

Luigi Pirandello

Six Characters in Search of an Author

*In a New Adaptation
by Robert Brustein*

PLAYS FOR PERFORMANCE

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Production and Study

Edited by Nicholas Rudall and Bernard Sahlins



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Ivan R. Dee
CHICAGO

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INTRODUCTION

by Robert Brustein

This text was prepared for the American Repertory Theatre's production of *Six Characters* in Cambridge in the fall of 1996, the result of a continuing collaboration between the company actors and myself. The time and place are reflected in the adaptation, but the production has enjoyed a number of revivals, over a period of eight years, in various cities and with a variety of different actors, always adapted to changing conditions. This version, in other words, is meant to be liquid, spontaneous, improvisatory, adaptable—much like Pirandello's concept of the drama. Directors and actors are encouraged to treat it as loosely as I have treated the original text.

In Pirandello, the six characters intrude on actors rehearsing his own play *Mixing It Up*. In our version, they walk in on a rehearsal of *The King Stag*, a popular play in the ART repertory. In your own production, the play being rehearsed by the actors should, if possible, be a vehicle familiar to your audiences—say, *Our Town*, or *A Christmas Carol*. When the American Conservatory Theatre performed *Six Characters*, it announced a showing of *Hamlet*, and had the characters interrupt the opening scene.

Similarly, the ART actors in the play (aside from the six characters) used their own names, often their own characters and attitudes. Feel free to substitute the names of your own actors—and improvise with them asides and witticisms more appropriate to personal experience and local history.

A problem which this approach engenders is determining the nationality of the six characters. We treated them as essentially Italian, since Pirandello conceived them that way, with Italian concepts of honor and moral codes. The exception was Madame Pace, who (for company reasons—we were one woman short) was turned into a Latino pimp named Emilio Paz. An American city has lots of Latino people, but what are formally dressed Italians doing in a theatre filled with American actors? The answer is that they come from the author's imagination, but if your actors need more motivation (the audience doesn't), tell them the family are immigrants newly off the boat.

Six Characters depends a lot on magic, which is to say stage tricks. Although magicians are not supposed to disclose their secrets, here are some hints about the way we solved our problems. Avoid using a curtain. The audience walking in will see what appears to be an empty stage, decorated with flats and props stored up from other shows. Downstage left there is a table and chairs, where the stage manager is setting up for rehearsal—sharpening pencils, chalking the stage, instructing a stage hand, and so forth. At the back of the stage is a loading door (a painted drop if you don't have one) through which the characters enter.

The entrance of the actors poses no problems, and their banter and rehearsal should proceed under work lights until the director (Jeremy) complains that he needs better illumination. The scrim we used as the *The King Stag* backdrop began to tremble right before the entrance of the characters (use a winch machine), then went transparent. When the loading door lifted slowly, revealing the six, they were brilliantly back lit, moving from side to side in unison. It is best to follow each of the six, but especially the Father, with a special light different in quality, intensity, and color from the lighting of the rest of the stage.

For the scene in the back room of Emilio Paz's grind house, we did the following. The Father and the Stepdaughter ask to set up the scene with furniture simulating the furniture of the room: a table (with the envelope on it), a couch, a clothes rack. The most important element is the mirror. We brought down a huge mirror from the flies, composed of a mylar material which was transparent when lights were used behind it. When Paz materialized behind the mirror, the furniture in the back room

was exactly parallel to the crude props placed in front of the mirror. But the mylar was not only transparent—it ~~actually projected an image of the actor standing in front of the mirror back into the room~~. Thus, when the Father and Stepdaughter sat down on the bench facing the front of the mirror they seemed to be sitting facing us on the couch in the room; and when the Mother aimed her handbag at Paz behind the mirror, she actually seemed to have hit him in the face. Thus, scenes were played in front of and behind the mirror at once.

Pirandello uses a lot of narrative in this play. One way to make that narrative dramatic is to bring it into the present. When the Father and Stepdaughter tell of their encounter near her school when she was little, make that a scene that's actually happening, with the Father stroking her face while she tells (in a little girl's voice) about her reactions. Do the same thing when the Father narrates how the Stepdaughter entered his house (after the encounter in Paz's back room) and saucily demanded money.

The most difficult—and most effective—scene in the play is the last one. Having set up the light booms to simulate trees and the blue plastic to simulate a pond and a cardboard moon, the play proceeds. The Son—finally forced to speak—faces the audience and tells the story of how he watched the little girl go near the pond. The Mother crosses sorrowfully to join him. That cross brings the spectator's eye to focus on the little girl with the Stepdaughter standing behind her helplessly. Very slowly, the plastic on which the little girl is lying begins to descend (we used an elevator for that purpose) as the plastic fills with water, enough to drench her clothes. The Stepdaughter reaches down and, sobbing softly, brings the dripping body offstage.

As the Son continues his story, the scrim once again turns transparent to reveal a parallel reality behind the simulated stage props. The Boy is revealed standing by a real tree as a real moon casts its image on the pond at which he's looking. The Son (pointing his finger at his head) parallels the action of the Boy pointing a revolver at his head. The shot is fired, the Boy falls, the lights go out, and the actors rush behind the scrim as the rest of the family disappears off stage. Pandemonium ensues—shouts, screams, falling furniture. The only light is provided by an actor (Chuck) who brandishes a desk lamp. The Boy's body is carried on stage as the actors gather around him. After a call for more light, Chuck turns the lamp away to kick over a chair and free the lamp cord. When he turns the lamp back on the body, it is gone (a quick moving hinged trap which drops the boy actor onto some mattresses beneath the stage).

