

## The evolution of female characters in Dario Fo's plays from the '60s to the '80s.

### Introduction.

Fo's plays have evolved over the years passing through various stages: situation comedy and *commedia dell'arte*, epic theatre, political theatre; in doing so his plays have evolved and some features of each stage may be found in later plays where Fo has kept the features he felt were useful to convey his message. In this excursion the evolution of female characters is remarkable because, although passing through the same stages, it follows a step-by-step architecture to create three-dimensional, tangible, *personaggi*. As Franca Rame says "before we left the official theatre circuits, my characters, the female characters written by Dario, had a tendency to be decorative, *d'appoggio*..." while "with time Dario has changed his attitude towards women"<sup>1</sup> - this gradual change can be observed studying the female characters closely in the plays through the years.

Fo brought on the stage issues such as divorce, the condition of women and working mothers, rape and abortion, dear to the feminist movement that boomed from the '60s to the '80s and to political parties of the left. He brought the nation's attention to the condition of women, well in advance of the laws, through theatrical means as he had realized, long before the Italian feminists, "that the struggle was cultural as well as political".<sup>2</sup>

Situation comedy, *commedia dell'arte*.

Fo first uses situation comedy as he is interested by the mechanics involved in the play and in the political message conveyed rather than in his characters<sup>3</sup>. He still works under the strong influence of the variety shows, that have brought him on stage, while strengthening his message and widening his cultural horizon. Gradually the female characters, who start off as being beautiful, scantily dressed and without much to say, turn into everyday women, mothers, peasants with ordinary problems such as motherhood, work, loneliness, weight and eventually terrorism and drugs.

In *I cadaveri si spediscono e le donne si spogliano* (1958) Francisca's role is marginal, even though she is the main character. The main objective of this thriller farce is to highlight the incredible situations that are created by the impossibility to divorce; Fo carries the situation to its extreme paradox where homicides are organized to rid wives of unwanted husbands! It is important to remember that in Italy only the Sacra Rota, the Vatican's special tribunal, could annul marriage vows, and that legal separations were sought only in extreme cases because they resulted in living social life as an outcast.<sup>4</sup> The Democrazia Cristiana and the Catholic church, together with the right wing and the monarchists, fought over the years with all their means (political, social, religious and cultural)<sup>5</sup> a battle they were to lose on December 1st 1970 when the so called Fortuna bill (sustained by many women in parliament: L. Jotti, G. Levi Arian, G. Re, C. Zanti Tondi, M.A. Macciocchi, L. Sgarbi Bompani) became law 898 (with 319 votes in favour and 286 against)<sup>6</sup>. The Democrazia Cristiana attempted to repeal the divorce law through a referendum they lost by 60 per cent, and that the left wing parties were not sure to win, due to the large number of women, including Catholic, that voted for divorce<sup>7</sup>.

In this play Fo faces this issue twelve years before the law was passed showing a great political foresight and taking a militant cultural stand, although he does not

stress women's condition at all. In fact, as the title implies, there is an abundance of female flesh shown, a tendency of the variety shows that Fo had explored with Franco Parenti and Durano in the early '50s, and the female characters suffer the well known *bella e oca* (literally: beautiful and dumb as duck) syndrome.

Situation is also important in another play on divorce and family law, *Non tutti i ladri vengono per nuocere* (1969), where the three female characters on stage have no depth of their own and closely resemble the *maschere* of the *commedia dell'arte* where they are satirised social stereotypes and are moved as puppets in a game of "comparisons, similitudes and differences, misunderstandings and mistaken identities"<sup>8</sup> to create the surreal situation that ironically depicts normal life.

The two bourgeois wives are concerned with the *brutta figura* and the scandal of adultery while the thief's wife is worried for her husband's wellbeing and sincerely upset at the thought of an affair; they depict the difference in the social classes' way of perceiving the issue of matrimony and divorce. Paroxysm is reached when the adulterous couple refuses to call the police to arrest the thief because they too are committing a crime punishable with detention and would prefer killing him, committing a greater but definitely more acceptable offence to society.

