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Doing Things with Words: Directing Dario Fo in the UK

By the early 'eighties, Dario Fo seemed to have achieved a unique place in British theatre, with both *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* and *Can't Pay? Won't Pay!* enjoying long West End runs, while he himself retained the respect of the alternative and fringe community for his radical politics and championship of popular theatre forms. Yet although he was subsequently awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, interest in Fo's work seems to have gone into a steady decline in Britain. This is only in part attributable, argues Marco Ghelardi, to a less favourable political and theatrical climate: it has also to do with the topicality and adaptability which is integral to Fo's approach to playwriting, and more especially with an acting style apparently inimical to British traditions – a style based in the collective and the situational rather than the individual and the psychological. Marco Ghelardi is a young playwright, director, and producer whose career has involved him in both the British and Italian traditions. He has also been an assistant director in opera (notably at Covent Garden), and with his theatre company, Outlaw Theatre, he has recently managed to bring a Fo production, *Johan Padan and the Discovery of America*, back to the Riverside in London, where it opened in May of this year.

APART from the problems common to any theatrical production, directing Fo in the UK involves different specific problems. This article will not provide any solution for them, as solutions are to be found in practice, but it will offer some thoughts on the problems. I have identified five problems, of which the first is:

1 The Theatrical Climate

We need to address the reasons for a gradual eclipse of Fo from the British stage which began in the mid-1990s and which continues, despite the expectation that the conferring of a Nobel Prize might have increased public attention and audience numbers. Fo enjoyed a huge commercial success in the early 1980s, thanks to productions of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* and *Can't Pay? Won't Pay!*, only to undergo increasing neglect and a poor production history. There are many different reasons for this, of course, but the main problem, the first that we have to solve, relates to what we can define as the climate or mentality of the period in question.

In 1980–82, the peak years for Dario Fo in Britain, which paved the way for him to come to the Riverside Studios in 1983, British theatre was still enjoying the wave of socialist playwrights which emerged out of the 1968 explosion, an explosion which, thanks to the removal of censorship, involved politics as much as theatre. The 1970s was the great decade of Hare, Brenton, Edgar, Griffiths, of McGrath's 7:84, of Red Ladder, of dozens of small touring companies whose new style in theatre went along with a commitment in politics. It was within this climate that Fo's plays were received, and enjoyed a sensitive response from audiences.

The 1990s were different. Playwrights such as Ravenhill, Cartwright, Kane, Marber, who focused on stories with strong sexual overtones around private existences, were the leading attractions of theatrical London, alongside alternative theatre companies which mainly played on an aesthetic of pure forms. Politics were no longer in the forefront of theatrical output: classics such as Brecht or Gorky were enjoyed *despite* the political message they contain.

Theatre simply reflected the change in society and culture at large. In between the two, a period of crisis had occurred, which

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involved not only Britain but western society at large – a general crisis of politics, with a decline in commitment and a growing sense of social indifference, and a specific crisis of Marxism, which (it was claimed) came to an end in 1989 along with the collapse of Communist Europe.[1]

These are indeed two separate phenomena, but for the scope of this paper they can be conveniently examined as one. There has been (or still is) a crisis, and Marxism seems outdated, whether as an explanation of the world or as a source of allure and fascination. Then the question is: does Dario Fo have anything to say to us now, given that he is such a *topical* playwright – one who creates a throwaway theatre to respond to a particular situation of that particular moment – and given that he also expresses the very ideology which is deemed unimportant and old-fashioned today?

Of course there is the classic answer: *because* Dario Fo is the Nobel Prizewinner, *because* he is one of the most performed playwright in the world, *then* we can't do without him. This answer is highly unsatisfying, as the reason for putting on plays should be their relevance and not their inclusion in a cultural canon. And we cannot assume Fo himself would be satisfied with it, given his preference for a theatre that is alive in the here and now.

We can argue that since the 1970s Fo has abandoned the focus on the ideological grand narrative and fought single battles instead of a war. Lacking a structured political partner alongside him as he used to have, and having lost the teleological aim of Marxism, which sets the struggle towards the final goal of the Revolution and the creation of a new social system, Fo had to limit himself to short-term issues such as drugs, corruption, or the status of women. So plays like *Settimo ruba un po meno 2* or *Zitti! Stiamo precipitando*, or *Il Papa e la strega* have no less bite but cannot assume a shared ideological commitment with audiences, and have to rely on the strength of the topical references in order to generate political participation and involvement on the part of the audience.

Another production trend was the exploration and analysis of trans-historical aspects of oppression. There was no longer an urge to examine issues about the past – for instance the origins and history of left-wing and communist movements which occupied so much of Fo's output during the early 1970s; rather, the interest went back to the long-term history of the oppressed, not only through the anonymous jester of *Mistero buffo*, to which Fo added material, but also through Johan Padan, Harlequin, St Francis. . . .

