

Six Plays

Luigi Pirandello

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Six Plays

SIX CHARACTERS IN
SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR

Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore (1921)

Translated by Felicity Firth

The Characters

THE FATHER

THE MOTHER

THE STEPDAUGHTER

THE SON

THE BOY (*non-speaking*)

THE LITTLE GIRL (*non-speaking*)

MADAME PACE (*conjured into being in the course of the play*)

The Company

THE PRODUCER AND DIRECTOR OF THE COMPANY

THE LEADING ACTRESS

THE LEADING ACTOR

THE SECOND ACTRESS

THE YOUNG ACTRESS

THE YOUNG ACTOR

OTHER ACTORS AND ACTRESSES

THE STAGE MANAGER

THE PROMPTER

THE PROPERTY MAN

THE CHIEF STAGEHAND

THE PRODUCER'S SECRETARY

THE COMMISSIONAIRE

STAGEHANDS AND THEATRE STAFF

Daytime: the stage of a theatre.

N.B. *The play is not divided into acts and scenes. It will be interrupted twice: once, though without a curtain, when the PRODUCER and the FATHER withdraw to outline the scenario and the ACTORS leave the stage, and a second time when the CHIEF STAGEHAND lowers the curtain by mistake.*

The first sight that greets the audience on entering the theatre is the stage in its ordinary workaday guise. The curtain is up, the stage is empty, almost dark, and devoid of any items of scenery. This is to give us the impression, right from the start, that all we see is quite impromptu.

Two small flights of steps, one right and one left, link the stage to the auditorium.

On the stage the top of the prompter's box has been removed and lies shoved to one side.

On the other side, downstage, and facing away from the audience, are the working table and folding chair of the Producer-cum-Company Manager. Two other small tables of different sizes and various chairs are dotted about, available for the rehearsal if needed. There are chairs again right and left for the actors' use, and at the back somewhere, just visible, a piano.

As the house lights are lowered the CHIEF STAGEHAND in blue overalls comes through a doorway onto the stage. He has a tool bag slung from his belt. He picks up some lengths of wood in a corner, brings them downstage and kneels to nail them together. The sound of his hammering brings the STAGE MANAGER running from the direction of the dressing rooms.

STAGE MANAGER: What do you think you're doing?

CHIEF STAGEHAND: What does it look like? I'm banging this nail in.

STAGE MANAGER: Now? (*He looks at his watch.*) It's gone half-past ten. The producer will be here in a minute to rehearse.

CHIEF STAGEHAND: Yes, well. I've got a job to do an' all!

STAGE MANAGER: Maybe you have, mate, but not now.

CHIEF STAGEHAND: And when might you suggest?

STAGE MANAGER: Well, not just at the moment; a rehearsal's about to start. Come on, clear up all this clobber and let me get the set ready for Act Two of *The Rules of the Game*.

*(The CHIEF STAGEHAND, with much grumbling and muttering, collects up his wood and departs. In the meantime the members of the company, ACTORS and ACTRESSES, begin to assemble on the stage, wandering on in ones and twos. There are nine or ten of them, as required for today's rehearsal of Pirandello's *The Rules of the Game*. As they arrive they exchange "good mornings" with each other and with the STAGE MANAGER. Some go off to their dressing rooms: others, including the PROMPTER, with the rolled-up script tucked under his arm, stay chatting on the stage waiting for the PRODUCER to arrive and start the rehearsal. They sit or stand in groups, smoking, grumbling about their parts, reading out snippets from the odd theatre magazine. ACTORS as well as ACTRESSES should be dressed in cheerful clothes, light in tone, and this first improvised scene should be very lively and entirely natural. At one point one of them could sit at the piano and strum a dance tune to which the younger ones could dance.)*

STAGE MANAGER (*clapping his hands to call them to order*):

Right! That's enough now! Come on! The Producer's here!

(Song and dance are immediately broken off. The ACTORS turn to look into the auditorium as the PRODUCER, who is also the Director of the Company, enters from the back of the house and

makes his way down the gangway. He wears a bowler hat, carries a stick under his arm, and has a fat cigar in his mouth. The actors acknowledge him as he advances down the auditorium and mounts the stage by way of one of the sets of steps. His SECRETARY hands him his post: the odd newspaper, a script.)

PRODUCER: No letters?

SECRETARY: No letters. That's all there is.

PRODUCER (*handing him back the script*): Put that in my office.

