

# Blackshirt Theater

*The death of Pirandello raises anew the question of the influence of his mysticism and of Fascist "philosophy" on the Italian theater*

By R. W. Wiley

ONE can estimate the importance of Pirandello on the contemporary Italian drama only by comparing the work of the "maestro" with that of his rivals and disciples. Two facts immediately strike the attention: first, that Pirandello was immeasurably superior to any other dramatist now writing in Italy; second, that all the others slavishly imitate, with varying degrees of success, the technique, the style, and the "Pirandellian" philosophy of the Nobel-prize winner. It is impossible to go to the theater in Italy and not meet his specter. There is not a single play that doesn't reek of his turgid mysticism.

Yet this is not odd. No other formula could be so well adapted to the exigencies of the Fascist stage. You have a semblance of reality and underneath it a kind of dream world of fantasy. Italians would like to be realistic and "Mediterranean," hence the semblance of reality. But they also like to unleash their polysyllabic rhetoric whenever the occasion permits—as must often be the case in a dream world of fantasy like Mussolini's Italy. It would be impossible for the contemporary Italian author to write a play which did not depend chiefly on fantasy for its effect. He would have to become realistic. That is, he would have to show life as it actually is in Italy today, and that is anything but Pirandellian. After the first representation of his play—if it ever got so far—your author would probably be sent to the island of Lipari (by now the Æolian Isles have probably become the most select intellectual colony in Italy). So he turns to Pirandello for his inspiration and to Fascist propaganda for his material. When the two ingredients have become so thoroughly mixed as to be indistinguishable, his work is completed. There is only one drawback: no one goes to see the play. Despite all Pirandello's protests to the effect that the Italian drama is the best in the world, and that modern Italian drama is superior to that of the past, and that he, Pirandello, was superior to all other dramatists, the theaters become emptier and emptier.

It must have been discouraging for one who had received the accolade of the Nobel prize to see his plays performed to empty houses. But Fascism found subtle means of soothing his irritated sensibilities. Every now and then the aged maestro was called upon to deliver himself of a portentous lecture in praise of Mussolini, Fascism, and himself. It should be noted that Pirandello joined the Fascist Party shortly after the murder of Matteotti, when full responsibility had been placed on



Nero, 1936

Lithograph by J. Vogel

the leadership of the party. When asked to explain his action, Pirandello answered in one word, pregnant with mystic innuendo: "Matteotti." Nonetheless, he never tired of declaring that art and politics do not mix, that they have absolutely no connection.

But he was not averse to sponsoring embryonic dramatists who sought to combine his philosophy with the propaganda of the regime. He knew that it could not be done; so his

laurels were safe. Of course he would have denied indignantly that the subject of *Frederick the Second*—an insane king asserts he is far wiser than his normal subjects—had any connection, however subtle, with the present situation in Italy. No, art and politics are separate and distinct activities. Let our young writers attempt to combine them and you will see how right I am, he would have said.

Hence, the "Littoriali del Teatro" which

were held at Florence from the ninth to the seventeenth of February, 1936. Eight plays, judiciously selected beforehand, were presented by eight different Italian universities in collaboration with the amateur theaters of the several *Dopolavoro* (After-Work—i.e., recreational) organizations. The subject selected for competition was one dear to both Pirandello and Mussolini: The Family. I shall briefly outline the plot of the different plays. It will be seen how much they owe to the maestro and how much to the duce.

THE first play, *Rye Bread*, was presented by the G.U.F. (*Gruppo Universitario Fascista*) of Milan. In it we are shown the household of a peasant farmer, one of whose sons was a deserter in the World War; the other, to expiate his brother's fault, has gone as a volunteer to East Africa. The peasant laments the dereliction of his first-born but exults in the second, who is fulfilling his duty as a patriotic Italian soldier. In the second act we are present at the fortuitous meeting of the two brothers—the elder repenting his misdeeds: "the volunteer and the deserter united forever in the sacred name of their Fatherland." The play ends on a note of exalted mysticism. At home the peasant beholds a vision of his two sons fighting side by side for Italy. Their weapons are bared sabers, not

mustard gas. In the words of the critic of the Florentine *Nazione*, whose political orthodoxy is above suspicion: "The author was unable to develop his plot convincingly and so lost himself in useless chatter and complete emptiness of form and idea as to arouse in the audience a most lively rebellion." And so on. This is daring criticism in Italy. It must have cost the critic some hours of sleep, knowing, as he does, that the review will receive the careful attention of the Ministry of the Press in Rome, and that the Littorali must have a success, merited or unmerited. The "lively rebellion" of the audience, which felt no hesitation in expressing its disapproval, consisted in whistling, shouting, stamping, at almost every line.

