



The Journal of
The Pirandello
Society of
America

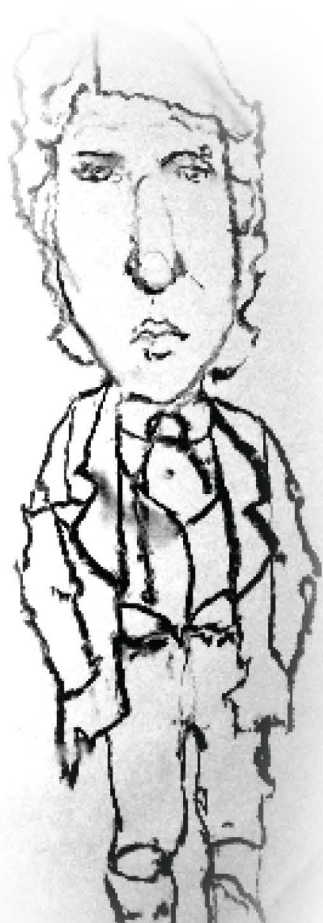
Collaborations,
Translations,
Criticism,
Performances,
Reviews

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The official publication of
The Pirandello Society of America

PSA Volume XXVI



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A Giant Success: A Staged Reading of *The Giants of the Mountain*

(The Gallery, Theaterlab, NYC, October 15, 2013)

SAMANTHA COSTANZO BURRIER

Borough of Manhattan Community College

In keeping with his own theory of *not concluding*, Pirandello's writing never officially concluded. Driven by the desire "to continue to work, always work,"¹ as he wrote to his muse and confidant, Marta Abba, Pirandello continued to create up until the night before he died in December of 1936. Pirandello was always motivated by his persistent spirited imagination, so even while on his deathbed, he dictated his idea for the third act of his final play, *I giganti della montagna* [*The Mountain Giants*],² to his son Stefano. Pirandello's last gift to the world, though unrevised and unfinished, is the consummation of his life's work; he called *I giganti della montagna*, "il mio capolavoro" ["my masterpiece"] and "il trionfo della fantasia" ["the triumph of the imagination"] (Antonio Illiano 107). In his excitement, Pirandello wrote to Marta Abba of *I giganti della montagna*:

I do believe that I am composing my masterpiece, *The Mountain Giants*, with a fervor and a trepidation that I can't express. I feel I have climbed to heights where my voice finds unheard-of sounds. My art has never before been so full, so varied and unpredictable: so truly like a feast for the spirit and for the eyes—all shining pulsations as fresh as dew. [...] It has everything, it's an orgy of fantasy! The lightness of a cloud passing over the depth of an abyss; powerful laughter exploding among the tears, like thunder in the midst of storms; and everything suspended, no comparison to what I have done so far; I am touching the peak, you'll see! (Frassica 47-48)

Abounding with fantastic creations and supernatural elements, *I giganti della montagna* maintains the integrity of traditional myth. This genre of the mythical realm was the perfect forum for Pirandello to stage the conflict between the spiritual world and the materialistic world and to give life to his abstract theories of life versus form and illusion versus reality. The play,

“al limite, fra favola e la realtà” [“at the boundary, between fable and reality”],³ is a labyrinthine representation of the creative spirit versus the world of form, reason and logic, the role and function of art, communication in the theater, and enlightenment versus disillusion. The mythical locale of the play, *La Scalogna*, represents true reality for Pirandello as well, as it is the place where the creative spirit is free to concoct and give life to even the most fantastic ideas of the imagination; it is a reality where one is free to realize, not just dream, ideas so outlandish and radical that the creator seems to have reached madness. However, there is no threat of scandal or mental institutions in this reality. Cotrone, the magician, explains that despite the fact that the actors live meagerly outside of society, they do not yet have everything and are not truly free because they still possess the desire for an audience. He explains that people experience “emptiness” differently as it evokes either a positive or negative connotation. In Pirandellian terms, most people view living authentically with the flux of life—though deviating from the norm—as living ‘without.’

I giganti della montagna is, in essence, Pirandello’s response to the question he posed forty-three years earlier in “Arte e coscienza d’oggi” [“Art and Consciousness of Today”]: “Quale sarà l’arte di domani?” [“What will be the art of tomorrow?”] (*Spsv* 906). Disappointment and disenchantment with art is reflected in the action of the play within the play, but Pirandello’s own *myth* answers those challenging conventions, surmounting form, and representing the mysteries of life is far from tragic or impossible.

Representing the art of today, theater scholar Stebos innovatively adapted and directed *I giganti della montagna* as, “a staged reading with live performance art.” The performance was held at Theaterlab in New York City on 15 October 2013. The actors were: Jessica Cermak, Joe Hoover, Terrence Montgomery, Nichole Jorgensen, Douglas Rossi, Clinton Powell, J.B. Alexander, Rick Bean and Margaret Catov. In addition to the nine spirited readers, Stebos incorporated two talented artists, David Pullman and Alan Bessen, who choreographed a series of character studies in the form of drawings to the actors’ reading, bringing the rich stage directions to life. As the descriptions of the characters were read, the artists, on opposite sides of the stage, excitedly drew their interpretations of Pirandello’s characters.



