

[Title](#) || Dario Fo - biography

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Dario Fo - biography

by *Eva Marinai*

Dario Fo was born on March 24, 1926, in Sangiano, in the province of Varese, near Lake Maggiore. His father Felice, a stationmaster of socialist creed, was fond of theatre and acted in a local amateur company. His mother, Pina Rota, from a farming family, was an imaginative woman, brimming with inventive ideas. In the seventies she published an autobiographical account, *Il paese delle rane (Land of Frogs)*, with Einaudi. She grew up on a meager diet and the popular stories her father Bristin told her, as he would later tell his grandson. Bristin was the regional name of the pepper seed and connoted a sharp personality. His tales and those of local travelers and craftsmen (later referred to by Dario, in a phrase that captured this melting pot of history and legend, «the storytellers of the lake») offered the budding playwright a *corpus* of rich and suggestive narratives. He added to these in turn, preserving a connection with the atmosphere if not the substance of this tradition. Dario acknowledged an enormous obligation to his grandfather in shaping his own way of telling stories, even defining him the «first Ruzante» he had ever met. Ruzante was an outstanding theatre figure of the “alternative Renaissance”, that soon was to become Fo’s most inspiring model of theatre.

The socialist Felice, not being an active member of the party, suffered – at least according to his family – the effects of his manifest political ideas, with the want of stabilization. The family was forced to travel around Lombardy, following their father: after Sangiano, they moved to Luino, where Fulvio was born in 1928 and Bianca in 1931, then to Voghera and to Oleggio, finally to Porto Valtravaglia, on the shore of the lake that was considered by Dario his real childhood home.

Fo’s education, after school, continued in Milan, and entailed great sacrifices from his family who was, yet, solicited by young Dario’s artistic gifts and disposition to study. In 1940 he began attending Liceo Artistico, then the Accademia di Brera and the faculty of Architecture at the Politecnico. These were war years. Although up to 1943, the first phases of the conflict, domestic life in the Lombardy countryside hadn’t changed much, the situation changed radically with the landing of the Allied soldiers in Sicily and the downfall of Mussolini. On September 8 1943, when Badoglio signed the Armistice, the Resistance organized groups of partisans, the most relevant of which was under the command of CLN. The entire area surrounding Lake Maggiore was turned into the firing line in an uninterrupted war. In the middle of the period referred to as ‘the Resistance’, the Liberation occurred, i.e. the invasion by the Allies. During the fascist occupation, seventeen-year-old Dario was conscripted into the army of the Republic of Salò. At first he shirked, but was recruited again and moved to Monza, where he even managed to stage his first farce. Then, as a deserter, he took refuge in the mountains, and after that in Milan, while his parents were taking part in the Resistance: his father organizing the smuggling to Switzerland of escaped Jewish and British prisoners, his mother treating wounded partisans.

After the Liberation, Dario and his brothers commuted to the Accademia and the Politecnico of Milan, though more prone to entertaining fellow-students with tales and shows rather than studying. Actually, while already working as a decorator, assistant architect and stage manager, Dario left university when he had almost completed his graduation. By then he was in a novel personal and cultural situation. Having settled in Milan, developing their great passions for painting, music and art in general, the Fo brothers led a *bohemian* life, comprising evenings of jazz music and endless political-cultural discussions with communist comrades late into the night. Although never joining the party, Dario felt naturally “leftist”, as the entire *intelligentsia* did at the time, considering Antonio Gramsci their putative father as well as inspiration ideologist. At that time, Gramsci’s *Quaderni (note-books)* were already published.

Fo’s precocious approach to popular culture and theatre, rightly regarded as the basic instrument for dialectic speculation, was influenced by his acute understanding of Gramsci’s theories. By then, his will – and his natural tendency – to reject all hierarchies, even the historical and theatrical ones, were apparent. His interest in farce, (a genre deemed “minor” compared to tragedy or comedy), went in that same direction. It intended not only to envisage a different future, on the wave of post-war reconstruction, but also to recreate the past, re-reading “popular” tradition in the light of new cultural-historical developments and points of view. The results of this approach appeared in later performances, as for instance in his masterpiece *Mistero buffo (Comical mystery)*. His works were nurtured, in these intensely productive years, also through his avid readings: he devoured Gramsci and Marx as well as American novelists and the first translations of Brecht, Majakovskij, Lorca.

The circle of Dario’s and his brothers’ friends included personalities such as the painter and future president of the Accademia di Brera Emilio Todini, the sculptor Alik Cavaliere, comic-strip writer Guido Crepax, and musician Fiorenzo Carpi, who later worked with him in many productions, and became in a short space of time one of the most famous composers at Rai. Fo’s acquaintances ranged from the world of art, with contacts such as De Chirico and Carrà, through cinema, Gillo Pontecorvo, Vittorio De Sica, Carlo Lizzani, Federico Fellini, to literature, Elio Vittorini.

While he was setting up his first exhibition in Bergamo in 1945, Fo was already involved in the theatrical scene in Milan. He would go to watch the rehearsals of Giorgio Strehler’s plays and was counted amongst the group of so-called “whistlers”, who attended plays by old guard authors (sometimes implicated in fascism) heckling, Dadaist style, with remarks such as “Bourgeois, we will bury you!”

