



University
of Glasgow

Fischer, D. (2007) *The debate with Pirandellismo in the theatre of Eduardo De Filippo*. *Pirandello Studies*, 27 . pp. 50-63. ISSN 0260-9215

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/5326/>

Deposited on: 8 May 2009

THE DEBATE WITH *PIRANDELLISMO* IN THE THEATRE OF EDUARDO DE FILIPPO

Donatella Fischer

Critics have long debated the influence of Pirandello on the theatre of Eduardo De Filippo. More specifically, the question a number of scholars have raised is to what extent De Filippo's plays are informed by the poetics of *pirandellismo*. The latter term has come to signify a state of mind where characters use reason to analyse their own lives and the lives of other people while being aware that everything is dominated by appearances. Cynicism, mistrust, relativism and a bitter sense of humour are the common denominators of *pirandellismo*. Pirandello undoubtedly exercised an extraordinary influence on many writers and shaped Italian theatre in an almost unprecedented way. However, when approaching De Filippo's works, rather than looking for the presence of *pirandellismo tout court*, it is perhaps more constructive to examine the way in which several of his plays open up an intertextual argument with the implications of Pirandello's poetics. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that De Filippo's engagement with *pirandellismo* is not straightforward. On the contrary, the relationship is an uneasy one, very often carrying strongly polemical overtones.

De Filippo's career as a playwright started in the early 1920s, when Pirandello's controversial *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* [*Six Characters in Search of an Author*] took the Italian stage by storm. De Filippo's plays at this time were very different in scope from those of the Sicilian playwright. His early works are profoundly indebted to the Neapolitan theatrical tradition, and therefore incorporate elements of the variety show, the *café chantant* and the French farce. The tradition De Filippo looked back to was largely that of the theatre of the nineteenth-century actor and playwright Petito, and of his own father Eduardo Scarpetta.¹ De Filippo's theatrical production falls into two halves, separated by the watershed of the Second World War. The works written between 1920 and 1945 are collected in the *Cantata dei giorni pari* [*Cantata of the Even Days*],² where the 'even days' represent a more positive view of life and human relationships: a more pervasive

1 Eduardo De Filippo was the son of the famous Neapolitan playwright Eduardo Scarpetta. Despite being steeped in the tradition of *avanspettacolo* and vernacular theatre, Scarpetta proved to be the great reformer of Neapolitan theatre. The best example of this transformation is his 1887 *Miseria e nobiltà*, where for the first time Scarpetta cast the bourgeoisie as the object of criticism in the play. Yet this class also represented the audience which Scarpetta wanted both to attract and to mock, by staging its ambitions, its vanity and its idiosyncrasies.

2 The first Einaudi edition of this collection dates back to 1959.

sense of humour and a stronger comicality openly reminiscent of the tradition of Scarpetta and his contemporaries prevail over the darker aspects.³

However, De Filippo was present at the opening night of *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* in Naples in 1922, and was completely mesmerized by the experience. He later recalled:

Serata indimenticabile. Ricordo ancora lo sgomento, la profonda emozione che provai assistendo a quella recita. Alla fine dello spettacolo attraversammo i corridoi del teatro, muti tra la folla che discuteva Pirandello. I sei personaggi mi avevano letteralmente scombussolato, mi pareva quasi impossibile continuare a far ridere la gente con i quadri delle riviste, mentre in altra sede l'arte drammatica raggiungeva quella potenza di idee e di espressione.⁴

Yet, despite the undoubted spell cast on him by Pirandello, De Filippo's plays continued largely to 'make people laugh' for almost another decade, though in more than one instance one can sense other overtones. The 1922 comedy *Uomo e galantuomo* [*Man and Gentleman*], for instance, reveals a darker edge behind its farcical structure. The play portrays a love triangle in a bourgeois environment where lies are necessary to keep up appearances at all costs. Despite this, the extent of Pirandello's impact on De Filippo's plays was to appear more clearly only after the two playwrights met in 1933 in De Filippo's changing room at the Teatro Sannazzaro in Naples. Pirandello was there to see the performance of the one-act play *Sik Sik l'artefice magico* [*Sik-Sik the Magical One*] and was so overwhelmed by De Filippo's and his siblings' artistic excellence that he asked to meet them. Subsequently, Pirandello asked De Filippo to adapt the short story *Liola* for the theatre and translate it into Neapolitan. The adaptation was premiered in Milan in 1935 to public acclaim. The same year, Pirandello asked his fellow playwright to prepare a stage adaptation in Neapolitan of *Il berretto a sonagli* [*Cap*

3 *Cantata dei giorni pari* includes seventeen works, of which the most famous is *Natale in casa Cupiello* [*The Nativity Scene*] (1937). Other well-known plays are *Uomo e galantuomo* [*Man and Gentleman*] (1922); *Ditegli sempre di sí* [*Always Tell Him 'Yes'*] (1927); *Sik Sik l'artefice magico* [*Sik-Sik the Magical One*] (1929); *Gennareniello* (1932); *L'abito nuovo* [*The New Suit*] (1936); *La parte di Amleto* [*The Part of Hamlet*] (1940); *Io, l'eredità* [*The Heir*] (1942).

