

SIX CHARACTERS OF 911: REALITY or ILLUSION?

A chance encounter with Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of An Author*

It is often said that theatre is an illusionary art that reflects the reality of life. This evocation of reality is produced by the stage techniques that serve the illusion in any play whether ancient or modern. By contemporizing a theatrical text, we can often polish this mirror to create the sharpest reflection.

Luigi Pirandello, in the judgment of those who awarded him the 1934 Nobel Prize, created a "bold and brilliant renovation of the drama and the stage." He dared to create illusionary characters that live side by side with the real actors on stage. In his *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, the sudden appearance of a family of six, whose life is left unfinished by an author who abandoned them, interrupts the rehearsal of an acting troupe. To make this play more accessible to contemporary audience, my producing team tried to draw parallels between the illusionary world and the reality of life surrounding us. I proposed that both the characters and the actors were interrupting our world, invading our privacy, and entering into our lives. We attempted to contemporize Pirandello's text by adding astonishing events that had shaken our realities to interweave with the unexpected visit of the characters.

Contemporizing a theatre production is a technique very familiar to most theatre artists. Sometimes the technique is used only for the sake of novelty and at other times it is used with a sincere belief that this is the best way to bring a playwright's story and characters into the life of the contemporary audience. For me, this is perhaps the only way I know to bridge the past and the present in the hope of breathing continuity through my numerous and various lives. Sometimes, I do this consciously, and at other times *it* happens by itself. However, whether the process of such contemporization is deliberate or not is rarely of concern. The creative process is much more like when we deeply engage in an improvisation. Since a great part of our creative work as theatre practitioners is improvisatory, shouldn't we allow for these improvisations to lead our lives as well?

According to Andrei Serban, the Romanian director, "Improvisation is what makes acting healthy." I believe that improvisation makes life healthy as well - like going to the gym (and we all need to keep in shape). I believe most of us, consciously or unconsciously, improvise when we write, rehearse a play, when we fall in love and certainly when we teach. I tend to allow improvisation to filter and shape my reading of a play as well, specifically when I read it for production. However, just as improvisations are structured and are affected by a certain understanding of the realities surrounding us, my reading of a play too is influenced by my knowledge about the social environment where I live. This may be the conscious part. And as when we engage in improvisation we leave ourselves open to come what may. When reading a play, too, I allow for a degree of unknown influences to guide me through an improvisational reading. This may be the unconscious part.

For the past twenty-five years I have directed plays in a way that some critics, colleagues and audiences have called “cultural exploration of the theatrical text” - a struggle that I would like to think of as an attempt to contemporize the play. In this paper I will try to briefly discuss one such attempt; a production of Luigi Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, which opened couple of weeks after, and was heavily influenced by, the unfortunate events of September 11th, 2001.

I was asked to direct this play at Southern Methodist University, in Dallas, Texas for the Fall 2001 semester. I had read Pirandello’s text some twenty years earlier and never really liked it. Re-reading it, even in various translations, did not help. The script was boring, wordy and outdated. I was toying with the idea of rejecting the offer altogether when one day, strolling through Manhattan’s Strand book store (a marvelous place to find cheap used books) quite accidentally, I stumbled on Robert Brustein’s rendition of this play. I reluctantly bought the script and carelessly glanced through the introduction.

In his very first paragraph, Brustein calls his version “liquid, spontaneous, improvisatory [and] adaptable, much like Pirandello’s concept of drama.” He encourages directors and actors “to treat [this play] as loosely as [he has] treated the original text.” I liked that. I read the play on the subway going back home to Brooklyn. By the time I got home, I knew what I would like to do with this play. “What really matters in art and life,” says the painter, David Salle “is to go against the tidal wave of literalism and literal-mindedness, to insist on, and live, the life of the imagination.” Brustein’s adaptation allowed for living the life of the imagination.