Power is restored following a flickering of the lights, and once again we are back in the drab, grey empty rehearsal stage. The actors are in a state of confusion and panic, searching the theatre for signs of the characters. Gradually, they gather their things and leave the theatre. Only the director (Jeremy) remains, surveying the stage and trying to absorb what he has experienced. Unexpectedly, once again the scrim begins to tremble and the loading door begins to rise. We see the six characters again brilliantly back lit, with snatches of their speeches heard over the loudspeakers. Suddenly, all six fall forward on their faces with a loud thud. It is another illusion—a gigantic Polaroid photograph. Jeremy hisses "Jesus" and runs offstage. Blackout. Houselights up. We did not take a curtain call for the sake of maintaining the illusion we had created, but this is entirely at the discretion of the director and the cast.

Some additional hints in rehearsal: Make certain that you maintain a distinct difference in style between the actors and the characters. The actors should be jaunty, relaxed, colloquial, "modern." The characters should be formal, a little stiff. You might also (as we did) paint their faces and hands with pasty white makeup, adding dark highlights under the eyes, to emphasize their otherworldliness. Don't overdo this or it will look like a horror movie effect. When the Father and Stepdaughter refer to the Author, have them actually talk to him (find a spot in the balcony where he's sitting). The most difficult role in the play is that of the Mother, since she has so little to say and must always be the image of grief. Anna Magnani is a good image for her—a heavy, hollow-eyed if once sensual woman.

The clothes of the Father and the Son should be significantly better-tailored than those of the rest of the family which are neat but worn. The actors should wear relaxed street clothes, sneakers, and t-shirts. The voice of the technician in the booth can be recorded—but best to use an actual technician rather than an actor.

The production should make the audience's flesh creep. It's a metaphysical ghost story about the transparent nature of reality.

CHARACTERS

SCOTT, stage manager

ANTHONY, a stagehand

JEREMY, director

KAREN

CHUCK

TOMMY

WILL



actors

FATHER

MOTHER

STEPDAUGHTER

LITTLE BOY

LITTLE GIRL

SON



characters

EMILIO PAZ, a pimp

Six Characters in Search of an Author

When the audience enters, the curtain is up and the stage is abandoned. The theatre is empty, there is no set on stage, the house is dark. The audience must have the feeling that it has happened into a theatre where not a performance but a rehearsal is about to take place. Downstage is a small table with three chairs behind it, their backs to the audience. Houselights are up. A stagehand (Anthony) wanders onto the stage from the shop in work clothes. Having brought in the backdrop of a set, he is trying to pull out its wrinkles. The stage manager (Scott) walks on through the house doors, carrying a coffee pot and a script. He and Scott exchange hellos.

SCOTT: After you sweep up, can you get out the Deramo and Smeraldina masks?

ANTHONY: Sure.

SCOTT: Thanks. We're going to need them tonight. Floyd, you up there? (*calling to the electrician in the booth who answers through the speaker, "Yeah, Scott"*) Set up something we can use for *The King Stag*—you know how Jeremy hates work lights. (*Floyd: "Okay, sure."*)

(The stagehand picks up his tools and materials and starts sweeping. The actors wander in through the various doors of the theatre, one after the other—Will, Tommy, and Karen [later, Chuck]—to rehearse Gozzi's The King Stag. As they enter, they improvise greetings to the stage manager ["Hi, Scott." "Do you need me right away? I'd like to get a sandwich." "There's a poker game at Bob's house after rehearsal," etc.] Some sit on chairs and read the paper; Will lies on the floor and does yoga exercises, waiting for Jeremy [the director] to arrive and start rehearsals. Tommy discusses with Scott where he exits in the scene to be rehearsed, and tries on bits of costume. Jeremy enters through the house doors left.)

SCOTT: All right, settle, everybody. The senior actor's arrived.

(The actors grow quiet and peer into the darkened auditorium. A voice from the back of the theatre calls out, "Hi, chaps." Jeremy, the senior actor, walks down the aisle onto the stage and greets the actors who respond, "How's it going, Jeremy?" To Scott he says, "How you feeling?" Scott: "Not bad.")

JEREMY: What am I supposed to be doing tonight?

SCOTT: *King Stag*. We have to plug Karen into the scene with Deramo in Act 1. I want to make sure they're both comfortable with the movement.

JEREMY: Movement? That's not my job. That's the director's job. I'm just the actor who's coming in for help. That's Andrei Serban's job. He's the director....

SCOTT: You know how busy Andrei is. He's been on the West Coast and back and forth to Europe.

JEREMY: Andrei's never here when he's wanted. He's always farting off all over the world, directing Chekhov in Tokyo, or opera in Cardiff, or no doubt doing something in Greek in Buda-*pest*....

KAREN: Oh come on, Jeremy, you've just got your knickers in a twist.

JEREMY: I have not got my knickers in a twist....

SCOTT: Let's get going.

JEREMY: It always falls to me. Why is it always me, me, me?

SCOTT: Jeremy, we have done this show three hundred times in eleven different countries—why are you so grouchy tonight?

JEREMY: I am not grouchy. I'm in a very good mood, thank you. And could we have some decent light for Christ's sake? These new contacts are killing my eyes.

SCOTT: *(to booth)* Floyd, when you're set up could you punch that in, please? Thank you. And kill the house and works. *(In a few seconds, the stage where the actors are standing is lit with a brilliant white light Scott and Jeremy sit down at the table.)* Thank you.

JEREMY: Oh, that's much better. That's nice and cozy. I like that. So, are we all here?