This biting picture of the Italian middle class comes soon after Fo left the bourgeois theatre circuit, ETI, in 1968 to perform in the *case del popolo*, administered by ARCI (the cultural and recreational association of the Partito Comunista Italiano), thus taking a more definite political standpoint refusing to be a "court jester". As the author says:

the bourgeoisie accepted even our most violent criticisms of them as long as we criticized them inside their own structure, in the same way as the king's court jester was allowed to say the most incisive things to the king, as long as he said them at court, to the courtiers who laughed, applauded and said 'My, how democratic

this king is.' This was a way for the bourgeoisie to show itself how sympathetic and democratic it was... But once you go outside this dimension and go and talk to the peasants and the workers, to the exploited, and tell them a few home truths, then you're not accepted...<sup>9</sup>

The monodimensional characters seen in the above paragraph differ from Marcolfa (the 1969 play goes by the same name) where this character is once again a checker on the board of happenings. This female part acquires a distinct personality rich in common sense and peasant wisdom as demonstrated by the proverbs cited, but carries with it the burden of a culture that does not recognize a woman's status outside the family and motherhood<sup>10</sup>, that appreciates beauty and femininity, that fosters dreams for the impossible<sup>11</sup> and hope in the *provvidenza* so dear to Manzoni.

Marcolfa is ready to do anything to marry and become a wife, to wear a white gown in which she sees herself beautiful while resulting grotesque, to buy a lottery ticket that will certainly win and change her life. It's Francesco, her male counterpart, that in the end allows her to see the fallacy of her reasoning when he confesses having set up the winning lottery ticket to have her understand that one must not live "waiting for the right day, the right number, the right moment and luck!... Because it's time to realise that who lives hoping dies... a slave!"<sup>12</sup>.

In the finale we also catch a glimpse of other common curses of Italian female culture: belief in "black magic" or the *fattura* which would excuse Giuseppe for having run after another woman and have Marcolfa blamed instead; the romantic ideals of the princess that declares her love in such terms as "humble" and "slave" for the ridiculous marquis because he seemingly faced death for her<sup>13</sup>. In the same year Carla Ravaioli publishes *La donna contro se stessa* dedicating a chapter to *Il matrimonio come carriera* (Laterza, Bari, 1969, pp.40-43), following the same stream of thought Fo shows his public how deeply rooted is antifeminism in Italian culture

throughout the strata of social classes in women themselves.

In this first phase of Fo's work the female characters are essential to the mechanics of the plays but have no particular message to convey. Their parts do not stand out and the few lines spoken do not carry the play's message. Their rather decorative function becomes unequivocal when Fo inserts short danced and/or sung *stacchi* or intervals. In the late '60s female characters acquire more depth but still depend on their male counterparts for action and content.

## Epic theatre.

Fo's use of situation comedy and *commedia dell'arte* has always been biased by his political standpoint; he has always tried to rid this form of theatre of its "court" influences while retaining the "peasant" features. His studies brought him to a pre-*commedia* approach that naturally led to the epic theatre when he left the mainstream Italian theatre to seek an alternative theatrical circuit on the wake of a political situation that had permeated all aspects of social life: the universities were occupied, workers were on strike, the unions had lost touch with their blue-collar base, extraparliamentary parties were multiplying, the Partito Comunista Italiano was being strongly criticised for its *riformismo e revisionismo* while a worldwide view showed the Vietnam war, the events of May 1968 in France, guerrilla warfare in South America and Africa, the cultural revolution in China.

The whole situation was ripe for change. Fo severed his roots from the theatrical circuit and created an alternative collective theatre company and a new contract with the audience. They were to be no longer passive but participating in the show through preliminary assemblies to integrate ideas into new plays and through the introduction of the *terzo atto* (third act), that is a debate on the show itself. This led to a season of strong contemporary political satire and to a search for popular cultural roots that also brought on stage a new woman: a sentient being with real needs, problems and grief looking for a rightful place in society.

