

# OPINION

## Paying Tribute to Dario Fo, The Italian Jester

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*"I am the jongleur. I leap and pirouette, and make you laugh. I make fun of those in power, and I show you how puffed up and conceited are the big shots who go around making wars in which we are the ones who get slaughtered. I reveal them for what they are. I pull out the plug, and... pssss... they deflate"* - Dario Fo.



On 13 October 2016, the world lost the Nobel prize-winning Italian playwright, director, actor and political activist Dario Fo, who died at the age of 90. He was a renowned satirist who poked his fingers in the eyes of the Church and the state. For his barbed and remarkable political satire in plays such as *The Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, Fo received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1997. He was the first Italian actor-playwright since Luigi Pirandello to win the

Nobel Prize for literature. As a matter of strange coincidence, American poet-singer Bob Dylan received Nobel Prize for literature the day Dario Fo died.

"With Dario Fo, Italy loses one of the great protagonists of theater, culture and the civic life of our country," so said Italian Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi, who himself was constantly lampooned by the audacious Fo. "His satire, his research, his work on set design; his multifaceted artistic activity remains the legacy of a great Italian in the

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world.”

Born in San Giano, a small town on the bank of Lake Maggiore in northern Italy on March 24, 1926, Fo came to be known as one of the greatest comic actors of the 20th century. Apart from being an Italian actor-playwright, stage director and political campaigner, he wore many other masks which included being a comedian, singer, songwriter and stage designer. Fo spent his childhood following his amateur actor father who worked on the railways, and absorbed oral storytelling traditions in taverns and town squares. He learned narrative techniques from his grandfather, a farmer who travelled the countryside telling satirical anecdotes about local news to attract customers to buy his wares. His interest in the travelling storytellers contributed to Fo’s ascendancy to fame as he produced and acted in an array of satirical works while using the style of performance of strolling storytellers. “The oral tradition was very much a part of the local culture during his childhood, and he remembers various forms of popular entertainment, such as puppet shows and professional storytellers. But his greatest influence would come from the local storytellers he refers to as *fabulatori*” (Scuderi 26).

Since *fabulatori* had a big influence

on Fo, his earliest performances, way back in the 1940s, were stories and sketches improvised around the tales he had heard from them.

While still a student, he was called up by the army of the Fascist dictator, Benito Mussolini, but he somehow escaped and hid in an attic during the last few months of the war till Italy was liberated. After the war, he turned to stage designing and improvised monologues.

In 1945, Fo studied art at the Brera Art College and architecture at the Milan Polytechnic in Milan. During this time, he also began improvising stories that were influenced by travelling storytellers such as those from Lake Maggiore, the place had a large number of strolling storytellers. Though the stories they told were based on simple observations of everyday life, each tale contained a sharp bite of satire. The satire was usually directed toward the official world including the bureaucracy and the church.

In 1944, Fo wrote his first play, *A Master Drives a Servant Mad, Then the Servant Drives the Master Mad*, though it didn’t have the fortune to be ever staged. However, he won praise as well as censure in 1953 for the jointly written play, *A Finger in the Eye*, that satirised what Fo saw as

historical falsehoods constructed under Fascism.

In 1962, Fo wrote and directed a variety show, *Canzonissima*, for RAI, a TV company. Fo used the show to give the Italians the glimpse of a type of television resembling the origins of theatre, far removed from the “junk TV” previously produced by the company (Mitchell).

Fo has been best known for *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* (1970), a play based on the case of an Italian railroad worker who was either thrown or fell from the upper story of a Milan police station while being questioned on suspicion of terrorism. Earlier he had won kudos for his one-man show *Mistero Buffo* (*Comic Mystery*), written in 1969 and frequently revised and updated over the next 30 years, taking a wild comic aim at politics and, no less importantly, at religion. However, the *Accidental Death* is such an exploration of language, history and local lore that he had had to perform it more than 5,000 times worldwide over the next three decades.