Be it as it may, Fo was never one to neglect the importance of a technical formation. In fact, on several occasions following the somewhat reckless years of his adolescence, he confirmed that, when conceiving a theatrical work, his first

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concern was a spatial, scenery and architectonic setting. This is captured in a famous remark he made: «Even today, when imagining a work, writing, I happen to think ‘by plan and elevation’» (1984). His first satire, of 1948, entitled *La Tresa ci divide*, was presented in Luino right after the defeat of the left, in April of the same year. But his first remarkable monologues, in 1950-1951, brought up all his theatrical and histrionic features developed over the years, interweaving his childhood world amidst the aforementioned Storytellers of the Lake with the revolutionary cultural and political quests he had pursued in his Milanese youth. It was his first experience with Strehler at the Piccolo, that brought home for him that he couldn't interpret plays written by other authors. In Intra he met Franco Parenti, an actor at the height of his success both in theatre and on radio, with the sketches of Anacleto the gas-man. Parenti immediately grasped Dario's eclectic gifts and solicited him to go on a tour of Milanese theatres and halls, where he got in touch with show business and with emergent actors like Walter Chiari, Aldo Fabrizi, Ugo Tognazzi, as well as great Totò. He presented his eccentric stories, with their mix of popular tradition and theatrical invention, to a vast and varied audience. Following a radio screen-test, he composed twelve satiric monologues assembled under the title *Poer nano (Poor Dwarf)*, broadcast in the program *Chicchirichì* alongside Parenti and Giustino Durano's voices, later staged at the Odeon theatre in Milan in 1952 within a wider variety show. «Poer nano» means poor devil: an ironic stock phrase that accompanies all the anti-heroes in the phantasmagoric stories narrated by Fo. It's an expression of the popular dialect of Lombardy, employed by the playwright as a narrative “key” for what can be defined fables for adults or “counter-tales”. Here his non-acceptance of the conventional logic is apparent, as well as his rebellion against conventional morals that always see good on one side and evil always and only on the opposite. Alongside comic writing for theatre and radio, Fo also authored songs in the style of those French *chansons* fashionable in those years as performed by singers like Juliette Greco and Georges Brassens, whose exhibits were considered expression of a philosophy close to Ionesco's or Adamov's. The success of his broadcasts convinced Fo to take part in the summer show *Sette giorni a Milano (Seven Days in Milan)* (1951-52), where he met Franca Rame. This encounter was to mark the life of both for good. Franca's family came from a deep-seated tradition of Italian comedians with its roots in the Commedia dell'Arte. She was born and brought up in the theatre, never doubting her future as a performer and a «soubrette». In a way she represented exactly the tradition that Dario was trying to recall, reconstruct and revitalize. It's in consequence of this fortunate encounter with Franca and the Rame family that Fo conceived a model of theatre at the interface between farce and comedy that soon would become his own peculiar style of writing production.

In addition, he studied mime with the French artist Jacques Lecoq, whose teaching appears clearly in the performances of the new-born company Fo-Parenti-Durano. In 1953, the three actors, with the name of “Dritti” (ironically opposed to the trio “Gobbi” composed by Alberto Bonucci, Vittorio Caprioli and Franca Valeri) wrote and interpreted the satirical show *Il dito nell'occhio*, followed in 1954 by *I sani da legare*. These two “anti-revues”, which somehow were borrowed from the genre of the “curtain raiser”, would attract the critics' attention: it was example of re-birth of a first-rate Italian comical-satirical theatre, far from the sparkling *soubrettes* on the forestage, in the style of transalpine revues or of overseas musicals adapted to the Italian audience by Paone, Garinei and Giovannini. Both revues underwent a heavy censorship: Franca often reported how their prompt books were sent back from Rome jammed with red ink, something that would become habitual for the couple. The Nobel prize Salvatore Quasimodo, at the time drama critic who used to follow Fo's work with great interest, stated the value of the show *I Sani da legare*, and detected in it an unforeseen revival of the Commedia dell'Arte, as well as traces of surrealistic and decadent French poetry.

The company broke up in 1954: Parenti went back to the Piccolo Teatro, Durano went on to set his own performances without reaching the expected success, while Fo was attracted by the screen. 1954 is also the year of Dario and Franca's wedding. Fo and Parenti resumed collaborating in 1956, with the eleven serials of the Sunday broadcast *Non si vive di solo pane*, where, in the line of an English character, we find one of his first radio instances of acting in *grammelot*. The show was an amusing satire of customs that made fun of Italians' manias and habits, like the success of television quizzes (these were the years of *Lascia o raddoppia*), but under the appearance of mild social criticism, it denounced recent historical and political events.

Beside theatre, Fo showed a growing interest in script writing. In fact, having moved to Rome, the couple happened to meet Roberto Rossellini and Ingrid Bergman. The production of *Lo svitato* by and with Dario Fo, directed by Carlo Lizzani, dates to 1955. In the film the actor-playwright tried to employ old clownish techniques in the style of Jacques Tati, to represent man's sense of bewilderment towards a society that's more and more mechanized and alienated. These themes would be developed all along the Fifties and the Sixties not only by theatre people, but also by committed satirical song writers like Enzo Jannacci and Giorgio Gaber.

