



—Dave Sutherland photo

**SIX OF ONE, A HALF-DOZEN OF THE OTHER**—Characters in Search of an Author, that is. Just at the moment the Director (Jay Smith) is telling them that Luigi Pirandello doesn't seem to be in right now. Looking distressed is Ken Agrell-Smith as The Father (second from the right).

## Six characters in search of an outdated concept

Studio Theatre continues to be amazingly without presence in the city this season. Having presented first an interesting play, followed by a mis-timed presentation of an important play, Studio has reverted to type with another of its ugly winners, *Six Characters In Search Of An Author* by Mr. L. Pirandello.

The production is past, but its words and sights remain in the minds of those who saw it. Indeed memories fade, but it is not memory that is important here. What must be considered are the effects on people's thinking, the unconscious alienation of mental habits.

If Studio Theatre had any sense of social responsibility, it would carefully avoid such plays. The Pirandello play in question is merely the conformation, the reinforcement of the rut of dead thinking which artists, writers and dramatists have spent most of this century trying to shatter.

If we are still to be caught up in the vagaries of that stupid question "To what degree and in what way does the illusion of reality have its own reality", if we are to continue to count the number of times two mirrors can reflect each other, then 1984 will penetrate as a painfully present reality into the few remaining places like the theatre, which as yet remain original.

What is worse is that the Studio production was a good production. It was solidly capable proscenium theatre from the directing down. It was the kind of production which has not yet failed to convince me that the Citadel should have closed down after its second production of the preceding season.

There was an amazing continuity, even within the acting. Only one name deserves to be singled out, Mr. Ken Agrell-Smith, on whose ample shoulders the burden of

controlling the levels of intensity fell for the first two acts. On the whole the actors worked as a team—or at least seemed to—which, considering the Broadway tradition out of which Studio comes, and into which its students would like to be fed, is in itself a miracle.

What seems at first to be a difficult play, and which becomes for a short while a complex play, winds up as a piece of confusion—mostly to its author, partly to its performers. It is a script about scripts—not a play about plays, or actors. *Six Characters* is a piece of self-indulgent masturbation by a sick writer.

The play does not reveal the tensions of the theatre or life, it merely feeds parasitically on those tensions. *Six Characters* merely takes a short one-act play of cliché emotions, and by means of a cliché device spreads that one act into three. There is no beauty in its superficial ugliness, there is only a certain awfulness about its sickly ingenuity.

Studio Theatre is to be congratulated, perhaps, for presenting us with a nearly transparent production for a controversial play that has allowed us to deal mainly with the play and the questions it raises. Unfortunately the controversy, the questions of the play are not worth considering. It should be known that this reviewer would have preferred, and indeed, asked his editors if these columns could have been left blank with a heading as *Critic draws blank from Pirandello play*.

The presentation of a good production, however, only serves to emphasize Studio's continued lack of perception of what is going on in the theatre world. In artistic terms this means Studio is sponging, it is not contributing its own share to the world of theatre. It

has given us no new insights, no new breakthroughs.

What could have happened with this production? Why could one not re-write the play? Why leave it to consider the reality of a character considered as quite separate from the actor who has to play that character? Why talk about an eternal moment shared so unobviously by six nothings and so much better taken care of by Albee in his "little bastard" in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, or by Wilfred Watson in his handling of the crocodile theme in his new play, *Thing In Black*, which will be performed in the complete round at the Yardbird Suite, starting Wednesday, March 8.

—Peter Montgomery

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## Books, etc.

If you have been following this column over the last few months, you will know that I have an avowed weakness for light literature: fairy-tales, children's books, and so on. Maybe this is just the echo of my own simplicity, but I would rather think that there is some merit in fantasy.

This view is to a large measure borne out by the king of fantasy-writers himself, J. R. R. Tolkien, in a little volume entitled *Tree and Leaf* (Unwin, \$1.10; also available, I believe, in the Ballantine *Tolkien Reader*). I almost hesitate to mention Tolkien again, because I run the risk of being accused of jumping on a bandwagon; but since the Tolkien craze is more or less over now, and the man stands a chance of becoming a respected writer instead of a teen-age hero, I will venture to discuss him here.

*Tree and Leaf* is a reprint of two pieces which were written some thirty years ago. The first, "On Fairy-Stories", is an essay which attempts to define and justify the fairy-tale as literature. Tolkien both expands and limits the definition: a fairy-story need have nothing to do with the little creatures, as many have supposed; but on the other hand not every story which depends on fantasy is a fairy-story. Beast-fables (like *The Three Little Pigs*) and dream-visions (like *Alice in Wonderland*) do not qualify, because they do not accept Magic as their frame of reference.

This idea, of course, gets Tolkien entangled in the problem of Truth in Literature. Fairy-tales are often criticized because they have nothing to do with reality; Tolkien will have nothing to do with this, and gets around the problem by creating a Secondary World which is consistent within itself. Hence Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief" becomes instead a "Secondary Belief" which has nothing to do with the Primary World.

Tolkien also discusses the origins of fairy-tales (with reference to the difficult question of myth) and the elements of "escape" which are so obviously contained in fantasy. By "escape" is usually meant "escape from reality"—nonsense, says Tolkien: "For my part, I cannot convince myself that the roof of Bletchey station is more 'real' than the clouds." The escape provided by fairy-stories is an escape into a different and more pleasant part of reality, and not to be condemned.

The second part of the book, "Leaf by Niggle", is a very short fairy-story. Niggle is a little man who lives in a peculiar world where all activities are controlled by the State. He is a painter when he has time (which is not very often, because the State forces him to work), and dearly loves to paint leaves. His great work began with a leaf, and grew to a tree, and finally to a whole country; but Niggle never finishes it.

Niggle is constantly plagued by the thought of a journey he must make—it is never explained why he must make it—but refuses to prepare for it. At last he is forced to go; he is put on a train, arrives at a sort of work camp, and stays there for a while. From there he is moved to a country which is the exact duplicate of his old painting. He spends the rest of his day here, finishing the landscape and preparing it for the arrival of others.

This is a very odd little story. Tolkien has explicitly stated that he despises allegory—and yet in "Leaf by Niggle" we have the complete life-death-resurrection cycle mapped out. It is almost too trite to say that Niggle is Everyman, that the painting is the heaven which we create for ourselves, and so on. How very peculiar that a man who despises allegory, and who has written volumes with scarcely a trace of it, should have made such an obvious excursion into it here!

All in all, "Leaf by Niggle" is not a really terrific story. It is worth looking at as a curious remnant of Tolkien's earlier work, but it is not the best example of the principles set forth in "On Fairy-Stories". The essay itself, however, is an extremely interesting and often radical treatment of a subject which is too often ignored. Tolkien is one of the great masters of the fairy-tale, and his aesthetic theory gives us some good insights into his art.

—Terry Donnelly