

## Pirandello's Youthful Passion: Writing for the Theatre

by Jane House

Pirandello was over 40 and had already achieved fame as a novelist with *The Outcast* (*L'Esclusa*, 1901) and *The Late Mattia Pascal* (*Il fu Mattia Pascal*, 1904) when his first plays were produced in 1910,<sup>1</sup> and he did not commit himself to playwriting until he was almost 50. However, the letters he wrote as a young man and two extant plays present incontrovertible evidence that he had the ambition to make his name as a playwright when he was a university student and a recent graduate, and that the young man had no compunction about submitting his plays to major figures in Italian theatre---Cesare Rossi, Ermete Zacconi, and Flavio Andò---in the expectation that they would be produced at important theatres in Rome.

The two extant plays from this period, *Why?* (*Perchè?*) and *The Epilogue* (*L'epilogo*), published in 1892 and 1898 respectively, represent only a fragment of the plays that Pirandello wrote before he turned 30. *The Epilogue* would become *The Vise* (*La morsa*) which was published in *Maschere nude*. *Why?*, on the other hand, lay forgotten for almost a century. The one act was never produced during Pirandello's lifetime; it was not part of his collected works; and William Murray did not include it in his comprehensive collection of Pirandello's one-act plays. It was brought to the attention of Pirandello scholars in 1976 by Edoardo Villa (173–80) and was first published in English in 1995 (House and Attisani 417–423). As far as productions are concerned, it was first produced in Rome in the mid-1980s, and had its American premiere in a dramatic reading by Jane House Productions at a closed session of the Pirandello Society of America, 30 December 2002. This was followed by a public reading at the Istituto Italiano di Cultura on 28 January 2003.<sup>2</sup>

*Why?* reveals that the theme of the jealous husband was an early preoccupation. Enrico

tortures himself with jealousy over his wife's past admirers. Two particularly strong examples of this theme in Pirandello's later work can be found in the 1902 short story, "The Merry-Go-Round of Love," and in the 1930 play, *Tonight We Improvise*, where Ciro Coppa and Ricco Verri, respectively, keep their wives caged like wild beasts, a condition that eventually leads to their death.

Pirandello's early letters, which were published in the 1980s by Elio Providenti, offer further proof of the young man's quest for a career in the theatre. His youthful passion for drama has also been recorded by Alessandro d'Amico and Gaspare Giudice.<sup>3</sup> In November 1886, when he was a first-year student at the University of Palermo, Sicily, Pirandello wrote to his sister Rosalina that he had finished *The Birds in the Sky* (*Gli uccelli dell'alto*), a play based on classical Greek drama (Giudice 31). Four months later, in March 1887, he wrote that he had burned the play, but his descriptions to his sister show that he planned to have the auditorium be the stage and the spectators act as the chorus in a Greek tragedy. There is also the suggestion of the theme of madness, a theme that would preoccupy his later drama. The birds of the sky, the cranes, were, he wrote,

mad and hardly every land. They are thrashed by the wind and the storms but they fly on and on, not knowing where they are going. All they know is that they are going forward. Cocks and hens, those middle-class birds, peck around in the mud and laugh at the birds in the sky which fly overhead screaming, as though they are praying for something.... (*ibid.*)

In mid-November 1887, the aspiring playwright, poet, and student arrived in Rome, and for the next two years he would pursue his studies at the University. He was now in the exciting capital of a new nation. Rome had never been a theatre center, but since the 1870 unification of Italy, and despite the government's refusal to subsidize theatre in any of the major cities of the new nation—Rome, Milan, and Naples—efforts had been made to turn the capital into a theatre

center like Milan. The theatres in Rome comprised major and minor edifices dating back to the early eighteenth century and those built since the Risorgimento.

Almost a month after arriving in Rome, on 10 December 1887, Pirandello wrote to his sister that he was expecting the manager of Teatro Manzoni to stage a play of his “in ten or twelve days’ time.” (Giudice 32) The eleven-year-old Teatro Manzoni<sup>4</sup> had a large orchestra, two rows of 23 boxes, a balcony and gallery and housed an eclectic repertory of plays including Shakespeare, Goldoni, Victorien Sardou, Giuseppe Giacosa, Paolo Giacometti, as well as grandguignol, dialect plays, and operettas. Pirandello’s play does not seem to have ever been produced. (*ibid.*)

The young student remained undaunted. Giudice reports that Pirandello was looking forward to having some other plays staged during the 1887–88 season: the five-act play “The Happy People” (*La gente allegra*) and “The Women of the People” (*Le Popolane*). (*ibid.*) He hoped these plays would be presented at Teatro Valle by Cesare Rossi. It is quite clear that the young Pirandello had high aspirations. The elegant 1726 Teatro Valle had, and still has, a horseshoe-shaped interior that seats about 1,675 spectators in its parterre, four rings of boxes, and gallery.<sup>5</sup> By the mid-nineteenth century Teatro Valle had become the most important prose theatre in Rome, and among the great Italian actors who graced its boards were the international stars Adelaide Ristori, Tommaso Salvini, and Sarah Bernhardt.

