

Metta Theatre

The Man With the Flower in His Mouth

Education Resource Pack

created by Poppy Burton-Morgan

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Introduction

This pack has been developed to help you to get the best out of your visit to see *The Man With The Flower in His Mouth*. It is full of essential material to enable students to understand the narrative and themes of the play as well as the contemporary context of this production. There are suggestions for follow up activities and an interview with Poppy Burton-Morgan.

If you would like to talk to us about coming to do a workshop with your institution please get in touch – just email education@mettatheatre.co.uk

With thanks to:

William Reynolds
Headlong Theatre Company

Luigi Pirandello

A Biography

'I am a child of Chaos and not only allegorically'

Luigi Pirandello

Luigi Pirandello was an Italian dramatist, novelist and short story writer. He was born on June 28, 1867 in Caos, on the island of Sicily. His father owned a prosperous sulphur mine and his mother was from a wealthy family. He received his elementary education at home, and by the age of twelve had already written his first tragedy.

In 1880, Luigi completed his high school education and fell in love with his cousin Lina. While initially disapproved of, Lina's family demanded that Luigi abandon his studies and dedicate himself to the sulphur business so that he could immediately marry her. Luigi went to work in the sulphur mines with his father for a time, but he grew increasingly unhappy. The marriage to Lina, was called off and Pirandello moved to Rome to continue his studies.

In 1894, Pirandello married a shy, withdrawn girl from a respectable family: Antonietta. They had two sons and a daughter and Pirandello began publishing novellas and a collection of poems. But in 1903 Pirandello's life was shaken by a calamitous event: the sulphur mines flooded. His father had invested an enormous amount of his own money, into the venture. The family financially collapsed and Antonietta suffered profound psychological shock. She never fully recovered. Pirandello harboured thoughts of suicide, but began intensive work on a novel. By the time the First World War broke out, he had published three novels and numerous short stories. It was not until 1916, however, that he turned his attention to the theatre. He was remarkably prolific, turning out as many as nine plays in one year. But as Pirandello's fame as a writer increased, his private life deteriorated. Antonietta, plagued by suspicion and obsessive jealousy, began to turn physically violent, becoming so volatile that she was in need of institutionalization. Against the advice of doctors Pirandello instead chose to keep her at home. Their daughter was so disturbed by her mother's illness that she tried to take her own life. The illness had a profound effect on Pirandello's writing as well, leading him to explorations of madness, illusion, and isolation. It was not until his plays finally began to prove profitable around 1919 that he was able to send Antonietta to a private sanatorium.

In 1925, Pirandello was appointed artistic director of the Teatro d'Arte di Roma by Mussolini. As the company flourished Pirandello met actress Marta Abba, for whom most of his later plays were written, and his troupe began touring extensively throughout Europe and America. Mussolini's support allowed Pirandello's work to reach an international audience, yet for the remainder of his life, Pirandello was tainted by the stigma of being associated with the Fascist Party and remained under close surveillance by the Italian secret police. Pirandello was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1934. He died alone in his home in Rome on the 10th of December, 1936.

The Man With the Flower in His Mouth

About the Play

The Man With the Flower in His Mouth is a one-act 'dialogue', based on Pirandello's novella *La Morte Addosso* (*Death on Him*), written in 1923. It became, in 1930, the first piece of television drama ever to be produced in Britain, when a version was screened by the British Broadcasting Corporation as part of their experimental transmissions. It has also been turned into an opera by Luc Brewaeys which premièred in De Munt in Brussels in 2007. Our adaptation updates and relocates the action to London, staging it within a café, and perhaps more dramatically swaps the gender of two characters - in the original 'The Boy' is 'The Woman' and 'The Traveller' is male.

