

Dario for mayor!

Dario Fo, playwright, Nobel laureate and – at 79 – still the most subversive man in Italy, is running for mayor of Milan. But why? And what will he do if he wins? Well, for a start, he'll sort out the traffic, he tells **John Hooper**



I am trying to enjoy the most delicious risotto milanese, cooked by the Nobel laureate's wife, but the Nobel laureate is standing on the other side of the table with his hands (which, he wants me to understand, are Silvio Berlusconi's feet) resting knuckles-down on either side of his plate while his wife, who is pressed against his back with her arms jutting out through his, wiggles her hands and peeps round his head, grinning broadly.

The moment you arrive in the Fo household, you realise you are going to have the greatest difficulty in keeping any sort of a grip on the situation. It is as if you had strayed on stage during one of Dario Fo's frenetic comedies and been taken for a member of the cast.

Phones ring. Crises erupt. People burst in demanding instant responses to urgent questions. An entire set has to be moved to Naples that morning and the transport firm wants €8,000 (£5,400). "Eight thousand euros, Dario! What should we tell them?"

More phones ring. Fo begins to make a point (was it the one about the carvings in Modena cathedral looking like centaurs but really being

teachers? Whatever). His wife, Franca Rame, cuts him short. She starts on an opinion of her own. He interrupts her. I try to slip in a question. Another phone rings. Rame lifts the receiver and lets it fall back on the hook; looks fleetingly guilty; gives a "What is one to do?" shrug.

At any moment you expect a coup de théâtre of the sort for which Fo is celebrated. Were kidnappers disguised as firemen to burst in, as in *Abducting Diana*, seize his personal assistant and drag her from the flat, it would not seem inappropriate. In fact, the coup de théâtre has already taken place. And this is the result.

Dario Fo – at 79 still the most subversive man in Italy – wants to be mayor of Milan. The idea of an elderly anarcho-Marxist trying to take over the running of the country's business capital might provide him with a splendid plot for a play. But this is for real.

The latest poll, in last week's edition of the news magazine *L'Espresso*, suggested the right's reputedly reluctant candidate, Silvio Berlusconi's education minister, Letizia Moratti, was doomed from the outset: she stood to win less than 30% of the vote. So it looks as if it will all come down to a "primary election" in January to decide who should run against her.

"It's the primary that counts," says Fo. "Whoever wins the primary is already the mayor."

Victory would make him the official candidate of "the – the – what's it called? – the, erm . . ." Fo flaps his hand and snaps his fingers.

"Union?" puts in a helpful documentary maker who is here to follow his campaign.

"Yes. Union."

The Union is Italy's opposition alliance. Its principal components, including most of what is left of the old Italian Communist party, are backing a suit- and tie-wearing former prefect of Milan, Bruno Ferrante. But the *Espresso* poll showed that he faced a stiff challenge from Fo.

The 1997 Nobel prize winner for literature was found to be better known to voters, and almost as trusted as the former prefect. Asked who they intended to vote for, 46% opted for Ferrante and 34% for Fo. But large numbers were still undecided. The playwright and actor has the support of half the Greens and the all-important backing of a party whose supporters – pacifists, minority advocates, radical leftists and old-style trade-unionists – floated its candidate to victory in an earlier primary in another part of Italy. This party is "er – er – Communist Reconstruction", says Fo.

"Communist *Re-found-ation*," says his PA with the tone of one who has said the same thing many times before.

It is not that this brilliant man is becoming forgetful. No one can doubt his formidable mental and physical stamina. Two nights before our interview he had performed a two-hour monologue at a theatre outside Milan. It is just that parties and alliances do not have much of a place in his pristine vision of politics as a contest between *il popolo* (the people) and *i potenti* (the powerful).

When he was given an honorary doctorate by the Sorbonne earlier this year, he told a story that was quintessential Fo: half arcane erudition, half sheer whimsy. He explained that, in the 17th century, there had been a fashion – much favoured by the rich and powerful – for wearing extraordinarily heavy cloaks. The only snag was that high winds could actually carry away the wearer, who would sometimes never reappear. "It is a fashion," he concluded, "that I feel ought to be revived."

But, hold on, is not Fo himself now trying to become one of *i potenti*? He laughs and shakes his head. "I would say that I fly even without a cloak," he says. "My calling has been enabling

The king of political theatre . . . Fo, with his wife Franca Rame, at an anti-government demonstration in Milan last week

Photograph: Luca Bruno/AP

me to fly for a long time. It's just that my flying is metaphysical and not real, so I don't end up being dashed against buildings."

Which, if you think about it, is a pretty good politician's evasive answer. So I press.

"I saw what was happening in Milan," he says. "I saw an enormous confusion on the left. They

'I want people, when they decide whether to vote for me, to be as indignant as I am'

were constantly proposing candidates; one was a great surgeon, an expert on cancer, another a great journalist, a former editor of *Corriere della Sera*. And then there were rows. This one didn't suit that one, and so on. I said to myself: 'What is it that the left is looking for? It's looking for moderates.' The left of the right – I mean the Catholics – they want at all costs to have a moderate."

And "moderate", in the Fo vocabulary, is not

a good thing. The left in his beloved Milan were slipping off down the same road as the Italian left, which is fielding a moderate Catholic and ardent privatiser, Romano Prodi, against Silvio Berlusconi in next year's general election. But then the Italian left was itself following a path already trodden by New Labour and Tony Blair.

"Blair? He brings me up in goosebumps," says Fo. "He has nothing to do with the left, either culturally or behaviourally. He even manages to be friends with Berlusconi." Then he mumbles something I don't catch. It is only later, when I

play back the Minidisc, that I hear he had added: "He must have a strong stomach."