Pirandello writes, “When a character is born, he leads such an independent life that you can conceive of him in a hundred situations the author hasn’t written,” thus he allows for directors and actors to place their own interpretations on the character, re-making it anew with every production. However, as directors, we are taught to begin rehearsals with what we think is a clear grasp of the playwright’s intention. Yet, we are almost always surprised by the discoveries we make as we unravel the characters. The question then is how are we to be sure that what we create is indeed what the author wrote. Some directors like Peter Sellars and Jonathan Miller go so far as to dismiss the idea that it is ever possible to determine the original intention of the author within the text. I argue that it is not the author but rather the characters that lead us into a journey of the unknown, a world of discoveries, a bridge that connect the playwright’s words and ideas to that of the production team, and through it, to the contemporary realities surrounding the play’s production relative to the place and time of performance, and its audience. It seems to me, therefore, that what we must do as artists is to be open and receptive to the life of the character, within the contemporary social issues and present realities of production’s time and place.

The ancient Greek tragedies are thought to have the perfect structure, a structure that has over time been tested against every method of training actors and all styles of directing. They are built from one climax to another and it is in this path that the information is released gradually and bit by bit, revealing just enough to take us to the

next hilltop. In recreating a past life within my present surrounding, I employ a similar method when directing a play. I begin my rehearsals with a vague idea, an image perhaps of what bothers me most about the play. A situation foreign yet imaginable to the life of the character, that if he were to be placed there, he would be faced with perplexing and difficult questions. The character, being placed outside his natural and familiar environment will then struggle to survive. Then I, remaining uninhibited and vulnerable, reveal my personal, behavioral, socio-environmental, and political challenges gradually and gently to the character, exploring our relationship at every step. As in an actual relationship, I reveal what I enjoy about him, what pains me about his behavior, and what concerns me about his choices. I begin a dialogue with the character as if it is he, not the author, who is in charge of his own fate and is partly responsible for our relationship. Then we, together, review his story, examine the political, social, cultural, and educational environment that surrounds him, his fellow characters and the play.

Richard Foreman speaks of his technique in theatre as feeling “the impulse, not knowing yet what it means or how it wants to work but to let the impulse lead.” In my productions this impulse is revealed through a collective exploration of the social, cultural, behavioral and political environment that is shared between the production collaborators, which include play’s characters, actors, designers, and myself. For Peter Sellars “a production is a discussion between ourselves and the play.” I believe, since theatre is what happens in the minds of the audience as he leaves the building, only he is in control of such discussion. Therefore the audience is both influenced by and influences, the present realities of his environment including the faith of the play and players. It is because of this audience that the characters are reborn, and the production is created. Thus the production, as shared experience, is extended to the audience, thereby generating a dialogue between the house and the stage, which hopefully seeps to the society beyond the walls of performance space. It is as if in a *gathering* where small talk between individuals functions as building blocks for an all-encompassing conversation regarding issues concerning the environment that surrounds the gathering. In other words, I would like for the imaginary personalities and the real persons to share a unique and unprecedented experience ignited and initiated by the production - an experience that helps relate the imaginary truth of the past with the realities of the present by creating a bridge that connects the *assumed realities* of the character, as imagined by the playwright, to the *living realities* of the actor as guided by the production, to the *present realities* of the audience as prescribed by the society and environment. I hope to engage an audience who by witnessing this connection may decide to no longer remain passive as a mere spectators at a spectacle and rather take an active role in “re-imagining” socio/political/behavioral/educational/environmental... realities.

It is my belief that through this process of contemporization, the viewer is forced to take one of the following two paths: a) to cross this *bridge* traveling backwards in time, and experience the resemblances of his present circumstance to what existed in the past and thus by referencing what is learned through such history avoid the repetition of previous mistakes; or b) to allow for the continuation of this *bridge* to enter his own conscious life, and be less likely to behave in a way that leads to the disastrous and

destructive resolves of the characters as assumed within the play and thus be encouraged to actively participate in *future-building* for himself and others, i.e. the society.

Therefore, I often begin the rehearsal with what I do not know in the life of the characters, what I have not prepared for within the written play, and what I do not understand about my own living social environment. What often helps me remain sane and lucid during the process of breathing life into the play's characters is my personal passion for life, my commitment and love for the art of theatre, and my blatant reliance on my collaborators as equally passionate artists who live within the same situational environment, and share at least some of the same concerns, even if we do not agree on all issues.

