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edited by
Luciana d'Arcangeli
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**Dario Fo & Franca Rame
Beyond the Rules**

Spunti e Ricerche

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Dario Fo and Franca Rame: An Enduring Artistic Partnership

Introduction Essay

In 1997 Dario Fo was assigned the Nobel prize for literature, a fact which raised considerable controversy in the world of culture in Italy, but at the same time gave rise to two distinct and important factors for Fo and Rame scholarship. One was a sort of licence, that is “the authoritative backing of the Swedish Academy” (Farrell 2001 274) and international recognition of Fo’s theatre, as Joseph Farrell underlines.¹ The other, equally due, was an increased focus on the issue of defining Franca Rame’s contribution in this artistic partnership. Twenty years after the assignation of the prize, this special issue of *Spunti e Ricerche* pays homage to the work of this remarkable couple, but also this collection of critical essays wants to contribute to the celebrations of Dario Fo’s 90th birthday, started in March 2016 at the Piccolo Teatro Studio Melato² with family and friends from near and far. Messages from the world over were screened on the night and the intention was to continue with shows, exhibitions and talks during the ensuing months. Fo was to be present in Edinburgh at the beginning of October of that year, at an especially interesting exhibition, his first as a visual artist in the UK, titled *Dancing with Colours, Whipping with Words*. This was planned for the Royal Lyceum Theatre and Fo was to appear on stage in conversation with Professor Joseph Farrell. Sadly Dario, who had quietly been hospitalised earlier, died on 13 October.

Dario Fo was a man of such volcanic creativity: he has left us paintings, posters, sketches, costumes and backdrops, books, songs, films and, above all, more than 80 strikingly original, dramatically ground-breaking plays. In Franca Rame, his partner and wife of 60 years, he found the perfect match for his own passionate, crusading and creative spirit. She was an activist, playwright, actress, company manager, writer, senator. Rame’s dynamism, powerful imagination and intellectual acuity complemented Fo’s own astonishing array of talents and inextinguishable creative energy. In his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1997, Fo dedicated the prize to Rame, sharing it with her as they had shared life, work, stage and page for so long. It is not at all surprising to learn that Dario reportedly continued to speak to Franca every day remaining to him following her death on 29 May 2013, as if she had never left his side.

At her funeral Fo publicly declared that the very successful play *Coppia aperta, quasi spalancata* (1983) actually owed its sure grasp of the potentially farcical nature of sexual politics in marriage to Franca. Indeed, Rame’s death seemed, in an artistic sense at least, to afford him the freedom to happily concede just how much of the writing success that the world mostly attributed to him alone should actually be shared with her. Fo went on to launch Rame’s posthumous book *In fuga dal Senato* in 2013 with a series of performances. Moreover, he wrote biographical novels on Maria Callas and Lucrezia Borgia, portraying them with characteristics remarkably reminiscent of Franca.³ And in his every appearance after May 2013, he rarely neglected an opportunity to mention the importance of her work.

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One of the couple's theatrical guiding principle, as Sharon Wood explains, was "laughter with anger, *riso con rabbia*" (93), an incitement to political commitment and social conscience. They turned on its head the tradition that wanted the theatre audience to leave after having enjoyed a play, thoroughly cleansed by tragic catharsis. The couple's theatre may have elicited great laughter generated by dialogue, actions and songs, but it was the ending or the closing monologue where the audience was brought to reflect: their audience was not meant to exit light heartedly, leaving all issues behind. Rather, they had to be moved to do something to change reality. This was particularly true in the highly political decade 1969–1979 when the couple added a *terzo atto*: their audience was invited to stay and talk with the performers to minutely analyse the topic of the play, its consequences and ramifications.⁴ In fact, some of Dario Fo's and Franca Rame's main successes in the theatre date back to this period, a time when the burning issues of Italian politics were particularly divisive. It is only natural to wonder then how plays "da bruciare" – as Fo himself called his production of that time, works written to have immediate impact in the here and now – have fared over the years. A quick search on YouTube will confirm that many of Fo's early plays are still being performed all over the world.