The work of the second evening met with no greater success, and it certainly did not deserve any. This was *The Convergents*, presented by the University of Padua. A young man upbraids his family for having brought him into the world only to suffer, and he goes out to seek his fortune. After a number of unexciting and inconclusive adventures he returns, fortune won. After all, the old life was the better. This is exactly the conviction Mussolini has been trying so long to instill in the Italian emigrants who blindly persist in living abroad.

*Twentieth Century Rhythms*, by the

G.U.F. of Pistoia, seems to have been, in the opinion of the judges, the least successful of the plays. I do not know why it should have been singled out for such severe reprobation, but some decision had to be made, and after all the G.U.F. of Pistoia is not at all the powerful organization that the other groups represent. The play is in two scenes, with the same actors and the same situation in both. They are shown first as members of the wealthy cosmopolite bourgeoisie, and then as a peasant family, poor, yes, but how infinitely happy sacrificing their all for the Fatherland! If only the Italian people in general could reconcile themselves to such a mode of existence! That's the idea, expressed in lines the banality of which is inconceivable to one who has not perused an Italian newspaper or seen any manifestation of the new spirit in Italy.

The play presented by the Bolognese group, *A Voice Calls*, was far and away the most extraordinary of them all. It opens at a reception given by a young man just returned from the university. Five men but no women. The host is upbraided by the guests for having failed to provide companions. What to do? He calls in the gardener's daughter. She is beautiful, voluptuous; lust flames up in the eyes of the guests, who are portrayed as debauched sons of the aristocracy. After a short preamble they simply leap on the poor gardener's daughter and she is overwhelmed in their collective embrace. In the meantime the host has gone out into the fields to pick flowers with still another daughter of the farmer. The idyllic love between these two is kept in exquisite symbolic contrast with the sordid passion of the others throughout the play. The second act shows that a change is coming over the young men. They begin to repent their past life; each one in turn demands the victim of their collective rape in marriage, but with no success. In the last act the child is born. The décor is highly suggestive. The woman is upstairs in the bedroom. The doctor keeps coming to the door to recount the progress of the travail to the assembled suitors. One by one they creep slowly up the stairs to hold the new-born infant. When they return it is with transfigured faces that they face the future. Complete regeneration; a new life has opened to them: new hope, new joy, something to live for. This is exactly the ideology of the new penal code in Italy: rape is rape only when aggravated by the sin of abortion. *A Voice Calls* might easily have been written by Pirandello; it lacks only his superficial polish.

THE next night we were treated to *The Birth and Life of Luigi Falta*, given by the Genoese group. The hero, an artist, is tired of his routine life (interesting, how many of these plays are motivated by a desire to escape). We see him, after some period of internal struggle, at the railroad station with his satchel, as yet undecided where to go. A fisherman talks with him, and he is persuaded to go to a village by the sea where the population is in ferment because the "authorities" (who the authorities are in this play we



Anton Refregier

## Militarism

The black polity is mute and as if in meditation,  
Vainly searching, they say, for the happiness which passed;  
A wraith-like form stalks by, in khaki,  
Lightning slides snake-like into my heart's gloom,  
And in the silent squares and in silent alleys,  
"Tran tran" echo the spurs.

Within the soul reëcho the winds of slaughter,  
In her desolated house the old woman recalls her son,  
A mother squeezes her babe in her embrace and shudders,

As a passerby sings: "The Son of Psiloriti."\*  
And in silent squares and in silent alleys,  
"Tran tran" echo the spurs.

The heart restrains its tear and rechills from tremor,  
Thick darkness in the soul and the boots threaten,  
Some laborer with drooped shoulder blasphemes,  
A hoarse dog barks—barks—  
And in the silent squares and silent alleys,  
"Tran tran" echo the spurs.

JOSEPH ELIXIA.

\* A Song About Venizelos.