(*He looks round and addresses the STAGE MANAGER:*) I can hardly see what's going on. Get us a bit of light, will you?

STAGE MANAGER: Sure. (*He goes to see about it, and soon the right side of the stage where the ACTORS are is flooded with brilliant white light. Meanwhile, the PROMPTER has gone to his box, switched on his light and opened up his copy of the play.*)

PRODUCER (*clapping his hands together*): OK. Let's make a start. (*To the STAGE MANAGER:*) Who's missing?

STAGE MANAGER: Our leading lady.

PRODUCER: I might have known. (*He looks at his watch.*) We have lost ten minutes already. Put her name in the book, will you? She'll have to learn she can't be late for rehearsals. (*While he is speaking the LEADING ACTRESS'S voice is heard from the back of the auditorium.*)

LEADING ACTRESS: No need for that, my dears! Here I am! I'm here! (*She is all in white and wears an enormous dressy hat. She carries a small lapdog in her arms. She comes running down the aisle and hurries up the steps.*)

PRODUCER: You do it on purpose, don't you – keep people waiting?

LEADING ACTRESS: I'm sorry. I had a ghastly time getting a taxi. I really meant to be on time. But I see you haven't started yet. And I'm not on at the beginning. (*She calls the STAGE MANAGER by name and hands over her dog.*) Be a dear, and pop him in my dressing room!

PRODUCER (*muttering under his breath*): Even the damned dog! As if the place wasn't a bloody zoo already! (*He claps his hands and turns to the PROMPTER.*) Right. We're off. Act Two of *The Rules of the Game*. (*He sits down.*) Are you with me, gentlemen? Who's on?

(*The ACTORS and ACTRESSES clear the front of the stage and seat themselves on chairs at the side, except for the three who are on stage to rehearse the scene, and the LEADING ACTRESS who, ignoring the PRODUCER's request, sits herself down at one of the two small tables.*)

PRODUCER (*to LEADING ACTRESS*): Do I take it you're in this scene?

LEADING ACTRESS: Me? No... why?

PRODUCER (*irritated*): Then get off for God's sake!

(*The LEADING ACTRESS gets up and goes and sits with the others who are now well out of the way.*)

PROMPTER (*reading from the script*): "Leone Gala's house. An unusual room which doubles as dining room and study."

PRODUCER (*to STAGE MANAGER*): We can use the red set.

STAGE MANAGER (*jotting it down*): The red set. Right.

PROMPTER (*still reading*): "A table laid for a meal. Desk with books and papers. Bookcases and glass-fronted cabinets full of good china and silver. A door, back, leading to Leone's bedroom. Another door, left, leading to kitchen. The main entrance is on the right."

PRODUCER (*standing and pointing*): Right, let's sort this out. Main entrance over there. Kitchen, here. (*To the actor playing Socrates*;) You will use this door here. (*To the STAGE MANAGER*;) Perhaps you can organize an inner door at the back, there, and some curtains. (*He sits down again.*)

STAGE MANAGER (*making a note of it*): Right.

PROMPTER (*still reading*): “Scene I. Leone Gala, Guido Venanzi and Filippo, otherwise known as Socrates.” (*To the PRODUCER:*) You want me to read the stage direction too?

PRODUCER: Yes, yes! That’s what I said, isn’t it?

PROMPTER (*reading*): “As the curtain rises, Leone Gala, in chef’s hat and apron, is hard at work beating an egg in a bowl with a wooden spoon. Filippo, likewise dressed as a cook, is also beating an egg. Guido Venanzi is sitting listening to them.”

LEADING ACTOR (*to the PRODUCER*): Look, do I really have to wear this thing on my head?

PRODUCER (*annoyed by this remark*): It would seem so! It’s in the script! (*He makes a gesture to indicate the script.*)

LEADING ACTOR: Well I’m sorry, but I think it’s ridiculous!

PRODUCER (*rising in fury*): Ridiculous, is it? You find it ridiculous! And what do you suggest? Can I help it if we can’t get hold of good French plays any more so that now we’re reduced to putting on plays by Pirandello? Nice stuff if you can understand it, but designed it would seem to get up the noses of actors... and critics... and audiences! (*The ACTORS laugh. The PRODUCER stands up, moves over to the LEADING ACTOR and yells at him.*) So it’s “yes” to the chef’s hat! And beat those eggs! And there’s more to beating eggs than you might think! You’re supposed to convey a sense of the very eggshells that they come from – so mind you do! (*More sotto voce laughter and ironic comment from the ACTORS.*) Quiet, please! I’d be obliged if you would listen! (*Again, addressing the LEADING ACTOR:*) I mean it, the very eggshells! The shell being the empty form of reason, devoid of its content of blind instinct. You, Leone Gala, are reason. Your wife is instinct. It’s known as role-playing, right? And your role is to be a man who deliberately sets out to be his own puppet. Get the idea?