Antonio Scuderi deals in detail with this very question of endurance in his essay, "Coercion, Rapture and Delusion: Why Dario Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* is Still Relevant Today". The article invites to reflect on Fo's penchant for historical forms of theatre and popular modes of performances. Indeed, Fo's well-recorded subversive use of official history and language, particularly his playful and selective re-interpretation of history or deconstruction and re-construction of language as forms of defiance of canonical culture and class system, may yet turn out to be one of the most enduring aspects of his theatre. Scuderi revisits *Accidental Death* to stress its ageless appeal and political relevance today. He considers Fo's interpretation and development of Brecht's epic theatre and shows how Fo makes use of this particular genre to engender political self-consciousness and commitment to action. The playwright's intervention on what could have remained a minor, somewhat obscure historical event ultimately made of the Pinelli case a paradigm of abuse of power and justice which continues to resonate, precisely because it touches on fundamental transferable themes such as the modern crisis of democracy and specifically the misuse and abuse of power by the very structures and symbolic figures that should ensure justice and equity.

Of Dario Fo's plays, this is the one that perhaps most of all displays the playwright's characteristic habit of continuous (re)writing. The initial script was produced and subsequently shared and tried on stage, adjusted where necessary and enriched with pointedly salient improvised moments or updated with information from the daily news. *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* was written by Fo with the specific aim of propagating counter-information "to combat the official versions of the authorities" on the circumstances surrounding the "accidental" death of Giuseppe "Pino" Pinelli (Foot 69). The performance was enriched every night with information received during the day from the courtroom and the lawyers, confidantes and other sources privy to the libel case. It was Franca Rame who recorded each performance and then filtered its details to adjust the script, deciding what would stay on the page. This was especially true of the texts that went to print which can be considered akin to a still photograph of a script in evolution. With the essay by Laetitia Dumont-Lewi, "Franca Rame, autrice dell'opera di Dario Fo" the volume revisits the complex

question of authorship in relation to the Fo/Rame production. Their remarkable working affinity as a couple has been amply celebrated, but issues such as the method, the importance and the extent of Rame’s contribution still require due consideration. Franca Rame, herself, in a wonderful (yet damaging) *coup de theatre*, renounced authorship of *Lo stupro/The Rape*, the most private of her plays, as well as others to guarantee their survival as a Nobel’s work in the over 1200-page volume of collected plays she edited for Einaudi’s “I millenni” series: *Dario Fo. Teatro*. While Fo’s own acknowledgement of Rame’s crucial input, particularly from the assignation of the Nobel prize onward is wholehearted, the issue of authorship could be said to have been muddied by the couple themselves especially by the more recent Fo/Rame blanket attribution. As Dumont-Lewi notes, the fact that Rame appears as author in works published posthumously further obfuscates the matter. However, although many writers owe much to their editors and still retain full authorship, to call Rame merely an editor of Fo’s work has been shown to be utterly misleading. Dumont-Lewi’s essay shows how particularly from the 1970s onwards much of their theatre production was a creative process of authoring which the two did together for each single work, from the outset through to performance, re-writings and to print. The critic ascribes to Rame’s authorship a qualified status. Because of the provisionality of the theatre text and the usual post performance re-writings, Rame’s function as actor-improviser allows her to be an effective co-creator of the text and her enormous work of recording, transcribing, adding documentation to their theatre production makes her an author in the etymological sense of guarantor of their theatre production. Dumont-Lewi shows how the perception of author as the sole creator of a world view in a text is put into question when examining the process of Fo’s and Rame’s collaboration. Moreover, she shows that the very question of authorship of a theatrical text, when considering the authoring functions involved, needs further consideration.