SCOTT: Chuck's late.

JEREMY: Chuck's late, *(looking at his watch)* I suppose he's plugged into his Walkman somewhere listening to some sports spectacular. Are those wonderful Celtics ... *(he pronounces this Keltia and is corrected)*. *(Chuck enters, with Walkman headphones over his ears)* All right, let's go the Oh—who's that roaming in the gloom?

SCOTT: Chuck, five minutes late....

CHUCK: Sorry, everybody. I had to put in a call to Kathy and Jesse.

TOMMY: Why did that take so long?

CHUCK: Rotary, *(dialing)*

WILL: What are you listening to?

CHUCK: World Cup soccer. What are we doing?

SCOTT: Act 1, Scene 9, the Smeraldina interview. You've just exited up left. *(Chuck exits up left)*

JEREMY: Will, could you get the other way up, please? It's easier for acting on the whole ... or possibly not in your case. Okay, let's go. As Scott said, we've done this old chestnut hundreds of times, so let's blow off the cobwebs, give it some energy, and GO.

TOMMY: Jeremy, can I cut down the movement in this scene? It's hard to see with the mask, and it feels dangerous with all that movement.

JEREMY: Don't talk to me, talk to Andrei Serban. He's the director, and you can break your blood neck as far as he's concerned. It's his favorite bit. You have to realize you're not just moving in this scene, you're representing the spirit of movement. You may not know it, the audience may not know it, the critics may not know it, but Serban knows it. That's enough, *(shouts at Tommy)* You're a metaphor! You have to be symbolic of the thing you're representing. I don't know why the theatre always has to be so bloody different. Why can't we do stuff people like—like *A Christmas Carol*. No, we're always expected to screw up the classics and infuriate the audience and irritate the critics. We can't even do Gozzi straight. Anyhow, in this scene, Deramo is the symbol of innocence and Smeraldina is the symbol of chicanery. Do you understand?

EVERYBODY: NO.

JEREMY: Nor do I. Let's go.

SCOTT: Okay. Stand by onstage ... and GO.

(Tommy and Karen take their places. After Tommy jokingly calls "Line," they begin to do a scene from King Stag.)

KAREN: My lionhearted lord, in Lombardy we were a family of consequence. Then catastrophes and calamities fell upon us. Dishonest servants stole our wealth, our lands, my jewels. But they could not steal my—hee, hee, hee, modesty. And poverty cannot pollute a noble mind, can it?

TOMMY: So, lady from Lombardy. You love me?

KAREN: Ah, cruel tyrant, can you ask such a question? When already I am utterly yours?

TOMMY: Tell me, Smeraldina, what if I chose you for my wife ... and then I died, leaving you a widow? Would that make you sad?

(The drop begins to billow as if in a wind. Chuck, who has been awaiting a cue offstage, comes from behind the drop to whisper in Scott's ear. The drop goes transparent, showing six figures upstage in the loading door, backlit by a brilliant light, undulating.)

SCOTT: Hold, please, *(the actors stop)*

JEREMY: Did someone turn on the air conditioning? It's freezing in here.

SCOTT: Jeremy, we'll have to stop for a minute.

JEREMY: What's the matter?

SCOTT: Chuck says some people have come in. He tried to tell them we're working, but they insist on talking to us.

JEREMY: Don't worry, I'll get rid of them. I'll do it. I'll be very diplomatic. I'll ask them to leave in more uncertain terms, *(he walks into the drop)* Anthony, could you take this drop out, please? *(Anthony says "Sure, Jay.")* I nearly ran into it. *(gestures to Scott)* Scott?

SCOTT: Thanks a lot. *(to the Characters)* I'm sorry, but this is a closed rehearsal. Can I ask what you want?

FATHER: *(comes forward, followed by the others, to the foot of the stage)* We're looking for an author.

WILL: So are we. *(laughter)*

FATHER: Any author will do, sir.

JEREMY: Well, we're here rehearsing some classics. We don't have any spare live authors around. Unless you'd like us to resurrect Carlo Gozzi? *(the actors laugh)*

STEPDAUGHTER: *(excitedly, as she rushes forward)* But that's perfect. You have no new plays. We could be the hit of your season.

(A moment to describe the Characters. They are bewildered and ill at ease. These Characters must be completely different from the actors in the company. They are bathed, for example, in their own special light, which follows them everywhere. The Characters are not ghosts but created realities proceeding from the heat-oppressed imagination, and therefore, Pirandello says, "more real and consistent than the amorphous realities of the actors." The Mother is the picture of sorrow, whose tears seem to have frozen in the corner of her eyes. She is dressed in plain material, with stiff pleats, making it [and her] look as if it were carved.

The Father is about fifty. He has reddish thinning hair, but he is not bald. He has a full mustache and an uncertain, rather vacuous smile. He is pale, with a high forehead. His eyes are blue and oval-shaped, clear and sharp. He wears light trousers and a dark jacket. His voice is rich but at times harsh and strident.

The Mother seems to be crushed under a heavy burden of shame and humiliation. She is wearing a thick black veil and a simple black dress. When she raises the veil, she shows a face like wax, her eyes humbly fixed on the floor.

The Stepdaughter, eighteen years old, is defiant, at times insolent. She is very beautiful, even in her mourning dress, and very elegant. She is disdainful of the timid, suffering, depressed air of her young brother, a scruffy Little Boy of fourteen, who is also dressed in black. But she is full of warmth and tenderness toward her sister, a four-year-old Little Girl who is dressed in white with a black silk sash around her waist.

