

Title || The Fabling of the Jester in Mistero Buffo: Dario Fo and the political re-use of popular material

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Published in || «Sciami», 2017 - www.nuovoteatromadeinitaly.sciami.com

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Number of pages || pag 1 di 2

Language || ENG

DOI ||

Mistero buffo (1969)

monologue – “popular jestering”

by and with Dario Fo

collaboration: Collettivo Teatrale Nuova Scena

Premiere, Sestri Levante (Genoa), 1th October 1969.

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by Eva Marinai

After an open rehearsal at a students' sit-in at the University of Milan, Dario Fo's most celebrated play opened in Sestri Levante (Genoa) on 1st October 1969 under the guise of a “popular jestering”. The piece is a series of monologues describing biblical episodes, whose treatment is inspired to the apocryphal gospels and to popular re-tellings about the life and miracles of Jesus. This initial form evolved into the textual mobility which became typical of Fo's work with Franca Rame: the work evolved greatly from its first staging, due also to a large number of showings in Italy and abroad. The piece's dramaturgy should be seen as a true “mobile text” and as a “potential show”: it is a dynamic text which carries a built-in mimic, gestural and pluri-vocal dimension open to being altered by the actor who is also its author (Barsotti, 2007).

The title, a clear wink to Mayakovsky's *Mystery-Bouffe* directed by Meyerhold in 1918, refers back to the medieval practice of the ‘mystery’ as sacred or devotional-themed passion play; at the same time a popular, irreverent aspect is singled out – the ‘comical’ in the title – which criticises power through a satirical, grotesque treatment. In his role as modern jester Fo makes use of a number of dialects from the Veneto and Padania regions intermingled with the extremely onomatopoeic linguistic reinventions of his *grammelot* to tell the silent and ancient story of the lower classes to great comical and derisive effect. Episodes such as *The Raising of Lazarus*, *Zanni's Hunger* or *Boniface VIII*, well-known also for their successful broadcast on Italian TV since 1977, attest to Dario Fo's incredible artistic talent as an ‘actor-author’ (Barsotti, 2007) and to the work's corrosive power, which makes *Mistero Buffo* one of the most important contributions to Western theatre in the 20th century.

The piece was printed a number of times, often being altered slightly in its form. Since its first edition for Nuova Scena, entitled *Mistero Buffo. Giullarata popolare in lingua padana del 400* (Cremona, 1969) to the last, edited by Franca Rame and published for Turin's Einaudi in 2003, the structure of the piece changes enormously. While the first version already contains *Death and the Fool*, *The Raising of Lazarus*, *Morality Play of the Blind Man & the Cripple* and *The Marriage at Canaan* (initially entitled *The Drunk*), it doesn't include episodes which were nevertheless performed at the Casa del Popolo in Cusano Milanino in 1969, such as *Boniface VIII* and *The Birth of the Villain*. These were later published in the 1970 Mazzotta edition of the text as ‘additions’, while other episodes which had also already been performed on stage – such as *Fresh and Sweet-Smelling Rose* and *The Birth of the Jongleur* – didn't appear in print until 1973 in the Bertani edition published in Verona. Einaudi's first edition dates from 1977, where *Mistero Buffo* appears in the fifth volume of Fo's comic works alongside *I Reason and I Sing*; Einaudi later reissued the script with a DVD of the show as part of its ‘I Millenni’ series in 1997. In the ‘definitive’ Franca Rame version from 2003, the script is divided into two parts: *The Mysteries (Presentation, Fresh and Sweet-Smelling Rose, The Rite of the Goats and Mammuthones, The Slaughter of the Innocent, Morality Play of the Blind Man & the Cripple, The Marriage at Canaan, The Birth of the Jongleur, The Birth of the Villain, The Resurrection of Lazarus, The Madonna Meets the Marys, Mary Under the Cross, Death and the Fool, The Nailers, The Story of Saint Benedetto of Norcia, The First Miracle of Baby Jesus)* and *The Grammelots (Zanni's Hunger, Scapino's Grammelot, Grammelot of the English Lawyer, Razzullo's Neapolitan Grammelot, Fall of Power)*. An appendix to the text contains some satirical prologues to specific episodes, written as comments on events in Italian history from 1969 to the present.