4 Quoted by M. Giammusso, *Vita di Eduardo* (Milan, Mondadori, 1993), p. 112: 'An unforgettable evening. I still remember the wonder and the deep emotion I felt when I saw the play. At the end of the performance we walked through the theatre completely dumb-struck, while around us the crowd was discussing Pirandello. *Six Characters* had literally shocked me, and I thought I could no longer simply make people laugh with my variety acts, while somewhere else dramatic art could express ideas so powerfully.' (All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.) Giammusso's volume includes an exhaustive account of the relationship between Pirandello and De Filippo. A letter Pirandello wrote to De Filippo to congratulate him on the success of his adaptation of *Il berretto a sonagli* is published in *Ci*, pp. 365–7.

and Bells], which was again premiered in Naples with great success and sold out for all twenty-two performances. The theme of madness, which is at the core of *Il berretto a sonagli*, is actually one of the recurring issues in many of De Filippo's plays, where often the line between madness and normality is extremely blurred. For example, De Filippo had already examined this theme in his 1927 comedy *Ditegli sempre di sí* [*Always Tell Him 'Yes'*]. Here, the lead character Michele, just released from a mental hospital, discovers that the mad people are those who surround him and insist on saying things which do not represent what they think. By contrast, Michele would like people to use a literal and transparent language, where meaning is recognizable and clear to everyone. In trying to make people aware of the discrepancy between what they claim and what they think, he expresses his concerns through a sentence which becomes the *leitmotiv* of the comedy: 'C'è la parola adatta, perché non la dobbiamo usare?' ['There is a right word, so why shouldn't we use it?'] At the end, unable to deal with the 'normal' lunacy which he sees around him, Michele opts to go back to the mental hospital, preferring the company of the those who, like him, have been put away by society simply because they cannot come to terms with its madness.⁵

Unfortunately, the artistic, and indeed intellectual, relationship with Pirandello was doomed to be short as the Sicilian playwright died in 1936, but it was to be central to the development of De Filippo's theatre. As if brooding on the human implications of *pirandellismo*, De Filippo took a number of years to incorporate into his own theatre some of the issues present in Pirandello's plays and formulate his own response to *pirandellismo*. It is in fact only in the later plays, collected in *Cantata dei giorni dispari* [*Cantata of the Odd Days*], which includes the works written after 1945, that we find several instances where De Filippo engages with Pirandello's poetics.⁶ In contrast with the overall positive outlook of the 'giorni pari', the plays of the 'giorni dispari' represent a time scarred by war and its aftermath, and portray a social reality where traditional family and moral values have been shattered. The well-known 1945 *Napoli milionaria!* [*Naples's Millionaires*] is one of the best examples of these preoccupations. Faced with the haunting spectre of the War and its social and political consequences, it is not surprising that after

5 The comedy is also reminiscent of Scarpetta's *'O miedeco d' 'e pazze* [*The Mad People's Doctor*], which depicts the fragile line between normality and madness. Inevitably, however, critics have identified some early references to Pirandello, which emerge more clearly in later works such as *Le voci di dentro* [*The Voices from Within*], *La grande magia* [*Grand Magic*], *Questi fantasmi!* [*Oh! These Ghosts*] and *Gli esami non finiscono mai* [*Exams Never End*], where characters switch, in turn, between the 'corda pazza', the 'corda civile' e the 'corda seria' (the 'insane', 'social' and 'serious' strings), as postulated by Ciampa in *Il berretto a sonagli*.

6 The first edition of *Cantata dei giorni dispari* was published by Einaudi in 1951, before *Cantata dei giorni pari*. It was subsequently revised by the author and republished in three volumes in 1979, including all his latest plays. The text of the edition which will be used in this article, *Cantata dei giorni dispari*, edited by A. Barsotti, 3 vols (Turin, Einaudi, 1995), is faithful to the 1979 one.

1945 De Filippo's theatre took a wholly new direction, which also had to come to terms with the tragic portrayal of human nature represented by *pirandellismo*.

Like Pirandello and many other playwrights, in exploring the complexity of contemporary society De Filippo chose the family unit as his vantage point. And, as if to refine this perspective, such analysis is frequently undertaken through strong female characters, among whom Filumena Marturano is undoubtedly one of his most famous creations. Women often become the vehicle through which the plays enquire into the family microcosm as a mirror of the wider social context. However, representation of the family differs considerably when we move from the pre-war to the post-war plays. In the latter, the portrayal of the family unit is much more disillusioned, even negative at times. The very image of the Italian family and of the southern family in particular, resting on indestructible blood bonds and on a mythical mother figure, is put under close scrutiny. In the works of *Cantata dei giorni dispari* there are no ideal families, but turbulent households where relationships are continually redefined by opportunism, marriages often crack and external pressures overturn traditional roles. It is within this landscape that we have to assess the impact of Pirandello's poetics on De Filippo's works.

