Study guide for

Pirandello’s
HENRY IV

In a new version by
Tom Stoppard
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‘Henry IV is a play about madness, time, aging, masks, and the attempt to escape from one reality and substitute another of one’s own making. In this substitution we see a man attempt to control his life in the same way that a playwright shapes his play or an actor his character.’

Richard Oliver, Dreams of Passion: The Theatre of Luigi Pirandello

Cast

In order of appearance

Harold: Stuart Burt
Landolf: James Lance
Ordulf: Neil McDermott
Bertold: Nitzan Sharron
Giovanni: Brian Poyser
Marquis Carlo Di Nolli: Orlando Wells
Baron Tito Belcredi: David Yelland
Marchese Matilda: Francesca Annis
Frida: Tania Emery
Doctor: Robert Demeger
Henry IV: Ian McDiarmid

Creative Team

Director: Michael Grandage
Designer: Christopher Oram
Lighting Designer: Neil Austin
Music & Sound Score: Adam Cork
Sound Designer: Fergus O’Hare

Photograph by Ivan Kyncl

Ian McDiarmid as Henry IV in Tom Stoppard’s version of Pirandello’s HENRY IV, Donmar 2004
Plot summary

The play opens in what appears to be the throne room of the 11th century Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV. It soon transpires that courtiers in medieval costumes are taking part in a charade in present day Italy. They have been hired to pretend to be the counsellors of a mad nobleman who has believed himself to be Henry IV since falling off a horse 20 years earlier. The accident took place during a pageant in which the nobleman was dressed as the Emperor Henry IV. His wealthy sister – who has recently died – provided him with the palace and the followers to enable him to live out his delusion.

In Act One, a group of aristocrats arrive to meet Henry. They are:

The Marquis di Nolli - Henry’s Nephew, the son of his recently deceased sister
Frida - Di Nolli’s fiancée
Matilda - Frida’s Mother and the woman whom Henry was formerly in love with.
Belcredi – Matilda’s lover and Henry’s old rival
Genoni – A Doctor

The aristocrats have to dress up in 11th century style costumes and assume the roles of characters known to the Emperor, Henry IV, before they can meet him.

In Act Two, the aristocrats – led by the Doctor – initiate a strategy to shock Henry out of his madness. Frida and Di Nolli are dressed in masquerade costumes to resemble the young Henry and Matilda. They are to stand in front of two portraits of the young Henry and Matilda - painted in the costumes worn during the fateful pageant when Henry was still young and sane.

Meanwhile, Henry reveals to his counsellors that he is not mad at all; after 12 years of believing he was actually Henry IV, he then became conscious of his true identity, although chose to continue to live out his created fiction of madness.

When the masqueraded Frida in Act Three confronts Henry, he is almost driven mad again by seeing what he thinks is the portrait of Matilda come to life. When Belcredi accuses Henry of play-acting, Henry takes his revenge and stabs Belcredi to death. Having acted in sanity, he is now perceived to be actually mad and the play ends with his realisation that he has now trapped himself in the role of the mad Emperor for the rest of his life.
A performance history of Henry IV

Early Italian stagings of Henry IV and subsequent productions in Britain.

Milan, 1922
The first production of Henry IV was staged at the Teatro Manzoni, Milan, on 24 February 1922. It was performed by Ruggero Ruggeri’s Company, with Ruggeri playing the title role.

Rome, 1925
The play was revived at the Teatro Argentina, Rome, on the 11 June 1925 by Luigi Pirandello’s Company.

Britain, 1924 and 1925
This was followed by a European tour where the play received its first professional British staging at the New Oxford Theatre in late June 1925 – albeit in Italian – again, with Ruggeri playing the title role. (There had been an amateur production of the play at the Amateur Dramatic Club, Cambridge, 7 June 1924, translated by Edward Storer):

Madness, whether treated poetically as by Shakespeare, or ironically, as by Pirandello, is always a moving spectacle. It becomes terrible at the hands of Ruggero Ruggeri.

The Times, 19 June 1925

Later in the same year, the play received another production at the Everyman Theatre, Hampstead, with Ernest Milton in the title role. The translation used was again by Edward Storer:

Mr Milton was better than the actor in the A.D.C.’s (the Amateur Dramatic Club, Cambridge) production of a year ago – as perhaps can go without saying, as the comparison is that of a professional against amateur – but he was also more interesting, I thought, even than the star tragedian of Signor Pirandello’s Company that recently appeared in London.

Unmarked Newspaper Review, Theatre Museum Archives
Mr Milton did, from this first entrance, with his horribly unreal flaxen hair, his haggard painted cheeks, and his pale robe of sackcloth hanging on him like a shroud, stamp on the audience once and for all the shuddering horror of an apparition from another world – not from the world beyond the grave, but from the world of one who has entered the grave in his own lifetime.

Unmarked Newspaper Review, Theatre Museum Archives

London, 1953
The play was next revived in London at St James’ Theatre on 20 April 1953, when Ruggero Ruggeri – at the age of 82 – returned to London with another Italian production of the play.

Everything hangs on the part of the “Emperor” who explores the no-mans land between illusion and so-called truth, and Signor Ruggeri, who played the part so memorably in 1925, is an actor who even now has the power to make us shy over our shadows: a sly glint in the eye, a speaking hand movement, and a power to surprise us which mark the great interpreter.

Manchester Guardian, 22 April 1953

London, 1973
London didn’t see its next staging of Henry IV until February 1974, when Rex Harrison played Henry at Her Majesty’s Theatre. Clifford William’s directed:

Harrison assumes the pursy, dropsical look of the incarcerated invalid. On each bloated cheek is a dab of red paint. The hair is lank, the skin bewhiskered, the head rigid and strained, the eyes almost blind. Yet he has a chilling majesty, querulously issuing high, off-hand orders and dominating the court like a ruined cathedral in its close.