These points suggest that Fo had reacted to the changing times and adapted his political theatre to the new kind of audience that he was facing. In this way he managed to survive, to enjoy considerable success, and even to win the Nobel Prize despite the general ideological crisis.

However, the fact that no major productions of Fo's post-1970s plays have enjoyed any real success seems to suggest that such changes were not enough to ensure him an impact on British society. Fo's reputation in the UK is still linked to the success of the early 1980s productions of *Anarchist* and *Can't Pay? Won't Pay!*, possibly the two best examples of Fo's hard-hitting alternative political theatre of the 1970s. It is unfortunate that they created the false impression that Fo was one of the many political playwrights to emerge from the turmoil of that decade, and, like so many of them, now has nothing to say.

Fo is not a writer of political theatre in the way that this term is understood in Britain. Political theatre in Britain is very much linked to the tradition of intellectual left-wing political writers who came out of the 1968 'revolution'. To a greater extent than was true of the work of the social writers of the preceding generation (the 'angry young men'), such theatre was (and is) ideological since it depends on the super-structure of Marxist ideology to exist. When that ideology underwent a crisis, so too did that theatre. This was not the case for Fo, who had been doing political theatre since the 1950s and carried on through the 'end of history', because his is a popular theatre, not an application of intellectual categories.

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Although Tony Mitchell underlines the struggle and the achievement of many English socialist playwrights and theatre companies in the field of popular culture,[2] it is debatable whether left-wing English theatre was actually rooted in popular culture, as was that of Fo. The problem goes beyond the scope of the present paper, although I might point out that, compared to Fo's theatre, analogous British attempts were based on a movement from the top to the bottom: the playwright who turns his attention to the people. On the other hand, Fo was already a popular political entertainer and a jester before 1968, lacking only the awareness of being one. Marxism and the traditions of popular theatre provided the comedian Fo with the awareness of who he was and what was his struggle, but the potential for it was already there.[3] As Fo says about the jester:

> The jester is born out of the people and from the people he draws the anger to give it back to the people, mediated by the grotesque style and by reason, so that the people become aware of their own condition.[4]

At the foundation of Fo's theatre there is the relationship with the people which involves a specific style of representation – the grotesque, and a response-link based on anger, and it is helped and maintained by reason in understanding and analyzing reality.

Marxist ideology helps reason in understanding reality, but it does not help that relationship which is not based on ideological continuity or similarity but on the simple fact that the jester belongs to the people. The jester's role is a reactive one and cannot achieve great changes because he depends on (as he is an expression of) the level and the nature of the unrest of the people. So the individual Fo inevitably suffered in the downturn period of post-1970s,[5] but the link between the jester Fo and the audience was not severed: the people did not stop listening to Fo as it was their own (very angry) voice which spoke to them, provoking and teasing with the true paradoxes of injustice, and calling them into action.

I believe that the development of trans-historical masks of oppression must thus be interpreted: as an attempt to maintain and strengthen the relationship with the people through the use of modes and themes from the popular theatre. Fo uses Marxism, but he is not used by it. Ultimately, there is a deep core in Fo which cannot be analyzed or reduced to academic categories: it is a strong belief in humanity which leads to optimism, openness, sensitivity. However naive this might sound, this is the base of his Marxism, and one of the first attractions for audiences. Because of this, Fo's theatre is not an application of ideology but a slow transformation into a true *vox populi*, which uses Marxism as – I would say – the melodic modulation of its sound.

It would be wrong, however, to divide the two aspects too definitively. What we really need is to divide Fo from intellectual, orthodox Marxism. We need to retain Marxism as the irreducible phenomenon of opposition, a force which faces that which in western society is still unresolved, still unjust, still unfair.

In this sense, Fo offers an opportunity of seeing in action that plural version of Marxism that was advocated by philosophers on the wave of western triumphalism after 1989[6] – a re-thinking of Marxism as an inalienable condition of western politics, a rebellious force which will always emerge: 'no future without Marx, without the memory and the inheritance of Marx'.[7] In this sense, Fo is even more precious than before *because* what he has to say sounds unusual and different; he is up to date *because* he is outdated; he is right on time *because* he is late.

2 Topicality

This archetypal yet specific redefinition of Marxism is what can save political theatre, both as a source of debate which is relevant, and as a source of debate which attracts people and arouses their interest. Fo's *impasto* of Marxism, archetypal figures, popular entertainment, and specific contemporary issues represent a way out of the cul-de-sac of 1970s political theatre: a re-foundation of it.