The story is relatively straight-forward – a traveller sits in an all-night café having missed the last train. The Man with the Flower in His Mouth enters and strikes up a conversation. Although at first reticent The Traveller soon falls under the spell of The Man's fantastic and fantastical conversational abilities and what unfolds is a philosophical exploration of identity, memory and imagination. The Man talks, not in riddles, but in symbols and ciphers and just as The Traveller is beginning to grasp the heart of his discourse he is distracted by the sight of his friend, The Boy, who to his great annoyance follows him everywhere he goes. The sight of The Boy becomes a catalyst for The Man to fully reveal the tragedy underpinning his philosophical musings and so he departs leaving The Traveller in a state of shock, alone in the café.

Follow up activity:

The action, such as it is, of the play takes place within a café and this production sets it in a café. But imagine other locations for it - for example, a launderette, a library, the railway platform from which the Traveller has just missed her train. Now in pairs improvise the opening scene of the play - letting the location inform the dialogue (so in a launderette the Traveller might be waiting for her laundry, in a library setting the dialogue would have to be whispered etc). Then discuss what these respective settings might add to or detract from the story.

Cast

The Man With the Flower in His Mouth



Samuel Collings

Theatre includes: *The Lady From The Sea/The Comedy Of Errors*, Royal Exchange; *School For Scandal/Dr Faustus*, Greenwich Theatre; *Ex/The Big Break*, Hampstead Theatre; *So Little Of You Left*, Oval/Tour; *Doorbells Of Florence*, Vivid Dreams; *The Garden*, Riverside Studios; *An Inspector Calls*, Dukes Lancaster; *Alice Project*, BAC/Sprint/Spill Festival; *Without Laughing*, Theatre 503; *News Revue*; *Lie Detector*, Edinburgh; *Dr Faustus*, Liverpool Playhouse; *Lock The Gates*, Lyric Hammersmith; *Hanging Around*, Kneehigh; *Murder In The Cathedral*, NYT; *Misper/Dido & Aeneas*,

Glyndebourne; *Curse Of The Egyptian Mummy*, Regent's Park. TV/Film includes: *Holby City*; *The Insiders*; *Doctors*; *Hex [series]*; *Dan Clark's Guide To Work*; *Bluebird*; *A Tale Of 2 Girls*; *The Briefcase*. Radio includes: recordings, various BBC productions & live broadcasts for *Resonance/BBC New Writing & Holy Mountain*.

The Traveller



Liana Weafer

Liana trained at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, her theatre credits include: *Measure for Measure*, *The Winter's Tale*, *Troilus and Cressida* (all Shakespeare's Globe); *The Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet* (title role - National Tour); *Lucifer Saved* (Finborough Theatre); Slapdash Impro Festival (the Improsarios @ Old Vic Tunnels) previous productions for Metta include *Hamlet* (White Bear Theatre) and *The Elephant's Child* (Arcola/Trafalgar Studios); she has performed numerous readings for Theatre 503 and Hampstead Theatre and is

an active member of the new Rough Fiction Ensemble. Her film credits include: *I do* (Monumental Studios - selected for Cannes 2010 Short Revelations).

The Characters

The Man With the Flower in His Mouth is a young man, with a hugely vivid imagination. In appearance he is both mad man and clown – a shabby yet intriguing individual of many layers (both sartorial and psychological). A sensualist, The Man lives both with a foot in our world and a foot in the world of the original play – 1920s Italy. Consequently his language is both more formal and also more absurd. But like a poet he is in love with language – he revels in it, just as he revels in everything that is left to him in life – the exquisite pleasure of watching a parcel being wrapped, or peering through the curtains of a stranger's house and imagining what goes on within – the pleasures of the imagination.

'But there are links between certain memories, even distant ones, that are individual to us all; determined by thoughts and experiences so unique, that we'd never understand one another if we tried to use them to communicate.'

The Man With the Flower in His Mouth

The Traveller on the other hand is a much more everyday character – attired in beiges and browns. A sensible person – a mother and a wife. But she is also like the inversion of The Man – where he embraces life to the full and yet has so little of it left, she has all the time in the world – time to while away the hours in an all-night café – and yet she doesn't really live her life, she lives it for those around her – her husband and her daughter. Her language reflects this – it is all hesitations, repetitions, ellipses (trailings off) – the mundane and the everyday.

