

'Right You Are' examines identities

A passage, almost a tunnel, stretching back from the proscenium to the dark rear wall. Three black doric columns on the left and two white curtains on the right create an illusion of great distance between the front of the stage and the end of the tunnel, where stands the butler, immaculate in black tie and tails, one side of his face in shadow.

He walks serenely downstage, but his strides seem to cover yards at a time, as he bears down on the handful of people sitting in a semicircle facing the audience. They are discussing the nature of truth. Things are not as they seem.

An excellent set and imaginative staging were among the successful elements of the Department of Dramatic Art's production of Luigi Pirandello's "Right You Are (If You Think You Are)," which played Thursday through Sunday in Playmakers Theatre.

The play is set in a provincial town in central Italy. The Agazzi household and their neighbors are worried sick because the newly-arrived lady next door, Signora Frola, is being mistreated by her son-in-law, Signor Ponza, who prevents her from visiting her daughter.

In the first act Signora Frola and Ponza offer convincing explanations for the odd state of affairs, each accusing the other of lunacy. The neighbors spend the rest of the play rigorously investigating the matter, trying to ascertain the truth. All hinges on the identity of Signora Ponza.

According to Signora Frola, she is Ponza's first wife. Ponza, on the other hand, claims that Signora Ponza is his second wife, and that Signora Frola is mad in thinking his wife is her daughter, who is in fact dead.

Finally, Signora Ponza comes on stage, hidden behind a veil, and announces that she is both daughter and second wife. And to herself she is nobody. Is it she who is mad? The issue is unresolved as the curtain falls.

Pirandello's point is obvious. Every one of us plays a variety of roles, depending on to whom he is playing. Does this imply deceit? Is it our duty to condemn this multiplicity of



From left, Elizabeth McDonald, Rob Vanderberry, Andrew Lazarus and Amy Nigro

Roderick Cameron Theater

personalities?

No. Masks are essential. The very word "personality" comes from the Latin word for mask. Without masks peaceful society could not function. The only danger comes from pretending they do not exist.

But theater is not an intellectual medium; philosophical issues work on stage only if they sit on the shoulders of strong theatricality. "Right You Are," Pirandello's first play, is diluted with philosophy and discussion.

But DDA's production, directed by Adam Versenyi, succeeded in creating moments of effective theater from a dull, talky text. The most obvious success was the set, designed by Walt Spangler. It was good to see, for once,

a set designed to accommodate actors rather than impress the audience. Everything in it concentrated attention on the actors, and at the same time it was attractive in itself. The forced perspective created an astounding entrance (well-exploited in the staging) and also underlined the things-are-not-as-they-seem theme of the play.

But set alone won't carry a show. Most of the first act was dull. Not only is the text insipid, but in this section the staging seemed artificial and the acting was at its most monotone and undifferentiated. There was a brief sparkle when Jeff Untz came on as the quasi-maniac Signor Ponza. Untz captured attention with a consistent performance which excelled in specificity and commitment.

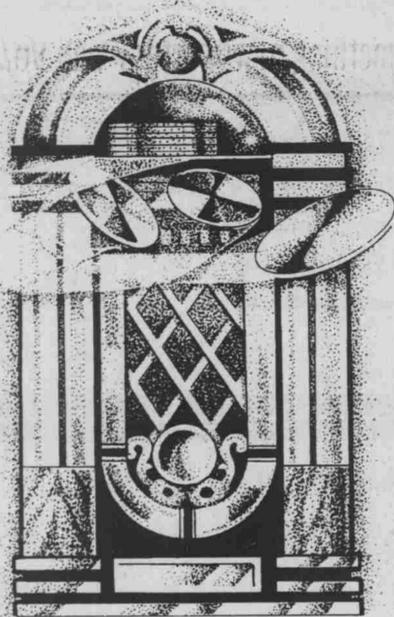
After the intermission the show began to come alive. Rob Vanderberry, as Lamberto Laudisi, started things rolling with a compelling soliloquy to his mirror and a strange

dance among the chairs. As in the rest of his performance, Vanderberry made excellent use of movement to create the caustic character of Laudisi. The scene immediately following the soliloquy, involving Laudisi and the butler, was perhaps the most successful scene of the evening.

Robin Agnew came dangerously close to stealing the show in the role of the butler. What he did with an apparently insignificant role was astounding, particularly in terms of timing and specificity. God and the casting director only know why he was given such a small part.

Some of the most successful staging involved the treatment of groups, the respectable burghers who rushed from one informant to another, or stood together to condemn, pity or be scandalized. Especially memorable were the eerie, unreal appearances of the citizens during part of Laudisi's soliloquy and the final scene when all were stunned by Signora Ponza's words.

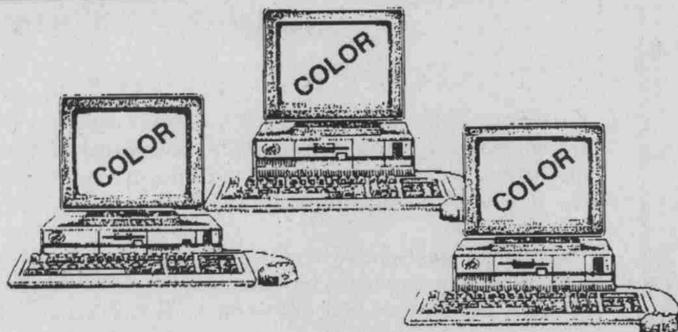
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