As already pointed out, the extent to which Pirandello influenced De Filippo's plays is still very much an open issue. Critics tend on the whole to fall into two categories: those who detect a pervading *pirandellismo* in many of De Filippo's works, and those who are more sceptical. The latter, while not denying the impact of Pirandello, do not consider De Filippo's writings wholeheartedly Pirandellian. I tend to agree with the second group, as I would argue that ultimately De Filippo's plays were not shaped by the lessons of Pirandello. Eric Bentley, a major theorist of theatre, made the point well. He recalled that at the opening night in Rome of De Filippo's *La grande magia* [*Grand Magic*] 'tutti gridarono Pirandello' ['everyone shouted Pirandello'],⁷ as the play explores the faint line between illusion and reality through the tormented Calogero di Spelta. Yet in a later critical study of De Filippo he observed:

Whether Eduardo was influenced by Pirandello or was simply nourished from the same sources and interested in the same problems was not discussed. Worse still: the word Pirandello, as such words will, prevented people from seeing things that would otherwise have been evident. For all the superficial 'Pirandellism' of *La grande magia*, the play is really a much simpler, more commonsensical affair. Pirandello in his despair toys with a nihilistic relativism [...]. In Eduardo, on the other hand, no such devilry is thrust upon the universe. If one man has an illusion, another sees it as such.⁸

7 Quoted in B. de Miro d'Ajeta, *Eduardo De Filippo: nu teatro antico, sempre apierto* (Naples, Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1993), p. 218.

8 E. Bentley, 'Son of Pulcinella', in his *In Search of Theater* (London, Dobson, 1954), pp. 281–95 (p. 282).

Similarly, Robert Gene Bander echoed Bentley's words in a 1968 article where he noted: 'It is, says Pirandello, impossible to know the real truth [...]. Eduardo's plays, however, convey quite different implications. The truth is discoverable to those who wish to find it. Illusions are never allowed to remain unambiguous.'⁹

In reality, there is a great deal of ambiguity in many of De Filippo's plays, though this does not prevent the discovery of certain fundamental truths about the human character and its weaknesses. Equally disputing De Filippo's similarity to Pirandello, Claudio Meldolesi has explained the extent to which the Neapolitan playwright avoided copying Pirandello by remaining instead loyal to his own theatrical tradition:

Eduardo ebbe l'accortezza di non copiare Pirandello, bensì di restare fedele alla sua identità di attore e al suo processo creativo, basato sull'intimità con il personaggio. Il creatore di *Natale in casa Cupiello* si servì diversamente del maestro, usandolo come una specie di super-autore: Pirandello aveva scritto di fantasmi e Eduardo scrisse degli stessi fantasmi, animandoli però del suo sentire attorico, con investimento incondizionato [...] per cui ne vennero dei fantasmi di natura diversa. In tal modo *Il berretto a sonagli* poté trasformarsi in *Questi fantasmi!*¹⁰

It is important to add, however, that De Filippo's 'ghosts' are different from Pirandello's. His 'ghosts' (those who populate *Questi fantasmi!* [*Oh! These Ghosts*], but also those created by mutual mistrust in *Le voci di dentro* [*The Voices from Within*]) are projections of deep-rooted fears and insecurities, and often of despair. They are, paradoxically, 'human ghosts' which belong to everyday life. They are not the disembodied 'shells' which haunt Pirandello's stage in a play such as *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*. Paola Quarenghi, one of the major experts on De Filippo's theatre, has emphasized another crucial difference between Pirandello and De Filippo in terms of their different perceptions of the 'pretence' enacted by the actor:

9 R. G. Bander, 'Pulcinella, Pirandello and Other Influences on De Filippo's Dramaturgy', *Italian Quarterly*, 12 (Fall 1968), 39–71 (p. 51).

10 C. Meldolesi, *Fra Totò e Gadda: sei invenzioni sprecate dal teatro italiano* (Rome, Bulzoni, 1987), p. 63: 'Eduardo was smart enough not to copy Pirandello, but remained instead faithful to his own identity as an actor and to his own creative process, which was based on a close relationship with the character. The creator of *Natale in casa Cupiello* used the master in a different way, referring to him as a kind of super-author: Pirandello had written about ghosts and Eduardo wrote about the same ghosts, but completely transformed through his sensitivity as an actor [...] the resulting ghosts were therefore very different. In this way *Il berretto a sonagli* became *Questi fantasmi!*' See also the comments by F. di Franco, *Le commedie di Eduardo* (Bari, Laterza, 1984), p. XIV, and of A. Bisicchia, *Invito alla lettura di Eduardo* (Milan, Mursia, 1982), pp. 54–6.

Eduardo ha fede in questa finzione, che può 'far vedere' ciò che non esiste e ha fede nell'attore che la realizza; Pirandello ne diffida e diffida delle tecniche messe in atto dagli attori per creare l'illusione della realtà. Nelle sue opere, nei suoi saggi, nei suoi drammi, nei suoi saggi sul teatro, avvertiamo come un orrore della finzione.¹¹

Quarenghi's words are probably those which best describe the ethos of De Filippo's works. At the other end of the debate, Ugo Piscopo is one of the critics who charge De Filippo more openly with *pirandellismo*:

L'incontro con Pirandello ha due aspetti: uno diurno, fatto di consensi, di letture, di collaborazioni, ormai quasi esaustivamente scrutinato dalla cronaca e dalle letture critiche; uno, invece, notturno, fatto di ricadute di effetti raccolti involontariamente e attivi anche a lunga distanza.