'I... Yes I just missed it... I got to the platform as the doors were closing.'
'Me? No...why? No, I'm not sick.'

The Traveller

The Boy is mute and in our production, because he is outside the café, invisible. All we know about him then comes from The Man, which we may not necessarily take at face value. He is young (yet prematurely aged) and a martyr, suffering intensely on behalf of The Man. Their relationship is left deliberately ambiguous – are (or were) they lovers or merely friends? Interestingly given his own personal experiences with Antonietta several of Pirandello's plays include mute or near-silent mentally ill characters; 'The Boy' in *The Man With the Flower in His Mouth* (originally 'The Woman'), Signora Ponza in *Absolutely! (Perhaps)*, and perhaps most famously 'The Mother' in *Six Characters In Search of An Author*.

'If he'd at least bother to brush the dust off that wreck of a hat he wears, off his coat. He's more of a duster than a man. Even his hair's gone dusty, here, at the temples, and he's only a boy.'

The Man With the Flower in His Mouth

Silence

'Words are the part of the silence that can be spoken.'

Jeanette Winterson, novelist.

The Man With the Flower in His Mouth is full of silences. It opens with 5 minutes of silence, before The Man utters his first words, and it closes with 5 minutes of silence as we see The Traveller, still reeling from the The Man's revelations calmly gather up her things and leave. And in the play proper we hear beats, hesitations, silence and pause. Pirandello was very alert to silence as a dramatic tool – and indeed uses the space between the words to tell a lot of the emotional story. He also frequently writes silent or mute characters into his plays (see above).

Samuel Beckett's play *Krapp's Last Tape*, currently running in the Duchess Theatre (West End) starring Michael Gambon, opens with 15 minutes of silence. Harold Pinter was another famous dramatist who used silence as a dramatic device – indeed it became one of his trademarks – the 'Pinter Pause'. Pinter wrote 140 pauses into his work *Betrayal*, 149 into *The Caretaker* and 224 into *The Homecoming*. The longest are typically 10 seconds. He distinguished between two types of silence:

'One when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is being employed. This speech is speaking of a language locked beneath it. That is its continual reference. The speech we hear is an indication of that which we don't hear. I think that we communicate only too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid, and that what takes place is a continual evasion, desperate rearguard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves. Communication is too alarming. To enter into someone else's life is too frightening. To disclose to others the poverty within us is too fearsome a possibility.'

Harold Pinter

In *The Man With the Flower in His Mouth* we may talk of four types of silence:

Beat – this represents a short pause, a breath, and is often employed as a technical device to aid the rhythm of the writing.

Hesitation – this represents a trailing off, an ellipsis (...), and often stems from a lack of confidence in the words being spoken. The Traveller frequently uses hesitation as a way of implying something without having to say the words. So here the sense is often clear but left unsaid, because as Pinter says 'communication is too alarming'.

Silence – (Pinter's first type) – this is the silence of the opening of the play – it is not yet pregnant with meaning, or the weight of words unsaid. Interestingly though even after The Man's 'torrent of language' has been unleashed he sometimes uses silence rather than pause, often to great comic effect.

Pause – (Pinter's second type) – where the story is told through silence rather than words. This silence feels like a breath suspended: electric, sometimes pregnant.

Follow up activity: Think back through the play and try and remember an instance of each of these types of silence. How did the different types of silence make you feel when you were watching the play unfold?

The Production

Director & Adaptor



Poppy Burton-Morgan is Artistic Director of Metta Theatre Ltd, which she founded in 2005. Credits as adaptor and director for Metta include *Waiting* (Southbank Centre, Purcell Room, starring Juliet Stevenson), *Blood Wedding*, (Southwark Playhouse) & *The Elephant's Child* (Trafalgar Studios & Arcola Theatre). Other directing credits for Metta include *12 Dancing Princesses* (V&A Museum), *Canticles* (Arcola Theatre, Little Angel Theatre & Shunt Vaults), *Otieno*, (Southwark Playhouse), *La Voix Humaine/Le Livre Blanc* (Riverside Studios), *Hamlet*