LEADING ACTOR (*with a hopeless gesture*): Frankly, no.

PRODUCER (*returning to his place*): Nor do I! Well, come on! Let’s get started. Wait till you see how it ends... you’ll like it! (*Confidentially to the LEADING ACTOR:*) Actually I think

you should give us about three-quarters face. Otherwise, what with your mumbling and Pirandello's bumbling nobody is going to understand a thing! (*Clapping his hands together.*) Come on, then! Right, everybody? Let's start!

PROMPTER: Might I just ask – I'm so sorry – but may I put my lid back on? There's an awful draught!

PRODUCER: God, yes! Do what you like!

(Meanwhile a uniformed COMMISSIONAIRE has approached the stage via the central aisle of the auditorium to tell the PRODUCER of the arrival of the SIX CHARACTERS, who have followed him in and now stand a little way behind him in a bewildered group, looking about them with a lost and puzzled air. Any stage production of the play must make absolutely clear the fundamental distinction between the SIX CHARACTERS and the ACTORS of the Company. The physical separation of the two groups, recommended in the stage directions once both are on the stage, should certainly help to make the distinction clear. Different-coloured lighting could also be used to reinforce it. But the most effective and apposite means I can suggest would be the use of special masks for the CHARACTERS of some material solid enough not to go limp with sweat, but light enough for the ACTORS to wear them comfortably, and so designed that the eyes, nostrils and mouth are left free. This device will elucidate the play's essential message. The CHARACTERS must not, in fact, seem to be phantasms; they must appear as figures of created reality, immutable constructs of the imagination: more real and more consistent, because of this, than the natural and volatile ACTORS. The masks will help convey the idea that these figures are the products of art, their faces immutably fixed so that each one expresses its basic motivation: the FATHER's face registering Remorse; the STEPDAUGHTER's, Revenge; the SON's, Contempt and the MOTHER's Sorrow. The MOTHER will have fixed wax tears in the dark hollows of her eyes and down her cheeks, like those seen on ecclesiastical images of

the Mater Dolorosa. Her dress, too, while simple, should be of some special material and of an unusual design, with stiff folds falling like those of a statue; it must not look like a shop dress or be of a familiar pattern.

The FATHER is about fifty, balding slightly, his reddish hair receding at the temples. A thick curly moustache fringes his still youthful lips, which tend to part in a meaningless, uncertain kind of smile. He has a wide forehead, outstandingly pale in a pallid face; oval blue eyes, very bright and piercing; light trousers and a dark jacket: his voice is sometimes mellifluous, sometimes jerky and harsh.

The MOTHER gives the impression of someone appalled and oppressed by an intolerable burden of shame and humiliation. She is quietly dressed, in widow's black. When she lifts her heavy crêpe veil she reveals a face which is more like wax than ailing flesh. She keeps her eyes permanently downcast.

The STEPDAUGHTER is eighteen, arrogant and brash to the point of insolence. Strikingly beautiful, she too is in mourning, but in her case the clothes have a flashy stylishness. She is clearly contemptuous of her shy, unhappy, bewildered younger brother, a scruffy BOY of fourteen, also in black. She is warmly affectionate, however, towards her little sister, a LITTLE GIRL of about four, who wears a white frock tied at the waist with a black silk sash.

The SON is a tall young man of twenty-two. He bears himself stiffly, as if grown rigid in the suppressed contempt he feels for his FATHER and the sullen indifference he shows his MOTHER. He wears a purple overcoat and has a long green scarf tied round his neck.)

COMMISSIONAIRE (*cap in hand*): Excuse me, sir.

PRODUCER (*snapping*): Well, what is it?

COMMISSIONAIRE (*hesitating*): There are some people here, sir, asking for you.

PRODUCER (*again, very angry*): For Heaven's sake, man, I'm rehearsing! It's your job to keep people out while rehearsals

are in progress! (*Peering into the auditorium.*) Who are you people? What do you want?

FATHER (*approaching the steps which lead up to the stage, followed by the others*): We are here in search of an author.

PRODUCER (*both angry and astonished*): An author? What author?