London, 1990
The play’s most recent London production was in May 1990 at the Wyndham’s Theatre with Richard Harris playing Henry:

…from the moment when he suddenly removes his Henry IV make-up and wig and declares, with a breathtakingly, blokey casualness that he is ‘so bloody bored’ with the whole pretence, Harris plays the part with a wonderfully tamed and caustic daring.

‘He who plays the king’, Paul Taylor, The Independent, 26 May 1990
The performance history of Henry IV in context.

Pirandello ranks in importance with Goldoni in the Italian theatre and has had a major influence on the development of modern European drama. Why, then, has Henry IV received so few revivals in Britain since the first professional production staged here eighty years ago?

The British Theatre wanting to capture the ‘zeitgeist’ of modern European drama can best explain the early productions that were staged in Britain. In a post-First World War Britain, where the ideas of Sigmund Freud were being embraced into the culture, it seems fitting that audiences should be drawn to a play that explores the boundaries of illusion and reality in such a profound way. Freud had revealed the multi-dimensionality of personality, as well as the unconscious. It was Pirandello’s transformation of these thoughts from theory to artistic creation that was so timely for audiences throughout Europe.

However, the play was perceived to be problematic in terms of its staging, which could account for it not being revived in London again until nearly twenty years after Pirandello’s death and nearly a decade after the Second World War. The plot was deemed to be complex, with the opening of the play taken up with the exposition of plot and details relating to Henry IV and his relationship with Pope Gregory. Indeed, writing about the 1953 London revival in The Daily Mail, Cecil Wilson commented that ‘even the Italian Ambassador, Signor Brosio, confessed in the interval that he could hardly find his way through the maze.’

The rationale for the subsequent revival in 1974 was attributed by some of the critics to the general interest in the ideas of R. D. Laing at the time. Michael Billington, writing in the Guardian, was struck by the production’s ‘extraordinary resonant modernity’:

...when Henry claims that the madman “can challenge your logic with a logic of his own” and that the sane man says a thing can’t be while the madman says everything can be, we are plunged straight into the world of R. D. Laing

The Guardian, 21 February 1974

Irving Wardle noted that ‘in Langian terms, he (Henry) has retreated into the eleventh-century masquerade as a strategy for living in an unlovable situation.’

When Billington saw the play again, during its revival at the Wyndham’s Theatre in 1990 in the latter years of the Thatcher Government, it appeared to him to be ‘a tougher, harsher work about a man trapped inside a historical mask, denied wife, child or ordinary human contact.’ A solitary protagonist, viewed by an audience who’s Prime Minister had told them there was ‘no such thing as Society’.
Henry IV in a new version by Tom Stoppard at the Donmar Warehouse, 2004

Michael Grandage, the Donmar’s Artistic Director and the director of HENRY IV, recognised the problematic areas of the play - as discussed in the previous section – feeling that the original play was a somewhat impenetrable piece for a contemporary theatre audience. This is why he commissioned Tom Stoppard to create a new version of the play; to bring it to life and make it watchable. The key creative decision made when conceiving this new version of the play was to place HENRY IV’s Medieval Court against a contemporary backdrop. The production is therefore set in 2004 as opposed to the 1920s – the setting contemporary to Pirandello at the time of writing the play. The production has been given a deliberately modern feel, with, for example, the ‘aristocrats’ appearing in this season’s Georgio Armani designs when they arrive at Henry’s court.

‘This translation flows; it has passion and humour. You can hear Tom Stoppard’s voice in the play.’

Charlie Westenra, Assistant Director
Key concepts and ideas in the Pirandellian play

This section looks at the fundamental concepts and ideas behind Pirandello’s plays – with particular reference to *Henry IV*. See how many of these ideas you can identify when you watch the Donmar’s production of the play.

**The Face and the Mask**

The main idea behind most of Pirandello’s plays is that Life (or reality or time) is fluid and indefinable and that man uses reason to give life definition. But, because life is indefinable such concepts are illusions. Man is sometimes aware of this illusionary nature of his concepts, but ‘anything without structure fills him with dread and uncertainty’. The drama that Pirandello created from this idea is usually described with reference to the **face** and the **mask**. The face represents the complex suffering of the individual; the mask represents the external form and social laws. For Pirandello, all social institutions and systems of thought – from religion and law to philosophy and morality – are ways in which society creates a mask, fixing the face of man by classifying him. As well as the mask being put on the face by the external world, Pirandello believed that it could often be the construct of internal demands. The mask can sometimes be literal, as in his play *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, or take the form of costumes, make-up and props, as in *Henry IV*. It can also be a metaphorical concept.

**The Theatre of the Looking Glass**

Man’s acceptance by society of a superimposed identity is the concept behind Pirandello’s **teatro dello specchio** (theatre of the looking glass). The image of the mirror and reflection occurs in most of his plays. However, the reflecting mirror is the inner eye as well as the eye of the world.

The portraits of the young Henry and Matilda hung in the throne room exemplify this idea:

LANDOLF: they’re paintings to the touch. But to Himself, seeing as he never touches them…to him they’re more like, whatstis, representations of – yes – what you’d see in a mirror. That one is him just as he is, in this throne room which is right in every detail, no surprises, see? If it was a mirror, you’d see yourself in the eleventh century. So that’s what he sees. Himself. So it’s like mirrors reflecting back a world which comes to life in them, like it will for you, you’ll see, don’t worry.