Even if we have established that Fo's theatre as a whole remains a valuable and

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useful cultural entity, the problem of its topicality remains to be resolved: 'the need to find an English equivalent for the very specifically Italian social, cultural, and political references they contain'.[8] Since very often Fo's plays include references and responses to the contemporary Italian context, so the Rame pieces (the plays which deal with the female role in society, and were developed as a close collaboration between Rame and Fo) represent for me the best solution. And the translation of the first collection of monologues, *Tutta casa, letto e chiesa*, did have a strong impact on British theatre, leading many actresses to include the pieces in their repertoire.[9] Plays like *Una giornata qualunque* and *La donna grassa* would strike even more sensitive chords as they are more up to date than *Tutta casa.*

Una giornata is a play about a woman, Giulia, who wants to commit suicide but is constantly interrupted. It links (like the previous *Coppia aperta, quasi spalancata*) the female condition to politics ('the woman's role in the family situation is always one of subjugation, like the proletariat, while the man plays the role of the bourgeoisie'[10]), questioning the supposedly emancipated condition of the contemporary woman. So the ideology of the oppressed, Marxism, is linked to contemporary issues such as women's role (and psychology and self-help doctrines alongside it).

Giulia is no archetype, but she is surely a collective voice, emblematic of the woman alone. That she is not a naturalistic character is clear from the fact, for example, that very few details of her past are given, only those needed to create and progress the 'situation' of the play (more about the 'situation' later). The piece begins seriously, only to assume more and more comic tones, until a moment of true slapstick is reached with the two violent but clownesque thieves. However, this precedes a surprisingly dark ending.

Mattea, the fat woman *of La donna grassa*, is another abandoned woman, but she has achieved wealthy status through the production of machines which act as lovers. As in *Una giornata*, Marxism and the female condition are combined to question the emancipation of today's woman: on the one hand, Mattea cannot have a human relationship and is growing fatter and fatter because of loneliness; on the other hand, Anna, her daughter, lives under the delusion that her bohemian life-style is a sign of freedom and independence. Again we have a collective voice, and again another dark farce.

Both plays are enhanced by Fo's inventive staging (projected images, a video camera, and scales which move independently), playing with the gimmicks of modern technology. Both are grotesque, satiric, and bitter but not cynical. As they are not specifically topical (they were not written in response to any specific Italian event), they could have even more meaning in Britain today than in Italy.

3 Acting

The third problem is whether English performers can act in a style which looks either extremely personal or firmly rooted in an alien exotic tradition of performance such as *commedia*.

To understand where Fo's style comes from, it is paramount to go back and look at traditions of theatre. Fo did not create a theoretical method, but he analyzed his own practice, developing it, finding parallels with it, and so on. To do this, he looked back to various traditional styles of popular theatre. As Joseph Farrell has wittily remarked, Fo 'is a political progressive but a theatrical conservative'.[11]

English and Italian traditions of theatre are very different; yet traditions are not entities which can easily be compared, since very often the same names refer to different things. Thus, Italian naturalism is not English naturalism, despite having the same name. And English *commedia* is not Italian *commedia*. Every tradition adopts styles, keys, and registers to its own background, so that very often one simply risks describing commonplaces: saying that English actors have less physical exuberance than Italian actors is on the edge of reiterating stereotypes. On the other hand, commonplaces are not strictly speaking wrong: they are simply superficial truths.

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We can note some points – as that Italy compared to England has a poor tradition of playwriting, balanced by a strong tradition of acting. And I would say regarding physical exuberance that it is not so much that Italian acting is more flamboyant, but that there is more skill in controlling physical expression. This is indeed a paradox: the more you control, the more you can allow yourself to express. It is very difficult in England to achieve the right – i.e., medium – level: you either do too little or too much with your body. It is not by chance that so-called physical theatre companies (a term which does not exist as such in Italy) relate to traditions outside the British theatrical background: either contemporary dance (DV8, Frantic Assembly) or the *commedia dell'arte*, (Lecoq's offsprings: David Glass, Theatre de Complicité), with some added spice from Grotowski/Odin training.

These differences need to be taken into account when discussing the problems of doing Fo in England. The basic elements of Italian theatrical tradition are the basis and the background within which Fo's craft is expressed, and too often they are forgotten or misunderstood.[12] It is worth remarking as well that the emphasis on the body is not a *commedia* heritage of the Italian theatre, but it is rather the other way round: it is the Italian heritage of *commedia* which makes it a highly physical style. We can quote as one example, Leone di Somi, a director of court plays in Parma and not a *commedia* artist, who said in 1565 that

> the actors' movements, styled by the father of the Latin tongue the body's eloquence, are of so great importance that perhaps the power of words is not more than the power of gesture.[13]

Dario Fo is not strictly speaking a *commedia* performer, because, as he remarks, he came quite late to *commedia*, to find that certain techniques that he already possessed, even a certain approach, were the same.[14] This approach comes from Fo's work on mime, clowning, circus, medieval jesters, and 1950s variety shows (the so-called *rivista*): his *commedia* pieces are a mixture of *commedia* plus all these different traditions, rather than an archeological reconstruction of the style itself.[15]

What all these traditions have in common, and the reason which enables Fo to mix them and to obtain that particular style which is the trademark of all his work, is the emphasis on external techniques and rhythm, and on the relationship with the audience rather than on character impersonation. However, and this is where the apparent terminological similarity slips into misunderstanding, these flamboyant styles from a flamboyant theatrical tradition (at least in the way that it is perceived in England) are kept under a tight technical control and they are never undisciplined.