The Cast
Photo: Stefano Boselli

I giganti della montagna is set in a surrealistic world where, “all notion of a naturalistic setting has disappeared” (Bassnet-McGuire 155). The characters are comprised of three main groups: 1) *Gli scalognati* [The Scalognati], described by Pirandello as “a curious society of the dispersed, who live, in an ownerless villa, a life given over to dreams and illusions,” headed by the magician, Cotrone:



Cotrone and Diamond
Photo: Stefano Boselli
Drawing by David Pullman

2) A nomadic theater troupe trying to find an audience for the play, *Favola del figlio cambiato* [The Fable of the Changeling Son], run

by *Il conte* [the Count] and his wife, Ilse, the guiding spirit of the theatrical company:



The Count
Photo: Samantha Costanzo Burrier
Drawing by Alan Bessen



The Countess
Photo: Stefano Boselli
Drawing By Alan Bessen

and 3) *I giganti* [the Giants], “with their dull, unthinking brutality,” and the servants of the Giants, “the poor fanatical servants of life” (Young 154-163).

The *Scalognati* have renounced society to live naturally in the villa. Having resigned from everything, or “everyday consciousness,” their souls are purified and they are freed from self-consciousness—like the animals and the trees who do not have the “privilege” of watching themselves live, as Pirandello has described this curse many times before. The drama of *I giganti della montagna* is the conflict between the actors, representative of art, and the *Scalognati*, the allegorical primitive and natural forms of the spirit, versus the Giants, who in their destruction of the human spirit and adherence to reason, represent the resistance to art and obstacle of form.

In a brief interview with the director Stebos, I gleaned some interesting facts about the reading:

Did you stay close or exact to Pirandello’s original version?

Stebos: I stayed as close as possible to the original—I would say exact, but keeping in mind actability/fluidity for the actors—because some character’s names are “telling names,” I tried to translate those as well. For example Duccio Doccia became Shaw

Shower, where Shower is the translation of Doccia, and Shaw is an alliteration to Shower as Duccio to Doccia.

How did you manage the fact that the play was “unfinished” by Pirandello? Did you end it just like the original?

Stebos: We finished where Pirandello finished. We did not read out, as in other productions sometimes happens, the prose summary of the final fourth act that Pirandello’s son, Stefano, wrote out following Luigi Pirandello’s summary, just before his death. I believe the ending is much more powerful if we only hear the *Giants* approaching, but we never actually see them.

How did you come to the idea of incorporating the artists Bessen and Pullman?

Stebos: The idea of the artists drawing came from Pirandello’s extreme detail in his stage directions. Because of the impossibility for directors to be so specific in actual productions, these stage directions are frequently partially or completely ignored. A reading was the perfect way to realize those stage directions in visible form, in exact detail. While interviewing artists for the drawing part, I also realized that since the play shows the coming together of two separate groups of people, the *Scalognati* who live in the isolated villa, and the touring troupe of actors, it would make sense to also see two very different drawing styles for the characters. So that’s why we ended up with two drawing artists.

What element do you feel the artists added?

Stebos: One of the themes the play is about, is the ability of art to “create itself” in a magical place; everything the characters thinks is immediately realized by the objects and costumes in the villa, and even the characters themselves act as if under a spell. The drawing was a way to visualize this magical process: someone thinks (i.e. reads the play) and it becomes reality (it is drawn). So let’s say that they added some magic to the formula of the reading with voices alone.

On of the actors, Jessica Cermak, who played the old woman, Sgriccia, said of her role in the reading:

It was both a thrill and a challenge to work on this amazing piece. Working on a piece where theatre and magic meet each other in such an amazingly creative setting was a true treat. It seemed truly fitting to work with more than one medium, acting and drawing. I hope that someone will consider mounting a full production of *The Giants of the Mountain*. With today's technology it seems as if Pirandello's scenery could be fully realized. But then again perhaps it is fitting that a play that addresses creating art for arts sake and not an audience's praise should remain so itself.



Jessica Cermak and drawing of Sgriccia by Alan Bessen

This was truly a creative and extraordinary adaptation of a Pirandello play that is rarely performed. The incorporation of the artists added a dynamic layer to an already multi-layered play. Stebos' representation of Pirandello's final play demonstrates that art today is still capable of being fresh and inventive. I look forward to more Stebos productions in the future.

Notes

¹ Trans. Marta Abba, *The Mountain Giants and Other Plays* 15.

² The first act of *I giganti della montagna* [*The Mountain Giants*], titled *I fantasmi* [*The Phantasms*], was published in 1931 in "Nuova Antologia." In Florence in 1937, *I giganti della montagna* was staged outdoors in the Boboli Gardens under the direction of Renato Simoni (See *Album Pirandello* 328).

³ After the *List of Characters* in *I giganti*, one reads: "Tempo e luogo, indeterminate: al limite, fra la favola e la realtà" ["Time and place, undetermined, at the boundary between fable and reality"] (*Maschere nude* 10: 391).

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