

six characters in search of a stage

Opera da camera
by
Edward Lambert

adapted by the composer
from the play by
Luigi Pirandello

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After its initial failure in 1921, Pirandello's masterpiece *Six Characters In Search Of An Author* soon became a cult work. Its originality lay in its inherent '*theatricalism*', (as the movement became known), in which the stage was once more exploited for its illusionary qualities rather than its resemblance to real life, a reaction to the realist style of theatre prevalent at the time. *Six Characters* was adopted also by the surrealists. Logic is indeed suspended since the plot is largely a narration of things that have happened: yet these things are re-enacted before our eyes, with results that are absurd.

The torments that afflict the Characters are lived through as they re-enact them. They know of no other existence, since this is their only life and they are trapped in their story. This is a play about a play, a self-referential examination of the processes of the stage. In the final act of the play the Characters describe their attempts to make their creator complete the drama and put them on the stage: they feel without it they are denied the life they deserve, that is, to live as characters in a masterpiece that will give them immortality. There is something of the *commedia dell'arte* in them and they are being manipulated like puppets. At the same time, their story is one of high drama with a passionate, Italian hue and it would not be out of place in an *opera seria*, which is where, it is supposed, the opera's cast has come from: the Characters need, above all, to sing.

Synopsis

Six Characters from an opera appear in an empty theatre where a **Director** is waiting for the cast of modern work he evidently does not really understand. The Characters insist on telling the **Director** their story and re-enact it for his benefit as they proceed. The **Father**, clearly a gentleman of some wealth and learning, had a wife, the **Mother**, with whom he had a **Son**, now a taciturn young man. The Mother, however, ran off with a lover a long time ago and abandoned them both.

There is with the group an attractive young woman; this is the **Daughter** of the Mother and Father who was born after the Mother had moved away. There are two children with the group, a young **Girl**, not much more than a toddler, who is the Daughter's child, and a **Boy** of about fourteen, the son of the Mother and her lover.

The lover has died and, now in mourning and destitute, the Mother has returned to seek work from **Madame Pace**, the manager of a business which fronts as a fashion-house but which is also a brothel. Madame Pace is not one of the Six Characters and her appearance defies logic. But she is central to the plot - so she is there and she is the only character who enjoys her role. She is played by the singer doubling the role of the Son.

The Mother is unaware that Madame Pace has begun to arrange clients for her Daughter and it is the Daughter's earnings which are keeping them alive. One day, the Father approaches Madame for sex and is introduced to the Daughter; neither knows the other since they have lived apart. The Mother bursts in and interrupts them and the situation horrifies them all: the Daughter has been exploited, the Father shamed, and the Mother is tormented with guilt.

The Characters go on to explain that the family came back to live with the Father and the strains of the various relationships came to a head when... in the garden... by this time the Characters are traumatised by re-living the events as they recall them. The distinction between the narration of their story and their attempts to stage it for the Director has

broken down. Everything now depends on the Son: unwilling to play his part in the drama, it takes much persuasion to get him to relate his discovery of the little Girl drowning in the fountain. As he does so, the others re-create the scene.

The Girl is indeed found dead in the fountain which the Director has provided for them. The others turn, horrified, to discover the Boy - who had been watching from his hiding place - has shot himself. Carrying the two dead children, the Mother and Father are left together with the Son they started out with all those years ago, while the Daughter makes her escape into the world alone.

The Director was beginning to feel involved in the drama but suddenly finds the cast has evaporated and he is left to clear up the mess.