Copying the Surface

This simple but, in practical terms, hard paradox is easy to forget and difficult to accommodate in English theatre. Dario Fo himself complains that:

> There is always a tendency to exaggerate, to perform in the manner of music hall or vaudeville – a mistake which derives from the lack of understanding of the *commedia dell'arte* tradition. These performers lack a sense of timing, of genuine pace; there's always an element of overacting, of laying it on with a trowel, let us say.[16]

Because of the lack of a direct link with traditions of *commedia*, English versions are often a copy of the surface: because of the apparent freedom from the English 'head acting' style, *commedia* becomes 'a lost paradise, the stuff of dreams',[17] where actors can rediscover the sheer enjoyment of the freedom of theatricality. The Italian context is different as, although it is true that *commedia* as such disappeared in the course of the eighteenth century, it did survive in different shapes or forms throughout the nineteenth,[18] and touring companies such as Rame's family were the direct heirs of that tradition. The link is there, strongly, and the influence deep. What Dario Fo means in his remark about misunderstanding is that the general superficial knowledge of *commedia* in England leads to an underestimation of the refine-

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ment and control needed for the technique to work, and so to excess and overacting: English performers tend simply to do too much.

Fo talks about *commedia* because, among the styles of popular theatre which form his personal performance style, it is the one which most directly relates to its pure craft. The very name of *commedia dell'arte* suggests the emphasis on craft: *arte* being work, craft, technique. *Commedia*, and all the analogous related styles, are the opposite of free-for-all enjoyment: they are tight crafts of precision and accuracy, highly skilled games where everything is controlled. As Fo has remarked: 'theatre is geometry and mathematics'.[19]

Fo's directing of Molière at the Comédie Française, described as '*Molière à l'Italienne*', was an explosion of *lazzi* and gags built around the tightest possible structure.[20] Often the *lazzi* do not push the action forward but rather slow it down or stop it. Because of this, the performers need to balance the *lazzi* without completely losing the plot of the play. The logic of the plot might be paradoxical, but it is a logic, and the performers cannot undermine it.

The paradox of precise control giving the audience the effect of freedom is a practical paradox of acting which links Dario Fo to another much misunderstood practitioner, Bertolt Brecht, who notably, according to Fuegi, based his theatre on *chaos according to plan*.[21] Fo's style of acting thus has many elements in common with Brecht's epic style, although we need to bear in mind that it is not an application of Brecht's theory but a refinement of *commedia* and farcical practice: as with *commedia*, Fo arrived at Brecht by his own route and created his own version of it. It should not be a surprise that epic is the word that Fo himself so often uses to describe his theatre. As Brecht himself pointed out:

> It is easier to act in this epic way in comedy because a strong measure of distancing is essential. The epic style is much easier to understand in this context and so it is advisable to mount comic pieces regularly.[22]

In Fo's view, Brecht simply went back to forms of popular theatre, and he did this to cleanse German theatre of the overloaded style of his time.[23] Fo joins the sheer joyful energy of popular theatre with the precision of craft in the same way as Brecht united a distancing purpose on the part of the performer with the concept of *Spass* (fun).

The Performer, Not the Character

Commedia and all the other styles employed by Fo have a strong emphasis on precision of craft and technique and so they are concerned with the performer, not the character. They are completely external. The consequence of their externality is an inevitable *distancing* between actor and character which for Fo – paradoxically – creates *realism*. He defines realism as a style which 'seeks to reinvent reality into a more acceptable form while naturalism is the tendency to recreate in excessive detail the part of a situation to an infuriating degree. Reproducing details and overplaying them.'[24] Realism is for Fo a purer and at the same time enhanced version of reality:

> There is a basic fact: that the bravura of an actor, his talent, is the ability to reconstruct reality, and reinventing it, giving the impression of being more real than reality. The problem with some actors is that whatever gesture they make on-stage, they always have to overload it, in ways that are obvious. In other words banal.[25]