Il primo aspetto ha come fatti fondamentali l'incoraggiamento dato dallo scrittore siciliano ai fratelli De Filippo [...]. Il secondo aspetto s'innerva in un atteggiamento sofisticato, cerebralmente acido, non solo dei personaggi, ma del discorso in genere. È come se le situazioni ammettessero letture diverse e divergenti da parte degli interpreti, schermassero di una maschera doppia e pesante il vero volto dei soggetti [...] in un gioco subdolo di equivoci e di scambi, grazie al quale sulla follia, sulla devianza, sull'assurdità fa agio una grande probabilità di verità.¹²

- 11 P. Quarenghi, 'Eduardo e Pirandello', in *Eduardo e Napoli, Eduardo e l'Europa*, edited by F. C. Greco (Naples, Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1993), pp. 37–65 (pp. 51–2): 'Eduardo believes in this pretence, which can "make people see" what does not exist through the actor who plays it; Pirandello mistrusts both the pretence and the techniques used by actors to create the illusion of reality. In his works and in his essays on theatre there is a horror of pretence.'
- 12 U. Piscopo, *Maschere per l'Europa: il teatro popolare napoletano da Petito a Eduardo* (Naples, Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1994), pp. 189–217 (p. 192): 'The meeting with Pirandello has two aspects. A conscious one made of agreements, readings and collaborations, something which both the press and the critics have exhaustively evaluated. The other is an unconscious one, made of elements De Filippo accumulated involuntarily but which remain active for a long time./The first aspect is based on the encouragement the Sicilian writer gave De Filippo and his siblings [...]; the second emerges in the philosophical and cerebral quality not just of the characters but of language in general. It is as if situations offered different and diverging interpretations and shielded with a double mask the true face of the characters [...] in a surreptitious comedy of errors where the possibility to discover truth is wedged between madness, waywardness and absurdity.' For further perspectives on De Filippo's *pirandellismo* see also the following works: E. Giammattei, *Eduardo De Filippo* (Florence, La Nuova Italia, 1982); A. Greco, *La grande magia: Eduardo e il metateatro* (Saveria Mannelli, Rubettino, 1988); F. di Franco, *Le commedie di Eduardo*; B. de Miro d'Ajeta, *Eduardo De Filippo*; A. Barsotti, *Eduardo drammaturgo (fra mondo del teatro e teatro del mondo)* (Rome, Bulzoni, 1995).

Piscopo refers in particular to *L'arte della commedia* [*The Art of Comedy*], yet his interpretation does not allow for the fact that this play opposes the concept of *pirandellismo* by using its own strategies. De Filippo himself protested against the charge of *pirandellismo* made by many critics in connection with his plays, and during a discussion with a group of students he retorted:

Io, questo Pirandellismo attribuitomi dai critici non lo capisco, se devo dire la verità. Che cosa vuole dire? Che cosa vogliono dire? Che ho copiato da Pirandello, che mi sono appropriato della sua tematica? Se è questo che si intende per Pirandellismo, mi pare che non sia neanche il caso di parlarne, tanto è ovvio che, a cominciare dalla mia concezione del Teatro a finire con i miei personaggi spesso poveri e affamati, spesso maltrattati dalla vita, ma sempre convinti che una società piú giusta e umana sia possibile crearla, niente potrebbe essere piú lontano dall'idea teatrale di Pirandello e dai suoi personaggi. Se poi, per Pirandellismo s'intende che io ho avidamente letto, ascoltato e amato il suo Teatro [...] che ancora oggi, se penso a lui, alla sua intelligenza lucida e scintillante, al suo humour, alla sua umanità, mi sento prendere da una nostalgia tremenda e da un senso di perdita irreparabile, allora sí: sono ammalato di Pirandellismo.

Tutti noi scrittori e anche tutti noi uomini dobbiamo molto al genio di Pirandello.¹³

Ultimately his plays are more complex than the author's personal views, but in this case De Filippo's words point out that his theatre is not a 'theatre of ideas' but a theatre which is interested in the human tragedies that make up everyday life, and which he stages through the world of his Neapolitan characters and through the claustrophobic streets of his native city. Even when characters such as Gennaro Jovine (*Napoli milionaria!*) or Guglielmo Speranza (*Gli esami non finiscono mai* [*Exams Never End*]) indulge in long speeches they never lose sight of reality, and any philosophical trait is always abruptly interrupted—if not mocked—by some concrete event. Lack of food, resort to theft, the black market, or, as in his last