The flop of the movie was due not only to Fo's lack of experience in the practice of cinema, but to the undue meddling in the script of the collaborators forced on him by the production, and heavily marked the couple, who decided to give up working in movie industry and go back to Milan. In 1958 the new company Fo-Rame set off, during the summer season of the Piccolo, with the presentation of four farces collected under the title *Ladri, manichini e donne nude*. The show was a hit and kept being run in the more prestigious winter season, where it was interchanged with *Comica finale*, which was made of four new farces presented at the Stabile of Turin the year before, by the director Giancarlo De Bosio. From the genre of the minor theatre Fo borrowed some techniques of improvisation that already hinted at the future “*many-voices*”, certainly imperfect as to what would be displayed in his subsequent monologues, but already showing Dario's great histrionic talent. He also

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intended to overcome the dramaturgic unity retrieving the Italian comic tradition, expressed among others by Petrolini, who used meta-narrative interruptions and meta-theatrical stratagems to endow the “a parte” (apart from) with epical, political and poetic contents. Being a reader of Feydeau, Labiche, Courteline and of course Beckett and Ionesco, in those years Fo represented the Italian spokesman of the theatre of the absurd against his own expectations. His farces could be brought back to the *comedies de boulevards* rather than to existentialist plays.

Anyway, this was the phase defined by the critics of the Seventies “petit bourgeois” and was neglected as mere entertaining, whereas it can be considered a step leading to scenery crucial for Fo’s future poetics. It was also a step towards a way of satirizing, for which he took his cue from Totò’s absurd funniness, so as to use paradoxes to subvert commonplaces and established order. Fo’s first comedy, dated 1959, *Gli arcangeli non giocano a flipper*, winking at an American imported fashion, argued with cunning irony against contemporary Italian bureaucracy, at the time of the so-called “economic miracle”. The same year he first appeared on television, in the comedy *Monetine da cinque lire*, but he became famous as leading actor in *Carosello (Merry-go-round)*, the entertainment program most watched by Italian viewers. From that moment till his questioned conduction of *Canzonissima* (1962), Fo wrote a comedy every year with the reestablished company Fo-Rame, being its leading actor and author, and having Franca as leading actress, her sister Pia Rame as costume designer and Fiorenzo Carpi as music director. The titles reflected the mannerist taste of the time: *Aveva due pistole con gli occhi bianchi e neri*; *Chi ruba un piede è fortunato in amore*, both staged at the theatre Odeon in Milan.

1962 marked a turning point, both for Italian history and for Dario and Franca’s personal life. While the political ruling class began “opening to the left”, pope John XXIII promulgated the Second Vatican Council to “modernize” the Church. The Democrazia Cristiana was upset for the party’s internal scandals, lost consensus and worked at an agreement to the Socialist Party in order to check alliances with the communists. In February Amintore Fanfani formed a centre-left government. The new government, in its first year, abolished the law on preventive censorship and created the second channel of Rai, under the direction of Sergio Pugliese, who right away summoned the couple Fo-Rame to collaborate. Pugliese, whom the Fos considered an open-minded personality, thought it was well-timed to offer a satirical view of contemporary Italy to Italians: at first he asked Dario and Franca to present some episodes of the variety show *Chi l’ha visto?* then to conduct Saturday night’s most watched program, *Canzonissima*. The circumstance is well known. On the whole, thirteen episodes were scheduled, but some of the sketches, considered too shocking for internal politics, as dealing with charges and attacks for the phenomenon of “mafia” (an unpronounceable word at the time) or of “white deaths” (deaths occurred when working, especially in building yards), had been preventively censored by the revisers of Rai. This brought to a conflict between the couple and the directors of the broadcasting station, and ended with the triumphant desertion of the conductors: Franca and Dario, in the middle of an episode, walked out of the set still wearing the scene costumes, followed by a multitude of fans. Polemics and trials ensued: the two actors were banned from the screens until 1976, when a new political turn brought the PCI to be part of a government alliance, and to retract the ban.

Anyway, the great cloud of dust raised by the argument gave renown to the couple and made them stars of Italian as well as international magazines. The – sad - reverse of the medal were the warnings and threats of kidnapping to their six-year-old son Jacopo, who from then would have to live under police escort. The following year, 1963, was the year of their return to the theatre with four comic masterpieces, foreseen by the less known joint comedy *Storia vera di Pietra d’Angera che alla crociata non c’era*, written but never staged in Italy before the Eighties. They were *Isabella, tre caravelle e un cacciaballe* (1963); *Settimo: ruba un po’ meno* (1964); *La colpa è sempre del diavolo* (1965); *La signora è da buttare* (1967). *Isabella* represented an important break in Fo’s work and artistic life: on the one hand it started the overcoming of the farcical, situational writing to open up to an “ideologized” dimension of drama; on the other it started the second phase of the “bourgeois” theatre activity, of outstanding successes and outstanding takings. Besides, a greater awareness of the mechanisms of theatre (and of its “political” power) made the playwright-actor use a more articulated language, and blend the gestures with a polyphonic discursive scene. This was far from mere caricature and affected gags, rather it was able to compose a more substantial and “choral” dramaturgic structure.

