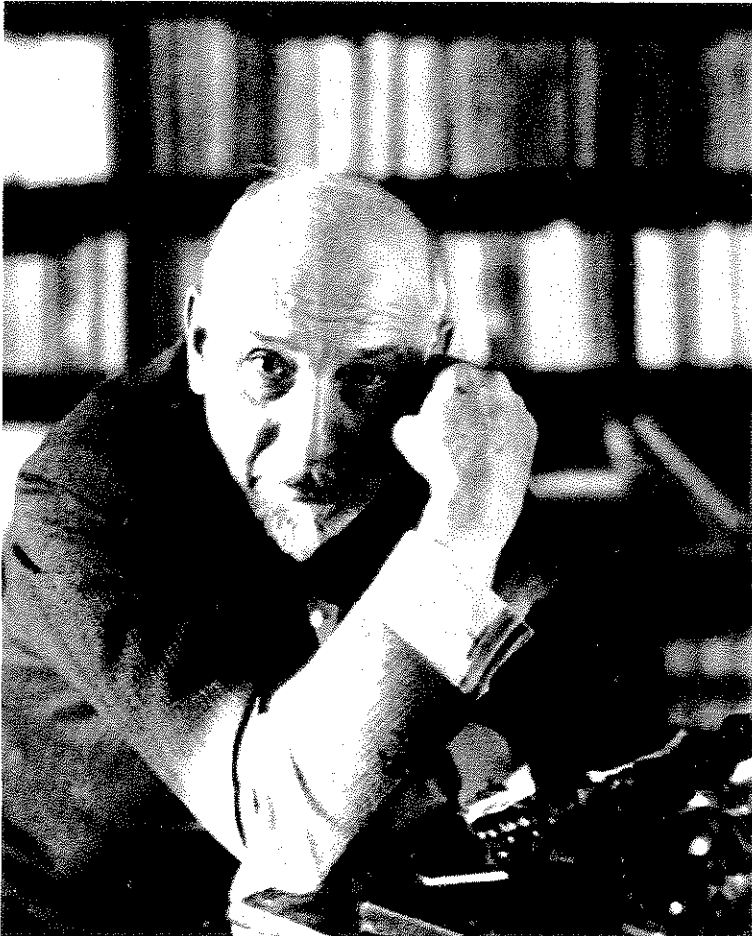




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Collaborations, Translations, Criticism, Performances, Reviews

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Marta Abba.
Photograph Courtesy of The Cleveland Public Library,
Photograph Collection.

Marta Abba, Luigi Pirandello and the Cleveland Connection

ALFONSO D'EMILIA
Cleveland, Ohio

Marta Abba, Luigi Pirandello's muse and principal interpreter, who lived in Cleveland from 1938 to 1953, established there an authentic Pirandellian legacy, thus further enhancing the rich Italian heritage in the city. Her loyal friend Orfea Barricelli and her son Gian Piero,¹ among others, were to be a source of comfort for the rest of her life, especially after she felt slighted by the Italian intellectual community following Pirandello's death.

Marta Abba was born in Milan in 1900, and at age seventeen she was graduated with honors from the city's L'Academie du Theatre Filmdramatique in the same city. A few years later, this fascinating, talented, young actress joined Pirandello's Teatro d'Arte company at Rome's Teatro Odescalchi, debuting to considerable acclaim in Massimo Bontempelli's play, *Nostra Dea* (*Our Dea*) in April, 1925. Destined to play leading roles in Shakespeare, Ibsen, and Shaw, as well as Pirandello, and to be the object of the great Sicilian dramatist's affection and devotion, she would eventually triumph on the stages of Paris, London, Berlin, Prague, Budapest, Vienna, and Buenos Aires. Marta also distinguished herself on Broadway where, at the invitation of impresario Gilbert H. Miller, she starred in *Tovarich*. It was while appearing in *Tovarich* that Marta learned of the inconsolable loss of her "caro Maestro," December 10, 1936, an event she announced from the stage of the Plymouth Theatre that evening.

Two years later, on January 28, 1938, Marta Abba married Severance A. Millikin, a member of a wealthy, highly respected Cleveland family; indeed, he was often referred to as Cleveland's patron of the arts. The marriage ceremony took place at the private home of Mr. and Mrs. John A. Hadden in Cleveland Heights. The Abba/Millikin residence, the Longwood Estate, a 35 room English Tudor mansion erected in 1906 on a 150 acre parcel of land, was described by *The Cleveland Plain Dealer* as once "the center of Cleveland's social and cultural life" (January 29, 1938, "Quit Drama? Marta Abba Just Smiles;" and again on April 8, 1985, "Severance Millikin, Arts Patron, Dies"). It is presently a shopping mall. In 1942 Cain Park in Cleveland Heights served as

the outdoor theatre for Marta's first "American" Pirandellian role, a production of *Right You Are If You Think You Are*, which according to the then *Cleveland Plain Dealer* drama critic, William F. McDermott, was a great success.