“Fo received the Nobel Prize because of his international acknowledgement as a major figure in twentieth century” (Mitchell: 14). The announcement regarding the award of the Nobel came as a shock

to the Italians and non-Italians alike. Umberto Eco expressed delight that the award had been given to someone who “does not belong to the traditional academic world” (Mitchell: 230-31) The Nobel committee’s choice was indeed unacceptable by many segments of the world population, especially by the Italian government and by the Roman Catholic Church, which have both been Fo’s favourite targets in such works as *A Madhouse for the Sane* and *Mistero Buffo*. After a version of *Mistero Buffo* was broadcast in Italy in 1977, the Vatican denounced it as “the most blasphemous show in the history of television” (Behan: 2).

Having studied painting and architecture, Fo was fascinated with the architecture of the Romanesque churches but has often been against the policies of the Roman Catholic Church. He was amazed that the overwhelming architecture was an artefact of simple builders and sculptors and not a by-product of the so called powerful intellectuals. According to the Vatican newspaper *L’Osservatore Romano*, it was flabbergasted by Fo’s selection. Journalist Bohlen said, “Giving the prize to someone who is also the author of questionable works is beyond all imagination” (Countryman: 45)

Some churches warned their practitioners not to go to see the play, which the atheist Fo described as “a satirical critique of every conceivable subject” (Mazzucco).

In 1968, Fo and his actress and playwright wife Franca Rame (1929–2013), with whom he frequently collaborated in writing and acting, founded their own troupe, *Nuova Scena*, a company allied to the Italian Communist Party, which toured the country performing for the working class and popular audiences. Dealing with subjects like the Vietnam War, the Chinese revolution and student revolts in the West, Fo and Rame took their works out of “bourgeois” theatres to non-traditional locations such as factories, streets, piazzas, and circus-style tents.

The company’s first play was an allegorical puppet play using marionettes and mechanical figures to represent social forces like capitalism, the middle class, and royalty. It used revue-length sketches to satirise the Church, monarchy, the army, and industrialism. Its central theme was the historical struggle between the middle class and the working class.

Fo wrote more than 80 plays, many of them in collaboration with Rame, and his work was translated into

about 30 languages. Basing their art on the tradition of the medieval jester and the improvisation techniques of Commedia dell’Arte, Fo and Rame thrilled, dismayed and angered audiences around the world.

After internal disputes and the Communist Party’s withdrawal of support, Fo’s connection with *Nuova Scena* in 1970 ended and he created an independent political theatre group called *La Comune*, dedicated to examining the socio-political issues, for which he wrote several major works. The first play which this group presented was his *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, which was based on an actual case.

A long-time member of the Communist party, Fo and Rame were denied entry into the United States in the early 1980s. The decision sparked controversy and prompted US intellectuals to stage protests in support. In 1984, the US government relented and allowed the couple to visit New York to see a production of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*.

In this regard, the worst episode occurred in 1973, after a Fo play criticising the police was presented in Milan. That was the time when his wife was kidnapped, tortured and raped by a fascist group later found to have links to members of the

*carabinieri*, the Italian federal police. But Fo and Rame riled their opponents across the political spectrum.

Both of them had been the members of the *Soccorso Rosso* which is an organisation that supports the rights of prison inmates who are imprisoned for political offenses.

Forceful, wittily anarchic and often disturbing, his works were impeded by Italian censorship up till 1962. The most famous of these is *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* (1970), a farce about the alleged suicide of an anarchist in police custody. The play is based on the fall from a police station window of an anarchist who was being questioned over a 1969 Milan bank bombing. The police officer who led the interrogation was fatally gunned down in 1972.

Giovanni Pinelli was an Italian railway worker and anarchist activist, who died in the custody of Italian police in 1969 after being arrested. Pinelli was a member of a Milan circle called the "Ponte della Ghisolfa." Giovanni's death was the inspiration for Dario Fo's play *La Morte Accidentale di un Anarchico* (*Accidental Death of an Anarchist*). The said bomb blast on December 12, 1969 in Milan had killed 17 people and injured 88. Giovanni Pinelli and

a few other anarchists were arrested for police interrogation following the event. Giovanni was held and questioned longer than he was meant or even permitted to. On 15 December 1969, Pinelli fell from a window of the fourth floor of the Milan Police Station. The three police officers who were interrogating Pinelli were accused of murder. But soon the case was given some other shape and it was concluded that the fall was accidental. Since then Giovanni Pinelli case has (officially) been cleared, but the people's responses to the result of the case have been different. It was widely believed by people that Pinelli's death was engineered by the police.