I met the design team for *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, for the first time early summer of 2011. Some of them had not yet read the play. I presented a brief outline of the play and then asked my creative collaborators who they imagine these six people are? How they lived? Where they may be coming from? Where will they go? And why are they here? My collaborators had no answer. Neither did I. We then discussed few production ideas, elements for sets, costumes and props. I thought the *characters* should dress in a style-less black and white costumes to suggest a sense of timelessness, and the *actors* in colorful clothes, to imply a contemporary look. We then visited the theatre where this play was to be staged. It was a 270-degree thrust stage where every inch of the stage is clearly visible from the house. Such space was not suitable for a play that depends so heavily on magic and on keeping actions hidden from audience. I realized that any heavy scenery will become an obstacle, blocking sightlines. Even keeping twelve actors on full view for two hours was a difficult task. I felt that I had no choice but to go for minimum sets and props. I was sure that the characters would help make the magic happen for the audience. I also decided that we should change Pirandello's first scene, replacing the comedy being rehearsed by the acting troupe when characters enter with my recent production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I explained for my colleagues the reason for this change. I had left my teaching position in the U.S. and returned to live in my home country of Iran in 1992. In Iran theatre productions are controlled by official government office. In order to stage a play, the director must apply for a special permission and receive approval. I had submitted 124 proposals during my seven years living in Iran. However none were approved, and none were rejected. Finally, following the election of Mohammad Khatami as president, I was permitted to stage Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1999. Even so, this production was raided and closed down by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. I was summoned to the Court of Islamic Guidance, where I was accused of "Raping the Public's Innocence", a considerably serious crime. Although the court proceedings were inconclusive, my family and I received numerous death threats, and were forced to leave Iran immediately.

Ironically, these young bearded men's intrusion, their sudden appearance among the audience, and their threats to beat up the actors and myself, happened during Act Two, Scene Two, when Titania calls to her Fairies, "Come, now a roundel and a fairy song." Inadvertently their interruption resulted in a bit of irony that suited both this comedy and the actual situation within the country. Titania ends her speech demanding, "Sing me now

to sleep.” On stage, the fairies began to chant a melody composed in a gibberish fairy language. As they chanted, a revolutionary guard stood up in the audience and shouted, “Enough. Stop this nonsense instantly and leave the stage!” A Fairy sang, “You spotted snakes with double tongue, thorny hedges, be not seen.” Another bearded man shouted, “You heard him! You infidel creatures get off the stage!” Another Fairy spoke, “Newts and blind worms, do no wrong. Come not near our Fairy Queen.” Up to this moment the audience thought it was all a part of the production. Everyone seemed to enjoy the interaction, until they heard another pale faced angry young man dressed all in black screamed, “Get off the stage you whores!” and saw a dozen revolutionary guards swarm toward the stage as he continued, “You shameful whores, get off this blasphemous stage!” I thought this intrusion had demonstrated what *pure* theatre should look like, and it was matched in my initial reading of Pirandello’s play.

Rehearsals for *Six Characters* began a week before Sept 11, 2001. I was still searching for the answers to my original questions: Where do these characters come from and why? And where do they go? Sometimes when I have such problems with a text, I take my questions with me to rehearsal. There I create a kind of a crisis, puzzlement, a perplexing challenge, if you will, relating to what I have not understood. I believe that will help the answer to present itself. This, perhaps, is a way for me to find a refuge within the play, to see my own self in it. I trust that the characters, being the ones who know all the answers, will save me from my bewilderment, save me from being sane and reasonable. And they often do save me from settling for mundane and mediocre choices.