CAST

AN OPERA DIRECTOR - **baritone**

Characters from an opera:

THE FATHER - *a gentleman of wealth and learning* - **bass**

THE MOTHER - *his (ex-)wife, a simple-hearted lady* - **mezzo-soprano**

THE SON - *a taciturn young man* - **tenor**

THE DAUGHTER - *an attractive young woman* - **soprano**

MADAME PACE - *a fashion designer & pimp* - **tenor**

THE BOY - *teenaged child of the mother by another partner* - **(silent role)**

THE GIRL - *the daughter's young child* - **(silent role)**

*[The two **tenor** roles to be played by the same singer]*

INSTRUMENTS

Clarinet 1: Bb clarinet, Eb clarinet

Clarinet 2: Bb clarinet, bass clarinet in Bb

Viola

Cello

Piano

Scene: an empty theatre or rehearsal space

Overture: the Director

DIRECTOR (*searching for a switch*)
There must be light somewhere. Ah!
Where is everyone? Am I in the right place? I must get this right... (*reading a script, then giving up*).

Why must I direct these modern works, where nobody understands a thing? Each persona projects a reflection of its own puppeteer through inverting mirrors and prismatic dreams; then a juxtaposition of past and present runs in reverse from destiny, where coincidence collides with intent...! I just don't get it! It's sure to fail gloriously whatever it is. Or will it draw the crowds because it's so obscure? Why should I care? Just get on with the job!

(The Six Characters have entered)

Part One: the Characters explain the background to their story

FATHER Excuse me...

DIRECTOR (*seeing how the Six Characters are costumed*)
Who on earth are you?
I think you've come to the wrong place.

FATHER

We are searching for a stage.

DIRECTOR

Well, there are plenty of theatres around! Which play are you in?

FATHER

If you please, we would show you our drama.

DIRECTOR

I'm rehearsing for an opera.

DAUGHTER

Ours is far superior!

DIRECTOR

Are you trying to be funny?

MOTHER

Not at all.

SON

If only we were!

FATHER

Life is brim full of absurdities - so strange, they appear implausible - but they are genuine, they are veridical.

DIRECTOR

What on earth are you talking about?

FATHER

What is your mission, good sir?
To imbue fantastic characters on the stage - with life!

To render them more vivid than those
who merely breathe:
beings less real but more true!
More true to life than life itself!
You forge a character, but we were
born *dramatis personae*!

DIRECTOR

Born characters? In a drama?

FATHER

Indeed, a most interesting cast for an
opera that we were born to sing.

MOTHER & DAUGHTER

We will sing it now!

FATHER

Whosoever is born a character cannot
die, for though a writer will die, his
creations are immortal:
we are come to live like them - for
eternity. Hear our voices!

DAUGHTER

Like we are... as characters... in this
drama - now!

Then... at a certain moment...

when this little darling here...

[takes the GIRL by the hand]

Is she not lovely?

When this child is taken from me;

and this imbecile here

[seizing hold of the BOY]

does the most stupid of things, like
the fool he is, then I shall escape.

But the moment is not yet arrived.

After what has occurred between us

[indicates FATHER]

I will no longer stay here,

to witness this mother's anguish for
that fool...

[indicates SON] Look at him!

See how arrogant, how aloof he is,
because he is their son, the rightful
heir. He despises him, *[pointing to the*
BOY & GIRL]

despises her, because... they are
bastards! He despises me because...

MOTHER

[to DIRECTOR, in anguish].

In the name of these two little
children, I beg you . . .

[she grows faint and is about to fall]

Oh God!

DIRECTOR

Is this lady your wife?

FATHER

Yes my wife!

DAUGHTER

She tortures herself, destroys herself
because she abandoned her son,
[indicates SON] then two years old.

MOTHER

He forced me to leave! I left my
home, my family through no fault of
mine, nor from any passion.

[indicates FATHER] Ask him!

FATHER

It is true, it was my doing.

I drove her away!

MOTHER

After he had married me...

who knows why?
I was a poor insignificant woman...
[she breaks down]

DIRECTOR

This is definitely theatrical - for those
who like this kind of thing. Go on!

FATHER

We had a servant
who grew close to her.
[indicating MOTHER]
They were kindred spirits.
I dismissed him, sent him away,
but this poor woman
pined for him so much
I could live with her no longer -
not so much for the boredom
she inspired in me
as for the pity I felt for her.

