

# The Herald The Arts

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## DON'T MISS ...

**CHITTY CHITTY BANG BANG**, Festival Theatre, Edinburgh, tomorrow 7.30pm, matinees Thursday and Sunday shows 1pm and 5pm (October 9)  
**PHILL JUPITUS**, left, is Baroness of Scotland in this touring staging – October 10  
Festival Theatre boss John Stalker presents a classic, with the world of stand-up comedian Peter Manford as Caractacus Potts. Theatre

# Why provocateur Fo is happy to remain the Italian firebrand

Veteran director reveals his close affinity with Scotland's people



## Theatre

NEIL COOPER

**S**PEAKING from Italy, Dario Fo is talking about his relationship with Scotland, a country where actors and theatre-makers have adopted the plays of the veteran director, actor and political provocateur like few others, and made them their own. As the author of modern classics such as *Accidental Death Of An Anarchist*, *Cant Pay? Won't Pay!* and *Trumpets And Raspberries* prepares to return to Edinburgh like an adopted prodigal to take part in *Dancing With Colours*, *Whipping With Words*, a month-long festival of his work and influence on contemporary political theatre, the 90-year-old Nobel Prize winner sounds in remarkably rude health.

At the other end of the line, two translators from the Edinburgh Italian Cultural Institute hang on to Fo's every word, chuckling occasionally at something he says. They refer to Fo as Maestro, a suitably grandiloquent word for an artist who, along with his artistic and life partner Franca Rame, changed the face of theatre, but whose craft is rooted in older, bawdier traditions where larger than life actor-managers held court. In that respect, it's not hard to recognise how Fo's work might fit in well in Scotland, where vaudeville and music hall were similarly applied to the wave of popular theatre that emanated from the likes of 7:84 and Wildcat in the 1970s and 1980s.

"It is very emotional for me," says Fo of his return to Scotland, "because Edinburgh has the most important festival in the world, and so many people come there because of it. I really love the city and the landscape, but most of all I think the people are really special, because they are really warm people who like to take part in their lives.

"It was a very pleasant realisation for me, that in both the Scottish and Italian traditions there are folk tales and mystical stories, and the fact that these particular aspects of folklore have

been very strong in Scotland, the same as they have in parts of Italy, show off the strong link between the two countries."

*Dancing With Colours*, *Whipping With Words* pivots around Fo, but it also incorporates work by a younger generation of radical theatre-makers using popular forms. This will include a production of Kieran Lynn's play, *Breaking The Ice*, a comedy that focuses on the follies of a hapless bureaucrat en route to a conference to save the Arctic.

There will also be two performances of Julia Taudevin's play, *Blow Off*, an explosive exploration of political extremism performed by Taudevin with composer/musician Kim Moore alongside Susan Bear and Julie Eisenstein, aka Glasgow band Tuff Love, as a piece of guerilla gig theatre. Mark Thomas will also return to Edinburgh with his solo piece of stand-up theatrical activism, *100 Acts Of Minor Dissent*, while there will also be a rehearsed reading of *I, Mother*, a new play by Morna Pearson inspired by Franca Rama's *The Mother*.

Fo's long-term collaborator Mario Pirovano will perform the maestro's monologue, *Francis The Holy Jester*, and there will be workshops and panel discussions featuring some of Scotland's key theatre-makers influenced by Fo. These will almost certainly include mentions of 7:84 and Wildcat, as well as *Borderline*, whose relationship with Fo's work dates back to 1985.

This was with a production of *Female Parts*, a collaboration between Fo and Rame, and was followed in 1985 by the company's take on *Trumpets and Raspberries*. This featured a cast that included Alan Cumming, Andy Gray and Elaine C Smith and Fo declared it as "The best my play's been done outside Italy".

A double bill of *The Virtuous Burglar* and *An Ordinary Day* was produced by *Borderline* in 1988, followed two years later by *Can't Pay? Won't Pay!* The same year saw Morag Fullerton direct her much revered production of *Mistero Buffo*, starring Robbie Coltrane. The latter was revisited in 2005, when the late Gerard Kelly directed Andy Gray in the title role. In 2005, *Borderline* produced a new version of *Accidental Death Of An Anarchist*. Many of these were translated



COLLABORATION: Dario Fo with his artistic and life partner Franca Rame, who died in 2013. Fo returns to Edinburgh this week.

by Joe Farrell, who has been Fo's greatest champion in Scotland, and who has penned the definitive biography of the still radical artist. The highlight of *Dancing With Colours*, *Whipping With Words* will almost certainly be a live conversation on the Lyceum stage between Farrell and Fo himself.

One of the many things up for discussion during the event will be the exhibition of Fo's rarely seen visual artwork, which will be shown across three venues, the Lyceum, the Scottish Storytelling Centre and the Italian Cultural Institute. There is a brightly-coloured life to the works that seem to vibrate in a way that reflects the stage work that they form such an essential part.

"When I have an idea of what I want to do on a stage," says Fo, "I think of it in terms of painting

something. I do that before and after making a theatre piece. It's always been there from the beginning, and connects up totally with my making theatre."

This is the case even more in Fo's current project, which focuses on the work of Charles Darwin, and will feature an exhibition of paintings which will subsequently be "performed" by actors alongside a play about Darwin.

While laughter is at the heart of Fo's work, it is the seriousness of it that rocked the establishment in Italy and beyond in a way that made Fo and Rame, who passed away in 2013, enemies of the state in a way that made their performances much more than naughty fun.

"My work starts from the main themes of *Commedia dell'arte*," Fo says. "Family, love and passion.

All through my life and work I have constantly adapted these themes to the political situation of the time, and this has always worked very well, because it was a way to make people understand the connection between some truths that are everlasting and what is going on in the moment."

This approach had a global impact with *Accidental Death Of An Anarchist*, which was inspired by the true story of an Italian anarchist who fell or was pushed to his death from a balcony window.

"The authorities made it look like it was suicide," Fo says, "and that was supported by the police, who never wanted to be honest about what had really happened. The people in Milan were very politically aware, and knew what was happening, and nobody believed the police version of events.. That is why I made the play, to show the truth and the reality.

"When something happens that nothing can be done about it, the authorities lose their heads, so they attack artists and

intellectuals. They scare them. They burn their theatres. They try to scare them off as much as possible."

For the younger wave of politically driven writers and theatre-makers attempting to articulate the state the world is in, Fo's faith in theatre remains undimmed.

"There are times when society is not sure what is happening," he says. "People in general may think there is nothing we can do about it, so even when an artist or a writer feels people aren't behind them because they don't understand what is happening, it is important to continue using satire or irony.

"It is important to keep addressing people," he says, ever the provocateur, "so they can find the right way to go."

*Dancing With Colours*, *Whipping With Words* – Dario Fo and Political Theatre runs from October 6-30. A *Conversation With Dario Fo* takes place at the Lyceum, Edinburgh, October 9, 5pm. elevenhq.com

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