The Son is twenty-two, tall, frigid, scornful of the Father and indifferent toward the Mother. He wears a massive overcoat and a long green scarf.)

KAREN: This rehearsal has been screwed up enough already.

TOMMY: No more schedule changes, please. We have enough of them.

WILL: I'm having enough trouble remembering my lines for *King Stag*!

CHUCK: I'm sorry, Equity doesn't allow visitors during rehearsals.

FATHER: *(to the Stepdaughter)* I guess there's no author here ... *(to Jeremy)* unless, maybe, you would like to ...

KAREN: Are you tourists here?

JEREMY: If you're looking for the Freedom Trail, it's ... is this supposed to be a joke?

FATHER: Of course not! We are bringing you a story of deep anguish.

STEPDAUGHTER: We could put your theatre on the map.

JEREMY: 'Bye now. We wish you luck with all your endeavors, whatever they may be. We're professional theatre, we're already on the map, and we have work to do. We have no time to waste on tourists.... Scott?

FATHER: *(hurt but gentle)* If you *are* a man of the theatre, then you know that life is full of strange things—things that are real, no matter how absurd they seem, and therefore don't need to be pretended.

JEREMY: First you interrupt our rehearsal, and now you insult us. Would you please leave?

FATHER: All I am saying is that it's a little crazy to try to reverse the order of life: to create scenes that are obviously untrue, and then try to convince us they are real. But then I suppose that kind of madness is built into your profession, *(the actors are growing angry)*

KAREN: Somebody else who thinks actors are loonies. Jeremy, can we please get rid of these people?

FATHER: Well, nobody is forcing you to make the false look true. You do it as a game.... Isn't it your job on stage to give life to fictional characters?

JEREMY: Look, sir, we do not do it as a game, as you call it. We are professional actors. I'll have you know that the actor's profession is the noblest in the world, *(to Tommy who looks dubious)* Well, it's a living. Even when our playwrights give us bad plays to perform, writing puppets instead of characters, we actors still manage to bring life to the scripts, right here on this stage, which I wish to hell you'd get off.... *(The actors heartily agree with Jeremy. "Right on, Jeremy." "You tell them, SA.")*

FATHER: *(bearing in hard with his argument)* There! You see what I mean? You say you've given life to the characters you've created characters who are more alive than those who breathe fresh air and wear street clothes! Well, perhaps they're not as real, but they're closer to the truth. We're really in agreement.

CHUCK: Hey, wait a minute. Just before you said ...

FATHER: Excuse me, but what I said before—about acting being a game—I said that because you said you had no time to waste on ... "tourists"—was that your word? But who knows better than you actors that nature uses the human imagination to create an even more intense reality.

CHUCK: Why are we listening to him? Where is all this getting us?

FATHER: Nowhere. I'm trying to prove that one can be thrust into life in a variety of ways and in many forms—as a tree, as a stone, as water, as a butterfly, perhaps as a woman. And maybe even as a character in a play.

TOMMY: All right, now let me get this straight. You're trying to tell us that you were all "thrust into life" as characters in a play?

FATHER: Exactly! And we're alive, as you can see.

JEREMY: Yes, like a stone, or a butterfly, a stoned butterfly. *(Jeremy and all the actors laugh)*

FATHER: I'm really sorry you think that's funny, because as I told you we are bearing in us a story of great pain and anguish—as you might have guessed from this woman dressed in black, *(at that point he brings the six down slowly to center stage, with tragic elegance, where they are lit by fantastic bright light)*

CHUCK: Nice lighting, Floyd. Could you save the special effects for us?

FLOYD'S VOICE: *(from booth)* I didn't do anything.

JEREMY: Don't encourage them, Chuck, *(to actors)* Very good pain and anguish, *(turns to the Characters)* And you lot, will you kindly leave the theatre? *(to the stage manager)* Scott, will you call the campus police?

SCOTT: *(comes forward but stops short as if held by a strange force)* This is a private rehearsal. Please leave the theatre.

FATHER: *(to Jeremy)* No, no, I beg you, don't you see ...

JEREMY: Don't you understand we have work to do?

WILL: *(mumbling)* This would never happen at the Huntingdon.

FATHER: *(coming forward with resolve)* I'm really surprised at you. Why can't you believe me? I guess you've never seen characters who have been created by an author assume real life on a stage face to face with each other. Is it because we haven't given you a written script?

STEPDAUGHTER: *(coming down to Jeremy, smiling and seductive)* We really are six of the most fascinating characters you'll ever meet. But we've been abandoned.

FATHER: That's right, abandoned. The author who first conceived us decided for some reason not to complete the written play and send us into the world of art. That really is a crime, sir, because a fictional character can laugh even in the teeth of death. An invented character is immortal! Men will die. Writers will die! But whatever has been created will live forever. Was there ever a real San-cho Panza or your Sir John Falstaff? But they will live forever because they had the luck to be invented by great imaginative artists.

TOMMY: Excuse me, are you a drama professor on some sort of weird field trip with your group? I mean, what do you want here?

FATHER: We want to live!

TOMMY: Forever, I suppose.

FATHER: No, only for a few moments—through you!

KAREN: What do you mean—live through us?

WILL: That's no way to make a living.

CHUCK: *(pointing to the Stepdaughter)* I wouldn't mind living a little with that chick in the high heels.

FATHER: Listen, our play is all ready to be pasted together. If you actors would help, we could make it all happen.

JEREMY: Excuse me, but I don't understand what you want from us. We don't do improvisations here. We do plays, scripts.

FATHER: That's why we're here.

JEREMY: But where's the script?