When the bearded men interrupted the performance of *Midsummer*, I invited them to come on stage and debate with the play’s character. I believed that Shakespeare’s characters would easily outshine them - the actors of the Iranian regime. Realizing the challenge, the young intruders did not agree to share the stage with us. This was similar to the plot Pirandello conceived in *Six Characters*, where the truthfulness of those illusory characters, which appear half way through an acting troupe’s rehearsal, is no match for the real life of the actors in the company. In *Midsummer*, the intrusion contributed to higher appreciation by the audience, who remained seated for over two hours, forced the guards to leave the building, and insisted that the authorities let us perform the last scene of the play. Therefore, I thought, we could challenge ourselves and the play by adapting a production concept where the Characters’ intrusion help the audience feel directly involved, thus forcing them to take an active role in their observation of the performance. I decided to go against the conventional wisdom and mix rather than separate the two worlds of reality and illusion, by considering the *Actors* as the intruders into the life of the *Characters*, who are always present inside a theatre space. I spoke about this decision with my collaborators, and thus began the first phase of my usually three-parts rehearsal process. I label the first phase “meeting to marriage.”

I normally do not cast a show before rehearsals begin. Rather, I choose a company of actors - in this case a company of 12 individuals half of whom eventually play the “Actors” in *Six Characters in Search of An Author*, and the other half would play the “Characters” in the play. Then, in what looks much like a social gathering, I introduce the cast and the characters (both Actors and Characters of *Six Characters*) to each other. This

gathering allows for actors and characters to learn enough about one another to decide whether they'd like to *date* each other. Finally they each have chosen a *mate* for him/herself with whom s/he will walk, talk, dance, kiss and make love. As a good host should, in this party I try to create an atmosphere conducive to each guest's needs and desire. So s/he, feeling completely comfortable and at home, finds her/his match. Eventually each character from the play finds his/her match within the cast, and they decide to *marry*. The *actor* has discovered the *character* hidden beneath his/her own physical self. Thus the union between the *cast* (real living and breathing individuals) and the *characters* (created by author's imagination and living within illusionary world of the play) takes place and now I can announce Who plays What. And the first phase on my rehearsal process is over.

The second phase is labeled *Marriage to Childbirth*. During this phase the *actor* and the *character*, having lived together, get to know each other more and more. The *actor* learns the behavior and habitual patterns of the *character* within the environment that playwright has conceived, while the *character* adapts to the actor's skills, his abilities and talents. By adjusting his actions and intentions to the conditions surrounding the *actor*, the *character* begins his life within the production's social, political, cultural, educational and economic environment, and thus *contemporizes* himself. Consequently, by the time their *child* is born, they have understood and adapted to one another's abilities and custom enough to live as a united couple side by side, while keeping their individuality independent. They may also decide to give up some of their personal characteristics in order to establish an atmosphere conducive to raising a *child*. By the end of this phase, *The Child* (the character which will be presented to the audience during performances,) is born. This *child*, therefore, possesses essential and specific qualities of both the *actor* and the *character* while having his own peculiar characteristics, which will undoubtedly be unlike another child who is born from different parents (same *actor* and another character, or same *character* and another actor.) We are now ready for the third phase.

All stage adjustments; actor's physical choices, blocking, stage activities, as well as related topographies, costume, lighting, props, projections, etc. belong to this phase. This, the final phase, is labeled as *Childbirth to Graduation*. The director's role during this phase is not unlike that of a teacher, a priest, a consoler, or a guide who helps the young child make choices suitable to his upbringing, and his social success. Choices as mundane as how, where and when to stand, eat, cry, etc., as well as the more sophisticated ones such as manners of speaking, philosophical and political belief, and appropriate judgments, evaluations and resolutions. In short, this is the period during which the *Child* (character in performance) is educated.

Opening performance is much like a graduation ceremony for this *child*, who while possessing many characteristics of the actor and the character, is now an independent being ready, and hopefully equipped, to enter the world making his own marks. This new individual, who will hopefully improve as s/he gains more experiences through repeated performances, is the one received and appreciated by the audience.