13 In *Eduardo: pensieri, polemiche, pagine inedite*, edited by I. Quarantotti De Filippo (Sonzogno, Fabbri-Bompiani, 1985), pp. 172–3: 'I do not understand this Pirandellismo critics attribute to me, if I have to tell the truth. What does it mean? What do they mean? That I copied Pirandello, that I adopted his themes? If this is what they mean by Pirandellismo, it is not even worth talking about it both as regards my concept of Theatre and my characters, who are often poor, famished, and mistreated by life but nonetheless convinced that it is possible to create a more just and human society. Nothing could be further from Pirandello's idea of theatre and from his characters. If, on the other hand, by Pirandellismo they mean that I have read, loved and listened to his Theatre insatiably [...] that even today, if I think of him, I feel a deep nostalgia for his lucid and sharp intelligence, his humour, and his humanity and that therefore I have the sense of a terrible loss, then yes: I suffer from Pirandellismo./All of us, as writers and men, owe a lot to Pirandello's genius.'

play, uncontrolled ambition, jealousy of someone's economic success, marital infidelity and generally strained family relationships always throw De Filippo's characters back into the nitty-gritty of their tormented existences.

The debate with Pirandello's poetics emerges explicitly in the 1946 play *Questi fantasmi!*, which not only criticizes *pirandellismo* but, in the second act, also parodies a famous scene in *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*. The scene in question is the one when the six characters, in Pirandello's play, first appear on stage interrupting the actors' rehearsal. In contrast with the disembodied figures created by Pirandello, De Filippo in *Questi fantasmi!* creates a family which is a grotesque version of the original. It is formed by Armida, the mother, her two children (a twelve-year-old boy and a fourteen-year-old girl) and two old people. Parody is a genre that is usually polemical and confrontational, and it is in this sense that we should read the scene. One of the most glaring differences between this family group and the Pirandellian original is that the members of the family are five and not six, because the father (Alfredo) is not with them. In De Filippo's play Alfredo is in love with another woman and has left his wife Armida. Moreover—again parodying Pirandello's work—De Filippo prescribed that these five characters should appear as 'ghosts', with exaggerated make-up, and that they should move almost in slow motion. But they have other comical traits. Armida wears a plaster on her forehead; her daughter's hair is grotesquely plaited, while the son suffers from a nervous tic. In all this De Filippo plays with Pirandello not only by endowing his characters with ghostly traits which are more reminiscent of vaudeville than of Pirandello's drama, but also, for instance, by making Armida speak a hilarious mixture of Italian and Neapolitan. In this fusion the dialect helps dispel any possible ambiguity about the nature of the five characters:

ARMIDA Fui una damigella! (*i due vecchi fanno un lamento come un rimpianto*) La mia vita era tutto un sorriso, ignara del male, propensa al bene... Fiori e musica fu la mia esistenza... (*i due vecchi si lamentano...*) Mai ombra di peccato sfiorò l'animo mio... (*al ragazzo che è ripreso dal tic*) Statte cuieto, ca te scommo 'e sanghe. Dunque... (*non ricordando ciò che diceva, con tono normale a Pasquale*) che stavamo dicendo?¹⁴

14 *Questi fantasmi!*, in *Cantata dei giorni dispari*, I, 168: 'ARMIDA: I was a lady! (*the two old people produce a mournful sound*) My life was sweet, I did not know any evil, my tendency was to do good... My existence was all flowers and music... (*the two old people moan*) Sin never touched my soul... (*to the boy, who has recovered from his tic*) Be silent, otherwise I will beat you up! So... (*not remembering what she was saying, with a normal voice to Pasquale*) what were we saying?' There could be a link between Armida's grotesque language and Madama Pace's carnevalesque qualities, especially since De Filippo had been a great admirer of *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*. *Questi fantasmi!* is available on VHS and DVD in the edition *Il grande teatro di Eduardo De Filippo* (Milan, Fabbri, 2003).

Despite their farcical appearance, though, through the presentation of the five characters as ghosts the comedy disputes the foundations of *pirandellismo* and reaches different conclusions. Pirandello's six characters are forever fixed in their immutable expressions and roles, because their story cannot be staged and therefore completed. Whenever the actors attempt to stage the characters' tragedy the story is subject to so many different interpretations that there is no agreement as to its meaning. By contrast, De Filippo steers well clear of such a metaphysical dimension and creates a scene that is completely earthly. Beneath the absurd pantomime of his five characters lies a family which is ridden with discord and betrayal (as in Pirandello's play) but perfectly able to tell its story of loss. What these five characters have come to ask is that the father, Alfredo, be reunited with them so that they can try to rebuild the family unit, and therefore recover a sense of cohesion and belonging. Whether the family is reunited or not is a moot point in the play, but again what matters is that the scene they have enacted has exposed the need to work towards reconciliation, something to which all characters in the story aspire.

The play, therefore, is not concerned with the impossibility of representing the tragedy of human nature, but with the realistic portrayal of its shortcomings. It invites the audience to probe beyond the farcical traits of the five characters without the aid of any cerebral, Pirandellian-style philosophizing. As in others of De Filippo's plays, theatricality is exposed as something fundamentally destructive, and is to be condemned.