FATHER: In us, sir. *(the actors laugh)* The play exists in us. We are the play. And that is why we're here with such a passion to show it to you.

STEPDAUGHTER: *(scornfully, but tantalizing and seductive and impudent)* Passion, is it? This is about passion, all right. My passion! For him! *(points to the Father and pretends she is going to embrace him)*

him, then stops and breaks into high-pitched laughter)

FATHER: (*angry*) Stay out of this, will you? And stop laughing at me like that!

STEPDAUGHTER: Ladies and gentlemen, my own father's been dead only two months now. But if you give me a chance, I'll show you there's still life left in this little girl, (*sings and dances "My Heart Belongs to Daddy" with suggestive looks at the Father, flirting a little with Chuck, who says, "I'm in love"; the actors applaud heartily*)

CHUCK: Karen, I think she's really got something.

KAREN: Yeah, be careful you don't catch it, Chuck.

SCOTT: What is this, Jay, some kind of audition?

JEREMY: I don't know ... it's like her version of *Rent*... (*to the Father*) Excuse me, sir, but is she ... u ... has she got a little problem?

FATHER: No, it's worse than that.

STEPDAUGHTER: (*to Jeremy*) You bet your life it's worse. Listen, please do this play now! Then you'll see, at the crucial moment when I—when this sweet little girl here—(*taking the Little Girl by the hand away from her Mother and crossing with her to Jeremy*). Isn't she lovely? (*holds her in her arms*) My sweet, sweet darling! (*lets go of her, very deeply moved almost against her will*) Well, when God takes this lovely little girl away from her poor mother, and this young imbecile (*taking the Little Boy roughly by the sleeve*), like the idiot he is, does the stupidest thing—oh then you'll see me take off! Yes, run away! But not quite yet, not yet! Because after the things, the intimate things, that have happened between you and me (*pointing to the Father, with a suggestive leer*), I can't stay with them any more and watch this woman being humiliated by that stuck-up character there (*pointing to the Son*). Look at him! Just look at him! Patronizing, aloof, because he's the legitimate one! Him! Contemptuous of me, of that boy, of that little girl—because we're bastards! Now you know! Bastards! (*embracing the Mother*) And you won't even acknowledge your own mother—the mother of us all. He looks down on her like she was nothing more than the mother of bastards. The son of a bitch! (*she speaks this rapidly with great excitement, raising her voice and shouting "bastards," and half spitting out "son of a bitch"*)

MOTHER: (*with deep anguish, to Jeremy*) Sir, I am begging you, in the name of these two little children ... (*grows faint*) Oh my God ...

FATHER: (*rushing to support her, as the actors grow more bewildered*) Get a chair someone.... Quick, get a chair for this poor widow.

TOMMY: Has she really fainted?

CHUCK: What's going on here?

FATHER: Look at her! Please look at her!

MOTHER: No! Stop! Please!

FATHER: Let them look at you.

MOTHER: (*lifting her hands and covering her face in shame*) Please, I beg of you, stop this man from doing what he is trying to do. I can't stand it.

WILL: This is getting way beyond me.

JEREMY: Excuse me, sir, but are you two married?

FATHER: Yes, she's my wife.

KAREN: But you just said she's a widow—and you still look pretty lively to me, daddy, (*the bewildered actors find relief in loud laughter and sniggers*)

FATHER: (*wounded and resentful*) Please don't laugh. Stop laughing at us! You see, that's her drama. She had a lover. A man who should be here with us.

MOTHER: No! Stop!

STEPDAUGHTER: He's dead—lucky for him. Died two months ago, like I told you. That's why we're wearing black.

FATHER: Yes, he's dead. But that's not the reason he's not here. He's not here because—well, just take a look at her and you'll understand—we're not talking about a passionate love triangle. She's incapable of love, she can't feel a thing, except maybe a little gratitude—and not for me, for *him*. She's not a woman; she's a mother, that's all. And her drama—you've got to believe me, it's a powerful piece of theatre—her drama is totally involved with these four children she's had by two different men.

MOTHER: Did I want two different men? I didn't choose to have them! It was *his* choice. He forced the other man on me. He *made* me go away with him.

STEPDAUGHTER: (*leaping up in anger*) Not true!

MOTHER: Why isn't it true?

STEPDAUGHTER: It isn't. That's all.

MOTHER: You don't know anything about it.

STEPDAUGHTER: It's just not true, (*to Jeremy*) Don't believe a word of it. Do you know why she's lying? Because of him there, (*pointing to the Son*) She tortures herself, wears herself out, and aches because of his indifference. She wants him to think that she abandoned him when he was two years old because this man forced her to.

MOTHER: (*passionately*) But he did! He made me do it! I swear to God! (*to Jeremy*) Ask him yourself! (*pointing to the Father*) Make him tell our son the truth, (*to the Stepdaughter*) You know nothing about it.

STEPDAUGHTER: I know how happy you were when my father was alive. Can you deny that?

MOTHER: (*with reluctance*) No.

STEPDAUGHTER: He always loved you deeply, (*to the Little Boy with anger*) Isn't that right? Admit it! Why don't you say something, idiot?

MOTHER: Leave him alone, poor thing. You're trying to make me look ungrateful. You're my daughter. I respect your father's memory. It was not my fault, it was not to please myself that I left his house. I left my son.

FATHER: She's right. It was entirely my fault.

CHUCK: If they can't get their story straight, how do they expect anybody else to understand it?

KAREN: The whole thing seems a little melodramatic to me.

TOMMY: I think I heard it somewhere before.