*HENRY IV* by Tom Stoppard, Act One.
Costruirsi – building yourself up

When Pirandello’s characters put on their masks to hide their shameful faces, they are building themselves up into a role, such as the role of the madman as taken on by the nobleman in Henry IV. This is what Pirandello’s term costruirsi refers to. The term becomes even more complex when considering the way in which Henry builds himself into a role: he is not simply playing Henry IV; he is playing the older Henry IV playing the young, 26 year old Henry of the portrait, from which he longs to be freed. With his dyed hair and his rouged cheeks, he enacts a masquerade within a masquerade.

HENRY: A woman who wishes she were a man... an old man who wishes he were young... None of us lies or pretends – what happens is, in all sincerity, we inhabit the self we have chosen for ourselves, and don’t let go. But while you’re holding tight, gripping on to your monk’s robe, Monsignor, from out your sleeve something slithers without you noticing: your life!

HENRY IV by Tom Stoppard, Act One

A play about time.

The passing of time is a central theme in Henry IV. Henry has a need to live in his youth; yet at the same time he has lost eighteen years of his original life, including the twelve years after the accident that have been stolen from him - when he was oblivious to his existence.

‘Henry IV’ is a play about the process of time, its relativity, and its constant and unstoppable passing. It is also about a man’s most critical experience of time’s passing - aging. The process of growing old – of becoming a series of other persons, physically as well as psychologically, of remembering what one once looked like and acted like – is dealt with graphically. The fixity of one’s image in the past (as represented concretely by the paintings of Henry and Matilda) is contrasted with the change of image in the present, including the use of makeup in a futile attempt to stop the change of time and make life conform to the image of the past.’

Dreams of Passion: The Theatre of Luigi Pirandello by Roger Oliver, page 131
**Themes of Madness, Reality & Illusion**

MATILDA: ‘I’ll never forget it, those faces…distorted, appalled in the face of his fury, which was no longer a masquerade but madness unmasked -

HENRY IV by Tom Stoppard, Act One

Henry’s madness is inextricably linked to notions of reality and illusion. There is no doubt that Henry’s madness resulted from the knock to his head acquired during the fall from his horse at the pageant. However, we discover that he is ‘playing’ the madman when he declares himself sane in Act II; yet he laughs ‘insanely’ according to the stage directions in Act III as he takes Frida in his arms prior to his ‘mad’ act of killing Belcredi. Before killing Belcredi, Henry has the choice of dropping his persona as Henry IV; after it, he will be trapped inside the persona, as he was when his madness was real. The theatrical metaphor has been extended: the mask has become a reality and he must now give his performance as Henry IV forever.

**Discussion Point**

Our culture seems to have become pre-occupied with glimpsing into the ‘real’ world of other people’s lives, from exposes of celebrities in tabloid newspapers, to reality TV shows. To what extent are we presented with ‘real’ or ‘constructed’ truths through these media?

**Practical Exercise**

How would you approach playing the role of Henry IV? Give particular thought to how you would contrast your performance as the ‘real’ Henry with the ‘mad’ Henry.

In pairs, put your ideas into practice by rehearsing this short section from Act II, where Henry brings to a close his audience with the ‘aristocrats’ in their feigned guises. Take it in turns to play Henry, with the other person taking on the role of director.

HENRY: “... (to the Doctor) What I think, Monsignor, is that ghosts for the most part are fragments of the unconscious escaping from our dreams, and sometimes when we see them wide-awake, in broad daylight, they startle us. I’m always frightened in the night when they appear – so many disjointed images, people laughing, riders got down from their horses... I’m frightened sometimes by the blood pounding through my vains in the stillness of the night, like the heavy thud of footsteps in distant rooms... but I’ve kept you standing here long enough. My respects, Duchess, and regards to you, Monsignor.

(Matilda and the Doctor bow in return, and leave. Henry closes the door and turns around, changed.)

What a bunch of wankers! I played them like a piano with a different colour for every key – I only had to touch them – white, red, yellow and green – and that other one, Peter Damien! – Ha! I saw through him alright! He didn’t dare show his face again!”

HENRY IV by Tom Stoppard, Act Two
The role of set design and costume in HENRY IV

Setting and costume are integral both to Henry’s creation of his Medieval world and to Pirandello in his creation of the world of the play.

**Design concepts for the production**

The Throne Room – where the play opens – is where Henry receives his visitors and gives his performance. The text intimates that it has been built to give the impression of being in an 11th century palace – but behind the scenes has the trappings of twenty first century living – such as electricity. As mentioned earlier, the Donmar’s production has been given a deliberately modern feel, with, for example, the ‘aristocrats’ appearing in this seasons Armani designs when they arrive at Henry’s court, emphasising the notion of all the characters – not just Henry – building themselves up into a role to present themselves to society. This contemporary style of dress will also emphasis the conflict between past and present in strikingly visual terms.

**Observation point**

After you have seen the production, assess the overall visual impact of the play, in terms of the way set and costumes were used to highlight the central ideas of the piece.

**Design concepts for ‘the play within a play’**

The counsellors stress the need for the visitors to wear medieval costumes when they meet Henry and enter his illusionary world. As the counsellors dress Matilda, Belcredi and the Doctor for their meeting with Henry, they emphasise that the person they have chosen to represent is unimportant: different people often meet Henry in the same costume as the same historical character. As Landolf says, Henry ‘doesn’t take in faces, only clothes’. In a society so pre-occupied with ‘surface’ values, it is natural that such an assumption should be made.