During one of the early rehearsals for *Six Characters in Search of An Author*, something happened that determined the way the production was shaped. We had just completed an improvisation about the plays' ending when the characters disappear after the young boy shoots himself in the head. One of the actor, light heartedly asked, "And how could I ever be able to wash this young boy's blood off the stage?" He was talking about the real blood that is left on stage after the illusory family of six suddenly disappear. "Blood!" I thought, as I felt a chill running down my spine. I had no explanation for this. That night I could not sleep, every time I closed my eyes the image of blood drowned me. The next day, I woke up to the news of planes crashing into the World Trade Center. I could not believe my eyes. Up to a few months before, every day around the same hour of morning, I got off that same subway stop underneath the Twin Towers to walk to Borough of Manhattan Community College where I used to teach. Walking up the stairs and into the street, I would let my mind wander staring at those mighty towers for hours. And every time my mind would return with a gift. Looking at them from the window of an office I shared with few other adjuncts, the Twin Towers used to serve as a point of focus for me, helping me get through yet another hard day. That infamous Tuesday morning, for the first time, I felt life may no longer continue as before. Staring at the TV screen while holding my twin three year-old daughters tight in my arms, I wondered if this would ever be the same rational world I had hoped to leave for my daughters.

I remember walking to the rehearsal that evening thinking that the "Blood" must mean something. Could that be one of the bases of the bridge that connects the illogical world of the play to the irrational world I live in. My mind kept going back and forth between the *Characters* in the play and real people I saw jumping out of the windows of the World Trade Center. I was thinking that these images were trying to tell me something. Maybe they were giving me the answer to the question about the blood. Maybe through these repeated TV footage I could find the answer to "where do these characters come from? Where do they go?" The rehearsal that night was unlike any other in my entire life. The cast was numb. The studio was dark and silent. Its ceiling seem to have been lowered pressing against my head. We all sat quietly for a long time. There was none of those usual jokes and pranks. No one seems to dare to start a conversation. It felt like a mass grave where bodies were still breathing. I felt we are among those who have been buried under tons of metal and concrete beneath Ground Zero. I had a feeling that we were all trying to convince ourselves that what we had heard and seen that day, has never happened.

Eventually, I felt like I needed to break this silence. In a voice that seemed to come up from the bottom of a deep well, I shared my fear of the blood. I spoke about my sleepless night and the nightmares that kept me up. I asked the question regarding the characters that had engaged my thoughts since the beginning; where do they come from or go to? As if they were afraid to remain silent any longer, suddenly the cast began to talk. They spoke altogether. It was impossible to understand what they were saying. It sounded like a unique gibberish coming from an unknown place within the earth. My feeling about being buried alive with hundreds of other people in a whole in the ground was intensifying. I felt anxious. I screamed, "Stop. Please!" As if none of this had happened they all looked at me bewildered, and remained quite. I continued, "We can not

understand each other if we all insist on speaking at the same time.” They looked at me, and at each other, like they didn’t know what I was talking about. I became more anxious. “Could it be that no one was talking and I have just imagined all this?” I thought to myself. I was scared. But I knew I could not show my fear. I pulled myself together. The first thing that crossed my mind was to ask how they felt about the unprecedented and unbelievably tragic event of that day. This in fact saved me. We shared our feelings when we first heard the news. We shared stories we had heard from our relatives and friends living in New York City. We tried to imagine how the passengers’ of those planes must have felt during the very last moments when they saw the skyscrapers’ high walls through the airplane window. We talked about the hijackers, especially the one piloting the plane, as it reached closer and closer to the buildings, and at the point of contact. We asked ourselves what must have gone through each person’s minds as s/he stepped off that subway, or walked out of the station. We tried to imagine what must have motivated the people who jumped off the 83rd story. We tried to look through their eyes as they passed by every single floor on their way down. The conversation continued until hours past the end of rehearsal time. Walking home that night, I felt we had enough material for a decade of improvisation. I thought of how I might use each topic discussed by the cast to create an exercise that relates to our production. What and how might they respond to such circumstances?