JEREMY: *(getting interested)* Look, fellows, could you cool it? I'm interested in this. Do go on. *(He removes himself from the table and goes into the auditorium as if to see how the scene would look from the audience's point of view)*

SON: *(coldly, ironically)* Look at him. Next he'll start spouting philosophy. Soon he'll be telling us about the Daemon of Experiment.

FATHER: You're a cynical little bastard, *(to Jeremy in the auditorium)* I use a phrase to explain my actions, and you sneer at it.

SON: Words, words, words.

FATHER: Yes, words, words. What else do we have for comfort when we're confused and consumed by guilty thoughts.

STEPDAUGHTER: You just want to bury your guilt, that's all.

FATHER: Bury my guilt? No, that's not true. It would take a lot more than words to do that.

STEPDAUGHTER: Yes, it would take a little cash, too. The money you were going to pay me. *(the actor senses something squalid coming)*

SON: *(contemptuously)* You are disgusting.

STEPDAUGHTER: Am I? What was in that pale blue envelope on the little mahogany table in the room behind Emilio Paz's strip joint? Ah, that name rings a bell, doesn't it? Emilio Paz, king of the grind houses, always happy to help his topless beauties collect a little extra money on the side.

SON: And she thinks she now has the right to abuse our whole family just because he was going to give her that money. But as it turned out, the transaction never took place.

STEPDAUGHTER: We came awfully close.

MOTHER: Stop, daughter. You ought to be ashamed of yourself.

STEPDAUGHTER: I don't feel shame, what I feel is an overwhelming desire for revenge. I'm dying to play that scene! The little room. I can see it clearly. The girls leave their street clothes over there, there's the convertible couch, there's the mirror, there's the Chinese screen, and right there in front of the window is the little mahogany table with the pale blue envelope on it. It's absolutely real. I could pick it up now! But don't anybody look, because I'm almost naked! No shame, no blushes—I leave that to him. *(pointing to the Father)* He was pretty shaky then, I can tell.

you that.

WILL: Does anyone understand what the hell's going on?

FATHER: I don't blame you for being confused when all you hear is her side! Why don't you give me a chance to reply to these horrible slanders?

STEPDAUGHTER: Nobody wants to listen to your long-winded excuses.

FATHER: No excuses! I want to explain the facts.

STEPDAUGHTER: Yes, your facts.

FATHER: We can never understand each other. For example, all the pity and compassion I felt for the woman (*the Mother*), she still believes is only vengeance and hatred.

MOTHER: But you kicked me out of the house.

FATHER: You see? I kicked her out! She actually believes that!

MOTHER: I can't talk as good as you, I'm not educated enough.... But believe me, sir, (*to Jeremy*) after we got married ... I don't know why he married me, a poor uneducated woman.

FATHER: But that's why I married you—because you were simple. That's what I loved about you, I . . . (*exasperated over his failure to make her understand, he throws up his hands*) Do you see the problem? She simply can't... it's maddening, maddening, this mental deafness of hers. She can't feel love for her children, yes, but up here (*taps his forehead*) deaf, infuriatingly deaf.

STEPDAUGHTER: Yes, but ask him to explain what good all his intelligence has done for us.

FATHER: If we only knew what misery comes from our efforts to do good.

KAREN: Excuse me, but, Jeremy, can we please go on with our rehearsal?

TOMMY: I'm sure I heard it somewhere before.

KAREN: Yeah, they were guests on the Jenny Jones Show.

JEREMY: (*to the Father*) Sir, you've obviously got an interesting story here, but we were rehearsing our play when you came in here, and we really can't spend all our rehearsal time on this. Do you think you can tell your story more clearly? We'll give you ten minutes, (*to the others*) Is that all right? ten minutes? (*the actors reluctantly give assent*)

SCOTT: All right, ten minutes, and I'm going to time this.

FATHER: All right. You see, there was a fellow working as my assistant—quite poor, very loyal, devoted to her (*pointing to Mother*). Nothing underhand, you must believe that. He was a good, simple person ... like her. Neither thought for a moment they were doing anything wrong.

STEPDAUGHTER: So he thought it for them.

FATHER: Not true! What I did, I did for her—yes, for me too, I admit it. It got to a point where I couldn't say a thing without one of them shooting the other a secret look—they seemed to be asking each other how to react to what I said, how to avoid irritating me. This made me angrier.

was always angry.

JEREMY: So why didn't you fire the poor bastard?

FATHER: I did, finally. But then I had to watch this unhappy woman moping around the house, like a stray dog looking for a place to lie down.

MOTHER: That's true.

FATHER: *(suddenly, turning as if to stop her)* And is it also true about the boy?

MOTHER: He tore my own son from my arms, when he was only a baby.

FATHER: But not out of cruelty. I only wanted him to grow up strong and healthy, in touch with the earth.

STEPDAUGHTER: *(pointing to the Son, jeering)* And what a magnificent success you've achieved.

FATHER: Is it my fault he turned out this way? I took him to a wet nurse in the country because his mother didn't seem strong enough. Also a peasant woman, like her. Simple women attract me—maybe that's wrong, but I've always felt the need for a kind of sound moral cleanliness, *(the Stepdaughter breaks out in raucous laughter)* Please make her stop that. It's awful.

JEREMY: Do shut up, will you? How can I follow the story if you make that awful racket? I'm sorry, she does go on. *(After Jeremy rebukes her, the Stepdaughter assumes her usual position ... absorbed and distant, half smiling. Jeremy again checks out the scene from the auditorium.)*

FATHER: I couldn't bear to have this woman near me. *(pointing to the Mother)* Not because she has upset me, and not because she suffocated me, but because I felt so terribly sorry for her.