When the visitors finally meet Henry, he comments on his dyed hair colour as if it were real. The stage directions read that he ‘shows Matilda his hair colour, almost coquettishly’ saying ‘Look! Still blond!’ Yet later in the scene he intimates that he is aware of the construction that he has created:

**HENRY:** We all hug our idea of ourselves to ourselves. As our hair turns greyer, we keep pace with the colouring bottle. It is of no consequence that I fool nobody. You, Duchess, don’t fool yourself or anybody else – perhaps the image in your mirror, just a tiny bit. I do it to amuse myself. You do it in earnest. But no amount of
earnestness stops it being a masquerade, and
I’m not referring to your cloak and coronet.
I’m talking about a memory of yourself you
want to hold tight, the memory of a day gone
by when to be fair-haired was your delight
—or dark haired if you were dark. The faded
memory of being young.’

HENRY IV by Tom Stoppard, Act One

The Portraits

A key feature in the room is two ‘portraits’. In this production
they are represented as old style, sepia photographs,
as opposed to paintings, in order to emphasise the
contemporary feel of the play. The photos are of Henry and
Matilda – the woman he loved at the time of the accident
—as they appeared in Medieval dress at the masquerade.
Su-Fern Lee - the Donmar’s volunteer in the Development Department - interviews the Designer of HENRY IV, Christopher Oram and asks him about his inspiration for the play

SFL: Henry IV by Tom Stoppard, Can you tell me how you started work on HENRY IV?

CO: Well HENRY has been quite a challenging show to research. First of all, there is the assumption that it is about Henry IV of England. Everyone assumes that it is by Shakespeare, or assumes it is a version of the Shakespeare story about Falstaff. In fact, you are looking at a whole different era and the truth about Henry IV of Germany is that he lived in the 11th century and that consequently he is practically un-researchable. He is very old, about 1000 years old, and lived in a period closer to the Roman Empire than to the medieval world. Hardly anything from that period still exists and what does exist is gothic cathedral art, manuscripts and a few paintings. So trying to find out about him is very difficult. There is only one picture which claims to be Henry IV, but it is a generic medieval figure with a crown and could practically be anybody!

This is both good and bad – on one level, nobody knows if I get it wrong, and I feel in reasonably safe territory. But the play is not just about Henry IV of Germany, it is a madman in 2004 thinking that he is Henry IV. So the costumes are not historical re-enactment costumes and are not the real clothes of the period, but are actually carnival costumes from a fancy dress party. There is also within the context of the play, a sort of cheat in that to support Henry’s madness, people have created this world around him so that the scenery is in fact scenery and the costumes are in fact costumes.

In terms of the scenery, I have made a particularly strong choice with the scale of the columns in HENRY IV - I wanted them to look big and epic. The less you put on the stage, the bigger the space seems. So I am playing a game to try and create a sense of claustrophobia by using massive architectural elements that I hope suggest the world is even bigger than what is actually visible. We are going to dwarf these characters with the pillars in the same way Henry’s mania dwarfs the play. The scale of the environment is reflective of his megalomania and the fact that he truly thinks he is Henry IV.

SFL: Is everything being especially created for this show?

CO: Everything is being specially made - all the medieval stuff and the costumes of 11th century German Royalty. But the costumes are made for people from Italy, so they are light weight fabrics as opposed to say coarse wool. We are creating everything in lightweight linens because the play is set in Italy, and we have a fantastic excuse to change things. I think the girls don’t have to have period medieval slippers, they can have lovely stilettos because they would want to look taller and more graceful and elegant. So I can really dress them up! The balance is to enjoy the cheat, and not be painfully accurate about the whole thing.

There is a line in the play that is very unhelpful - it says the characters have the best costume makers in Italy make their costumes. It’s difficult for us because we had a really strict budget for this! I know that if one were these people, the costumes would probably be more ornate and that they would spend more money on them. I had to make choices aesthetically and financially and you realise that the more you embroider something the more it costs. Put simply, we had to choose where we were going to energise the resources we had. For this show we needed contemporary costumes and period costumes and an awful lot of other stuff. It’s a lot to manage for a teeny tiny theatre with a teeny tiny budget.
SFL: And the play has a large cast as well.
CO: Yes, it is a very large cast, which is part of the excitement of doing it. It’s not one of those plays with only two people where everything is very static. Here you have a lot of people running around and a lot of big costumes.

SFL: With so many people on stage does that mean that your set is very pared down?
CO: I have done nine shows here at the Donmar and I have a pretty good understanding of how the stage works. You can’t fill it with scenery, because although it can look fabulous from the front two rows of the theatre, three-quarters of the audience don’t sit there. I would feel terrible if people in the audience couldn’t see properly or felt excluded from show. When I am approaching a design, I start with the barest space and then bring in elements that are going to support the world of the play. I leave a clear stage to allow a director or choreographer to create pictures through movement. I work very closely with directors for the design, in order to create the right atmosphere. We live in the world where the computers can generate images that are simply beyond construction, and audiences are used to that, so it’s best not to compete.

SFL: How much input do you get from the director?
CO: A lot! My collaboration with Michael (Grandage) stretches back over twenty productions so we are almost to the point of being non-communicative because I know how he works.

SFL: How did you collaborate with Armani, who supplied the modern day costumes?
CO: There is no way we could have done the show without their contribution. To be honest, we were breaking the costume budget with the medieval costumes alone. This is a hugely ambitious costume show for the Donmar Warehouse. Without the help of Armani, I would be pacing up and down Oxford Street, going into Oxfam and buying up suits that sort of look smart! Suddenly, we have the opportunity to get the real thing. No matter what anyone thinks of these clothes, they are the clothes that these people would wear. They are upmarket, smart, beautiful and true to the world of the play.