MOTHER

And so he turned me out -

FATHER

I sent her to her lover...
to release us both.

DIRECTOR *[after a pause]*

Well, if you've finished,
I must rehearse.

FATHER

This is only the introduction:
The real drama is imminent,
something complex, most interesting.

DIRECTOR

This is all rather discursive,
you know! In opera,

you need words to be sung!

SON *[contemptuously]*
Great art!

DAUGHTER

Art indeed! This is life,
this is passion! This is lust!

FATHER

Words! The root of trouble.
Within each of us lies a unique world:
Into words that I utter I instill
the sense and value of things as I see
them,
while you who listen translate them
each in his own way.
We think we understand one another,
but in truth we never can.

DIRECTOR

Come to the point!

FATHER

I was impelled by my miserable
flesh...
Not old enough to do without a
woman,
and not young enough to seek one
without shame.
Every man knows the secrets and
desires of his own heart.

DIRECTOR

I don't understand.

FATHER

I had not seen them for many years.
I did not know,
after the death of her lover,

that they were destitute; I did not know that she [*indicating MOTHER*] had sought work from Madame Pace.

DAUGHTER

The well-known leader of fashion, Madame's clients are of the highest class!

MOTHER

It never entered my mind that she might abuse my daughter.

DAUGHTER

Poor innocent mamma!
She thought Madame was paying her, yet it was I who provided for us with my hard-won earnings. She believed she was sacrificing herself for me and these children here, while in reality Madame Pace had bestowed upon me... lucrative associates!

SON

This is vile!

FATHER

One day...

DIRECTOR

...one day you met?

DAUGHTER [*indicating FATHER*]

Yes, we came together: what a scenario for you! Superb!

FATHER [*pointing to MOTHER*]

She arrived...

DAUGHTER

Rather too late!

FATHER

Just in time!

You can imagine now her position and mine: she, as you see her, and I who cannot look her in the eye.

She surprised me in a place where she ought not to have known me; she saw me in a shameful and fleeting moment of my life.

Hereafter the drama, you will perceive, acquires a tremendous value - for I brought them to my house, took them all in. But he... [*Indicating SON*]

SON

Leave me alone! I am not part of this.

FATHER.

What? You deny your role?

DAUGHTER [*to SON*]

You! Did you not refuse us hospitality?

We trespassed on your kingdom!

SON

Imagine when I saw arrive at our home this young woman [*indicating DAUGHTER*] with the children.

I had rather not disclose my feelings. Leave me out of it!

FATHER

That is a situation in itself!

Your aloofness, this cruelty to your mother, who returns home and fails to recognize her son, now grown up. . . that role to which we were born.

DIRECTOR

I begin to see an opera in all of this.

DAUGHTER

When you have a character like me - a role to which I was born!

MOTHER

We act that role
for which we have been cast,
a role to which we are born!

DIRECTOR

It's original!

FATHER

Timeless!

MOTHER

We act that rôle
for which we have been cast,
that rôle to which we are born.

*FATHER & DIRECTOR set about
preparing the stage*

SON

Are you serious?
What the devil are you doing?
This is madness! If we enact upon the stage this execrable . . . Well, you shall see what will come to pass.
[exit]

Interlude: the Daughter

DAUGHTER *[to the GIRL]*

My little darling! Are you frightened?
You know not where we are?

What is a stage? Just a place where people play. We need to act a comedy now, what a horrid part you have to perform! A garden . . . a fountain . . . look . . . just suppose it is here.

Where? Why, right here in the centre.

It is all make-believe. . . Ah, but I think a child would sooner have a make-believe fountain than a real one, so she could play in it.

What a prank for the others!

But for you, alas!

not quite such a joke:

you who are real-life and actually play by a real fountain that is big and beautiful, with ever so many lilies reflected in the water . . .