I put it to him that a lot of people are saying the left, as the left, is finished. "It hasn't died," he insists. "But it needs to renew itself and to create revolutions – not bloody revolutions, but revolutions in the sense of changing people's way of thinking, of living."

For example? "Well, stopping traffic from entering the centre of the city," says Fo. He ▶

◀ already has a plan for swap points on the outskirts of Milan where people will be able to park their cars and get on non-polluting public transport.

So, more green than red? He laughs. But he doesn't disagree. Nor does he disagree when I say we seem to be watching the emergence of a postmodern Fo. "Call him what you will," he says pleasantly.

His campaign is designed to fall into two uneven halves. The first is mainly concerned with research. To a greater extent than most playwrights, Fo has always been intrigued by hard fact, and it turns out that he has a bit of the journalist about him. He says he has an instinctive preference for gathering information from people rather than books.

He explains how he went about writing perhaps his most celebrated play, *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*. "First of all, I went to see the lawyers for the other side. They gave me the outlines. I studied the case. But I didn't stop there. There were the anarchist groups and I interviewed them. Then I read all of what the newspapers had written about the case. I became a familiar figure in the courts, listening to what was happening. And at the same time I began to write, to put it all down.

"This time, I'm not trying to put together a script, but a clear argument which above all convinces people who normally don't know the details and don't listen to them because they're so often communicated in a boring way, without any warmth, or passion or indignation."

Indignazione, along with *popolo* and *potenti*, is a Fo keyword. It crops up again and again, as in: "I want people, when they listen to me, to decide whether to vote for me, to be as indignant as I am."

Right now, Fo is indignant over Milan, "a city with a great cultural tradition". "After the



Outside, looking in . . . Fo in his pre-political days, impersonating Silvio Berlusconi in a 2003 show Photograph: Paolo Ruffini

war, it was perhaps the most advanced in terms of its theatre, cinema, literature, journalism, its engineers, architects and painters. Now it has crumbled," he says. Milan has become an "old city with no drive, no enthusiasm for renewal". Everywhere he looks he sees "a standardised, fossilised mentality". So "for the past 15 days, every day, I've been meeting

people – technicians, experts – but from outside the mainstream. They're not conventional.'

On the board behind him is a note pinned up to remind him of an appointment with the internationally renowned architect Massimiliano Fuksas. When I arrived he had been bidding farewell to an expert on waste management.

His desk is still covered with big sheets of paper on which he has been taking notes and drawing sketches to do with garbage collection. It is hard to imagine anything similar on Harold Pinter's desk.

As he pours out his findings, it is clear that Fo's limitless enthusiasm has penetrated to other, equally unexpected corners. Do I realise he asks, that Germany is generating 300 megawatts of solar energy? And am I aware that there are no fewer than three water-bearing layers of rock beneath Milan? Two are polluted but "then there is an even deeper layer which is very old, from the Ice Age in fact, 200 metres down". And the present council is planning to sell it off. "Terrible."

Now that he has assembled his facts and figures, he is preparing for the second – and perhaps more difficult – phase of his campaign which is to present it all to the electorate in a way that can persuade them to part with their votes.

Fo has a serious handicap: he can pretty much forget about access to television. He is far too hot to handle for the state-owned Rai, which banished his last series of programmes, on cultural themes, to a slot just before midnight. One of Italy's four commercial channels belongs to a businessman who is said to be backing his rival Ferrante. Silvio Berlusconi owns the other three and will scarcely want to give airtime to a man who has pilloried him mercilessly. Fo's last play *L'Anomalo Bicefalo*, includes the scene (which he later shows me over lunch) in which the prime minister is reduced to the height of a dwarf.

So Fo is planning to campaign from the stage. On Monday night, Fo began applying his peculiar skills to political campaigning with a show at Milan's biggest theatre, capacity 3,500.

"We're going to put on a series of shows, in fact. One every Monday. They won't be conferences and they won't be rallies, but lectures. I will be theatre as a representation of reality."

But are today's Italians ready to listen? *Mistero Buffo*, the most celebrated of all Fo's subversive monologues, was first put on in 1969 – a year after Europe's universities erupted transforming the continent's political landscape if not for ever, then certainly for a generation. Revolution was in the air, mingled with tear gas and nowhere more so than in Italy.

But that earnest Italy and today's Italy of Silvio Berlusconi and *Isola dei Famosi* (Celebrity Island) are very different places. I start to ask Fo whether, back in the 70s, he had ever imagined that his country – "Would have come to this?" he cuts in. "No, no, no. Would I have even thought that all these superficial things would have become so important? No. I would never have believed it."

For just a second, the irrepressible ebullience of the master storyteller evaporates. Then he perks up again. "If you dig deeper," he says, "beneath that layer of obtuseness that seems to cover the nation, you find people of a different calibre." He is off again, enthusing about the few campaigning excursions he has already made and how everywhere he goes he has found himself surrounded by "a crowd of people who want me to tell them the other story" ●

knitted by Diane from Newbury

Help people stay warm this winter

It's pretty simple really. An innocent drinker knits a little hat, sends it to us, we put it on a bottle, the bottle is sold in Waitrose or EAT and 50p goes towards charities helping to keep older people warm this winter. Everyone's a winner. Find out more at www.innocentdrinks.co.uk/supergran

innocent
your daily fruit

Christmas has become a complicated exercise in chic. Going for a red-and-green colour scheme? Old hat. Much more cool to twin amethyst with chartreuse

Style, page 22