FATHER: Any author, sir.

PRODUCER: Well, there aren't any authors here. We're not rehearsing a new play.

STEPDAUGHTER (*rushing up the steps, with jubilant enthusiasm*): But that's even better! That's terrific! Have us! We can be your new play!

ONE OF THE ACTORS (*amid lively comment and laughter from the others*): Listen to her! How about that!

FATHER (*following the STEPDAUGHTER onto the stage*): Well, yes... but if there's no author... (*To the PRODUCER:*) Unless... would you like to be our author?...

(*The MOTHER, leading the LITTLE GIRL by the hand, starts up the steps. The BOY does so too, and halfway up they pause expectantly. The SON remains at the bottom, evidently sulking.*)

PRODUCER: Is this some kind of a joke?

FATHER: It's very far from being a joke, sir. What we bring you is a grievous and painful drama.

STEPDAUGHTER: We could make your fortune!

PRODUCER: Well, perhaps you would be so good as to remove yourselves! We really haven't time for all this nonsense!

FATHER (*hurt, using his "mellifluous" voice*): But I don't need to tell you, sir, I'm sure, that life is like that; it's made up of absurdities, things which don't make sense – and which, like it or not, don't need to be credible, because they are true.

PRODUCER: What the hell are you on about?

FATHER: I'm saying that it is actually more nonsensical to do the opposite, to force things into the mould of credibility

to give them the appearance of truth. And might I point out, that, mad as it is, this is exactly what your profession tries to do.

(Indignant reaction from the ACTORS.)

PRODUCER *(getting up and looking the FATHER squarely in the face)*: I see. You think our profession mad, is that it?

FATHER: Well, all this making untrue things seem true... pointlessly, as a kind of game... Your job is to make fictional characters seem true to life, am I right?

PRODUCER *(quickly, voicing the growing indignation of his ACTORS)*: I really must insist on defending the dignity of the actor's calling. Today's playwrights, I grant you, may be turning out some pretty dull plays with some pretty dumb characters in them, but you know, we can claim to have given life, here on these boards, to some immortal masterpieces.

(The ACTORS, mollified, give him a round of applause.)

FATHER *(interrupting and pressing his point home passionately)*: Right! That's exactly what I mean! You have created living beings! As much alive, or more so, as the kind who breathe and wear clothes! Not as real, possibly, but more true! So you see, we agree!

(The ACTORS, impressed, exchange looks.)

STAGE MANAGER: I don't get... First you said...

FATHER *(to the PRODUCER)*: No, I'm sorry, that was meant for you, sir, when you barked at us that you had no time to waste on nonsense. Actually, in fact, who better than you should know that Nature's highest instrument in the creative process is the human imagination!

PRODUCER: All right, that's fine. But where does it get us?

FATHER: Nowhere. I'm simply trying to show you that there are a great many ways, and guises, in which one can be born: it might be as a tree or a stone, or water, or a butterfly... or a woman. It's also possible to be born as a character!

PRODUCER (*with ironic feigned amazement*): You mean you and your friends here have all been born as characters?

FATHER: Exactly so. And alive, just as you see us.

(*The PRODUCER and the ACTORS find this funny. They burst out laughing.*)

FATHER (*hurt*): I'm sorry you find it funny, because, as I said, we carry within us a painful drama, which I imagine you are capable of deducing from the sight of this lady here in her black veil. (*As he speaks he offers his hand to the MOTHER to help her up the remaining steps. Still holding her by the hand, he leads her with an air of tragic solemnity to the far side of the stage, which is suddenly bathed in an unearthly light. The LITTLE GIRL and the BOY follow the MOTHER. Then the SON crosses over, holding himself aloof and retiring to the background. Lastly comes the STEPDAUGHTER, who moves away from the others down-stage, and stands leaning against the proscenium arch. The astonished ACTORS are momentarily silenced by this development, then applaud to show their appreciation of the little show that has just been staged.*)

PRODUCER (*amazed and then annoyed*): Stop that! Keep quiet! (*He turns to the CHARACTERS.*) I must ask you to leave! Will you kindly remove yourselves! (*To the STAGE MANAGER:*) Get them out of here for God's sake!

STAGE MANAGER (*approaches them and then stops as if restrained by a strange sense of awe*): Clear the stage, then, please! Come along!

FATHER (*to the PRODUCER*): But we can't, you see, we...

PRODUCER (*raising his voice*): Some of us have a job of work to do!

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