You are ignored on account of that wretch there. *[indicating SON]*

I am in the devil of a temper, and as for that lad . . .

[seizes BOY by the arm]

What do you have there?

What are you hiding?

[pulls his hand out of his pocket, revealing a revolver.]

Ah! where did you get this?

[the BOY looks at her, but does not answer]

Idiot! If it had been me, I would have shot one of those two, father and son, or both of them, instead of killing myself!

Part Two: the scene in Madame Pace's

MOTHER

Is not my punishment the worst?
My God! Why are you so cruel?
Is it not enough for one human to
endure all this torment?
Must you then insist on others
beholding it also?

DIRECTOR

Let's have a look... a couch will do
for a bed... here somewhere...

FATHER

And the little table for the pale blue
envelope!

DIRECTOR

That'll do fine.

FATHER

A mirror. And the screen! We must
have a screen.
Believe me, it is a terrible suffering
for us, in these bodies of ours...

DIRECTOR

On the stage, you must not be
yourselves, you cannot exist.

FATHER

And I must have an envelope
to leave the money in.
I begin to understand why the poet
who breathed life in us
failed to put us on the stage:
it will be difficult to act me

as I really am!

DIRECTOR

Do as best you can.
Come on! The scenery is set!

DAUGHTER

I fail, in truth, to recognise the scene,
but how I shall live it!

MOTHER

I shall live it also when we
commence!

DIRECTOR

This 'Madame Pace', where is she?

FATHER

Alive... somewhere.

DIRECTOR

Yes, but where?

FATHER

One moment. If you would be so
good as to lend me your *articles of
fashion* for a moment . . .
Hang them here. Please be so kind.

MOTHER & DAUGHTER

After all, why not? There you are!

FATHER

On display; just like that.

DIRECTOR

Why?

FATHER

This will entice her

to come here in person,
attracted by the very articles of her
trade. Look!

*The door at the back of stage opens
and MADAME PACE enters*

DAUGHTER

There she is!

FATHER

It is she! I said so, did I not?

DIRECTOR

What sort of a trick is this? Where
does she come from? Whatever next!

MADAME

Excuse me, young sir!
Why are you so anxious
to disavow my reality
through misplaced devotion
to a vulgar sense of truth?
Why so disposed
to repudiate my physique
which is manifest before you,
created and lured here and aroused
by the magic of the stage itself?
Why do you spurn me,
she who has more entitlement
to abide in this theatre
than you can ever enjoy,
since I am more life-like
than any caricature?
Well, here I am, Madame Pace herself
stands erect before you.
Now you must witness the scene!

DIRECTOR

What next?

MOTHER

Good heavens!

MADAME

If I am to help this family
in its misery... I have no desire to
take advantage of this girl,
I do not wish to be hard on her...
but my patronage comes at a price.

MOTHER

You old devil! You murderer!

DAUGHTER

Calm yourself, Mother!

MADAME [*to DAUGHTER*]

There is present a gentleman desirous
of your company. Even if he is not to
your taste, my dear, he will not make
a scene, there will ensue no scandal.

FATHER

Wait! She was not with me when I
came . . . They cannot confront each
other yet or the whole thing is given
away. [*to MOTHER*] You must wait
outside for your cue!

MOTHER

Well then,
take that creature away also!

MADAME

Certainly, I leave! But first,
I present to the young lady this
gentleman who seeks a companion
for solace. You have to perform this
scene one way or another!
Reality is hard to bear. Come on!

You are introduced... now I leave you alone to get on with it! *[exit]*

DAUGHTER *[to FATHER]*

I am here with bowed head, modest like. Come on! Out with your voice! Say "Good morning, Miss" with that seductive smile . . .

FATHER

Good afternoon, Miss!

DAUGHTER

Good afternoon!

FATHER

I say... Is this your first time here, sweetheart?

DAUGHTER

No, sir.

FATHER

Well then, no need to be so shy, is there?

May I take this off you?