In *La grande magia* (1948) De Filippo continued his dialogue with Pirandello by exploring the dangerous boundary between illusion and reality. The lead character, Calogero di Spelta, is betrayed by his wife during a show where a magician orchestrates the elopement of the woman and her lover. Rather than accepting his wife's betrayal, Calogero prefers to believe that she is locked up in a box given to him by the magician, which he takes everywhere.¹⁵ Calogero's belief, or simulated belief, acquires all the traits of obsessive behaviour and ultimately madness. Like a Pirandellian character he chooses illusion over reality to avoid reality's pain and humiliation, yet he is not allowed to rest for ever in his mad conviction. Ironically, after months, it is the magician Otto Marvuglia who unveils the pretence to Calo-

15 *La grande magia* did not have a lot of success as critics interpreted the play as a form of deviation from tradition in favour of a more 'Pirandellian' and therefore intellectual style. This judgement needs to be reconsidered, however, as the play calls into question the very notion of *pirandellismo* by creating the Otto-Calogero opposition. For further comment see the following reviews: S. d'Amico, 'La grande magia', *Sipario*, 46 (1950), 31–2; E. Grassi, 'La grande magia', *Il dramma*, 15/1/1950, pp. 50–1. The comedy was successfully performed at the National Theatre in London in 1995: see M. Coveney, 'A Magical Mastery Tour', *The Sunday Times*, 23/7/95, and P. Roberts, 'La grande magia', *Plays and Players*, September 1995, p. 17. The play is available on VHS and DVD in *Il grande teatro di Eduardo De Filippo*.

gero and, persuading him that time never passed and that his trick only happened a few moments before, arranges for his wife to reappear. But even confronted with reality, Calogero refuses her and opts to believe in the magic box, thus descending more and more deeply into madness:

OTTO È tua moglie. Non è piú un'illusione. Il giuoco è finito.

CALOGERO Quale?

OTTO Il giuoco iniziato da me un attimo fa nel giardino dell'albergo Metropole.

CALOGERO Non è vero. Fu iniziato da me, lo dicesti tu. Io spinsi il giuoco fino al limite massimo. Io solo, allora, posso far riapparire mia moglie [...].

OTTO Ma la scatola è vuota!

CALOGERO Chi lo dice?... Come puoi affermarlo?... In questa scatola c'è la mia fede! [...] Non conosco questa donna. Forse fa parte di un esperimento che non mi riguarda. [...] Portala via questa immagine mnemonica di 'moglie che torna'. Due esperimenti in uno non li sopporterei.¹⁶

If, on the one hand, Calogero staunchly rejects any return to reality, the magician not only unveils the illusion in front of the audience but exposes its absurdity and purposelessness. Ultimately the play condemns Calogero's persistence in not wanting to recognize that it was all a game and *in wanting* to believe in a web of pretence the only outcome of which is the destruction of his marital life through self-imposed madness.

Distorted reality is also at the heart of the 1948 play *Le voci di dentro*. Here the lead character, Alberto Saporito, is convinced that a murder has been committed by a member of the Cimmaruta family, which lives next door. Alberto reports his suspicions to the police, and as a result of this the whole Cimmaruta family is first arrested and then released when Alberto realizes that his story was only a bad dream he had mistaken for reality. The damage is done, however, and among the Cimmaruta family mutual suspicions and mistrust spiral out of proportion, with the consequence that, as in an Agatha Christie thriller, all the family members are

16 *La grande magia*, in *Cantata dei giorni dispari*, I, 376–7: 'OTTO: She's your wife. It's not an illusion. The game is over./CALOGERO: What game?/OTTO: The experiment I started a moment ago in the garden at the Metropole./CALOGERO: That's a lie for a start. It was I who started it. You said so yourself. I pushed the experiment to the limit. I am the only one who can make my wife reappear! [...]/OTTO: But I tell you the box is empty!/CALOGERO: Who says so? How can you demonstrate it? All my faith [...] is in that box [...]. Perhaps she's part of an experiment which does not concern me. [...] Please do away with this archetypal image of the returning wife. I couldn't stand the thought of having to cope with two experiments' (from Eduardo De Filippo, *Three Plays: The Local Authority, Grand Magic, Filumena Marturano*, translated by C. Ardito [London, Hamish Hamilton and St George Press, 1976], pp. 170–1).

plausible murderers. The play is unrelentingly bleak, and engages with Pirandello's poetics by staging the monstrous distortion of reality which derives from the many different interpretations of evidence. The audience never discovers whether the Cimmarutas are murderers or not, but this is not what matters at the end. What is important is the fact that the play uncovers the cancer that is eating away at the family from within and has replaced common sense and trust with hypocrisy and brutality. The final tableau of the Cimmarutas is an indictment of their moral degeneration. And if the Cimmarutas are 'fixed' in their perverse roles, this is not because of a human condition beyond their control (as in the case of Pirandello's six characters, Enrico IV, Ciampa, and many others), but because of their own choice and their own evil, as Alberto points out at the end:

Mo volete sapere perché siete assassini? E che v' 'o dico a ffa'? Che parlo a ffa'? Chisto, mo, è 'o fatto 'e zi' Nicola... Parlo inutilmente? In mezzo a voi, forse, ci sono anch' io, e non me ne rendo conto. Avete sospettato l'uno dell'altro [...]. Un assassinio lo avete messo nelle cose normali di tutti i giorni... il delitto lo avete messo nel bilancio di famiglia! La stima [...], la stima reciproca che ci mette a posto con la nostra coscienza, che ci appacia con noi stessi, l'abbiamo uccisa.¹⁷

As if haunted by the implications of Pirandello's philosophy, De Filippo returned to this issue in his 1964 play *L'arte della commedia*. Briefly, this is the story of a travelling theatre company whose director, Oreste Campese, asks the prefect of the city where they are to perform to be present at their show. He is convinced that the presence of such an outstanding public figure will encourage people to buy tickets for the play. The prefect, however, refuses, and, in revenge for this, Campese challenges him. He warns the prefect that, that very day, when he receives the usual sequence of people in need of help, it may well be Campese's own actors who will enact the tragedy of everyday existence before his eyes. He also tells the prefect that since art knows how to imitate life, it will be impossible for him to establish whether the people he sees are real or not.

17 *Le voci di dentro*, in *Cantata dei giorni dispari*, I, 456: 'ALBERTO: You want to know why you are murderers? And why should I tell you? Who am I speaking for? This after all is the case of zi' Nicola... I speak meaninglessly? Maybe I am like you, without knowing it. You have suspected each other [...]. You have transformed murder into something that belongs to everyday life... crime is part of the family's budget! Esteem [...]. Mutual esteem which reconciles us with our conscience, which makes us feel at peace with ourselves, that we have killed [...].' The play is available on VHS and DVD in *Il grande teatro di Eduardo De Filippo*. For interesting reviews and comment see E. Talarico, 'Le voci di dentro', *Momento sera*, 27/2/1949; F. Doplicher, 'Le voci di dentro', *Sipario*, 370 (1977), 17–18; V. Pandolfi, 'Le voci di dentro', *Il dramma*, 1/1/1949, pp. 128–9; S. Quasimodo, 'Le voci realizzate', *Il dramma*, 1/4/1949, p. 4.

Campese shares many traits with the Pirandellian *raisonneurs*. He reasons and debates unrelentingly on the dignity and social relevance of theatre. Watching a play, he says, is like 'spying through a keyhole' (*Occhio al buco della serratura*, meaning 'mind the keyhole' or 'put your eye to the keyhole', is the title of the comedy he is to stage). This means that a play gives the audience the opportunity to observe in detail events and occurrences that are normally lost, or simply glossed over in daily life. Theatre, for Campese, acquaints people with themselves and their own idiosyncrasies. It is a moment of reflection and of reckoning. When the prefect, De Caro, sarcastically challenges Campese by saying, 'Li mandi pure questi "personaggi in cerca di autore". Troveranno buona accoglienza' ['Feel free to send these characters in search of an author. I will welcome them warmly'], Campese promptly retorts:

No, Eccellenza. Pirandello non c'entra niente: noi non abbiamo trattato il problema dell' 'essere e del parere'. Se mi deciderò a mandare i miei attori qua sopra, lo farò allo scopo di decidere se il teatro svolge una funzione utile al proprio paese o no. Non saranno personaggi in cerca di autore ma attori in cerca di autorità. La saluto, Eccellenza, buona giornata e stia attento.¹⁸

Campese's words capture the essence of all De Filippo's plays. His actors are not looking for someone who can finally give a meaning to their existence but are seeking to be recognized as instruments through which theatre can unveil what lies behind the mask. Campese's last cues on this point are quite telling:

CAMPESE Eccellenza, ma che gliene importa a lei, se si è trovato di fronte a un farmacista vero o a un farmacista falso? A mio avviso dovrebbe essere piú preoccupante un morto falso che un morto vero. Quando in un dramma teatrale c'è uno che muore per finzione scenica, significa che un morto vero in qualche parte del mondo o c'è già stato o ci sarà. Sono le circostanze che contano; vanno considerate e approfondite le particolari condizioni di vita di una persona umana, che ci permettono di chiarire le ragioni di una morte, un suicidio, un delitto... Ecco perché le ho detto stamattina: 'Venga a teatro, Eccellenza, venga a mettere l'occhio nel buco della serratura.'

DE CARO (*esasperato*) Ma gli attori me li ha mandati o no?

CAMPESE Attori o non attori i fatti non cambiano. Se ritiene che i problemi di cui è venuto a conoscenza, siano di tale portata da richiedere tempestivi

18 *L'arte della commedia*, in *Cantata dei giorni dispari*, III, 267: 'CAMPESE: No, your Excellency. Pirandello has nothing to do with this. We are not concerned with the problem of 'appearance and reality'. If I send you my actors it will be because I want to establish whether theatre is useful to people or not. My actors will not be characters in search of an author, but actors in search of authority. Goodbye, your Excellency. I wish you a pleasant day and be on your guard!'

interventi dello Stato, agisca in proposito, indipendentemente da quella che può essere la vera identità di questi signori [...]. Il Prefetto è lei.¹⁹

Campese's characters (or perhaps the 'real' people who visit the prefect) enact scenes that tell of social bigotry, prejudice, distress, loss and almost pathological behaviour. Ultimately, whether or not such scenes were enacted by Campese's company does not matter so much. What matters is the motivations and the human suffering that made the characters in those scenes behave as they did, and more importantly, what matters is that such performances succeed in awakening a form of human compassion. *L'arte della commedia* argues that, far from showing that reality is nothing more than a web of deceptions, the purpose of theatre is to portray the dreadful consequences of deception.