The second epic aspect of Fo's style is the concept of situation. The character impersonation of bourgeois theatre expresses a social and political ideology based on individualism. Epic theatre tells a collective story through a construction of the play on situations and not on characters. The situation is any context which is able to capture the attention of the audience. Fo builds his texts either on one main situation which is then broken up into many smaller ones, or on a series of situations. In *Una giornata qualunque* the situation is that Giulia wants to commit suicide but is constantly interrupted by phone calls. From this basic situation, each of the situations of Giulia interacting with the single interrupter is a situation in its own right. In this respect, the characters are masks – that is, 'emblem-

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atic pretexts at the service of a situation'.[26] And the theatre of situation is opposed to bourgeois theatre, in which characters and dialogue are the main elements. The situation generates the story-telling aspect of the performance: the fact that the actors need to tell a story rather than act a character requires a specific kind of acting, which is restrained and lets the situation reach the audience by itself.

There is a famous exercise in which Fo asks three actors to repeat the same sequence of actions, but then describes to the audience a different situation for each of the actors. The result is that the audience see the situation and not the action.[27] This concept links Fo to later Stanislavsky and avant-garde practitioners such as Barba and Grotowski, and deserves deeper analysis; for now, we can simply note that the situation is another device to call for restraint and accuracy in the acting:

> The actor must try to use the minimum amount of means. In fact, he must create a synthesis of the means that are already at a minimum.[28]

Economical precision – just what is needed – is required and achieved by the use of *synthesis*: the technique the actor uses to select the physical actions to present a situation:

> The problem of synthesis in describing this situation is fundamental . . . the value of the situation is accelerated by the synthesis . . . synthesis is the shortening of the rhythm of the images.[29]

Another aspect which links epic and popular is third-person acting. For Fo this is based on the use of the *aside*:

> Originally the aside was the destruction of the fourth wall. What does it mean? It means that in the moment in which one of the actors told something to another actor and immediately after that he replied the opposite to the audience, he was making a commentary, he was criticizing from the outside the character itself, he detached himself from the character in a rational way, he was acting in an epic style.[30]

The aside is the basis of the involvement of the audience and at the same time it provides a useful commentary on the action unfolding in front of the audience. This device goes along with the collective nature of the characters themselves: the anonymous jester of *Mistero buffo* is everybody, like the Everyman of the English moralities. Bourgeois theatre, Fo comments, cannot and does not want to involve the audience, and so employs the fourth wall, which – according to Fo – was first used by the *commedia dell'arte* performer Andreini in the seventeenth century, who thus marks the passage between the jester-like popular theatre and the subjugation of popular theatre forms for upper-class consumption in *commedia dell'arte*.[31]

The Collective Dimension

The collective dimension of the performance is achieved through the participation of the audience in the play, with asides and *incidents* (*incidenti*) which interrupt the suspension of disbelief: 'the audience need to participate in the scenic game with the constant awareness of the pretence'.[32] The bourgeois theatre prevents participation for oppressive reasons: the shared nature of the theatrical event is perceived as a moment of disruption of the social hierarchy.[33] The fourth wall is not so much a technique but rather a mode of performance: the audience is separated from the performance through sidelights, gels, make-up, excessively unrealistic speech, to create what Fo calls the 'atmosphere of an aquarium . . . an intimate and naturalistic concept of the theatre, and at the same time a metaphysical one'.[34]

The involvement of the audience covers the didactic aspect which for Fo's theatre involves the moments of counter-information, which are present in many more plays than the ones created only with this purpose, such as *Anarchist*. Those parts require an objective, precise style of acting: they are part of an analysis which is often paradoxical and/or provocative, but never superficial or imprecise.

Also, audience involvement is a specific feature of the Italian theatre tradition. Italian audiences are much more part of the shows than English audiences. The first time I watched performances in England, I thought

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the people were not enjoying the show, since no one applauded during it (as is customary in Italy); and they applauded only once at the end, whereas in Italy three curtain calls are thought the very minimum for a decent night's entertainment.

Finally, epic theatre is a call for political commitment. Fo began his workshops in London saying: 'It is essential that this work, work in the theatre, has an ideological moment behind it'.[35] The ideological moment is the foundation of the whole theatrical architecture. The reason why you are doing it will influence the choice of the style of theatre you do, and will sustain (or not) the very skill of the performer: 'I manage to express my own personal comic skills because I believe in the jester-like function of the comic craft.'[36]

I spoke earlier of the deep core of Fo's art and politics: this is it. Ideology is the way to articulate that profound openness which gives Fo his artistic longevity and his link to audiences. And this is the reason why he does it. When theatre artists complain about not having audiences, the first questions should be: *why do you do it? For whom?*