From the sidelines the MOTHER watches the progress of the scene with increasing horror. From time to time she hides her face in her hands and sobs.

MOTHER

Oh, my God!

FATHER

Oh, come now, allow me to make you relaxed.

DAUGHTER

No, no! I will . . .

DIRECTOR

Pretty good, this scene.

DAUGHTER

The best is coming now.

FATHER

But it is so strange. . .

DIRECTOR

Strange? Why strange?

FATHER

We play our parts so well.

DAUGHTER

There is a nice bit now for me: you will see.

DIRECTOR *[addressing FATHER]*

So when she says "No, no" you say...

DAUGHTER

Make no sentimental romance out of this intensely painful episode! Do you know how he answered me? "Ah well," he said, "then please take off this little dress."

DIRECTOR

Really?

DAUGHTER

The truth! And with these fingers tingling with shame . . .

She starts to undress

DIRECTOR

Stop! What are you doing?

DAUGHTER

The real thing!

DIRECTOR

It may be. But you can't do it now!

DAUGHTER

I cannot stop! I must act my part!
I will not spare *him* the horror
of being discovered
in the arms of his child.

*MOTHER at this point is overcome
with emotion, and breaks out into a fit
of crying.*

MOTHER

I cannot bear it. I cannot.

DIRECTOR

But since it's happened already . . . I
don't understand!

MOTHER

It is taking place now.
It happens all the time.
My torment is not make-believe.
I live and feel every moment of my
torture. And she
[*indicating DAUGHTER*]
has run away,
has left me, and is lost.

*The FATHER has slipped onto the
couch*

FATHER

The eternal moment! She
[*indicating DAUGHTER*]
is here to catch me, punish me
eternally for that one shameful
moment of my life.
She can but yield!
This is my sentence: the passion that
culminates in her final cry.

*The DAUGHTER emerges from the
screen and goes to the couch*

DAUGHTER

I can hear it still in my ears:
that cry from within me,
the surge of sound...
Lying like this with my head so,
and my arms round his neck,
I closed my eyes like this,
and let my head sink on his breast.
[*Turning to MOTHER, who is being
prevented from entering by
MADAME PACE*]
Cry out mother! Cry out!
[*with intense emotion*]
Cry out as you did then!

MOTHER [*coming forward*]

No! [*separates them*]
She is my daughter! *Our* daughter!

FATHER

That is how it happened.

DIRECTOR

Magnificent! ... blackout!

Part Three: the events in the garden

When the lights go up again, the DIRECTOR is thinking.

DIRECTOR

Ah yes: the next bit!
Leave it to me and you'll see!
It'll go fine!
You take up lodgings in his house
[indicates FATHER]
much to his annoyance . . .
[indicates SON]

MOTHER

For all the good
that is to come of it . . .

DIRECTOR

...he *[indicates SON]*
shuts himself up in his room...

MOTHER

So the scene in his room?

DIRECTOR

We must consolidate the scenes.
All the better to heighten the illusion
which we create for the audience . . .

MOTHER

...with our acting.

DIRECTOR

...the illusion of a reality.

FATHER

We have no other existence.

Our reality cannot alter
because it was determined
for all eternity:
it does not change from day to day.
The real world is merely transitory,
a fleeting illusion,
taking one form today
and another tomorrow,
according to circumstances,
subject to feelings,
desires and intellect
in different complexions . . .
who knows how? . . .

MOTHER

When a character is born
it acquires an independent meaning
which was not imagined by its author.
What is there then to marvel at?
Born a fantasy,
but cheated of the stage!

(The GIRL comes forward and pretends to play in the garden)

DIRECTOR

Now, you want the little girl to be
playing in the garden . . .

DAUGHTER

Yes, in the sun!
That is my only pleasure:
to see her happy
and care free in the garden.
Whenever she spied me,
she would run to take me by the hand.
She loved to show me the flowers,
not the big flowers,
only the little ones.