I knew we were approaching a very sensitive subject. I wished this were the 60’s so I could use the war to more effectively communicate my feelings of hopelessness, fear, death and destruction. Maybe then they would understand what might have made a man welcome death the way those hijackers did. Even if they were familiar with the Japanese suicide bombers of the 40s, they could understand those people’s motivation. If they had studied the anger and resentment that people on the other side of the oceans feel toward oppressive western governments and their mighty military power, or at least if they could hear through someone who had witnessed this bitterness directly, maybe they would feel the enormity of the repulsion that may have lead to these disgustingly brutal incident. But on TV screens and through the eyes of mass media, it all seemed like yet another action movie. They could never sense the enormity and gravity of these attacks. And being thousands of miles away from New York, I wasn’t even sure if my young actors would even really believe what had happened and why. Especially since they had nothing to measure this against; never experienced wars, deaths, and devastations to their families, relatives and neighbors. So I thought, perhaps, it might help hem realize the intensity of the situation if I shared some personal experiences about the wars I had witnessed during my lifetime.

I needed to be careful though not to overwhelm them with disheartening stories, and not to glorify the cause of those who commit such barbaric acts. But to speak merely as a director trying to present background information that may inform his cast about his vision for the production. I wanted to use this occasion to help them understand the other side of such events, a side that is rarely covered by the media. I was hoping this might help them see what might enflame the Characters of Pirandello’s play so passionately to want their story told. I wanted to speak with them as a person, as a human being, as one who has observed, witnessed, and even experienced personally the cruel and brutal acts of

untimely intrusion that interrupts one's life and dreams. As one who has lost dear friends and dear family members to such callous and barbaric acts. As one who has been awakened and reawakened by many disastrous, inhumane, unjust, unexplainable and vicious acts of war, of humans killing other humans, of people destroying other people, all in the name of justice and righteousness. I wanted to share with them my personal stories.

In early 1980's, over a million Iranians, and Iraqis, many of whom women and children, unarmed, peaceful and innocent brothers and sisters of the same faith, lost their lives to the Iranian Revolution, and to its aftermath, the eight year long Iran-Iraq war. The border lines of these two Muslim countries became a vast graveyard for hundreds of thousands bodies, some as young as 7 years old - children who willingly crossed the minefields, walking to their death, in order to pave the way for the soldiers. I told my cast about the starry summer nights of 1985, when I visited Iran. During this visit my host family and I would stand on the rooftop staring at what looked like shooting stars flying over our heads. Except, they were not shooting stars. They were Iraqi bombs passing over our heads to fall on the nearby electric and/or water facilities, factories, and populated neighborhoods. I told them how we could calculate what area was hit by counting the seconds after it passed over our heads, and how we then would rush to help the injured and collect the dead. I told them how I felt embarrassed and even ashamed being an American citizen every time my friends and family showed me another piece of an explosive clearly marked Made in USA! I also told them about demonstrations in Washington DC against the Gulf War of the early 90's. How, even though as an Iranian I should have been glad to see Saddam Hussein's army destroyed, as an American I found myself in agreement with hundreds of others who believed that the world's problems could not be solved by bombing innocent people. Thousands who agreed that American funds should not support dictators who kill their own people with weapons we provided. I understood the people who tried to educate others by distributing the news of atrocities that had claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, carried pictures of bodies placed in mass graves, where people, some still alive, were thrown in on top of one another, and buried. We spoke about similar civil rights actions they had read or been told about by their parents, who lived through one of the most sensitive times of the recent American history. We also discussed the relationship between these events and what happened in New York a couple of days earlier. We talked about the similarities and differences of those mass graves and the one produced by the September 11th attacks at the south end of Broadway.

I, then asked if Pirandello's characters could have come from a similar mass grave. In the conversations that ensued, most of these young artists felt concerned that America's actions around the world might have indeed contributed to such hatred that some, like the organizers of this attacks, feel toward us. Of course there were also those who felt America had the right and obligation to *rule* the world since "we are the strongest."

At home that night I watched, over and over, the footage of loaded commercial planes flying directly into the towers of World Trade Center. Suddenly I had a startling and exciting discovery, an exploration that seemed to open the gate for the play's contemporization.