The alternation of representation and commentary, of mimesis and critical reflection became sharper in those comedies – especially in *Isabella* – and this new dimension of Fo’s theatre led the audience to an active participation, to individual or collective taking sides as to the events staged. The tour of the company touched sixteen countries, and most of the box offices in Europe recorded a full house. Meanwhile, Fo’s name was put in the Yearbook of the Institute of Italian Drama along with 569 playwrights, among which Eduardo de Filippo, with whom Fo contended the palm of most represented author on the international stages in those years. At the same time, as from 1965, Fo collaborated with Gianni Bosio’s Nuovo Canzoniere Italiano (NCI), that meant to retrieve folk culture and music. So he staged and directed *Ci ragiono e canto (I think it over and sing)*, with Nanni Ricordi’s troubled assistance. The show was performed on the 16 of April 1966 at the Teatro Carignano. This event, too, was marked by conflicts and polemics, caused by the friction between the ethnomusicologists of NCI, who maintained a strict and controlled philological approach on their researches, and Dario Fo, interested as usual in reshaping and reestablishing the links between fractions of the past, even at the cost of forcing historical truth to his advantage. What’s more, the belief in a tight connection between the origin of folk songs, the archaic roots, even non-European, of this tradition, and the rhythm of work led him to carry out a lengthy study on the movements of the body, on pauses, on respiration, that exasperated his collaborators and caused quarrels eventually leading to a final breaking off. Anyway it was an original

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experiment, culturally and historically important: those were years of a growing ethnographical mostly for the south of Italy, as attested by Ernesto De Martino's coeval work.

Even if Fo's attitude to avant-garde theatre was not always benevolent, indeed it was quite rash, yet he became friends with Jerzy Grotowski, with Eugenio Barba and with Julian Beck, whom he defended when the police broke into the theatre in Milan during the performance of the *Free Theatre*, and strove to have the Festival of Parma include the Living's *Antigone* in its program.

Fatal 1968 was approaching, when Fo announced he desired to stop being "bourgeois's jester", to rather incarnate "people's jester". To him the figure of the storyteller, the minstrel, was representative of a popular culture considered an irreplaceable legacy of mankind, fit to interpret and voice injustices, discontents, worries of the humble, the oppressed, ordinary people. Certainly, this interpretation was far from a critical-historical vision of the phenomenon (as the Academy would say), yet Fo did not mind. Through the image of the jester at court or in the square, with the living presence of the performer, he brought to life the archetypal prestige and revolutionary power of the icon-mask, which from Aristophanes and the satyr of ancient Greece went down to Harlequin, to Saint Francis, to Totò.

At the time of the Sixty-eight's disorders and in search of new artistic and management ways, the company Fo-Rame turned into Nuova Scena, which included actors and authors of the old group as well as other artists from the Teatro d'Ottobre, directed by Nuccio Ambrosino. The newborn company immediately established a close relation with PCI, though Fo wasn't – as already told and unlike Franca – a member of the party. Nuova Scena intended to set up an "alternative circuit" to the official one of ETI (Ente Teatrale Italiano) and ended by using the Case del Popolo and the recreational clubs of ARCI, working with the Milanese secretary of the Association, the aforementioned Ricordi. Fo's "red period" began, when he was conscious of involving the public opinion in an ideological, moral, political change. This period would culminate in the Seventies, with the experience of the theatre group La Comune, come from Nuova Scena. For one thing, Nuova Scena was a complex reality, made up of three distinct "souls": the first, guided by Franca Rame in the '68-'69 season, staged *Grande pantomima con bandiere e pupazzi piccoli e medi; Ci ragiono e canto n.2; L'operaio conosce 300 parole il padrone 1000 per questo lui è il padrone* (title borrowed from Don Milani's experience at Barbiana); *Legami pure tanto io spacco tutto lo stesso*. The second, guided by Vittorio Franceschi, performed *Un sogno di sinistra* and MTM; while the third, with Fo alone, gave life to the monologue *Mistero buffo (Comical mystery)*. As for the "political" or "inquiry" plays, Fo scheduled what he called the «third act» of the show, i.e. a discussion following the performance: a moment of collective confrontation, soon involving the audience in being co-authors. Indeed the company met the audience not only to debate themes and problems come out of the performance, but also merely artistic questions, the audience being invited to take part in the estimation of the play, suggesting variations, alternative solutions or sometimes a total rewriting of the text, and proposing topics for future shows. No doubt *Mistero buffo*, Fo's popular minstrel show of 1969, a polyphonic monologue, is his performance-manifesto. Thanks to the direct meeting with the masses, laborers, workers, the "people" as Gramsci had taught, Fo had by then perfected a synthetic playwright-actor style, lacking those dramaturgical showy decorations that characterized the first phase of his theatrical story. He made his own, and mastered it, the «cabaret and circus fashion expressionism» (see R. De Monticelli, *Eco reinventata dai giullari*, in «Il Giorno», 16 ottobre 1969) ascribed to the comical tests of the Fifties-Sixties by both critics and audience, turning to a marked epic and political dimension, because of the huge spaces – stadiums, factories, squares – alternative to theatres, in which he performed. Starting from those "hot" years, tragically marked by the first terrorist acts of the new-born Brigate Rosse and Prima Linea, Fo began disagreeing with the organizers of PCI, with ARCI and with Ricordi. The terms and concepts of "fight", "freedom", "emancipation" – in years of feminism, of the referendums on divorce and on abortion, courageously supported by the Fos – denoted the actions of both Fo and Rame. She was committed in a hard campaign of human aid to the convicted and of sensitization as to the conditions of Italian prisons, which would end in the founding of "Soccorso Rosso". The couple, however, always kept away from all forms of violence and compulsion, even when it was for the common good. What good can come from the practice of violence? Exactly like for the Living Theatre's pacifist ideals and for the Sixty-eight utopia that fought for a "non violent revolution", Fo declared against the use of weapons, be they right or left. He was also aware of his position of dissident, same as Majakovskij, another model for him. Fo's utopian-revolutionary disposition together with his interest for the forms of worship of popular tradition clashed on several occasions with Lotta Operaia's Marxist activism: how could he mediate, for example, some factions of the movement's orthodox Marxism with his interest for the figure of Christ? If DC and the Vatican condemned *La resurrezione di Lazzaro (The resurrection of Lazarus)* and other passages of *Mistero buffo* as impious and blasphemous, PCI's embarrassment was more and more evident both for *Mistero* and for other coeval plays, like *Morte accidentale di un anarchico (Accidental death of an anarchist)* of 1970 – one of his plays most performed in the world – on Piazza Fontana massacre and the death of Pinelli.