DIRECTOR

Well then. Everything
shall happen in the garden;
and we'll group the other scenes
there. Here's a backcloth with trees
and this will do as a fountain.
The boy will be here, hiding behind
the trees. Come forward a little.
Let's try it now!
Come along! [*the BOY comes
forward fearfully*] What's the matter?
[*leads him behind one of the trees*]
Let's try it now!
At this rate, we'll never finish.

MOTHER

Many times have we sought out
our creator, while he sat writing
and urged him to let us sing!
Ah! What scenes, what arias we
proposed to him!

FATHER

Illusions of reality
presented in this comedy of life
that never ends!

DIRECTOR [*to the BOY*]

Hide here... yes, like that.
Try and show your head just a little
as if you were looking for someone . .
Excellent! fine!

DAUGHTER

[*indicates SON*]
You must send him away...
he's always shut up in his room.

SON

Delighted!

I could ask for nothing better.

DIRECTOR

No! Where are you going?

SON

I have nothing to do with it.
Let me go!

DAUGHTER

He will stay...

FATHER

...to act the terrible scene in the
garden with his mother.

SON

I shall act nothing at all.

DAUGHTER

He is bound here for life.

SON

Nobody can force me to act.

FATHER

We can.

SON [*to DIRECTOR*]

There was no scene between me and
her. Ask her!

MOTHER

Yes, it is true. I went to his room . . .
to empty my heart to him of all the
anguish that tortures me . . .

SON

I left. I do not care for scenes!

MOTHER

It is true. That is how it was.

DAUGHTER

Oh, if only our author
would go away, leaving me
finally alone in my shadow!

MOTHER

An author's fantasy
brought us forth embalmed alive,
to exist on the threshold
between nothing and eternity.

SON

We can no longer inhabit
a hall of mirrors
which freeze our image
in an endless distortion.

DIRECTOR

One cannot argue at leisure!
Drama is action not philosophy!
I too have my role to fulfil -
and we have to reach the finale!
Mind you, music changes things
even more, time itself is distorted...

FATHER

The mask is real
and fixed for all time,
but its incarnation is its destruction.

(all round on the SON)

DIRECTOR

Well now,
you must act this scene for me.
Just show me what happened!

MOTHER

If you could only tell us
what you feel in your heart.
Please! You have to obey!

FATHER

*[going to SON in a great rage,
MOTHER, frightened, tries to
separate them.]*

For the sake of your mother...
You have to obey!

SON

I shall do nothing!

DAUGHTER

Have you no courage?
You have to obey!

SON

No! I shall do nothing!
And for the sake of heaven do stop...
Have you no shame?
I will not act my part!

DIRECTOR

Well then, *tell* me then what
happened. You left the room?

SON

Without a word!

DIRECTOR

Then what?

SON

Walking...

DAUGHTER

Wait . . . First,

my baby must go to the fountain . . .
[she leads the GIRL to the fountain]

DIRECTOR

Well? . . walking in the garden . . .

SON

Why on earth do you insist?
It is terrible!

*MOTHER trembling looks towards
the fountain*

DIRECTOR

The baby?

SON

There in the fountain . . .

FATHER

She followed him . . .

DIRECTOR *[to SON anxiously]*

And then you . . .

SON

I ran over to her; as I dragged her out
of the water I saw the boy standing
quite still, with eyes of a madman,
watching the baby, drowning...

*A revolver shot rings out
where the BOY is hidden.
The DAUGHTER takes the dead
GIRL into her arms.*

MOTHER

My son! Help!

DIRECTOR

*[while the others lift up the BOY
and carry him off]*
Is he wounded?

MOTHER

Truly, dead!

DIRECTOR

Only illusion, I hope!

FATHER *[with a terrible cry]*
Illusion? It is for real!

DIRECTOR

Illusion? Reality?
To hell with it all!
Never in all my life...
Where is my cast?
I've lost a whole rehearsal
over this performance!