It dawned on me that perhaps the blood is the answer. That maroon-colored thick mass that is left on stage is where the characters enter from and exit to. Just like the twisted metal and crushed concrete are the signs left from the World Trade Center, the blood is the only clue left from those characters that appeared so mysteriously and disappeared so magically. *The blood* is perhaps the place where this alienated family of six shared a life and an afterlife. And as the complete story of 911 lives with those buried underneath the World Trade Center, the *reality* of these incomplete characters exists within the blood that is left on the stage after the young boy kills himself. It is in the mind of this lonesome boy, then, where the characters appear, where they live and where they vanish. In another words Pirandello's characters are the *illusory* invention of a psychotic individual who sit on stage all through the play observing every moment, an alienated and estranged young boy who plays no part in the convoluted relationships of his dysfunctional family. Then I understood why he has not been given a single line to speak. Why he was always "hanging around with that pitiful look on his face." And why the play comes to such an abrupt end when he is commanded to take an active part. I could now see the relevance of this theatre masterpiece to the time and place we live in. I could feel the terror of these *characters* whose lives were left incomplete, much like the lives of those who died in 911. I could feel their alienation both from each other and from the *actors* whose rehearsal they had interrupted. *Alienation* is the shared dilemma of our time. And that is the thread connecting the stage, the audience and Pirandello's characters.

I had spent the summer before in Iran visiting my aging mother and relatives. Although my family and I were received with an unsurpassed hospitality by relatives and friends, I could feel a sense of tacit distance. It was as if by living in the U.S. I have separated myself from them and their troubles. Now, working in Dallas, TX during 911, I could see a perplexing look in the eyes of my cast and crew. The abandonment of Pirandello's characters was now weighing upon my shoulders as well.

Staring at the TV screen and thinking about the play, I remembered a poem by the late Iranian woman poet, Forough Farrokhzad. In a piece entitled "I Pity The Garden" she pictures all of society as a family of five, where the Mother's life "is but a rolled-out prayer rug / facing the terrors of Hell." The Father says, "damn all the fish and all the birds / what difference when I am dead / if the garden is, or the garden is not / my pension is enough for me." The brother is "addicted to philosophy." He "calls the garden a graveyard," and tries to show "that he is pained, tired and desperate," but "his despair is so small / it gets lost each night / in the crowds of the tavern." And the sister "who was once the flower's friend," now "lives on the other side of town." Every time she comes for a visit "and the corners of her skirt get dirty / from sweeping through the impoverished garden / she takes a bath in Eau de cologne." In such a "bewildered" house, the poet herself is terrified. She sees that all the neighbors "have planted machineguns and bombs in their gardens," and the children of her street "have filled their schoolbags with little bombs." She is "afraid of an age that has lost its heart. / Afraid of the thought of so many idle hands, / afraid of so many alienated faces." And though "Like a schoolgirl madly in love / with her geometry lesson," she is "alone!" She still believes that "the garden can be taken to the hospital."

Another sleepless night ensued. The next day, at rehearsal, I told my cast about what had happened the night before. We addressed our own sense of isolation, spoke about our vulnerabilities, and discussed our personal, cultural and politics biases. Most importantly we talked about ourselves. We examined, as honestly as we could, our feelings towards one another, our insecurities and our conviction. That night, we stayed together much longer than usual, as if we were trying to shelter our feelings of loneliness, as if we wanted to hide behind each other's faces. Yet there was a connection. For the first time since the rehearsal began I felt totally connected to both my cast and to the characters of the play. We parted as one family, maybe as dysfunctional as Pirandello's family of six, but as a family non-the-less. I had now established a concept for this production of *Six Characters in Search of An Author*. I had discovered the bridge through which the play will be contemporized, and the *dating* seemed to be well on its way.

In following rehearsals, we discussed varieties of staging methods, considered blocking alternatives and decided on the casting. But the question of blood that is left on stage was still unresolved. We were approaching midway through rehearsals and still I could not understand, nor did I know how to explain, the *real* blood that is left from the body of an *illusory* character once the intruding family of six had suddenly disappeared into the thin air. We still had not discovered how to "deal" with this real blood. All my thoughts seem to lead me back to the boy. The only character who leaves a tangible sign from himself on the stage. What was so different about him that *real* blood could remain after he, the *illusion*, disappeared? I was certain that he, the boy, is the one who has imagined the story. I knew the other five were the creation of his illusionary mind, but what about he himself. How does he, himself, fit in this picture? The answer came to me a few days later.