MOTHER: And so he sent me away.

FATHER: *(defensive)* You were well provided for. Yes, I sent her away to the other man, so she could be free of me.

MOTHER: So *you* could be free.

FATHER: Yes, that's partly true. But I did it more for her, I swear it. *(folds his arms, then turns suddenly to the Mother)* I kept a close eye on you, didn't I? Until one day that fellow suddenly took her away to another city, resenting my interest in them. Until then I watched this new little family grow up; first this girl, then the others. I felt very tender toward them. She'll tell you that, *(pointing to the Stepdaughter)*

STEPDAUGHTER: Oh yes indeed. I was a cute little thing, you know, with hair down to my waist and frilly little underwear. He used to watch me coming out of school. He came to see how I was filling out.

FATHER: That's a lie! A vicious lie!

STEPDAUGHTER: It's the truth.

FATHER: Vicious! Vicious! *(he continues)* After she'd gone, my home was empty. She'd been a heavy weight on me, but her presence filled the house. I wandered through the empty rooms like

damned soul. This boy here (*to the Son*) was raised and educated away from home. When he came back—I don't know—he didn't seem mine any more, without a mother to link us together. Anyway, he grew away from me; we had no connection through love or anything. I wanted to fill the emptiness of my life. And so I thought more and more about them, that other family, wrapped up in their simple cares, free of my intellectual complications. And that's why I used to watch the child coming out of school.

STEPDAUGHTER: Will you listen to him? He used to *follow* me down the street, smiling at me and waving his hand! I watched him, wide-eyed, puzzled. Who was he? I asked my mother about him (*going to Mother and putting head on her lap, a little child again*) Mama? She knew. (*Mother nods*) She kept me out of school for a few days. When I went back (*again a little girl*), there he was again—a sad-looking figure, holding a brown paper bag. He came nearer and stroked me. In the bag (*excited*) ... was a beautiful silk shawl with a fringe on it. All for me?

JEREMY: Sorry, this is all fascinating, but dramatically it's irrelevant.

SON: (*contemptuously*) Yes, just literature.

FATHER: What do you mean, literature? This is life, my boy, real emotions.

JEREMY: That may be! But it won't work in the theatre.

FATHER: I know it won't. But this is only the background of the action. You don't put this on stage. As you can see, she isn't a little girl any more with long hair down to her waist.

STEPDAUGHTER: —or with frilly little underwear showing under her dress.

FATHER: The real drama begins now. And I can assure you, it's new and innovative.

STEPDAUGHTER: (*coming forward, fierce and brooding*) When my father died ...

FATHER: They came back here. Only I didn't know it. I had lost touch with them over the years. The drama was about to break out, violent and unexpected. I hadn't learned how to do without sex. I was lonely but revolted by casual affairs—not old enough to do without women, not young enough to have them without feeling disgust. Ashamed of myself but unable to suppress my desires. What good was my intelligence? And the women—what about them? You find one who looks at you warmly. You hold her in your arms. And the next thing she does is close her eyes. She's telling the man: "Blind yourself, for I am blind."

STEPDAUGHTER: And if she doesn't close her eyes, what then? When she looks directly into the sweating face of a man who comes to her without love, what then? Oh what disgust she feels from this attempt to justify lust, excuse it.... I can't listen to this shit any more. His intellectualizing is contemptible. He makes me sick.

CHUCK: (*from under the earphones*) Can we get to the point at last? I'd like to listen to the payoff (*or "I can feel my hair falling out"*)

FATHER: All right, then. But I'm just trying to provide you with some motivation. Isn't that what you actors always want? Anyway, how was I to know that they had all come back here after that poor fellow died, that they were dreadfully poor, and that the mother had gone to work as a dressmaker sewing costumes for Emilio Paz, of all people.

MOTHER: Believe me, I had no way of knowing that man gave me work because he had his eye on my daughter....

STEPDAUGHTER: Poor Mama. Do you know what that pimp would say when I brought back the stuff you'd been working on? That you didn't know how to sew a sequin, that you were messing up the seams. So you see, I had to find ways to bring in more cash while you sat home all night, thinking you were sacrificing yourself for me and these two children, sewing away at bras and G-strings for Emilio Paz.

WILL: And it was in the strip joint that you met...?

STEPDAUGHTER: (*pointing to the Father*) Him. Oh, he was an old customer there. What a scene that was going to be ... terrific!

FATHER: With her, the mother, coming in ...

STEPDAUGHTER: (*quickly, savagely*) Almost in time!

FATHER: (*crying out*) No, *just* in time, *just* in time. Luckily I found out who she was before it was too late. I took all of them back to my house then. Try to imagine that scene, with the two of us living in the same house. She behaving ...just like she does here; and I unable to look her in the face.

STEPDAUGHTER: God, it's so ridiculous. After what happened at Emilio Paz's, do you think it's possible for me to behave like a sweet young thing, modest and virtuous, in order to justify your pretentious notions about "sound moral cleanliness"?

FATHER: That's what's so interesting to me about life and drama, the way we tend to think of ourselves as a single personality. But it's not true. Each of us is many different complex people, and all of those people live inside of us. We discover this when we suddenly find ourselves doing something that defines us, and we hang there, as if in chains, summed up, for all time, by a single action. No, do you understand how this girl betrayed me? By accident she found me in a place I had no right to be, doing something I had no right to do. And now she wants to fix me in a reality that is alien to my nature, that came from a single uncharacteristic action of my life. That is what really hurts. You'll see what a tremendous impact the play will have when this theme of mine becomes clear. But other positions have to be considered. His ... (*pointing to the Son*)

SON: (*with a scornful shrug*) Leave me out of it. This has nothing to do with me.