SFL: Did you have to brief the Armani designers to give them the background of the play?
CO: Certainly in terms of the characters. For example, Robert (Demeger) is playing the doctor so obviously he can’t wear shorts and sandals. He’s got to look like he just arrived from Harley Street. Di Nolli (Orlando Wells) is in mourning, so there are obviously limitations there as well. But within that context we can choose anything that is in the Armani shop. Matilda (Francesca Annis) is in slacks, a jacket and a scarf. It’s an extreme contrast - this group from the 20th century collides with the Medieval world. There are strong contemporary colours and softer historical ones and they jar against each other. When the group arrives in their beautifully tailored, brightly coloured clothes in this very medieval gothic environment, they look fantastic and shocking and bizarre.
Pirandello and Stoppard

Tom Stoppard has said that any similarities to Pirandello in his own work should not be considered as proof of direct literary influence, but as evidence of the ‘impossibility’ for any contemporary Western playwright ‘to write a play that is totally unlike Beckett, Pirandello, Kafka…’

It is one of Stoppard’s early works, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, that has been identified as the play which most clearly shares themes and situations evident in Pirandello’s two best-known plays, *Henry IV* and *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. All three plays use theatre as a metaphor: in *Henry IV* Henry is both actor, director and playwright in the enactment of his life; in *Six characters in Search of an Author* the characters interrupt a rehearsal of another play, looking for an author to give life to their own; in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, the protagonists are caught in a script being written by someone else.

As Pirandello did in *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and *Henry IV*, Stoppard gives an added dramatic life to characters who have already been written: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two minor characters from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Two characters who, like Henry, are imprisoned in a timeless void.

Pirandello and Stanislavski

Pirandello formed his own company of actors whom he taught using Stanislavski’s techniques. Indeed, Stanislavski’s book, *Building a Character*, discusses the process of creating a character as being an act of construction, which is not dissimilar to Pirandello’s concept of *costruisi*.

Practical Exercise

Choose one character from *Henry IV*. Drawing on your knowledge of Stanislavski, how would you approach the physical realisation of this character - in terms of expressions, movement and speech - in performance?
Pirandello and Shakespeare

Parallels can be drawn between *Henry IV* and *Hamlet*. Hamlet’s reference to art holding a mirror up to nature seems synonymous with Pirandello’s *teatro dello specchio* (theatre of the looking glass). Just as Hamlet uses the play, ‘The Mousetrap’ to catch the conscience of Claudius, so Pirandello forces a crisis of recognition to catch first the consciences of some of his characters and then his audience.

Pirandello and Pirandello

Identity and the dual nature of the human personality was an issue that concerned Pirandello personally. Before marrying his wife, Antonietta, he wrote to her alerting her to the two sides of his own personality:

‘There are almost two people within me. You already know one of them; not even I know the other one very well…. The former is taciturn and continually lost in thought; the latter speaks with ease, makes jokes and isn’t adverse to laughing and making other laugh… I am perpetually divided between these two persons…. Which of the two will you love the most, my Antonietta?’

Discussion Point

‘The Playwrights who follow Pirandello are frequently better artists, but none would have been the same without him… In his insights into the disintegration of personality and the isolation of man, he anticipates Samuel Beckett; in his unremitting war on language, theory, concepts, and the collective mind, he anticipates Eugene Ionesco; in his approach to the conflict of truth and illusion, he anticipates Eugene O’Neill (and later, Harold Pinter and Edward Albee); in his experiments with the theatre, he anticipates a host of experimental dramatists, including Thornton Wilder and Jack Gelber; in his use of the interplay between actors and characters, he anticipates Jean Anouilh; in his concept of man as a role-playing animal, he anticipates Jean Genet. The extent of this partial list of influences marks Pirandello as the most seminal dramatist of our time…’

Robert Brustein, ‘The Theatre of Revolt’

These comments of Robert Brustein’s were published over thirty years ago, a few years before the 1974 revival of *Henry IV* at Her Majesty’s Theatre. Which playwrights’ work that you have seen and/or studied appears to build on Pirandello’s dramatic style?
The Rehearsal Process

Approaching rehearsals for HENRY IV

Michael Grandage doesn’t present his overall concept for a production to his cast at the start of the rehearsal process. He likes to get straight into exploratory rehearsals where the individual actors can begin discovering the play and find their characters. The production is given space to grow, rather than having a vision imposed on it. On this occasion, the design concept was discussed as it plays such an integral part in the production. The company also spent the first four days of rehearsal with Tom Stoppard, working out some of the complexities of the text – such as the chronology of Henry’s life - as well as collectively going through some of the more basic details such as the geography of the house/palace. (The counsellors drew up a map of the house, which was referred to during the early part of the rehearsal process).

One issue that Michael did focus on in the early stages of rehearsal was locating the world of the play and helping the actors discover the texture for this world; finding an energy for the lines that were flying across the space – not out of hate - but out of the Latin temperament of the play’s culture.

As in rehearsals for any play, there have been times when the director and the actors have been presented with an obstacle as to how a particular line should be said or what it means. In these instances, they have gone back to the literal translation of Pirandello’s play (translated word for word from his original) for guidance. If this strategy didn’t help them to find a creative solution, they would invariably decide to ‘ask Tom’ next time he visited the rehearsal room. That is one advantage of working on a version of a classic text created by a contemporary writer: they can be with you in the rehearsal room to guide you on your journey.

‘The rehearsal process has involved discovering Stoppard’s and Pirandello’s intentions and making them our own.’

Charlie Westenra, Assistant Director

Inside the rehearsal room

The following observations were made during a rehearsal of Act II that took place three weeks into the five-week rehearsal period. The approaches taken by the director and the actors during this rehearsal might help you in your own practical exploration of the play, or in rehearsals for other texts that you might be working on.
Working on entrances

Act II is set in ‘Another room in the villa. Adjoining the throne room, furnished in a plain antique style’. Michael was keen for the actors to show the curiosity of entering the room – yet another room in the palace - for the first time.