As for Cesare Rossi, the man whom Pirandello hoped would stage his plays, he had been a major figure in Italian theatre since 1860, and in 1877 he formed his own semi-permanent repertory company in Turin. He was interested in new Italian playwrights and for several years offered a prize for the best new dramas. Between 1881 and 1884, when Pirandello was still a teenager, the Turin company had great success due in major part to its two leading actors, Flavio

Andò, a well-known Sicilian actor, and Eleanora Duse. Pirandello's submissions were not accepted and no trace of these plays remains.

In 1891, after a two-year absence to complete his studies of philology at the University of Bonn, Germany, Pirandello settled permanently in Rome. He was not yet twenty-five, he was free of any entanglements, and he was still writing plays. On 12 June 1892, *Why?* was published. And he was also still hoping to get a production at Teatro Valle. In November 1892, he submitted *The Epilogue*, a one-act, to Ermete Zacconi for production at that theatre. The role of the wife in this drama of a familiar bourgeois triangle—husband, wife, lover—was intended for Zacconi's lead actress, Virginia Marini. Zacconi had recently left Cesare Rossi's company where he had been lead actor for three years. He had made a reputation for himself as a *verismo* or realistic actor, someone who had a modern, psychological approach to the revelation of character and to the recitation of lines, which seems to be parallel to Pirandello's approach in *Why?*<sup>6</sup> Pirandello's hopes were dashed once again. Zacconi did not accept *The Epilogue* for production. Nor did Cesare Rossi, although Rossi had promised to produce it. Since it was not unusual at this time for theatres to produce one-act plays, the rejection of *The Epilogue* suggests that it did not impress Zacconi or Rossi enough to compel them to produce it.

That Pirandello still did not give up his dream of being a produced playwright is further proof of his passion for the theatre and of the strength of his conviction that he had something important to contribute. His friend, the Sicilian writer Luigi Capuana, must have shared his conviction because he read *The Epilogue* to the Neapolitan critic Eduardo Boutet, and Boutet recommended it to Flavio Andò. Since 1887, the year Pirandello first arrived in Rome, Andò and Duse had been running the Compagnia Drammatica della Città di Roma, which toured Italy's major cities: Genoa, Turin, and Venice. (Weaver 61 ff.) Andò forgot about Pirandello's play

and, when he was reminded of it, excused himself from the project. Another rejection was apparently too much for the young playwright. His ambition thwarted, he composed such an angry letter to the famous Sicilian that he provoked a challenge to a duel and there was an exchange between seconds. Fortunately the duel was called off thanks to the conciliatory efforts of Boutet. (Giudice 52)

After these early attempts to have his plays produced by outstanding Italian artists in two of Rome's big theatres, Pirandello seems to have lost interest in pursuing a vocation as a playwright. But the seeds of dramatic inspiration had been sown and would ferment for the next 20 years, until the great outpouring between 1916 and 1924, when he wrote over 24 plays, among them: *Così è (si vi pare)* (*It Is So (If You Think So)*), 1917; *Il piacere dell'onestà* (*The Pleasure of Honesty*), 1918; *Il giuoco delle parti* (*The Rules of the Game*), 1918; *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* (*Six Characters In Search of an Author*), 1921; *Vestire gli ignudi* (*To Clothe the Naked*), 1922; *Enrico IV* (*Henry IV*), 1922; and *Ciascuno a suo modo* (*Each in His Own Way*), 1924.

## **Notes**

1. The one acts *Sicilian Limes* (*Lumie di Sicilia*), adapted from a short story of the same name, and *The Vise* (*La Morsa*) were produced at Teatro Metastasio, Rome, on 9 December 1910, under the direction of Pirandello's Sicilian friend, Nino Martoglio. *Pirandello e il teatro siciliano*, Sara and Enzo Zappulla, 26. Also see the brief biography at the web site maintained by the city of Porto Empedocle:

[http://digilander.libero.it/portoempedocle/la\\_vita\\_di\\_pirandello.htm](http://digilander.libero.it/portoempedocle/la_vita_di_pirandello.htm).

2. The American premiere dramatic presentation of *Why?* was directed by Jane House, with Oscar De La Fe Colon (Enrico), Carolina McNeely (Giulia), and Kathleen Stolarski (Maid). The translation was by Jane House. Cosponsors were Jane House Productions, Istituto Italiano di Cultura New York, Martin E. Segal Theatre Center—CUNY Graduate Center, and the Pirandello Society of America.

3. D'Amico credits Elio Providenti's publication of Pirandello's early letters with "la rivelazione che Pirandello tra i venti e i trenti'anni, aveva già scritto numerosi drammi." *Maschere nude*, Vol. I. 6, no. 2.

4. The Teatro Manzoni of Pirandello's day stood in via Urbana and was not the Teatro

Manzoni of today which lies in via di Monte Zebio. See “Roma,” *Enciclopedia dello Spettacolo*, Vol. VIII Col. 1135.

5. See “Roma,” *Enciclopedia dello spettacolo*, Vol. VIII, Col. 1124; and the Teatro Valle web site, [www.teatro.valle.it](http://www.teatro.valle.it).

6. His interpretation of Oswald’s gradual physical and mental breakdown in Ibsen’s *Ghosts* in 1892 terrified many spectators. See “Zacconi, Ermete,” *Enciclopedia dello spettacolo*, Vol IX Col. 2069.

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