



## “Naked” and “Hir” – Identity Meltdown

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*Taylor Mac and Pirandello share the same goal: reveal the deadening vacuity at the heart of bourgeois society and the male ego.*

[Naked](#) by Luigi Pirandello in a new version by Nicholas Wright. Directed by Eric Hill. At The Unicorn Theatre’s Larry Vaber Stage, Berkshire Theater Group’s Stockbridge Campus, 6 East Street, Stockbridge, MA, through October 28.

[Hir](#) by Taylor Mac. Directed by Alice Reagan. Staged by Shakespeare and Company at Elayne P. Bernstein Theatre, Lenox, MA (Closed).

Identity politics are the topic *du jour* in American theater, to the point of shell shock, given that these bloody tussles inevitably take the form of rock’em sock’em combat. Extremes butt heads — for the delectation of liberal audiences — before the peace of empathy or exhaustion finally sets in. So it was invigorating to see two well-produced, refreshingly acidic tragicomedies in Western Massachusetts take a different — and far less clichéd — tack.

Luigi Pirandello’s *Naked* (British playwright Nicholas Wright’s version of 1922’s *To Clothe the Naked*) reflects the pitiless sensibility of a master, a dramatist whose work is not often produced here because he is a pessimist. (Our audiences pay their money to be inspired in the theater, preferably via music.) Taylor Mac’s *Hir* (2014) turned out to be one of the most interesting absurdist farces I have seen in years, a genuinely subversive vision of our social meltdown that combines Sam Shepard and Ionesco. The script hasn’t been produced in Boston (at least a Google search doesn’t reveal an outing); this is a city that prefers farces that lampoon Sherlock Homes or Donald Trump. (Our audiences don’t like subversion in theater, doesn’t matter if there is music.)

So how do these plays recast the identity politics rumble? By doing away with the idea of identity entirely, at least as a stable category. Pirandello articulated the diabolical

notion over a hundred years ago: “Life is a continuous and indistinct flux and has no form beyond that which we from time to time give it,” he wrote, “infinitely variable and continuously changing.” Everything is fluid, including ourselves, a demeaning truth that we combat by solidifying endless self-celebratory narratives — but at the center of all the fictions lies a hollowness, the soul a whiff of nothingness.

It is this perception of the bare vacuum that the poor, seduced, abandoned young woman in *Naked* attempts to cover through the creation of a fib (“a decent little garment”), though her surrender to reality is inevitable. As usual with Pirandello, the plot is both a creaky melodrama and a send-up of one. Ersilia attempts to poison herself, but she survives, giving the newspaper a humdinger of a story about a dead child that she had been hired by a consul and his wife to mind and an affair with a lieutenant who has a fiancé. The men in Ersilia’s life come to her ‘rescue,’ including an aging novelist looking for a subject for a book (and a mistress), each generating his own self-regarding fiction about who the woman is and why she attempted to kill herself.

Methodically (perhaps too much so), all the self-serving masks drop away: once the male self-deceptions (and projections) are shed, Ersilia chooses to embrace the pain of being a non-entity, a soiled woman whose hit the bottom of the food chain. In our era of #metoo, the confession of *Naked*’s anti-heroine — her self-destructive ‘voice’ — takes on ironic (yet moving) political resonance.

The Berkshire Theatre Group staging is generally lean and clean. Eric Hill directs Wright’s tidied up script (though it still pokes along at times) with colorful fervor. The cast serves the play’s melodramatic mission well: David Adkins, James Barry, Jeffrey Doornbos, and Rocco Sisto are appropriately overripe, if at times a bit wilted around the edges. As for Ersilia, Tara Franklin is suitably enigmatic — her living-on-borrowed-time victim is mysterious, frenzied, traumatized, and attractive. Though a touch more ferocity from Franklin would have been nice. After all, it is her character who — out of desperation — punches a hole through the patriarchal cardboard pretense around her.



Elizabeth Aspenlieder in the middle of the chaos that is “HIR.” Photo: Emma Rothenberg-Ware

You could say that *Hir* is Pirandello on steroids. In it, the American family is liquefied. Identity demands order; “infinitely variable and continuously changing” flux transforms domesticity into chaos. Dissolution — in the name of freedom or “paradigm change” — releases comic energy, along with plenty of pain, hatred, and anger.

In a “starter home that never really got started” an abusive and tyrannical dad, Arnold, has had a stroke. He wears a diaper and can barely speak. He is being taken care of by his vengeful wife, Paige, who serves him milk shakes filled with estrogen. She likes to see him dress up in a wig and make-up. Daughter Max is well along in the process of becoming a man. In the beginning of the play Issac, dishonorably discharged from the war because of a drug problem (he worked in the Mortuary Affairs department, shipping body parts of blown-up soldiers back to the US) returns to find that nothing is the same. In this sense, Mac is drawing on the ‘returning soldier’ genre but, like everything else in the play, it is soundly demolished.

Son takes Dad’s side and rebels against the feminized patriarchy by reversing Paige’s demand for total mess. You could see *Hir* as a hilarious send-up of the primal nightmare that haunts Trump’s white male supporters. After the dissolution of what Kanye West calls “male energy,” liberated women will take control and seek revenge for past beatings, gender roles and sexual conventions will break down, war will turn out drug

addicts rather than men, and no one will want to be home because home will have become unaffordable and intolerable, more kennel than castle.

For me, *Hir* is a delicious exercise in anarchy. Dissatisfied and resentful family members — liberated from male domination — share the same goal: to escape the brutal clutches of the American Home. Paige wants to blow it sky high, and Mac shares that wish. Pirandello, at his best, balances pain and humor as he strips away our comforting illusions. Mac's brand of strip-tease is far more naughtily explosive; his vaudeville-esque craziness is volatile, to the point that the sudden shifts from amusement to pathos generates whiplash. But the Shakespeare & Company cast were up to the challenge, investing humanity into Mac's cartoonish figures, from the frenzied gung-ho of Elizabeth Aspenlieder's Paige to the bleary incomprehension of John Hadden's Arnold, the cutting sauciness of Jack Doyle's Max, and the panicked angst of Adam Huff's Isaac. Alice Reagan directs the proceedings with a sure black comic hand, never letting the proceedings settle into sitcom regularity.

With this play and [The Niceties](#) we are beginning a millennial-inspired counter-offensive to the corporate liberalism of American theater. The debate in the latter play revolves around fixed argumentative positions, which limits it. *Hir* is far more raucously theatrical, sensationally unruly. Mac and Pirandello share the same goal: reveal the deadening vacuity at the heart of American society and the male ego. Unlike the dour Italian, Mac offers a modest touch of empathetic possibility; at the end of the play Max disobeys Paige and wipes off Arnold's urine-soaked diaper. It is one of the few convincingly optimistic gestures I have seen on stage lately.

**Bill Marx** is the editor-in-chief of *The Arts Fuse*. For over three decades, he has written about arts and culture for print, broadcast, and online. He has regularly reviewed theater for National Public Radio Station WBUR and *The Boston Globe*. He created and edited WBUR Online Arts, a cultural webzine that in 2004 won an Online Journalism Award for Specialty Journalism. In 2007 he created *The Arts Fuse*, an online magazine dedicated to covering arts and culture in Boston and throughout New England.