Michael also worked on balancing the needs of the actors with the requirements of the scene. For example, Robert Demeger, playing the Doctor, felt he had a lot of energy to dispel as he entered the scene - which had built up during his meeting with Henry IV from where he’d just come – and felt he needed to enter before Belcredi and Matilda. However, the scene is opened by Belcredi, who needs to be in a strong position on stage in order to do this.

Identifying required levels of energy

MATILDA: I’m telling you he recognised me. When he looked into my eyes, he knew me.

Michael was captivated by the energy that he felt between Belcredi and Matilda as Belcredi blocks Matilda’s attempts to convince him that Henry recognised her. He liked the ‘fire’ that he saw between the two of them; this was the first time that the actors had created this moment during rehearsals. By identifying this electrifying moment, created for the first time during this rehearsal, the director is supporting his actors and enabling them to locate the same energy in subsequent rehearsals and performances.
Helping the audience to receive plot information

David Yelland, the actor playing Belcredi, noted that the altercations between himself and Matilda are always about who has the last word, rather than a dispute about the subject matter. As Michael pointed out, dramatically, we need both so that the audience ‘gets the point’.

Clarifying characters’ intentions for saying lines.

Rehearsals offer the opportunity for the director and/or actors to realise the meaning of lines and moments of action that the text doesn’t make clear for them. During this rehearsal, Francesca Annis - playing Matilda - David and Michael, all seemed unclear as to why the stage directions say there is an ‘awkward pause’ after Matilda’s line, ‘Or perhaps you have another explanation why he took an instant dislike to you?, referring to Henry’s attitude towards Belcredi at the meeting from which they have just come. Why is there a pause? Why doesn’t Belcridi come back with a witty retort, as is characteristic of his nature? And what is the other explanation for Henry having taken a dislike to Belcredi? Is it because Henry realised that Belcredi and Matilda were lovers? Is the line said by Matilda simply a way to try and get Belcredi to shut up? This was one of the instances where the literal translation was referred to. Pirandello’s stage directions read: From the tone of the question, the implied answer must be clear: ‘Because he understood that you’re my lover’. BELCREDI understands this perfectly, and at once becomes lost in a vain smile’. Nobody felt that this was how the line should be played. It was decided to consult Tom Stoppard - their living writer- when he came into rehearsal the following day.

Observation point

When you see the production, try and identify the final decisions made by the company regarding this sequence.

Invisible links and the ‘mental highlighting pen’.

When directing, Michael encourages the actors to detect the ‘invisible links’ in the text: those key moments that thread the through line of action together. One such moment occurs during the following exchange between the Doctor and Belcredi, when the Doctor refers to a key element of the action which will occur later in the scene: Frida’s appearance in the costume worn by her mother, Matilda, in the portrait; the ruse whereby Henry is to be ‘shocked’ out of his madness in Act III.

DOCTOR:  Let’s not rush things. We have to wait till it’s dark and it won’t take a minute to set up. If we can give him a shock and snap the thread that binds him from his delusion, give him back what he longs for – he said it himself; you can’t stay twenty-six for ever! – and free him from his prison – that’s the way he sees it –

BELCREDI:  - he’ll be cured! Saved by the alienation technique!
DOCTOR: His clock stopped, and we’re checking our watches for the critical moment when…with a quick shake, we might get his clock ticking again, after all this time.

Robert noted that he would need to get his ‘mental highlighting pen’ out for this sequence, accentuating its importance to the audience in relation to the action that follows.

**Realising visual signifiers in performance**

Michael encouraged the actors to maximise the visual impact of Frida’s entrance dressed as the young Marchese of Tuscany:

MATILDA: She’s me! My god, can you see? Stop there, Frida! She’s my portrait come to life!

The image of Frida in her costume remains the focus of the following scene, encapsulating in 3D Belcredi’s argument that ‘the younger generation still have to go through what we went through…..get older, make more or less the same mistakes.’

BELCREDI: Look at her! *(he points at Frida)* – centuries ahead of us, the Marchese Matilda of Tuscany.

**Observation point**

As you watch this scene in production, identify how the stage picture created by the actors highlights the visual importance of this scene.
In a group, read through the following extract from the opening of Tom Stoppard’s version of HENRY IV. The scene introduces us to Henry’s counsellors, Landolf, Harold and Ordulf. They are introducing a new counsellor, Bertold, to life at Henry’s palace.

Extract 1

ACT ONE
The Throne Room. There are two full-length, life size portraits, of a young man and a young woman dressed as Henry IV and Matilda, Countess of Tuscany. Harold, Landolf, Ordulf and Bertold - wearing the costumes of eleventh-century German knights - enter.

LANDOLF Next - the throne room!
HAROLD The throne room of the Emperor’s Palace at Goslar!
ORDULF Or could be Hartzburg ...
HAROLD ... or Worms, depending.
LANDOLF Depending on where we are in the story - he keeps us on the hop.
ORDULF Saxony ...
HAROLD Lombardy ...
LANDOLF The Rhine...
ORDULF Keep your voice down
HAROLD He’s asleep
BERTOLD Hang about. I’m confused. I thought we were doing Henry IV.
LANDOLF So?
BERTOLD Well, this place, these get-ups - it’s not him
ORDULF Who?
BERTOLD The King of France, Henry IV.
LANDOLF Whooops.
ORDULF He thought it was the French one.
LANDOLF Wrong country, mate, wrong century, wrong Henry.
HAROLD It’s the German Henry IV, Salian Dynasty.
ORDULF The Holy Roman Emperor.
LANDOLF The Canossa one - walked to Canossa to get absolution from the Pope. Church v State, that’s the game round here, day in, day out.
ORDULF Emperor at home to Pope -
HAROLD Pope away to Anti-Pope -
LANDOLF King away to Anti-King -
ORDULF Like war with Saxony -
HAROLD Plus with revolting barons
LANDOLF His own kids ...
BERTOLD Now I know why I’ve been feeling wrong in these clothes, these are not your French 1580’s.
HAROLD Forget the 1580’s.
ORDULF Think the ten-hundreds.
LANDOLF Work it out, if Canossa was January 1071 ...
BERTOLD I’m fucked.
ORDULF Royally.