This general analysis of Fo's acting can also be applied to Franca Rame. In the *Red Notes* workbook is a summarized account of Franca Rame's workshop on *Lo Stupro* with British actresses.[37] It is surprising how many times she stresses the importance of restraint in the acting, of letting the situation speak for itself. In the course of her career, Rame has slowly moved away from character impersonation (a mode of acting which was still hers in the first performances of *Mistero buffo*[38]) to the creation of an enhanced, theatrical version of herself which was finally fully achieved in *Sesso? Sì, grazie tanto per gradire*. As Fo remarks, the plays and the characters are not created about her but with her, in the sense that they originate from a close collaboration in which Rame participates, shaping and adapting the performance to her.[39]

Una giornata qualunque and *La donna grassa* represent two different half-way steps in this process, where Rame employs a very specific acting style. She is never Mattea, the fat woman: she is Rame who acts Mattea. This kind of epic distancing is what Fo complains that other actresses playing Rame's parts lack:

> It always ends up with the fact that these foreign actresses decide to use techniques to sustain the part which are exaggerated and which make them lean out and fall into farce, into boulevard. They lack the wisdom and so the epic culture which allows the great distancing from the role which keeps you always in the critical situation to create rhythm and counter-rhythm, and gives you the courage to throw away.[40]

In the actress Rame, the technical expertise is happily married with epic style in the church of popular theatre: it creates an organic whole difficult to substitute. It is very interesting to note how Rame employs the same tool as Fo – of *synthesis to create a situation* – which in her husband's style might not be apparent, due to flamboyance in the use of mimic skills in solo performance. In Rame's style they are precise nuances which are applied to a more realistic context: for example, in *Una giornata qualunque* they are used to give substance to the recorded voices of the phone calls.

4 Genre

Epic style can help the performer to tune in to a very particular key of Fo: the balance between farce and tragedy, the mixture of which is a very specific feature of Fo's theatre.[41] This is often overlooked, as British actors playing Fo tend to judge their performance 'solely by the number of laughs it obtains . . . thus allowing the farcical features to run away with the play rather than using them to score political points'.[42]

The miracle of Fo is that we laugh at tragic events: not only at political troubles, but at the suicide the protagonist wants to commit (*An Ordinary Day*) and at the desperate, loveless, lonely life of *The Fat Woman*. Fo is not a comedian but a jester; laughter is almost a tool which enhances the tragedy of the events:

> We never forget the fact that, even though it is a farce, what we are describing is true, is a reality. The element of farce heightens the tragic element

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of what they are portraying. In fact, the key to the tragedy is that which enables the comic to take on a satirical dimension.[43]

The plays are never – and this cannot be stressed enough – just an excuse for laughter: too often the farces are turned into vaudeville and the Rame pieces into sit-coms. The excess of comic play undermines the serious issues that the plays deal with, and that particular balance which is the essence of Fo's dramaturgy. From an acting point of view, the principle is, as Hirst puts it, 'never to expect laughs and never to destroy them'.[44]

5 The Text

The final problem involves the issue of translating and adapting the text of *Una giornata qualunque* and *La donna grassa*. These are not written in any of Fo's languages (*grammelot*, his mimicry of languages, medieval, dialect), but in plain Italian. This is a feature to remember, since adaptations into English tend to enhance the comic role of the language.[45] This might well be a successful transposition of the comedy into the English context, as Anglo-Saxon theatre enjoys wordplay much more than Italian – and surely more than Fo's theatre apart from the pieces in reinvented language; however, it is a heavy departure from the original.

Dario Fo is never subtle in his text, as his comedy has nothing of the literary, but it is completely theatrical. Where Fo is subtle is in his masterly use of timing, pace, gesture, audience interaction, sensitiveness, energy, *lazzi*, *trovate*, gags, asides, story-telling. Hood remarks that, 'the Fos are working in a tradition which precisely favours the word rather than the written text'.[46] And Valeria Tasca adds: 'it is important to realize that the creation of all Dario Fo texts is finalized on stage'.[47]

It seems to me more productive, and more in line with the original and the acting style it required, to restrain the language and look for the comedy where Fo intended it to be. The text is not just there for the jokes, but to provide the template on which the Fos exercise their skills of pace and rhythm ('I regard myself as a performer of texts that are compiled in a stave including rhythm and sound', he says[48]), and it comes from the craft of medieval jester and *commedia*. The performed text of any of Fo's plays is a highly developed concert of the formal elements of acting.