The great accessibility to sources when studying Fo and Rame is due to the latter’s hoarding instinct: from a very young age Franca kept her mementos in what, as a little girl, she called “la scatola delle meraviglie”:

Da anni tutto ciò che mi passa per le mani, lo conservo. Iniziai da piccola. A cinque anni?... *Boh*. Avete in mente le arance? Una volta le comperavi avvolte in carta velina, dipinta con disegni magnifici. Le scartavo con delicatezza... le lisciavo con le mani... e una... e due... e dieci... e... Le tenevo gelosamente, erano le prime cose *mie* della mia vita. Non ne buttavo nemmeno una. Ogni tanto me le rimiravo. (Canova 15)

Researchers owe much to Rame’s enormous archival work. The archive she put together is rich in posters, paintings, costumes, puppets, books, newspaper cuttings, even serviettes on which Fo had written or simply doodled. When technology allowed, she digitised over two million documents and made them available on the internet in the Archivio Franca Rame Dario Fo – www.archivio.francarame.it – so that students and researchers could freely access the material. With her passing, the physical archive had to find a new home and on 23 March 2016, the day before Dario’s birthday, the MUSALAB, Museo Archivio Laboratorio di Franca Rame e Dario Fo was inaugurated in the Archivio di Stato, in Verona. The dedicated staff of the archive has since created a live space where people of all ages can now socialise, access and be inspired by the material.

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A playwright's style and method of writing are individual, but if the playwright is also the actor who delivers his or her own lines on stage the performance element becomes an additionally crucial creative signature. Simone Soriani with his "Dario Fo, drammaturgia d'attore" adds to Scuderi's essay by analysing this second element, critically scrutinising the role of writer-performer. The critic connects Fo not only to the axis of Italian theatre as a tradition which gives centrality to the actor/performer over the text, but also considers Fo's forms of distancing and his type of epic theatre, highlighting his originality from a Brechtian matrix. The essay explores the complexity of Fo's dramaturgy as a form of anti-theatre, particularly in reference to *Mistero Buffo* and ultimately assesses the multiple impacts that the performative event has on the written production. The essay invites a reflection on Fo's mastery in engaging the audience. On the one hand Fo creates the appearance of openness to and solicitation from the audience, while on the other the audience is cued by a series of strategies – the framework, the location of performances, the figure of the jester who helps the audience to de-code the message, the clever appropriation of history and culture and the very creative use and playful subversion of language. Natale Filice's essay "La tradizione frammentaria dell'affabulazione come teatro: l'istanza autonoma del narratore tra lingua, rappresentazione, potere e popolo, da *Mistero buffo* al nuovo teatro-narrazione e oltre" complements the above essays with a consideration of Fo's legacy in today's narrative theatre. He examines the technical virtuosity of Dario Fo in *Mistero buffo* and how it functions as a model, particularly in the initial development of the various forms of *teatro di narrazione* in the 80s and then highlights the distance to the more contemporary manifestations of journalist-performers. This study provides a suggestive basis for further consideration regarding the reproducibility of Fo's theatre, its legacy in the context of *teatro di narrazione* and the very nature of such a performative style.

These essays are also particularly relevant as a counter-argument to a particular critical reception received in Italy, whereby Fo had been acclaimed on the one hand for his histrionic ability, but on the other dismissed for his writing, accused of producing lowbrow comedy and a particular style that no other actor could reproduce on stage. These critics were particularly vociferous after a so-called "jester", a mere entertainer, had been awarded the prestigious Nobel prize for Literature in 1997, instead of the poet Mario Luzi, allegedly nominated by the *Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei*. It made little difference that Fo in 1975 had been already nominated, but lost the prize to the genius of Eugenio Montale. There is a certain *schadenfreudian* satisfaction in imagining the reaction of those very sceptics, who immediately after Fo's death renewed their polemics at the announcement of Bob Dylan as the 2016 winner of the Nobel prize for Literature. One can only conjecture that Fo's nomination must have helped open the way to other unconventional candidates.⁵ Like Dylan, Fo from the beginning of his career through to the early 80s wrote quite a number of songs. Some he incorporated in plays, others were free standing and some, like "Ho visto un re" enjoy cult status in Italy. A few more recently televised improvisations are readily available on YouTube. Notwithstanding the continued presence of songs in Fo's theatre, this aspect of his work has relatively received little attention. Gloria Pastorino's essay "Not Preaching to the Choir" goes towards filling this gap. The critic traces the history of Fo's song production, examining its diegetic function and analysing the changing content and intent that songs had over the years, showing how they were eventually subsumed in performance. Likewise Luciana d'Archangeli's