BERTOLD I’ve been reading up the wrong ...
LANDOLF Sad. We’re four hundred years ahead of you, you’re not even a twinkle in our eye.
BERTOLD (angered) You got any idea how much stuff I read about Henry IV of France in the last two weeks?
HAROLD Didn’t you know Tony was our Adalbert, Bishop of Bremen?
BERTOLD What Adalbert? - no one told me anything!
LANDOLF Well, when Tony died, at first the young Count
BERTOLD The Count Di Nolli? He’s the one ...
LANDOLF He must have thought you knew.
BERTOLD ... first he thought the three of us would do. Then Himself started moaning - ‘They’ve driven out Adalbert!’ - he didn’t realise “Adalbert” had died on us, he thought the Bishops of Cologne and Mainz had booted him out, Tony I mean, all clear so far?
BERTOLD Wait. Bishop Tony of what?
ORDULF You’re fucked.
BERTOLD So what am I playing?
ORDULF Um, Bertold.
BERTOLD Bertold who? Why Bertold?
LANDOLF Himself kept yelling, “They’ve driven out Adalbert, so get me Bertold! I want Bertold!”
HAROLD We eyeballed each other - who dat?
LANDOLF Never heard of him.
ORDULF And here you are.
LANDOLF You’ll be great.
BERTOLD Forget it, which way’s out?
HAROLD No, no, relax.
LANDOLF This’ll cheer you up - we don’t know who we are either. He’s Harold, he’s Ordulf, I’m Landolf, that’s what he calls us so that’s who we are, you get used to it. But who are we really? ... Just names of the period. Same with you, I suppose, Bertold. Tony was the only one with a proper character, the Bishop of Bremen. He was a good Bishop, too, God rest him.
BERTOLD I keep my voice down
ORDULF The Rhine ...
HAROLD Lombardy ...
ORDULF Saxony ...
LANDOLF Depending on where we are in the story - he keeps us on the hop.
HAROLD ... or Worms, depending.
ORDULF Or could be Hartzburg ...
LANDOLF Next - the throne room!
HAROLD Always reading himself up.
LANDOLF And he bossed Himself about, not himself, Himself, his Majesty, he was like his teacher. With us, we’re his Privy Counsellors but we’re only here to fill space. It’s in the books - the barons had it in for Henry for surrounding himself with young toffs not quite out of the top drawer, so that’s us. Royal hangers-on, do anything for him, like a drink, a few laughs ...
BERTOLD Laughs?
HAROLD Just do what we do.
ORDULF It’s not as easy as it looks.
LANDOLF Bit of a waste really. We’ve got the scenery, we’ve got the costumes, we could put on proper shows, history’s always popular, and there’s enough stuff in Henry IV for several tragedies. But we four - we’re stranded, nobody gives us our moves, nothing to act, it’s that old form-without-content. All we can do is ... this. We’re worse off than the real ones. They were given sod all to play, true, but they didn’t know that, so they just did what they did because that’s what they did. Life. Which means, look after number one. They sold titles and stuff. And here we are, great outfits, handsome surroundings, shame about the puppets.
HAROLD No, fair do’s, you have to be ready to come out with the right answer or you’re in trouble.
LANDOLF Yeh, that’s true.
BERTOLD Well, that’s it, innit? How’m I supposed to give him the right answer when I’ve been learning the wrong Henry?
HAROLD You’ll have to put that right right off.
ORDULF We’ll all pitch in.
LANDOLF There’s lots of stuff on him, a quick skim will do you for now.
Discussion Points

What strategies does Stoppard use in his writing to introduce the audience to the central ideas of the play?

How would you define the style and genre of the extract? Justify your response with examples from the dialogue and action.

Now read through the second extract, in which Matilda, Belcredi and the Doctor are costumed by the counsellors in preparation for their meeting with Henry.

Extract 2

LANDOLF Yes sir - and says he brings the dead to life, practises all the diabolical arts - he's terrified of him.

DOCTOR Paranoia, quite normal.

HAROLD He'd lose control.

DI NOLLI (to Belcredi) We can wait outside - it's only the Doctor who has to see him.

DOCTOR What, you mean on my own?

DI NOLLI They'll be with you!

DOCTOR Ah, no, I thought the Countess ...

MATILDA I do - I am - I'm staying - of course I'm staying, I want to see him again!

FRIDA What for, Mummy? - please come ...

MATILDA (imperiously) Stop it - this is what I came for. (to Landolf) I'll be ... the mother-in-law, Adelaide.

LANDOLF Right. Bertha's mother, fine, you won't need any more than a cloak and a coronet ... (to Harold) Get on with it, Harry.

HAROLD What about the Doctor?

DOCTOR Yes ... we thought, the Bishop ...

HAROLD Abbot of Cluny, sir - right ...

LANDOLF He's been here lots of times.

DOCTOR Lots of ...?

LANDOLF No problem, it's a simple costume.

DOCTOR But...

LANDOLF He won't remember you, he doesn't take in faces, only the clothes.