During one of her frequent visits to the Italian Consulate in Cleveland, Marta met Walter W. Spetrino, the consulate secretary and later president of Il Cenacolo Italiano, whom she befriended and in whom she confided. Mrs. Spetrino had also the pleasure of meeting Marta's parents, Pompeo and Giuseppina, as well as her sister Cele.²

By the time Marta arrived, Cleveland had already attained a position of leadership in commerce, industry, and culture. It was a center of attraction for immigrants looking for freedom and economic opportunities. The Italian community, some 30,000 strong, was teeming with life. Although they were still longing for their respective villages on the Apennines or at the foot of Mount Aetna, these Italian immigrants realized that their new home was along the shores of Lake Erie. It was there, Dr. Carlo Ferroni of Ashland College has noted, that they would work, dream, and hope for a brighter future. And in spite of experiencing violent cultural clashes, they built places of worship, business, entertainment; they organized hometown, social clubs, religious feasts; they even published their own newspaper³ and broadcast Italian radio programs. The Italian Cultural Garden in Rockefeller Park was inaugurated on Columbus Day 1930, with a congratulatory message from President Hoover and an official gift from the Italian government in celebration of the 2000th anniversary of Virgil's birth: a bust of the Latin poet supported by the remains of a column taken from the Roman Forum.

But Marta Abba, the internationally acclaimed actress, came to Cleveland as if going into exile. Marta was born for the theatre, while Millikin instead was in search of a wife with domestic virtues. The quarreling lines were firmly drawn and Marta Abba and Severance A. Millikin were destined to go separate ways. Having won a one million dollar divorce settlement in 1952, Marta went back to her family in Milan the following year, although she remained involved in productions of Pirandello's plays.

Marta last returned to America at age eighty-six, two years before her death in 1988. She wanted to make sure that her love letters from Pirandello were secure in quasi-sacrosanct custody at

Princeton University. Thanks to "the Cleveland connection" and more specifically to her close friends, the late Mildred Andrews Putnam and her son Peter, a small portion of Pirandello's literary patrimony can now be found in America.⁴

Though confined to a wheelchair, Marta Abba presented the coveted gift of 552 letters to the library of Princeton University in person in November of 1986, with the understanding that they be published both in English and Italian so that the world may know "how much Pirandello suffered." (*Letters XIII*)

The English edition containing 164 letters was published by Princeton University Press in 1994: *Pirandello's Love Letters To Marta Abba*. It was edited and translated by Benito Ortolani, a highly esteemed Professor of Theatre at Brooklyn College and at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. The Italian edition was issued by Mondadori one year later. Ortolani tells us:

The reading of the letters does exclude not only the hypothesis of a trivial sexual relationship, but also that of a senile infatuation in a platonic literary romance. In the daily messages we are confronted with a man whose blood has long reached the boiling point, whose tears are real and abundant, whose capacity for torment seems almost unlimited. There is the mad grabbing for every thin thread of hope; the unbearable frustration resulting from the long distances away from Marta and subsequent loneliness; and even the palpable temptation closing in on him to reach into a drawer containing an implement of death and turn it on himself. But there is also relief. We read of his unbridled joy of every fulfillment of his beloved's desire and the generous offering of his time, his creative energies, and his moral and economic support in the effort to make Marta happy, admired, and envied woman. (XIII)

Yes, Marta and Luigi were in platonic love with one another. She was to him, as once described by Ibsen, "the May sun of a September life." (*Vital Signs*, Introduction by Robertson Davies, XV) Pirandello, a much older person, believed in chastity and remained faithful to his Antonietta, as far as we know. Pirandello refers to Marta in his will as "the daughter of my choosing who, with her noble and pure love, comforted the last days of my errant life." (Giudice 187)

On October 20, 1926, Pirandello wrote to Marta from Rome:

... you do not find therefore a moment to write to your old Maestro who maybe still deserves to be pitied if he laments the passing of something good that is no longer there: your letters, so airy, so intelligent and full of life, in a moment so many difficulties and so much sadness as the present one. They were the only air I could breathe! All the rest, suffocation! (*Letters* 11)

The minutes of Il Cenacolo Italiano meeting of October 1948 record Marta Abba's lecture with the following comment:

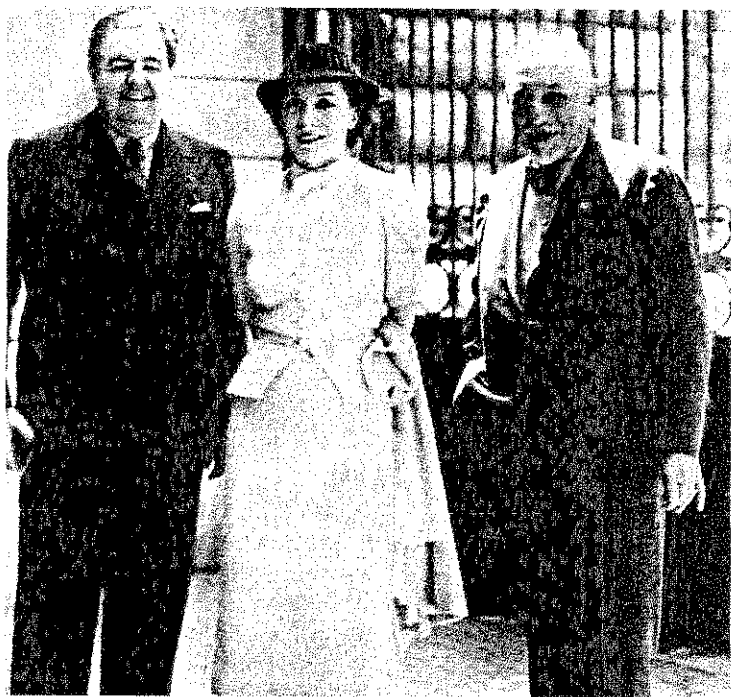
The beautiful and famous Miss [sic] Marta Abba Millikin reads her love letters from Luigi Pirandello. She explains, elaborates, reveals their intimate essence while portraying his gentle and passionate soul. Poetry pervades and animates those letters, as well as sweetness, sensitivity, pain. The great artist breaks down in tears while reading; she who has fully shared the bitter chalice of her beloved genius from Girgenti. And we, we wept along with her.

On December 4 1936, six days before dying, Pirandello wrote to Marta who was performing on Broadway:

This letter is already long, and it is time that I send it to the post office. But when will it reach you? If I think about the distance, I at once feel I am sliding into a horrible loneliness like into an abyss of despair. But you should not think about that! I embrace you tightly, tightly, with all, all my heart, Your Maestro. (*Letters* 337)

Pirandello adapted and dedicated the play *As You Desire Me* "To Marta Abba so it will not die." (3) Marta was to translate the text into English, and MGM's George Fitzmaurice produced a cinematic version starring Greta Garbo and Erich Von Stroheim. In this play through the character of "The Unknown Woman," Marta implores Luigi in the persona "Bruno" to "take me and make me as You Desire Me" (55) For "to be is to become. And I have become her, Cia," (55)—better yet Antonietta.

Marta also translated Pirandello's political play, *The New Colony*, as well as his last, great and unfinished work *The Mountain Giants*.



Above: Marta Abba with *Tovarich* producer Gilbert Miller and Pirandello.

Left: Marta Abba in *Tovarich* costume. *N.Y. Post*, August 28, 1936.

Facing page--top: Marta Abba's published letters to Pirandello (1991, ed. by Pietro Frassica).

Facing page--bottom: Marta Abba's last letter to Pirandello, written on Dec. 8, 1936, from New York where she was appearing in *Tovarich*.



Russian Role in French
Comedy for Italian Star

Photographs facing page taken at an exhibition at the Biblioteca-Museo Luigi Pirandello.



successivamente benissimo
 con un risultato inconfu-
 sibile, un po', un po' che
 non, parlar un po' bene che
 loro
 Ma non so perfettamente co-
 me un dono confortar e
 che certo che ce l'ha di fa-
 re tutto per il meglio.
 Ho da volere da Stefano per
 la scelta di questo che lei
 ha preceduto altri affari
 di stile, sono veramente
 contenti. Buon Natale
 caro Maestro, sia felice, e
 si abbia tutto il vostro
 affetto. 11. L.

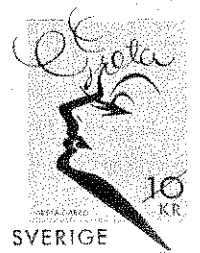
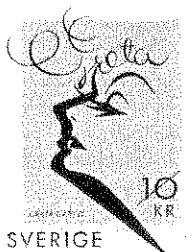
8 Dicembre '36
 Milano ore 19/14
 Caro Maestro, devo correre
 al teatro per la recita. Le
 trovo che le ormai quel
 che parlo col Norisiani
 che parla domesticamente
 Ma ho bene, un po' di
 successo è sempre più
 grande. Sono festeggia-
 to continuamente dai
 vari club di New York
 Domani sera a 8/16



New Issues

No paparazzi, please.

Shown at 140%



A friska frisco (Sweetest)



Left Top: Set photographs from *As You Desire Me* (1932), Greta Garbo with Erich von Stroheim (l) and Melvyn Douglas (r)
 Courtesy of the Biblioteca-Museo Luigi Pirandello.

Left Bottom: U.S. Postal Service September 2005 stamp issue, in conjunction with Sweden, on the 100th anniversary of Greta Garbo's birth.

This page: The U.S. Garbo stamp (Issued in New York City on September 23, 2005.) The engraved stamp issues for both Sweden and the U.S. are based on a photograph by Clarence Sinclair Bull taken during the 1932 filming of *As You Desire Me*. (Source: U. S. Postal Service.)