essay “Dario Fo and Franca Rame’s Characters Marginalised and Quelled by Technology” explores another area little represented in the critical scholarship, that of the portrayal of technology. Through an examination that begins with the couple’s participation in TV advertising in the early 60s to the plays of the end of the 20th century, the critic shows how the depiction of a consumerist approach to technology increasingly comes to represent yet another form of class exploitation and modern alienation.

The issue of relevance, performability and legacy is also extended to the classroom. As Walter Valeri, who in a 2004 essay had shown the many pedagogical reasons for which “[u]tilizzare i testi di Dario Fo e Franca Rame nei corsi di lingua italiana nelle università americane del Nord America è diventata una consuetudine” (504), so does Matthew Absalom in his essay dedicated to “The theatre project: from critical analysis to collaborative action – using Dario Fo’s *Non tutti i ladri vengono per nuocere* in the teaching and learning of Italian” illustrate how in the Melbourne classroom the 1958 one-act play is successfully used in a teaching context to engage students not only with the cultural content of the *pièce* but directly with the language of the play by performing it.

This volume also offers a selection of essays which explore specific aspects of the couple’s theatre such as the re-reading of canonical literary figures, the connection with contemporary writers and finally their recently published autobiographies. One of the most provocative aspects of Dario Fo, and one that has disconcerted many throughout his career, is his inventive, subversive and often auto referential use of literature and culture.⁶ The re-writing of literature and the re-interpreting history to project a different interpretation of the present and a cyclical concept of history – the past as today, is a recurrent feature in the Fo/Rame production and more so in the later part of their career. In particular Daniele Cerrato’s essay “*Il Boccaccio riveduto e scorretto* di Dario Fo e Franca Rame: uno sguardo di genere sui personaggi femminili” examines how the Fo/Rame text presents a re-reading of female characters from the *Decameron*, focusing on four specific figures and showing how these become the vehicle with which to denounce physical and symbolic violence perpetrated on women still today. The essay analyses how Rame performs and somehow “possesses” her characters, and how Fo tends to rewrite not only himself, but the authors that he presents, in this instance Boccaccio. Moreover the essay invites a reflection to similar instances of Fo’s re-readings such as that of Mayakovsky, Ruzzante, St Francis and others, all of whom end up embodying a political message that supports his own. This treatment is not confined to writers but is extended to a long list of artists (Michelangelo, Leonardo, Caravaggio, Giotto are but some) and their *oeuvre* on which Fo has written and which he has performed on stage and television. One might further mention historical figures such as Lucrezia Borgia, to whom in 2014 aged 88 he dedicated his first novel *La figlia del papa*, the anarchist and forger Paolo Ciulla and others.

Michele Ronchi Stefanati’s essay “Il giullare e la bagarre: il comico come modello d’anarchia” proposes a comparative reading of Celati’s and Fo’s work in the 70s. The study focuses on areas of convergence and divergences such as a common interest in *commedia dell’arte* and Tristano Martinelli, in the figure of the madman and in the creation of a sort of Bakhtinian de-stabilization or reversal of power structures. Ultimately the figure of the Jester in the work of Celati and Fo/ Rame is highlighted to show how it leads to quite different interpretations and functionality of such a role, and produces two distinctive views regarding

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social order and models of anarchy. Perhaps ignoring a more complex type of operation pertaining to the subversion of official history and historicity tout court, the critic argues that Fo's jester focuses on a Gramscian type of role as a figure that brings out the popular voice of protest and suggests a different type of social order. The importance of such a type of investigation needs to be underlined as it constitutes an avenue for new contextualisation of Rame/Fo's work and ways of reading relationships between intellectuals and cultural transferences.