(White Bear Theatre), *Hidden Light* (Barons Court Theatre & Oxford Playhouse), *Cocteau in the Underworld* (Arcola Theatre), *The Devil's Drum* (Arcola) & *The Birds* (Merton Chapel.) Other directing credits include *HMS Pinafore* (Cambridge Arts Theatre), *La Boheme* (COL Palestine National Theatre & tour), *Improv*, (Community production, Young Vic Theatre, Clare Studio), *Lost in Transit* (Education Production, Almeida Theatre) & *J'attendrais* (English Touring Opera). As an Assistant Director she has worked for Rupert Goold, Matthew Lloyd, Jonathan Munby, Phyllida Lloyd, Samuel West, Tim Carroll, Peter Duncan, James Conway and Tim Albery among others, and for companies including Headlong, Almeida, Opera North, ENO, ETO, Manchester Royal Exchange, Oxford Playhouse and Shakespeare's Globe.

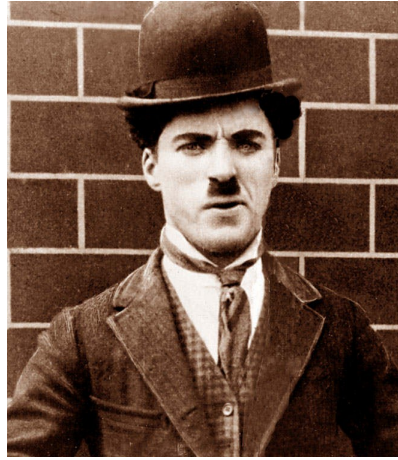
Costume Designer

Katharine Heath trained in Theatre Design at Wimbledon School of Art and Central Saint Martins. Recent costume designs include *Hamlet* (Icarus Theatre, National Tour), *Otieno* (Metta Theatre, Southwark Playhouse), *Rip Her To Shreds* (Icarus Theatre, Old Red Lion), *La Prima Donna* (Hellcat Productions, Latitude Festival) and *Lift & Separate* (Hellcat Productions, V&A Museum). Recent set and costume designs include *Chaika Casino* (Theatre Souk, Theatre Delicatessen), *A Dreamland Sideshow Christmas* (The Tom Thumb Theatre, Margate) and *La Dispute* (Soho Theatre, London/ Edinburgh Fringe).

The Design



Samuel Collings as The Man



Charlie Chaplin

Both *The Man With the Flower in His Mouth* and *The Traveller* have very very distinct styles. *The Man* was inspired by images of old clowns and mimes - the layering of clothes and bowler hat immediately conjure Charlie Chaplin - there is a conscious theatricality to his appearance. He has a foot in Pirandello's original world and also hopefully a foot in the present day. *The Traveller* meanwhile is much more contemporary in her aesthetic, and also her palette is much more muted. Beiges and browns signify a certain blandness in her character that helps explain her fascination with *The Man* and his stories. *The Waitress* is different again - she is in 'normal' clothes, with a dirtied apron and the only touch of theatricality are the red braces which again hark back to the image of clown/mime that we see in *The Man*. As for *The Boy* - in this production we never see him but from how he's described we know he wears a hat and an old coat and looks old himself, beyond his years.

Follow up Activity:

In groups discuss and create a distinct "look" for each of the characters. Try and take your inspiration is drawn from recognizable sources (e.g. films, photographs, contemporary celebrities, figures from history) and think about palette and textures/fabrics. Why have you chosen that image for the character? How does it enhance the character's personality and the themes of the play?

Symbols and Ciphers

In both the text and our production of *The Man With The Flower in His Mouth* there abounds symbols and ciphers. Death is compared to an 'insect crawling on your back' and the title itself is a metaphor - the flower referring to the fatal cancer from which the Man is suffering - held in his mouth. In the production, embracing the absurd-ism of the piece, The Man illustrates his stories and these symbols with mundane household objects - sometimes a tiny rubber duck represents death, sometimes buttons, coffee beans, coins represent the many citizens of Pompei as he describes their imminent demise.