FATHER: Why not?

SON: I'm not involved, and I don't want to be involved. You know perfectly well I was never supposed to get mixed up with you all.

STEPDAUGHTER: We're vulgar and common, you see! And he's so high class! But you may have noticed that whenever I look at this well-bred member of the upper crust, he can't face me directly.... He knows what he's done to me.

SON: (*not looking at her*) Me?

STEPDAUGHTER: Yes, you. Whose fault is it, sweetheart, that I went back to peddling my ass? Yours ... (*the actors start at this*) Didn't you make us feel like strangers in your home, intruding on your legitimate kingdom? He says I acted like a tyrannical bitch, but look how he treated us. According

to him, we had no right to move into his house with my mother—but she’s his mother too.

SON: Look how they’re ganging up on me. But consider my point of view. One day I’m sitting home quietly when this creature, acting as if she owns the place, comes in and asks for my father. God knows what business she has with him. The next minute, with the same bold look in her eye, she comes back with that little girl there. And she begins to treat my father, I don’t know why, in the most suggestive and forward way—demanding money from him as if he owed it to her.

FATHER: In a way, I did. I owed it to your mother.

SON: My mother? How was I supposed to know that? I had never seen her before. I had never even heard her name mentioned. Anyway, one day she comes in with her (*pointing to the Stepdaughter*) and with the little boy and that little girl. And they say to me, (*Stepdaughter speaks*) “Don’t you know this is your mother, too?” (*Son continues*) Little by little I begin to understand. But I’m out of it. Believe me, I’m an undeveloped dramatic character, and I’m very uncomfortable in the company. So please leave me out of it.

FATHER: But it’s because of your feelings that...

SON: (*exasperated*) What do you know about my feelings? When have you ever shown the slightest interest in my feelings?

FATHER: Yes, I admit that’s true. But this coldness of yours, this withdrawal, it’s cruel to me and it’s criminal to your mother. When she came back to the house and saw you for the first time, imagining what she felt knowing you were her son but not being able to recognize you.... (*points out to the Mother to the actors*) There, look, she’s crying.

STEPDAUGHTER: (*angrily*) Damned fool.

FATHER: (*turning toward the Son*) He says he’s out of it, but he’s really the crux of the action. Look at this little boy here, who’s always hanging on to this mother, scared, humiliated. And all because of that one there! Maybe this little boy has the biggest problem of all. He feels like the real outsider more than the others. He feels so ashamed, so humiliated, just being in the house. He feels like a charity case, you see. (*quietly*) Just like his father—shy, quiet, reserved.

WILL: (*W. C. Fields voice*) Never get on the stage with kids or dogs.

FATHER: He won’t be on stage long. Neither will the little girl—she’s the first to go.

JEREMY: Look, sir, I have to admit, you’ve got me. Your story is fascinating—quite fascinating. I think it’s got the makings of a good play.

STEPDAUGHTER: (*trying to push in*) Especially when it features a character like me.

FATHER: (*pushing her away, wanting to hear what Jeremy has to say*) Just stay out of it!

JEREMY: (*ignoring the interruption*) And if nothing else, it’s original.

FATHER: Oh, absolutely original! I told you so.

JEREMY: But you must admit it was awfully pushy the way you barged your way in here.

FATHER: I’m sure you understand. We see a stage and we can’t stay away from it.

TOMMY: You're actors, are you? Where—in community theatre?

FATHER: No, no, we're attracted to the stage because ...

JEREMY: Tommy, I think they may be pros. They handle themselves very well.

FATHER: (*angrily*) I'm not an actor.

TOMMY: Sorry.

FATHER: (*back in control*) No, like most people I can only act the part I've chosen for myself, or that's been chosen for me. But as you see, the role sometimes runs away from me, and I get a little melodramatic. All of us do.

JEREMY: Yes, I have heard that said. The story is fascinating, but as a play it needs polishing; it needs a playwright. I can give you the names and addresses of some agents ...

FATHER: No, no. Look, here's the thing. Why doesn't your company do it?

KAREN: Us? What's he talking about?

FATHER: Yes, you. Why not?

CHUCK: But none of us have ever written anything. Jeremy wrote something once, but they wouldn't even do it on TV.

FATHER: Why not start now? It's simple. And it'll be easier for you, because all the characters are right here, alive in front of your eyes.

JEREMY: That's not enough.

FATHER: But why not? After you've seen us live out our drama ...

JEREMY: We still need someone to write it.

FATHER: Write it *down*, you mean. Because it's going to happen right in front of you, live, in color, scene by scene, line by line. All you have to do is sketch it out and then it's performed.

TOMMY: Jeremy, this may sound crazy, but I think they've got the makings of a very good play here. There's plenty of time to plug Karen into *King Stag*. Why don't we use the rest of this evening to try it out?

JEREMY: It's tempting. It just might work.

FATHER: It *will* work. Wait till you see what great things come out of it. I can give you a scene breakdown right now.

JEREMY: I'm tempted, I'm tempted. What do you say, fellows, should we give it a whirl? (*the actors are more or less in agreement, except for Chuck who shouts "No!"*) All right, come into the green room and we'll copy down an outline, (*to Chuck*) I can't concentrate here with all this enthusiasm. Okay, Scott, take a short break.

SCOTT: How long a break, Jeremy?

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