The problem with the text is that there is no such thing as a definitive text. As Stuart Hood remarks, 'There are, [Franca Rame] told me, over a thousand emendations to the text of *Una giornata qualunque*.'[49] These emendations come, Hood explains, from audience interactions and up-to-date social and political references:

> the text of pieces like *Una giornata qualunque* as it now exists is the result of a dialectical relationship between the performer and the audience – a process which leads to emendations, to excisions, to the inclusion of *trovate* which worked on a particular night or with a particular audience and which are now incorporated in the acting text.[50]

Fo's theatre is not based on text: rather, it uses scripts as one of the elements of the performance. Fo and Rame work on the text in sequence: the whole script, and especially the long monologues, are divided up into sequences which are then transported into different plays. And it is not unusual to find yourself listening to some of these sequences at lunch with them, as they represent what in Italy is called *cavalli di battaglia* – in other words their best work, the work they can count on to have an effect on the audience.[51]

The first script is usually composed by Fo in no more than a couple of weeks. The rehearsals are more a testing ground for the text than a process of putting it on stage: it grows and changes with the performance and in relationship with it. The text is a tool that Fo and Rame use for that particular performance, and depending on the feedback they get from audiences they make changes to the sequences. The text develops throughout the run, but even after a script is published the Fos keep reworking and changing it. There is no published version of Fo's plays which is the same as any other.

This is indeed how Fo's improvisation works, and it links back to the *commedia*

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tradition. The fact that the *commedia* performances were improvised does not mean that they were improvised in the same way as English performers improvise in *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* and whose principles are laid down by Keith Johnstone.[52] They share the same name, but they are two completely different techniques.

Johnstone's *Impro* is a total improvisation from nothing, and a scene built with it cannot usually last long. The longer performances of *commedia* troupes were constructed around a scenario on which the performers improvised on the sequencing and structuring of set pieces. Here, each performer had his or her own *cavalli di battaglia* – personal best set-pieces that were performed or at least had some fixed points to work variations on. These were not only monologues, but visual and physical gags as well, and they were developed and adapted depending on particular audience response. Total improvisation was part of it, but 'only to a certain degree'.[53] And this is also how Fo and Rame use their texts in performances ('we rebuild them on stage'[54]), as Stuart Hood notes regarding *Una giornata qualunque*:

> The editor is confronted with the impossible task of dealing with what is and should ideally remain an open text. This seems to me entirely in the spirit and tradition of *commedia dell'arte* and of the travelling players among whom Franca Rame was born.[55]

This leads me to consider the high level of ownership that the Fos have of their text. I mean this in a theatrical sense: the characters are shaped on themselves, and this is even truer of the later productions. As Fo points out, referring to Rame's monologues: 'I write them knowing what are the expressive dimensions she can realize.'[56] Because of this fact, and because the text is a tool to be moulded by them according to each different night, the result is that it may appear impossible to perform their theatre without them: indeed, when you say to someone in Italy that you want to direct Fo without Fo, the usual dismissive reply is: impossible.

The only way to succeed in moving Fo's work into other languages is to come to terms with its theatrical nature and to work on its open text (in postmodern terms) or on its scenario (in *commedia* terms). In this sense, it is easier to work on a translation for a production rather than editing a translation for a *corpus* of Fo's work in a literary context, an operation where complete accuracy is impossible to achieve.

So, more than the text alone, it is the whole performance that needs to be translated: the operation of translation needs to take into account the limited importance of text as such in Fo's plays, and so must aim to translate each element of rhythm and gesture. Through this work the performance is shaped upon the performer, thus solving the problem of not having the Fos to act it. It is really like taking a dress and making a copy of it in a new fabric. The transition makes it possible to accommodate differences of size without making a different dress. The operation is to re-arrive at the same conclusion as the Fos through the use of the same tools, a new journey on the same path – dividing up the text in sequence and letting the new performer dress up in the part, moulding the translation to feel comfortable in it.

Coda: Can We Do It, Then?

Putting on Fo's plays is a hard task which involves a series of never-ending and seemingly impossible problems. It is so in Italy, let alone when you have to cross the culture gap and try it in Britain. I have listed my principles of the production of Fo and Rame's plays and the problems which I can foresee. The question of whether a faithful but lively rendering of Fo is possible in the UK is still open, and the answer has to be given in practice and not in theory.

English acting has always been highly considered in Italy for its qualities of precision and restraint. When Fo complains about the overacting essence of naturalism he mainly refers to the Italian version of it: 'pompous, over-emphatic naturalists who sing' instead of speaking.[57] Popular epic style is a difficult alchemy in the peninsula as much as in the British Isles, but it would be wrong to see it as a hopeless task:

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I think there exists a tradition of epic theatre in England too. Leaving aside the fact that there also exists a tradition of popular theatre which is still alive . . . farces, vaudeville, etc. It's a kind of theatre that has a lot of epic characters within it.[58]

