

## RECENT PRODUCTION

*L'uomo, la bestia e la virtù* [*Man, Beast and Virtue*], Palmerston Room, Fisher Building, St John's College, Cambridge, Sunday 29 May 2016; in Italian with English surtitles

Adapted and directed by Ludovico Nolfi for the Cambridge University Italian Society, with Michelangelo Chini (Professor Paolino), Ester Cannizzaro (Signora Perella), Joned Sarwar (Capitano Perella), Samuele Tofano (Dottor Nino), Claudia Dattoli (Rosaria), Antonia Sofia Sabato (sorella di Signora Perella), Guido Paoluzi Cusani (Totò), Giulia Corsino (Clara, alunna), Camilla Colombo (Rosa, alunna), Debora Camarda (Grazia), Nicola Lombardi (Vico, marinaio). Technical assistants: Clelia Furlan, Davide Martino, Alice Zanghi, Bianca Schorr.

The evening was dedicated to the actor Giorgio Albertazzi, whose death had just been announced.

Publicity for this production read as follows:

Everyone wears a mask. Not a literal one, maybe, but a mask nonetheless: everyone plays a role in the comedy of life. Professor Paolino, the Man, hides an illicit love affair under his respectable demeanour. Mrs Perella, his lover, wears the mask of Virtue but is not really virtuous at all; while her husband, Captain Perella, the Beast, seems oblivious to it all. But chance and destiny rarely leave well enough alone, and a series of unexpected events will radically change the dynamics of the group. The result is a hilarious and poignant comedy, a brilliant satire of the hypocrisy of bourgeois 'respectability', in the unmistakable style of Luigi Pirandello.

On stage, as here, the emphasis was on the satirical and farcical aspects of Pirandello's 'apologo' ['fable'], with Professor Paolino frenetically and brilliantly orchestrating a fast-moving build-up in Act I to the 'solution' to the characters' dilemmas in the ensuing acts. Staging and performance were the keys to the success of this production. Acting in a venue designed more for conferences and lectures and on a narrow stage with only one rear 'cupboard' for Paolino's pupils required particular, and careful, attention to movement and gesture. In addition, Michelangelo Chini appeared on stage at the beginning to announce that the spotlights in the Palmerston Room were not working, so only the house lights were available. This Chini did so naturally as to make it seem almost part of the performance: an unexpectedly 'Pirandellian' moment, but one which, when the play opened, also served to emphasize the quality of both acting and directing. The whole cast

worked well together, but as well as Chini I would single out Ester Cannizzaro for her interpretation of the thankless role of Signora Perella. While subservient to the point of being robotic, she was still able to exploit the borderline between farce and pity with her frequent bouts of nausea, and even more in the scene where she is prepared, by her lover, with plunging neckline and heavy makeup, to lure her husband into bed.

Pirandello himself emphasized the elements of caricature and bestiality in his play, and in his own production had some characters wear appropriate masks. Focus on the masks we are told we all wear, and our own unmasking, was especially apparent towards the end of the play when Capitano Perella leant over his veranda, and towards the spectators, to invite the anxiety-ridden Paolino, and by extension the expectant audience, into his house. We then became the spectators, and voyeurs, of the scene where Signora Perella places the flowerpots, one by one, on the veranda to signal the outcome of the night finally spent with her husband. It was both uproariously funny and, perhaps, retrospectively, troubling.

Ludovico Nolfi, a professional director necessarily working with the talent available in an amateur company, made some changes to the cast: the two pupils, male in the original, became female, as did the Perellas' son, transformed into Signora Perella's sister. All three actors gave lively and vivid performances, as did the other members of the cast. With his actors and assistants Nolfi staged a memorable, professional performance of this play. There was no interval, but the audience's attention was held throughout on the narrow and—recalling Peter Brook—almost bare 'stage'. At the time, in 1919, when the play was first published and when Pirandello was exemplifying the theories expounded in his 1908 essay 'L'umorismo' ['On Humour'], *L'uomo, la bestia e la virtù* would stand at one end of his test of our sensibilities, and our humanity.<sup>1</sup> The nature of farce and questions about what makes us laugh, and why are we laughing, skilfully underlay this production.

Julie Dashwood  
University of Cambridge

1 Pirandello published his revised and extended edition of 'L'umorismo' in 1920. Among other elucidations it contains, for the first time, the much-quoted example of the 'vecchia signora', added by Pirandello to illustrate the passage from the 'avvertimento del contrario' to the 'sentimento del contrario': see P. Casella, *L'umorismo di Pirandello: ragioni intra- e intertestuali* (Florence, Cadmo, 2002), especially pp. 323–24. In *L'uomo, la bestia e la virtù* Pirandello could, I suggest, be beguiling us into focusing on the 'avvertimento', and then asking why this should be.