In his desire to grasp at life The Man is a sensualist so these objects becomes totemic, imbued with meaning and power by the act of designation. It is an extension of the way we visualise in physical space events of elsewhere - the general moving salt, pepper, wine glasses in complex patterns around the table, over dinner, representing armies. It is a kind of game which to the Man comes naturally - submerged as he is - within the realm of the imagination. But the traveller is always one step behind - attempting to keep up, and join in the game, but always doomed to make a false move, at which the object reverts to its natural function and she's the one left a fool.

Creating visual metaphor is a strong part of the style of Metta Theatre productions. In previous productions we have used pebbles to represent peoples' lives, and sand their deaths in *Hamlet* (White Bear Theatre 2007), feathers to represent peoples' deaths in *Blood Wedding* (Southwark Playhouse 2009) and red sand (which covered the floor of the theatre) as a symbol for blood in our recent production of *Otieno* (Southwark Playhouse 2010).

Follow up activity:

Take a scene from a play - Shakespeare is a good place to start as it's full of symbols and imagery - and explore how you might physicalise those symbols to help tell the story. The idea is to create a visual metaphor to underline the metaphors within the text, or perhaps more generally the themes of a play or scene. It doesn't have to be a literal representation, but it can echo it (for example in the text of *Blood Wedding* birds are associated with death, which is where the idea of feathers came from).

Interview with Poppy Burton-Morgan

What attracted you to this play?

In many ways I think this small play is perfect - there is a wonderful marriage of intellect and heart. Philosophically we get into the real nitty-gritty of human identity - But simultaneously we also tell a very human story of two strangers connecting over a late-night coffee. It's also wonderful to work with a tiny cast because you can be much free-r in your choices, or rather you can allow the actors to be free-r in their choices and not have to pin things down in the same way as when you have a large cast and you have to think more about staging and blocking.

Where did the idea to stage it in a café come from?

The idea of staging it where the action is set is not my own, but came from the translator of the text Anna Söderblom, and was then introduced to me by a producer who helped developed this adaptation through some workshops with actors last year, with her company Broke Theatre. For which I am eternally grateful for being introduced to such a little gem of a play. There is definitely a vogue for creating site specific, or more accurately site-responsive work in this current theatrical climate, which I attribute to a two fold cause of audiences being interested in being immersed in something (a move away from the old 'fourth wall') and more practically because in these cash-conscious times it can be easier & cheaper as artists to make work in non-traditional spaces, without the massive overheads that theatre buildings can bring with them.

Why did you change the genders of some of the characters?

In the original the Traveller is male (and also the Boy is in fact not a boy but the Woman). I'm always interested in casting blind, as it were, and in fact we auditioned men and women, of a wide range of ages too, and so partly that decision was simply a function of casting the best actor for the role, which in this case turned out to be a woman. That said as a woman working in a (unfortunately still) male-dominated industry I'm always keen to provide opportunities for other women. And finally, on a more artistic note I was really interested to see how having a female Traveller would affect the relationship of the two characters bringing as it inevitably does - a sexual factor into play.

How did you rehearse the play?

This is a wonderful play to rehearse because it is on the face of it so simple - you don't need to spend lots of time on complex staging solutions and technical fireworks. It's just a conversation so you can go right back to basics and just play. We 'played' so many different ways - we did a guerilla style run-through in someone else's café without them knowing, to see what the effect of an unknowing audience would bring, we rehearsed it in bed (which certainly brought out the sexual element), and perhaps most memorably in order to make them focus purely on the text & story-telling and abandon the physical/visual language we'd been exploring we rehearsed in the dark, with the actors' hands tied behind their backs! Ultimately the surface simplicity masks a very real depth so I wanted to mine this as profoundly as we could whilst simultaneously leaving all options open and so creating a performance that always changing.

Web Links

www.mettatheatre.co.uk The Theatre company that mounted this production.

www.greenwichtheatre.org Our venue partner - a 400 seat theatre in Greenwich.

www.thelondonparticular.co.uk The venue - a wonderful new café in New Cross.