Thus the play highlighted an event that continues to divide the Italians, who are often bitterly split between the left and the right — in a stubborn legacy of the ideological and actual battles between fascist stalwarts and communist partisans during the World War II.

This production by Fo, places a maniac as the central character inquiring about the death of suspected anarchist Pinelli who had fallen from a fourth-storey window in a suspicious manner. Fo used the maniac as a decoy character. The irony is that the maniac who seems to be the lone character, who appears

most normal in that abnormal situation then turns out to be the madman in the end. The production mocked the judges and police by displaying the lies made up by the police officers to explain the death of the anarchist and the conflicting stories relayed by each.

Other productions too by Fo and Rame followed other important current issues also at a specific time. Along with supporting the political prisoners, Fo and Rame also supported the women's movement. The pair made a career out of mocking the post-war Italy, ranging from the domestic terrorism of the late 1970s to the bitter debates over abortion and divorce and the political corruption scandals of the early 1990s that brought down a whole array of politicians and businessmen from the seats of power. They encouraged feminists through their productions on women's rights issues, and began presenting plays on other contemporary issues also. The play *All House, Bed and Church* (1977), consists of several monologues which address female oppression. In one series, the woman actually kills all the men that have oppressed her. The performance magnifies the realities surrounding the audience which forces them to come to some very uncomfortable conclusions.

Among Fo's other plays

are *Mistero Buffo* (1969); *Non Si Paga, Non si Paga* (*We Can't Pay, We Won't Pay*, 1974), a satire in which housewives, angered by rising prices, steal food from a supermarket and set off events that bring Milan to a standstill; *The Pope and the Witch* (1989), and *The Devil with Boobs* (1997).

Fo's stature as an artist began to outstrip his fame as a militant by the end of the 1970s. Milan's La Scala Theatre let him direct a play, *Story of a Soldier*, in 1978, and audiences in furs, jewels and suits flocked to his works in mainstream theatres.

Finding a political affinity with the work of Marxist playwright Bertolt Brecht, Fo was influenced by Brecht's epic theatre techniques and later employed them in his own work. Inclination towards his political perspective became Fo's expertise as comic actor and mime, trained in entertainment employing a format of humorous, short satirical, farcical sketches. These factors, plus his love for the characters of Commedia dell'Arte, with their different regional dialects, are reflected in his work. An early example is *Il Dito nell'Occhio* (Finger in the Eye).

After joining the mainstream, Fo used materials from the Middle Ages

to evaluate the present from a historical perspective. Fo enjoyed the description of himself as a sort of medieval jester or strolling player that satirically mocks the institutions of authority such as the bureaucracy and the churches. Fo explained his method of satire as a way of arousing deep emotions in the audience. One of the major themes in Dario Fo is crime and comedy. Comedy is used to lighten the serious situations and it helps in absorbing the facts calmly and in depth. Satire makes people conscious because it becomes embedded in their intelligence. Inspired by the circus and carnivals, Fo's productions utilised farce, slapstick, witticism, ridicule, and parody to explore the social and political issues and to criticise the authority of all kinds. Though colourful improvisations and laughter entertain the audiences, at the same time they force them to face the realities of the culture and the circumstances surrounding them.

"Over time Fo developed his *giullarata*,<sup>2</sup> a one-man show performed in dialects, which in Italy were historically the predominantly spoken language of the people. It is a type of performance that, due to its basis in the principles of oral art, is closely related to other oral traditions around the world" (Scuderi: 27).

As Farrel writes, in the study guide for Dario Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, "figure of the *giullare* which provides Fo as a focus and a model" for much of his work, "is quintessentially medieval figure, who flourished around tenth to fifteenth century, before the blossoming of *Commedia dell'Arte*. Still the tradition of *Commedia dell'Arte*, from which Harlequin is evolved, is also an important source of inspiration for Fo.