One afternoon I was playing with my then three-year-old twin daughters. We were making up stories. However, fictional characters created in the story were as real to them as themselves, their mother and I. What taught me a great deal was when one of them, bored or tired, suddenly decided to end her story. She laid herself down and said "then I got old and died". Thinking that this was a continuation of her story, I remained seated waiting for the rest. After a moment she got up in protest. "Why are you still sitting?" She asked. "Don't you see I died?" Then, realizing my confusion, she questioned, "How could you still be living when I, who told your story, am already dead?" Irritated she demanded, "Die. Die!" she shouted "Everyone else is dead too" then she name all those other fictional characters who accompanied us in her story.

I concluded that the mass, which is left on stage, is nothing but the condensed version, if you will, of this family of six who are forced out of the young boy's head. A boy who himself is nothing but a *fantasy* in the *real* world of the actors, a traveling troupe whose dream of completing a performance cycle is shattered time and again.

For some directors think "theatre can never be discussed except in relation to the social, political, scientific, moral [and] cultural world around it." While others believe that the job of theatre is to reconstruct the past. And still others see the function of theatre as mere entertainment. I prefer to use theatre as a tool for socio-political education to

raise the level of *awareness* in my audience. Therefore, in an attempt to link the question of the past to the situation of the present, I use the stage as a place for cultural exploration of the present environment, and by contemporizing the theatrical text I try to build a *bridge* between theatre and the world. In another word, because I cannot be sure to always understand what exactly the playwright had in mind when writing the play, I prefer to allow for the question to grow inside me, to interrupt my life, to invade my privacy. I would rather like to serve this invader by keeping my eyes open and my antennas out. I study the text and try to interpret what happens in the play in light of the events in my cultural environment, and then present a new version of the play. A version that, while loyal to the essence of playwright's script, is a reflection of our contemporary values. Thus I present the contemporary question of the text. It is now the audience's job to supply the answer.

In the director's note for my production of *Six Characters in Search of An Author*, I asked: Is it the actor's profession, creating illusion, which is challenged by the reality of this family of six who "have no reality outside this illusion"? Or is it the reality of these characters' lives that captures the illusion of the stage and changes the reality of the actors themselves? Or are we simply witnessing another staged illusion of the reality of life? Is it us, the audience, observing a play in the making, or are the play's characters observing us perform the role of an audience? Or is it the actors' "game", creating "a perfect illusion of reality" that is shattered by the intrusion of the characters? Are the actors simply a medium for us to understand the imaginary world of the play? Or are the characters in the play, incomplete as they may be, using the actors to achieve a higher state of completion? Or, perhaps, the characters, the actors, and we, the audience, are all materials for making up a story that is created by the "illusory" mind of an individual who, he, himself is nothing but an illusion on this stage.

Richard Foreman tries to "shake the sleeper awake." Pirandello made a similar attempt. The playwright of Sept. 11th did just that. As dreadfully terrible as the deaths of some 3000 people in New York alone, Sept. 11th struck the very core of the stability of our own reality. The question most commonly asked in the aftermath of that day was "How could this happen?" This event that forever changed our perception of what is real. Just like the *real live* actors in Pirandello's play could not conceive of *illusionary* characters walking into their rehearsal, we as the most fortunate of people, living in this country, could not conceive of such a disruption of our lives by backwards, poverty-stricken, abusive and evil-minded individuals. To me all these security barriers, all these screening and baggage checks, all these uniformed, armed *protectors* present in our daily life, are attempts to keep those unknown characters out of the safe rehearsal hall of our reality.

As the audience left this production of *Six Characters in Search of An Author* they wondered if indeed "these characters had just walked out of Ground Zero." The critic for the Dallas Morning News concluded his review with: "I wept for terror and joy all through the final hour of this production. I wept walking back to the car. I wept all the way home."

I do not know why this critic wept, but it seems that this classic play related to him on a contemporary level. I did not set out to make *Six Characters* into a contemporary production, but by leaving myself open to the play and to the world in which I live, the play contemporized itself.

Mahmood Karimi-Hakak