In consequence of Ricordi's decision to let in Nuova Scena recruits coming from the fringes of the extra left in order to "control" the "comrades" as well as Fo's actions, the interactions within the group became more and more strained, until the final irreparable break. During the general meeting of ARCI Fo was accused of "breach of trust" and most of the councilors were threatened to resign in case the convention between the circuit and the actor would be renovated. The following day, the group split up into two parts: Nuova Scena pursued their work with the alternative circle until 1974, whilst Fo, Rame and Ricordi's group, together with Paolo Ciarchi, in 1970 started to La Comune, situated in a shed in via Colletta, Milan. The first work staged by La Comune was *Morte accidentale di un anarchico (1970)*, followed by *Vorrei morire anche stasera*

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se dovessi pensare che non è servito a niente (1970); then *Morte e resurrezione di un pupazzo* (1971); *Tutti uniti, tutti insieme! Ma scusa quello non è il padrone? (United we stand! All together! Oops, isn't that the boss?)*; *Fedayn. La rivoluzione del popolo palestinese attraverso la sua cultura e le sue canzoni (Fedayn. The revolution of the Palestinian people through their culture and their songs)*; *Pum pum! Chi è? La polizia! (Knock knock! Who's there? The police! (1972) Ordine! Per Dio.ooo.ooo.ooo (Order! By Go.ooo.ooo.ood)*. La Comune also managed to stage *Ci ragiono e canto* 3, with the storyteller Ciccio Busacca, but it wasn't a good moment for it. Among censorship, accusations of libel and other disputes, such as the ones with Pier Paolo Pasolini on the communist press, the shed's owner sent them out without notice, disagreeing with the ideas they presented in the show on Palestine. This was just the beginning of what can be called *annus horribilis*, year of dread, for the two actors-playwrights. On the 9th of April 1973, Franca Rame was the victim of kidnapping and rape, for which the responsibilities, not just of private violence but also of political aggression, came out a long time after. Only in 1998, the judge Guido Salvini, busy in an inquiry on the responsibilities of neo-fascists in some unsolved cases from Piazza Fontana on, and particularly on the connivance of the police force with the terrorists of the Right, drafted a report of over ninety volumes, based on more than four hundred questionings, in which also the case Rame appeared. At first Franca did not entirely relate her terrible experience, but two years after the event she wrote the monologue *Lo stupro*, even though she didn't feel like notifying the autobiographical component of the drama yet. She would let it know many years after, in November 1987, following the interpretation of the text in a Sunday TV show conducted by Adriano Celentano.

Meanwhile La Comune had the same fate as Nuova Scena. New disagreements within the group resulted in a final breaking off: the musician Carpi took the guide of old Comune, and in October 1973 Dario and Franca founded the Collettivo Teatrale La Comune (wishing to keep the original name). In the same year the new group presented the play *Guerra di popolo in Cile (The people's war in Chile)*, after the coup d'état of September 11th against Salvador Allende. During the setting up of this play and of *Mistero buffo* in Sassari, the police burst into the theatre after Fo's refusal to submit the prompt books to the organs invested for control. The playwright was confined to barracks in handcuffs, with the charge of «resistance and verbal violence to a public official». The next year opened with some French tours and with the allotment of a new seat: the Palazzina Liberty in Milan. Again, there were stormy discussions in the group, mainly about Fo's wish to create a sort of Milanese polyvalent cultural centre for the education, the arts, the political confrontation, in the wake of other contemporary experiences, like the Centre Pompidou in Paris which he had visited a short time before. In spite of the municipality of Milan conceding the keys, DC furiously sided against the decision and, following a city council, the repeal of the assignment was announced. Fo's reaction – no surprise – was to occupy the Palazzina. The occupation, including its partial restructure, lasted a long time and provided an ideal space for debates, didactic performances and grand settings, like *Non si paga! Non si paga! (Can't pay? Won't pay!)* (1974), *Fanfani rapito* and *Diario di Eva* (1975). Of the same year, 1975, was the first candidature to the Nobel prize, which so much made jester Fo smile. In 1976 the company embarked in a didactic trip to China, at times revealing – not too covertly – a lack of critical sense by Fo when – with exaggerated enthusiasm – he related the accomplishments of the Chinese government, the reverence of the people to Mao Zedong and the extraordinary presence of the storytellers all around Shanghai. Dario found what he was looking for, as happened many times before. This public glorification of communist China caused a clash even with director Michelangelo Antonioni, author of the film *Chung Kuo* (1972), which had provoked negative critics by the Chinese.