Giovanna Sparacello's "Le autobiografie di Dario Fo e Franca Rame: vita o teatro?" examines Dario Fo's *Il paese dei Mezaràt*, published in 2002 and Franca Rame's *Una vita all'improvvisa*, published in 2009. Through the lens of theoretical issues relating to autobiography, the critic explores the role that invention has in Fo's and Rame's respective autobiographies. Her reading is based particularly on Lejeune's *Le pacte autobiographique* (1996) and the concept that invention is at the basis of narrating oneself, the issue is how it functions and what sort of pact the narrator and reader create, as well as how to account for the variability and fragmentary aspects of memory. In this context the essay tries to assess where invention leads. For Fo it was a matter of finding the origin of his storytelling in the tales of the *fabulatori* of the Lago Maggiore. A mythologised figure of the storyteller emerges and with it Fo reclaims his efforts of rescuing from the hegemonic culture, a popular culture steeped in a long secular tradition. In Rame's autobiography, on the other hand, Sparacello identifies an intent to establish hereditary family links, so to speak, with fundamental traits which become a part of the Fo/Rame theatre production: links to the *commedia dell'arte* and to a type of alternative itinerant theatre. Many of her recollections are additionally geared towards registering that her role is not subaltern. Ultimately Sparacello shows how the two autobiographies manifest opposing narrative strategies which also exemplify Fo's and Rame's characters and contributions to their theatre project. Fo uses invention to creatively connect the past with the present, while Rame, through a selective and fragmented memory, authors and records their professional and personal contributions.

This present volume can only offer glimpses of the scope and magnitude of the couple's achievements and the nature of the obstacles, difficulties and problems which they had routinely to overcome. As Joseph Farrell wrote in his Introduction to *Dario Fo and Franca Rame: Passion Unspent*, his most recent book on the couple:

this level of output is impressive in itself, but does create problems for the conscientious critic or biographer, and indeed it has become clear [...] that even if modern publishers afforded authors the Victorian luxury of the three-volume work, it would still be impossible to write a satisfactory biography of Fo, one half of one of the most astonishing couples in the history of Italian and European theatre. Dario and Franca have simply done too much (11).⁷

We hope that recognition of this remarkable literary and dramatic phenomenon by, among others, the contributors to this volume, will lead to further research, scholarship and critical engagement to elucidate and appreciate the enormous body of work that Dario Fo and Franca Rame have bequeathed to us.

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Notes

- ¹ See chapter 17 “The Actor Vindicated” pp. 269–79.
- ² See *Dario Fo e Franca Rame – La nostra storia*, episode 1: Buon compleanno Dario! A Rai5 production. Internet. 13-3-2017. <http://www.raiplay.it/video/2017/02/DARIO-FO-E-FRANCA-RAME---LA-NOSTRA-STORIA-b68e59c4-cecf-4a76-858a-0769f2d928d9.html>
- ³ See Fo-Rame, *Una Callas dimenticata* (2014) and Fo, *La figlia del papa*. (2014).
- ⁴ Traces of the debates that took place in theatre spaces can be found in the two volumes by Dario Fo, *Teatro politico di Dario Fo. Compagni senza censura 1* (1970) and *2* (1973).
- ⁵ Scuderi claims that with his Nobel Prize recognition, Fo “has helped in redefining the concept of ‘literature’ in that it now must comprehend the oral tradition and performance.” (106).
- ⁶ One need only think of Michele Straniero’s long list of historical inaccuracies and his condemnation of Fo’s use of history as “saccenteria storica” (*Giullare e Fo* 64).
- ⁷ The volume documents the last years of the couple’s lives and is also available in Italian *Dario e Franca. La biografia della coppia Fo/Rame attraverso la storia italiana*. Milan: Ledizioni, 2014.

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Edited book:

Ackley, Katherine A., ed. *Misogyny in Literature. An Essay Collection*. New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1992.

Alaimo, Emma, ed. *Ferdinando Di Giorgi. Lettere a Federico De Roberto*. Catania: Fondazione Verga, 1985.

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