I would suggest that if there is a point where Pirandello and De Filippo meet and agree, it is in their concept of humour. For both playwrights humour is not a means of entertainment but a sharp weapon through which plays enact the intrinsically tragic aspect of human nature. Pirandello famously set out his notion of humour in the 1908 essay entitled *L'umorismo*. Here he distinguished between the action of 'making people laugh' and of 'laughing with people'. In the first case the result is irony, in the second the result is humour, a much more complex process of reflection, analysis and empathy. Humour and the bitter laughter it generates, according to Pirandello, constitute the 'sentimento del contrario', which allows the audience to share the fate of characters, so that spectators become the judges of the situation.²⁰ And later on, referring to Don Quixote, Pirandello writes: 'Noi abbiamo una rappresentazione comica, ma spira da questa un sentimento che ci impedisce di ridere o ci turba il riso [...] ce lo rende amaro' ['We have a comic spectacle but it provokes a reaction which prevents us from laughing or upsets our laughter (...) it makes it bitter'] (*Spsv*, p. 129). De Filippo echoed Pirandello when he stated that 'l'Umorismo è la parte amara della risata, non l'episodio ridicolo del vivere quotidiano' ['Humour is the bitter side of laughter; it does not simply capture

19 *L'arte della commedia*, p. 297: 'CAMPESE: Your Excellency, but why do you want to know if you were in front of a real or false pharmacist? In my view a dead body on stage is more worrying than a real one. When in a play someone dies on stage it means that somewhere in the world there is or there will be a real dead body. What matters is circumstances; we have to consider and assess carefully the specific life of a human being in order to understand the reasons for death, suicide or murder... That's why this morning I told you: "Come to the theatre, Your Excellency, come and look through the keyhole."/DE CARO (*exasperated*): Did you or did you not send me your actors?/CAMPESE: Whether I did or not, the facts do not change. If you think the problems you learnt about are so urgent that the State has to intervene, then act accordingly, irrespective of the real nature of these people [...]. You are the Prefect.' The play is available on VHS and DVD in the edition *Il grande teatro di Eduardo De Filippo*.

20 See *Spsv*, p. 127. 'Sentimento del contrario' may be translated as 'awareness of the opposite'.

the ridiculous aspect of some mundane event'].²¹ And in his book *Lezioni di teatro* De Filippo further refined his own notion of humour by replying to a comment on his play *Questi fantasmi!* with these words: 'Tu pensi alla tragedia classica [...]. Non ci devi pensare! No, devi tenere la parte comica e grottesca della situazione e allora trovi la tragedia moderna, dove si ride, però il caso è tragico' ['You are thinking of classical tragedy, but you shouldn't. Instead, you must emphasize the comical and grotesque side of the scene. Only then will you find the essence of modern tragedy. Yes, the scene makes us laugh but, at its core, it is tragic'].²²

This concept of humour, so reminiscent of Pirandello's, is present in all De Filippo's plays. But even in this case I would suggest that, rather than simply adopting Pirandello's ideas, De Filippo used them to refine his own poetics (some critics even speak of *eduardismo*) and thus give more depth to his plays. After all, his early works already show an increasing use of humour, as opposed to irony, despite their overriding farcical traits. Pirandello represented a moment of reflection and reckoning for De Filippo; and somehow he would never be free from his ghost, be it more or less directly to criticize him (as in *Questi fantasmi!* or *L'arte della commedia*) or simply to elaborate on Pirandello's own poetics of the theatre. De Filippo's last play, *Gli esami non finiscono mai* (1973), also represents his last dialogue with Pirandello. Characters are constrained in a series of mutual lies and a game of pretence which destroy families and friendships beyond repair. But, once more, pretence as a way of life is not ultimately what the play is about. The main character, Guglielmo Speranza, is the only one who is capable of discarding the mask, thus dissociating himself from the rules of society. Significantly, through him the audience gains access to the thwarted minds of the rest of his family and his friends, whose only motivations are self-interest and greed and who are eaten away by jealousy and envy. Redemption and reconciliation are systematically rejected in a world which has chosen its own moral damnation. De Filippo's last tribute to *pirandellismo* is also his last, and definitive, departure from it.

21 The comment appeared on the website *Il grande Eduardo*, at the address >www.italiamemoria.it/defilippo/pensieri/htm<, consulted in January 2001.

22 Eduardo De Filippo, *Lezioni di teatro* (Turin, Einaudi, 1986), p. 68.