But life in Milan went on, with its turmoil, the students demonstrations, the workers strikes, the pressing petitions by proletarian clubs, the birth of free radios. Fo and the Collettivo agreed with and joined in many of the facts, like the occupation of some factories in the outskirts, shared with the Living Theatre and the Stormy Six. Unlike these groups, he didn't approve of the free use of drugs, so fashionable in those years especially among members of the *hippy* generation. Fo's belief was that there's a great need of places for the recovery of drug addicts, and that imprisonment should definitely be abolished, as he expressed in 1976 in his play *La marijuana della mamma è la più bella*. Fo and Rame understood, probably before the others, that the problem of the use of drugs is a cultural one, and borrowed a sentence of the American physician Terzian, who said «in lumpen proletariat it's drug that uses individuals, while among the rich it's individuals who use drugs». However, he disagreed with most of his younger spectators, who considered drugs a symbol of a rebel generation.

Meanwhile, Italian public opinion kept moving to the left. In the political elections of 1976, DC reached a scant majority and was forced to govern with the support of PCI: they formed a government of “national unity” presided by Giulio Andreotti. Rai offered Fo to formally “go back” to the state broadcasting station with a transmission entirely dedicated to him, called *Il teatro di Dario Fo*. What better opportunity to really reach the masses, altogether and at the same time? The transmission, which included passages from *Mistero buffo*, *Ci ragiono e canto*, *Settimo*, *Isabella*, *La signora è da buttare* and a new play on women's condition, *Parliamo di donne (Let's speak of women)*, was recorded at the Palazzina Liberty – under the town councilors' bewildered glance – and broadcasted in two cycles, in spring-autumn 1977. As expected, it did not go unnoticed: Fo's burning satire on political and industrial corruption, on the Church and on countless more issues, situations and personalities caused debates, denounces, splitting. This in an Italy that, as happened all too often, faced with heavy episodes of unpunished political-financial corruption, charged the jester, whose major fault was to uncover the pot and ask the world to look inside. Furthermore, this period saw the controversy on Fo's militancy in R.S.I. (the fascist Repubblica Sociale Italiana) that filled the newspapers, suggesting – many years after – an uncertain and confused reading, especially by young people, in a country in need of reconstruction, between resistant partisans, Republican-Fascists and episodes of real class struggle. To

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these years of “ebb tide” and reflection on the recent past dates the writing of the song emblematically titled *Chi ce lo fa fare?* that went with the publication of *Il teatro politico di Dario Fo* with Mazzotta, in which however he wishes to state that the most proper definition, according to him, for his works staged by La Comune was «popular theatre», not «political theatre», Piscator style. Fo confirmed that all art is actually political, finally clearing up how this term defines a broad, far-reaching concept, having nothing to do with political parties, turmoil or propaganda.

A new phase of the carrier for the “couple in art and life” started with the monologues comprised under the title *Tutta casa letto e chiesa* (1977), co-written and interpreted by Franca Rame. Even the critics realized that Franca was not just the woman behind a great man, nor the pedestal of a monument or the diligent vigorous collaborator, as she had been considered many times – also by her husband – reductively to say the least. Franca was awarded the prestigious Prize IDI for the performance of the female characters in the show *Parliamo di donne*, broadcasted on Rai 2. Her monologues met with an unexpected success particularly abroad, uncovering a deep and expressively rich tragic-grotesque side (just think of *Medea*).

1978 is the year marked by the kidnapping of Aldo Moro by the Brigate Rosse, and by the splitting of the political parties on the timeliness of negotiating with terrorists. Franca personally went to Turin to speak to the bosses of the Brigade on behalf of DC’s undersecretary for Justice. The couple Fo kept being in the front line in the Italian political events, totally exposing themselves. Dario was struck by the episode that brought to the murder of Moro, and by the slander of those who had avowed themselves to be his comrades, then abandoning and denigrating him. So he wrote a classical tragedy called *Il caso Moro* (*the case Moro*), which he chose to never show, but that was partly published. In the same year, he tried his hand at directing: he accepted the invitation by Claudio Abbado to direct Stravinskij’s *Histoire du soldat* for the celebration of the second hundredth anniversary of the Teatro alla Scala in Milan. This is not his only lyrical direction: there would be other remarkable tests, like *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* (1987) and *L’italiana in Algeri* (1994). In all the cases, Fo “creatively” modified the original operas, rewriting parts of them and presenting mimes and new choreographies, and improvising according to his style. In 1979, with *Storia di una tigre e altre storie*, performed in the tense atmosphere of the meeting of the left in Bologna, Fo gave proof of his actor’s full maturity, going in and coming out of a subjective and an objective outlook, alternately interpreting man and animal, by means of his mimic- gestural gifts, so powerfully communicative. At the same time the Court of Cassation ordered them to quit the Palazzina Liberty.

In 1980 Franca was invited to present twenty series of a Rai program called *Buonasera con Franca Rame*, that offered her the opportunity to speak openly: the couple could broadcast some sketches that had been censored seventeen years before at *Canzonissima* and present them in a new version. In that year, together with their son Jacopo, they founded the free university of Alcatraz, on the Umbrian hills between Gubbio and Perugia, a cultural centre of “alternative” life, in which numerous artists took part, like Sergio Angese, Stefano Benni, Dacia Maraini, Milo Manara, Andra Pazienza, Elena Baldoni. To the same period dates the writing and staging of *Coppia aperta*, *L’opera dello sghignazzo* and *Fabulazzo osceno*, that developed themes of satiric eroticism of the ancient Greece and High Middle Ages. Among the works chosen for the show: Luciano of Samosata’s *Lucio e l’asino*, the French *fablieu* of the twelfth century known as *La sourie* and translated by the actor-playwright with the title *Parpaja Topola*.

