that would have been of value to scholars today. Pirandello cannot be blamed entirely for the gaps in our knowledge - the years of Fascist rule in Italy and the devastation caused by the Second World War contributed to the loss of documents and the absence of a tradition of Theatre Studies as a discipline in Italy has caused many more documents to be discarded or overlooked. In his book *Luigi Pirandello, Director*, Richard Sogliuzzo suggests that prompt books, diaries, letters and unpublished manuscripts often remain in the possession of actor families and their descendants and are therefore very difficult to trace. It is likely that there are many documents by and relating to Pirandello that are at present in private collections, unknown to anyone but their owners.

Coordinating the material, we have arranged the book into four sections: I - *Theoretical Beginnings and Early Practice*; II - *International Dramatist*; III - *The Teatro d'Arte*; IV - *The Later Years and After*. In Section I we have provided documentation that covers Pirandello's gradual involvement with the theatre. Section II refers to *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and *Henry IV*. Section III contains a selection that recounts Pirandello's growing involvement in the practical processes of theatre-making. The material in this section covers the founding of the Teatro d'Arte, details of the company's repertoire and the eventual demise of the company and collapse of Pirandello's great hopes for a new future for Italian theatre. In the fourth section the documentation focuses on two of Pirandello's later more radically experimental works that are not so well-known to English language readers - *Tonight We Improvise* and *The Mountain Giants*.

In addition to the documentation on productions, etc., the sections contain Pirandello's own theoretical essays on theatre, many of which have hitherto been unavailable in English. From the early "Spoken Action" of 1899 [Document No. 1] through to his 1934 Address to the Volta Congress [Document No. 55], Pirandello continually tried to formulate his ideas about theatre, and we have provided a selection of those statements that reveal not only the changes in Pirandello's views across a thirty six year period, but also the constancy with which he held onto his very strongly expressed views on the theatre and its possibilities.

This collection of documents aims to place Pirandello less in the familiar tradition of twentieth century dramatists, than in twentieth century

theatre history. His achievements as a director did not result in the establishment of a Pirandellian school of acting, which might perhaps explain why his directorial skills have been largely ignored, but nevertheless in setting up an Italian Art Theatre firmly in the tradition of other similar European ventures and in laying down a disciplined approach to ensemble acting work, Pirandello was a radical force in the Italian theatre and deserves to be remembered as such.

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INTRODUCTION

The Early Years

Luigi Pirandello was born on 28th June, 1867, in a house overlooking the sea just outside Agrigento on the island of Sicily, named appropriately, Caos. The symbolic significance of the place of his birth remained with him throughout his life, and when he died nearly seventy years later he left instructions for his body to be burned and for his ashes to be either scattered to the winds or placed "in some rough stone" near Agrigento. From birth in Caos to final resting place, Pirandello's ties with the land that he was compelled to leave were indissoluble.

Because he spent most of his life in Rome teaching, writing and eventually working in the theatre, it is easy to regard Pirandello's Sicilianness as being of secondary importance. In fact, the opposite is true, and it is possible to trace certain key motifs throughout his works that derive explicitly from his regional origins, motifs such as the driving need to sustain a sense of honour in the eyes of the world, the traumas caused to individuals, particularly husbands, by marital infidelity, the cleaving to a piece of land as a sign of identity, the gap between private pain and the maintaining of a public facade. These motifs recur through all Pirandello's works, prose and drama, regardless of whether the settings are specifically Sicilian.

Pirandello's deeply rooted sense of Sicilian identity led him to experiment with dialect writing, and the doctoral thesis that he wrote when he finally moved to study in Bonn, after studying first in Palermo and then in Rome, was on the phonetic development of the Agrigento dialect. Gaspare Giudice, his biographer, emphasizes the enormous importance of Sicilian social convention and regional tradition in Pirandello's life and works¹, and, like many Sicilian patriots, Pirandello shared the belief that Western culture owes its greatest philosophical tradition to Sicily, to the Graeco-Sicilian period.

Pride in his native land, however, contrasted sharply with the economic decline of Sicily and Southern Italy in the nineteenth century. Pirandello's father owned a sulphur mine, one of the few flourishing industries on the island; consequently Pirandello grew up in a bourgeois household and did not suffer the same deprivation as many of those around him. But the appalling