"*Mistero Buffo* was Fo's first *giullarata*," series of 'one-man' show (Vena: 275). This play has been referred to as Fo's masterpiece. Fo began this series in 1969, performing each story in the series so that it would smoothly connect one part to the next. During this time, he also began improvising additional stories, which became part of the series. The title was taken from a work by Vladimir Mayakovsky, whom he greatly admired, and the whole play is a subversive retelling of the Gospels, including an episode in which a legless man realises that he is better off as an outcast and desperately tries to avoid being healed by Christ. It is a satire on the capitalist system which has some indications of Marxist thought as well. Fo's stories are centred on the tensions between oppression and freedom.

The play incorporated a mixture of expressive mime and a partially invented language called *grammelot*, and Fo went on to perform it more than 1,000 times in Italy as well as in New York.

The playwright played all the roles, in the tradition of both the *guillare*, travelling comic, singer, mime of the Middle Ages, and the clown of the *Commedia dell'Arte*. According to Ron Jenkins, "originated around the sixteenth century, the true 'Commedia dell'Arte' play was not a piece of buffoonery but a tasteful entertainment, well-balanced and sober, and witty and not full of impertinent trivialities..... At the centre of Commedia dell'Arte performances are the four masks: Pantalone, Dottore, Harlequin (also referred to as Arlechino) and Zanni, out of which the figure of the Harlequin is of special interest in Fo's context. This figure of fantasy was protean and transformative, also the one who had the mixture of rationality, intelligence, ignorance and simplicity. One can see the glimmerings of the figure of Harlequin in Fo's *Mistero Buffo* and *Accidental Death of an Anarchist'* (Tiwari).

"Fo orchestrates his comic climaxes so that they coincide with the victim's liberation from

servitude, so that laughter and the defeat of tyranny are simultaneously linked in the audience's mind" (Jenkins 13). This reflects Fo's style of schemed arrangement of his political views within the canvas of his comedy sketches. Fo says, "Comedy makes the subversion of the existing state of affairs possible."

"Fo's productions are farces on official institutions, such as the Catholic Church in this instance. One potential problem in translating this production for the nations other than Italy is that the Church does not cast a shadow over other nations as it does over Italy. One critic described this as 'all the greater pity' since other nations may not appreciate the true satire Fo is trying to convey in this production" (Mitchell: 36).

Performances created by the brilliant mind of Dario Fo are absolute treasures to the entire world. With productions running worldwide, people around the globe may have access to one of the great literary minds of the 20th century. Fo links the past with the present. Fo uses the storyteller style of ancient times to examine current political issues. With this, Fo recreates this unique style of storytelling which engages audiences worldwide.

In describing his approach to

theatre, Fo claims “the more one approaches the new by way of experimentation, the more there is a need to seek out roots in the past” (Mitchell: 96).

“Perhaps one of the most difficult facts about Fo to transmit to a non-Italian audience is that he is revolutionary and radical where politics are concerned, yet an intransigent conservative in poetics” (Farrell: 19)

As a critic, Suzanne Cowan, said in

an interview in 1984, Fo compared the “male-female relationship in the family unit..... with the bourgeois-proletariat relationship in society.” Fo explained the personal nature of the later plays by saying, “In the face of the failure of revolutionary ideals, the basic problem is how people relate to one another” (Mitchell: 174).

Fo thus remained true to his conviction that “A theatre, a literature, an artistic expression that does not speak for its own time has no relevance.” ■

### Notes

- 1) *Fabulatore*, derives from the Latin word *fabula*, meaning “fable” or “tale.”
- 2) Fo termed his signature solo performance the *giullarata*, based on the Italian word *giullare*. *Giullare* is a derivative of the Latin *ioculator* (joker, jester), as are the French *jongleur* and the English *juggler*. In the Middle Ages, the *giullari* were itinerant players, mostly of the lower classes, who worked within the oral tradition. They included a wide variety of performers: musicians, dancers, acrobats, tumblers, jugglers, actors, mountebanks, storytellers, and so forth.

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