The couple was by then at the top of their success, receiving invitations from all over the world. One evening in their honor, in New York, saw the presence of Joe Chaikin, Sol Yurick, Arthur Miller, Bernard Malamud and Martin Scorsese.

Dario Fo was about to be conferred numerous honorary degrees by universities of the world (Rome, Harvard, Athens, Sorbonne and so on), forecasting his appointment of professor in the *Lezioni d’Arte*, that in the Nineties would nourish his lifelong passion, combining theatre and painting. He was invited at the Teatro Argentina in Rome for some lectures on theatre that would be broadcasted on Rai 3 with the title *I trucchi del mestiere* (*Tricks of the trade*); then at the Centro Teatro Ateneo by the scholar Ferruccio Marotti for a seminar on the Mask and the Commedia dell’Arte to the students of the Roman Ateneo. He lectured on the art of acting at CUT (Theatre University Centre) in Perugia and at the eminent graduation course DAMS (Disciplines of Art, Music and Performance) in Bologna. When finally they were granted the entry visa for the United States, Fo and Rame were guests at Harvard University for some performances-lectures and staged *Mistero buffo* and *Tutta casa, letto e chiesa* at the American Repertory Theater. They ended their American stay with two performance-lectures at Wheaton College in Norton-Massachusetts and at Columbia University. Back in Italy, Fo held a lengthy seminar on dramaturgy and comicality at La Sapienza University of Rome.

These were years of new productions, encouraged by international stimuli and by an audience that was ever more numerous and alert, especially on themes about women: *Quasi per caso una donna, Elisabetta*, on the relation between the queen of England and Shakespeare (1985); *Hellequin, Harlekin, Arlecchino* presented in Venice in the summer of that year; *Una giornata qualunque* (1986) for Franca Rame, along with the contemporary *Il ratto della Francesca*; then *La parte del leone* (1978); finally *Il papa e la strega* (1989). In spite of some troubles in their relation, the couple stood firm, facing the passing of the years, conscious of a deep sharing that could overcome the inevitable hindrances occurring in a long living together; a will accompanied by a good deal of self-irony. At the apex of this difficult moment, *Manuale minimo dell’attore* was published, a text that expounded Fo’s theatrical theories in a communicative and attractive way.

The Nineties weren’t less productive. In Milan Dario and Franca were in the demonstrations against the massacre of Tien-an-men Square in Peking. At Arco della Pace, in the presence of more than ten thousand people, Franca read *Letter from China*, while Dario played *La storia di Qu*. By invitation of Antoine Vitez, superintendent of Comédie Française, in Paris Fo

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staged Molière's *Le médecin malgré lui* and *Le médecin volant*; then realized a new series of shows ended with his first Lectures on Art: *Zitti! Stiamo precipitando!* (1990); *Johan Padan a la scoperta de le Americhe* (1991); *Settimo, ruba un po' meno n°2* (1992); *Mamma! I sanculotti!* (1993); *Dario Fo recita Ruzante* (1993); *La Bibbia dei villani* (1996); *Sesso? Grazie, tanto per gradire* (1996); *Il diavolo con le zinne* (1997); *Lu Santo Jullare Francesco* (1997); *La vera storia di Ravenna* (1998); *Marino libero! Marino è innocente!* (1998); *Lezione sul Tintoretto* (1999); *Discorso su Leonardo e il Cenacolo* (1999).

Alongside with the theatre practice, Fo constantly exercised the art of painting, which resulted in many exhibitions in all Europe, starting from the idea of a *Teatro dell'occhio*, on which his friend Tadini would write some enlightening pages.

Thanks to his competence, talent and study of art and history Fo realized a cycle of *Lezioni d'Arte* in the form of performance-conferences *à sa manière* (in his own style), which not only represented a scientific spreading of the history of Italian art, but also partly rewrote some key passages of the way to read and analyze a work of art. Starting from the mentioned Tintoretto and Leonardo, on whom he gave two lectures-performances at the Accademia di Brera on April 25 and May 27 1999 (this one broadcasted on Rai in 2003), in the first years of the new millennium Fo would test himself with several other prodigies of painting: Caravaggio (2003), Mantegna (2006), Raffaello (2006), Michelangelo (2007), Giotto (2009), Correggio (2010), and lastly with Picasso in 2015, and a cycle of lectures called *L'arte secondo Fo*, broadcasted from February 23 on the newborn cultural network of Rai 5, which inaugurated its program exactly with *Picasso desnudo*.