MATILDA That should help.

DI NOLLI We'll go, Frida - come on, Tito.

BELCREDI If she's staying, I'm staying.

MATILDA I don't need you here.

BELCREDI I didn't say you need me - I'd like to see him again, too, any objections?

LANDOLF If might look better if there were three of you.

HAROLD So, what's he ...?

BELCREDI Oh, just find something simple for me.

LANDOLF (to Harold) A Clunatic.

BELCREDI A Clunatic? What's that?

BELCREDI I wasn't frankly expecting to join the Benedictines. It's a pretty expensive form of insanity, this!

DOCTOR None of them come cheap.

BELCREDI Yes but when there's a fortune at one's disposal ...

LANDOLF You're right, sir - we have an entire costume department, everything perfectly made from period patterns. It's my personal responsibility to commission trained costumiers. We spend a mint. (Matilda re-enters wearing cloak and coronet.)

BELCREDI Ah! - beautiful! You look like a queen.

MATILDA You look like an ostrich in holy orders. Take it off.

BELCREDI Have you seen the Doctor?

DOCTOR I know, it's too bad ... never mind ...

MATILDA No, the Doctor's fine ... but you, you are ridiculous!

DOCTOR (to Landolf) Does he receive people often?

LANDOLF It depends. Sometimes he demands to see this or that character, and then we have to find somebody who's willing ... Women, too.

MATILDA Oh? - women as well?

BELCREDI You don't say. In costume? (pointing at Matilda) Like that?

LANDOLF Well, you know, women who'll do ...

BELCREDI Ah. (to Matilda) Watch yourself - this could be tricky. (Harold enters, gesturing for silence.)

HAROLD His Majesty the Emperor! (Ordulf and Harold take their positions. Ordulf holds the imperial crown, Harold the sceptre with the eagle and the orb with the cross. Henry IV enters)
**Discussion Points**

How many of Pirandello’s key concepts listed in Section Three can you identify in this extract?
How important are the elements of design, ie set and costumes, to this extract?

**Practical Exercise**

Divide into smaller groups and choose either extract one or extract two to work on. Explore the scene practically, using the following six headings as a guide for your approach to the work:

- Working on entrances and exits
- Identifying the different levels of energy required throughout the scene
- Helping the audience to receive plot information
- Clarifying characters’ intentions for saying lines.
- Identifying the invisible links that thread together the through line of action
- Maximising the visual impact of the piece through the staging of characters

Present your ‘work in progress’ to the rest of the group. Can they identify the creative decisions you have made under each of the six headings from seeing your performance?
Follow-up material

Assessing the production

You may find the following questions useful as a springboard for discussion after seeing the production.

‘Once the characters have left the stage, the mirror reflects back to the audience images of themselves, as they confront their relationship with what they have just seen, as well as the reality of their own lives’


- In your opinion, in what way did the production ‘reflect back’ images of the contemporary world in which we live?
- Which aspects of the production did you enjoy the most?
- Identify how the acting skills of two of the performers enhanced your appreciation of the production?
- Assess the contribution that Christopher Oram’s set and costume designs made to the production.

Ideas for further practical work

If you have enjoyed working on Henry IV, you may want to investigate some of the following plays that explore similar concepts:

- Six Characters in Search of an Author by Luigi Pirandello
- Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead by Tom Stoppard
- Hamlet by William Shakespeare
- The Maids by Jean Genet
- Queen Christina by Pam Gems
Brief biographies of non-fictional characters referred to in the script

Emperor Henry IV:  Henry came to the throne as a child and his mother, Agnes, acted as regent. She came under suspicion of adultery with the Bishop of Augsburg and had to be removed. To this piece of factual history, Pirandello adds the fiction that the accusation of adultery was brought by Peter Damien (see below).

Pirandello is interested in what happened to Henry when he was twenty-six, namely his penance to Pope Gregory VII. Pope Gregory, by then Henry’s arch enemy, brought him to his knees, literally, as he knelt in the snow at Canossa hoping the Pope would give him an audience. His wife, Bertha, knelt with him and Bertha’s mother, Adelaide, went with the Abbot of Cluny to plead with the Pope and his ally, Countess Matilda of Tuscany.

Bertha of Susa:  Wife of Henry IV. Bertha’s Mother, Adelaide Margravine of Turin, is the character Matilda chooses to present herself as when received by Henry.

Matilda of Tuscany:  Matilda inherited her title after her father’s murder in 1052, and the subsequent death of her older brother and sister. It was at Matilda’s ancestral castle of Canossa that Henry was forced to humble himself before Pope Gregory VII in 1077. It is Matilda of Tuscany whom the Marchesse Matilda dressed up as during the fateful pageant where Henry was knocked from his horse, and who is represented in the portrait that hangs in the throne room.

Abbot Hugo of Cluny:  Hugo was Abbot from 1049 to 1109 and was godson to Henry IV. He was advisor to nine different Popes; he and his Cluniac monk, Gregory (later Pope Gregory VII) were instrumental in promoting the powerful revival of spiritual life throughout western Europe which characterises the eleventh century. The Doctor presents himself as Abbot Hugo of Cluny at his meeting with Henry.

Peter Damien:  Had a long association with Henry IV, including lecturing the young king on his obligations towards the Roman Church and persuading him not to divorce Bertha in later life.
Bibliography and suggestions for further study

‘Henry IV’, Pirandello, in a new version by Tom Stoppard (Faber), 2004
‘Henry IV’, Pirandello, translated by Julian Mitchell (Methuen), 1979
‘Pirandello’s Theatre: the recovery of the modern stage for dramatic art, Anne Paolucci, (2002)

Credits

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Endnotes

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