The theatrical form Fo adopts is that of the monologue and of the narrative ‘affabulation’ or fabling, a form which has a didactic, Brechtian element, treated through the means of grotesque comedy. Alone on stage, Fo wears black on black, reminiscent of Jacques Lecoq's mime attire – Fo studied choreography with Lecoq in the 1950s, at the time of his collaboration with Parenti and Durano on *Il Dito nell'Occhio (The Finger in the Eye)*, when Lecoq was based at the Piccolo Theatre in Milan studying the masks of the Commedia Dell'Arte. Perhaps also thanks to Lecoq's physical training and pre-verbal exercises, Fo begins to work on the form of the *grammelot* on the magazine *I Sani Da Legare* (1954): “a multi-lingual, phono-gestural dance, which doesn't only reinvent the ancient dialects of Padania and Veneto with its own jestering self-images (...) but which also, elusively, alludes to the idea of foreign language” (Barsotti, 2015). The comical form of the *grammelot* allows Fo to transgress linguistic, and as such also social, norms.

The word *grammelot* as used by Fo is a variation of a French word used by mimes and actors. In his 2001 *Manuale Minimo dell'Attore* Fo writes that the term is “a French term coined by comedians, which transposed to Venice was pidginised into ‘gramlotto’”. It's also a reinvention of the French ‘grommelot’ (Taviani, 1988), which is how Copeau's actors referred to their pre-verbal exercises, grumbles, from the verb ‘grommoler’ (‘to grumble’), which they saw as the “emotional sound of an action” (Barsotti, 2007). The connection between Copeau and Fo could precisely be Lecoq, who became a choreographer for

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Jean Dasté – Copeau’s son in law – after WWII. Dasté introduced Lecoq to his research into the body on stage, and it’s possible that some of Copeau’s exercises were also used by Dasté and by Lecoq in Italy (**Marinai, 2007**). For the performance’s premiere in 1969, Fo used a mixture of spoken dialects which evolved over time into a written language, presented both in original and in translation from the 1973 edition onwards. But it was since 1974, that is since the French tour of the piece, that Fo incorporated the grammelot as the main stylistic trait of the entire oeuvre: “the grammelot gives words the value of captions, and gestures the value of words” (**Meldolesi, 1978**). A new version was presented for 15,000 spectators at the Palazzina Liberty in Milan on 7th April 1974, and, from 1976 onwards, when he presented the piece in Rome, Fo definitively incorporated the grammelots into the official play-text.

The phonic material is accompanied by a gestural score pertaining to the sphere of mime, which is particularly brilliant and intense. For example, the effect of a close-up is given by accentuating the curve of the mouth, the mouth’s corners pointed downwards for a parodic, pathetic effect and upwards for a comic effect which leads to a contagious laughter. That curve of the mouth then produces a pair of slightly nipping horse’s teeth, which are themselves framed by another curve, the heavy curve of the nose, and then above, the eyes, appear either as two tiny fissures in the face or round, surprised, luminous like a child’s. More than on a kind of deformation, or on a puppet-like disarticulation, this is a register that works on “an accentuation of the features’ imperfections, improved also by an unexpected fixity, and by the inclinations assumed by the face” (Barsotti, **2007**). In the actor-author, then, a corporeal language and a vocal gesturality co-exist as fundamental instruments for the translation of the message (Marinai, 2007), a message which is essentially political in nature.

Another important aspect of Fo’s work is the will to give dignity to popular, folk culture in a way which is operational rather than ideological (Puppa, 1978). Fo’s research into the roots of his tradition serves the double purpose of discovering one’s own territory and one’s own deep culture and of creating a feeling of cohesion between classes, a feeling of unity between high and low forms. The political dimension of *Mistero Buffo* resides not, as Soriani (2007) has noted, in an anti-capitalist rhetoric, but in “the creation of ‘universal’ or ‘atemporal’ stories that deal fundamentally with the tension between freedom and oppression” (Jenkins, 1986). The fact of finding and differently employing elements of an ancient folk tradition for performative, dramaturgical intents, unbound to a filological inquiry, speaks fundamentally of a dialectics of high and low culture, and constitutes one of the most successful attempts to recover an “unknown, betrayed” heritage by showing its stark opposition to hegemonic culture (Susa, 2005).

When asked by his fellow company members why the factory workers of the 1960s should be interested in these medieval stories, Fo used to answer by paraphrasing Gramsci: “if you don’t know where you come from, it’s unlikely that you know where you want to go. The cultural history of the proletariat also has origins in the magical relationship with nature, with myth, with religion. You can’t draw a line under it. Our duty is to study these origins of ours, to re-read them for today in its most fundamental values.” (Dario Fo with Luigi Allegrì, 1997).

The bibliographical references given in brackets in this text can be found in the bibliography included in the focus on Dario Fo.