He was by now a Great Old Man, come out undamaged – but not without wounds – from long battles, surrounded by prizes, plates, medals, and by a huge archive of documents lodged in their home-*atelier* and attended to by the irreplaceable Franca Rame supported by a team of researchers, secretaries, trainers following one another, like in the studio of a Renaissance Master. It's quite impossible to write out an exhaustive record of the works produced in those years: a weighty corpus difficult to catalogue, both for its quantity and for its variety (from theatre to narrative, from painting to video). To give some examples, after his autobiography *Il paese dei mezarât: i miei primi sette anni* (Feltrinelli, 2002), *Anomalo bicefalo* (2003), the transmission *Il teatro in Italia* with Giorgio Albertazzi (2004) and the performance-lecture on the history of masks for the museum Sartori, he wrote *Gesù e le donne* (Rizzoli, 2007). Meanwhile he had published *Il mondo secondo Fo* (2007) which he wrote together with Giuseppina Manin, then *L'Apocalisse rimandata* (2008) and *Sant'Ambrogio e l'invenzione di Milano* (2009). Making fun even of ictus, with no intention to wear slippers and dressing gown, he published *L'osceno è sacro* and *La Bibbia dei villani* (2010) and staged the show *Dipingere è come recitare* in Pontedera (2010). Then *Dio è nero* (Dvd, 2008), *Boccaccio rivedito e scorretto* (2011), *Ruzante e Arlecchino* (2012), and last but not least, a biting satyr on contemporary Italy, emblematically called *Il paese dei misteri* (2012), followed by the publication of his conversations with Beppe Grillo and Gianroberto Casaleggio, *Il grillo canta sempre al tramonto: dialogo sull'Italia e sul Movimento 5 Stelle* (2013).

Dario Fo's latest productions are two novels: *La figlia del papa* (2014) and *C'è un re pazzo in Danimarca*, but there's no doubt that he's writing something else while we conclude this biography.

We have purposely left the “question” of the Nobel prize at the end: it certainly is a question, and in addition particularly significant for the history of theatre.

The assignation of the Nobel prize for Literature to Dario Fo was an information that bewildered primarily the author-performer and his partner, then everyone else, some positively some less, to use an understatement. On the same day, 9th of October 1997, Rifondazione comunista voted with the right in order to delete the coalition of the centre-left directed by Romano Prodi, whom the Fos supported. The next day, the first page of the papers all around the world were invaded by the two “cases”. On the international level, Italy won in terms of art (with the Nobel) but lost in politics (with the vote of no-confidence to the government): two meanings of life, art and politics, that once again marked Fo's destiny, as witnessed by the Academy of Sweden's official statement of motives: Fo, «following the tradition of the medieval jesters, rebukes the powerful and restores dignity to the oppressed [...] His independence and clear taking sides have meant taking grave risks, and having to pay for them».

Absolutely true. However the question is a different one. He was awarded the yearned recognition as eighteenth Italian and sixth for literature after Carducci (1906), Deledda (1926), Pirandello (1934), Quasimodo (1958) and Montale (1975). Also Mario Luzi stood as a candidate to the prize in the same year, and did not enjoy the defeat. The debate around the assignation and the choice was on many levels: a personal one, involving admirers and detractors of Fo and his work, and a general one, about literary genres and codes. Dario Fo is an actor, a “neo-jester”, his writing is a writing for the stage. So why – (not only) his detractors wonder – a prize for literature? And the question became more complex: is theatre, and generally dramaturgy, literature yes or no? is it something less or something more? There's no doubt that all his life Fo has gone along secondary paths, becoming the spokesman of a theatrical popular tradition that until a few years before was neglected by the avant-garde and the intellectuals, and even by theatre historians.

In order to describe this complex and delicate process, and to have an *external* outlook on the situation, better trust a foreign historian: «Fo does not dupe academic critics with learned dissections of psychic wounds or individual dilemmas. He has no interest in investigating torn minds, nor in portraying the condition of human beings in a world made sterile by the death of God, nor in deepening the propriety of language to communicate emotional doubts. There is no metaphysical sub-text to discover, no hidden ambiguities to reveal, nor delicate psychologies of the characters to taste; nor even curiosities of rotten personalities to dissect and analyze, nor alternative fantastic worlds to contemplate. He doesn't build a philosophy like

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Pirandello did, doesn't portray a bourgeoisie at the mercy of a claustrophobic discomfort like Ibsen did, nor at the mercy of a regime at the end of its decline, like Tchekov did. To no purpose critics would seek in him a metaphysical dimension comparable to *farceurs*' like Beckett or Ionesco. Finally, unlike Artaud's or the early Strindberg's, his theatre doesn't show the neurotic symptoms of a creative mind, that could be taken for a distorted light on the senseless world in which men and women have to live every day. As a writer, his ground is the political, the social. As an actor, he stands by the street musicians, who sing and make wisecracks on relevant questions for passers-by. With his interest for recent events, Fo joins a rich tradition. His theatre, both written and staged, can only be appreciated if seen as behind the times and metaphorical, vigorously "out of context", that is the context created by contemporary times. He counts on and acts in amphitheatres where the *farceur* of ancient Atellana, the medieval jester and the Renaissance Harlequins use to be found. His theatre speaks with the powerless of their needs in an uncontrolled world, as the Academy of Sweden has acknowledged» (*Joseph Farrell, Dario e Franca. La biografia della coppia Fo/Rame attraverso la storia italiana, Ledizioni, Milano, 2014, p. 343*).

In 2010, finally (but it's not an end yet) Dario Fo entered with *Mistero buffo* in the repertoire of the Comédie-Française, the most prestigious theatrical institution in France and a symbol for the entire world of theatre. He is the fifth Italian author included in the repertoire after Carlo Goldoni, Gabriele D'Annunzio, Luigi Pirandello and Eduardo De Filippo.