With thanks to Kate Napier and T. J. Holmes

Notes

1. The key work I refer to is Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992).
2. Tony Mitchell, *Dario Fo: People's Court Jester* (London: Methuen, 1999), p. 243–4.
3. See Erminia Artese, ed., *Dario Fo parla di Dario Fo* (Cosenza: Lerici, 1977), p. 31–41; also Fo, *Il teatro politico di Dario Fo* (Milano: Mazzotta, 1977), p. 129–33.
4. Dario Fo, in Artese, op. cit., p. 51.
5. See Tom Behan, *Dario Fo: Revolutionary Theatre* (London: Pluto, 2000), p. 111–36.
6. See especially Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx* (New York: Routledge, 1994); and Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 1992).
7. Derrida, op. cit., p. 13.
8. Mitchell, op. cit., p. 244.
9. Ibid., p. 274.
10. Dario Fo, cited in Mitchell, op. cit., p. 173.
11. Joseph Farrell, 'Dario Fo: Zanni and Giullare', in Christopher Cairns, ed., *The Commedia dell'Arte from the Renaissance to Dario Fo* (Leiston: Mellen, 1988), p. 315.
12. Good descriptive analyses of Italian contemporary theatre from an Anglo-Saxon point of view are provided by David L. Hirst in his monographs on Strehler and Fo: see David L. Hirst, *Giorgio Strehler* (Cambridge University Press, 1993); and *Dario Fo and Franca Rame* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989).
13. Leone di Somi, 'Dialogues on Stage Affairs: Third Dialogue', trans. Allardyce Nicoll, in Toby Cole and Helen K. Chinoy, ed., *Actors on Acting* (New York: Crown, 1957), p. 48.
14. Cristopher Cairns, 'Dario Fo and the Commedia dell'Arte', in David J. George and Christopher J. Gossip, ed., *Studies in the Commedia dell'Arte* (Cardiff: Cardiff University Press, 1993), p. 248. See also, Farrell, op. cit., and Mitchell, op. cit., p. 6.
15. See Cairns, op. cit., 1993.
16. Dario Fo, cited in Hirst, *Dario Fo*, op. cit., p. 73–4.
17. Robert Erenstein, 'The Humour of the Commedia dell'Arte', in Cairns, op. cit., 1988, p. 136.
18. See, for example, Laura Richards, 'Un Pulcinella Antico e Moderno', in Cairns, op. cit., 1988, p. 277–95.
19. Private interview.
20. Private interview. For the definition, see John Townsen, 'Molière à l'Italienne: Dario Fo at the Comédie Française', in *Theater*, XXXIII, No. 3 (Summer/Fall 1992), p. 52–61.
21. John Fuegi, *Bertolt Brecht: Chaos According to Plan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
22. Quoted in Hirst, op. cit., 1993, p. 95.
23. Dario Fo and Franca Rame, *Dario Fo and Franca Rame: Theatre Workshops at Riverside Studios* (London: Red Notes, 1983), p. 6.
24. Fo, op. cit., 1983, p. 6.
25. Ibid., p. 24.
26. Franca Rame, cited in Hirst, op. cit., p. 9.
27. Fo, op. cit., 1983, p. 18–19.
28. Ibid., p. 21.
29. Ibid., p. 19.
30. Dario Fo, cited in Artese, op. cit., p. 95–6.
31. Ibid., p. 97–102.
32. Ibid., p. 97.
33. Ibid., p. 101.
34. Ibid., p. 94.
35. Fo, op. cit., 1983, p. 1.
36. Dario Fo, cited in Artese, op. cit., p. 139.
37. Fo, op. cit., 1983, p. 49–54.
38. See contemporary reviews (1976) which noted the difference between Fo and Rame, such as Maurizio Ponzi's, quoted in Artese, op. cit., p. 95–8.
39. Fo, op. cit., 1977, p. 150.
40. Ibid., p. 152.
41. See also Mitchell, op. cit., p. 173, and Hirst, op. cit., p. 84–5.
42. Hirst, op. cit., p. 99.
43. Fo, op. cit., 1983, p. 26.
44. Hirst, op. cit., p. 207.
45. See Hirst, op. cit., p. 77–81.
46. Hood, op. cit., p. 349.
47. Valéria Tasca, 'Dario Fo from One Language to Another', in Patrice Pavis, ed., *The Intercultural Performance Reader* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 119.
48. Dario Fo, cited in Mitchell, op. cit., p. 179.
49. Stuart Hood, 'Open Texts: Some Problems in the Editing and Translating of Dario Fo', in Cairns, op. cit., 1988, p. 348.
50. Hood, op. cit., p. 347.
51. Private interview with Franca Rame.
52. Keith Johnstone, *Impro* (London: Methuen, 1981), and *Impro for Storytellers* (London: Faber, 1999).
53. See Erenstein, op. cit., p. 125.
54. Fo, op. cit., 1977, p. 150.
55. Hood, op. cit., p. 348.
56. Fo, op. cit., 1977, p. 152.
57. Dario Fo, cited in Hirst, op. cit., p. 21.
58. Fo, op. cit., 1983, p. 26.

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