In his search for popular roots in theatre, Fo began studying in the early-sixties works of the *giullari*, the mediaeval strolling players who performed in market places and streets, both written and oral tradition, the language, the environment in which they performed, the contents and their political message. He worked upstream trying to find the source of this unofficial theatre before it was appropriated and transformed into the theatre of the ruling classes, when it was still the exploited people's

spoken newspaper. Fo adapted these works and gave them new life and a new popular language, "fifteenth century Padano" and "grammelot", rendering them vibrant and passionate, giving words to contemporary exploitation and thus becoming the "people's jester" - a living newspaper for a non-theatre-going audience. For this he paid the price of his predecessors: censorship and incarceration.<sup>14</sup> In dealing with contemporary problems Fo could not leave out the *questione femminile*, so he proceeded to give a universal depth to his female characters and portrayed them from a different point of view. This brought light to a world of emotions that had lived in shadow for too long.

The first work of this kind is *Mistero Buffo* (1969) which made Dario Fo a world renowned author and actor. It is a series of short monologues carried on stage through the use of the mediaeval *giullari's* technique where by all the characters in each story are impersonated by one actor alone, including female parts, switching from one "mask" to the other by a slight change in posture or tone of voice without the visual aid of costumes or scenography. As per a 1976 interview:

... this means that the actor must be the exclusive renderer of whatever happens, that he does not have to wear a robe to become a character, but to become a mask... The mask is the dialectical synthesis of conflicts, whereas a character carries with him conflicts without ever achieving their synthesis... the actor is an individual entity, while the mask is collective, because it tells of a general concern... it is the voice of the story, not the means of acting it out. It is not I who identify with what I present on stage. Rather, I can criticise, suggest conflicts, contradictions, hypocrisies, and comment under any circumstance. This is the epic fact, the enstrangement".<sup>15</sup>

Aside from the innovative technique and structure of this piece the great impact it made was due to the violent blasphemous satire of the forefathers of the ruling

class, past popes and judges who, as Franco Quadri states, act as a "filter through metaphors" of reality. Also important is the unveiling of a culture and historiography that differed greatly from the official ones. This culture consisted of other values and a will to revolt that in the people had always existed but had systematically been wiped out by the ruling classes through the ages.

Peasant culture was revisited by Fo not only to show his audience a different view of the past, but to spur the people to regain consciousness (as per Mao's and Gramsci's beliefs). Following this line of thought women achieved a new consciousness, their right to grief and anger. Even the Madonna is allowed such lowly feelings and steps down from her godly pedestal into a mother's clothes.

Confrontation between one of these women with other similar characters represented in sacred mysteries yields a striking difference: Fo's character is alive, the other stylised. The woman in *Strage degli innocenti*, who has had her child killed by Roman soldiers and is in a state of shock, carries a lamb as if it was her child, allegorically representing, as the author explains in the prologue, Mary and the Christ child. The allegory is used to give more freedom of speech than would ever be allowed the Virgin Mary: she blasphemes vehemently against such a crime as having been deprived of her child, denied motherhood status and dignity.

A second example is another "Madonna" carrying the same peasant strength, she is represented in the *Passione - Maria alla croce* by Franca Rame in a more dramatic style. Mary, like any mother would, tries to bribe the soldier to take her son off the cross and lengthen her son's life - Christ's passion is mirrored in her grief and cries. When she realises there is nothing to be done for him, she blames with unusual pathos the Archangel Gabriel for having tricked her into the worst fate a mother can suffer - watching her son die - while falsely promising dreams of greatness. Fo finds an everyday way, a woman's way of looking at holy mysteries: this is his new popular epic means, the characters are given a real voice. One can feel the drama the woman is living, the injustice, the political



awareness and the courage, all of which are in sharp contrast with the iconographic stereotype of acceptancy in the Passion.

A further change in Fo's female characters is due to Franca Rame's presence in the author's life and her interest in following "the development of initiatives and activities of the feminist movement"<sup>16</sup>. Her insistence on the need for a play on women gave birth to monologues on various types of female oppression and generally on women's condition that were first put together for the TV series *Parliamo di donne* (1977) and later the same year rounded up for the stage in *Tutta casa, letto e chiesa*.

The women's movement in Italy had by now reached mass mobilisation, communication channels had opened on television, radio shows and newspapers like *il manifesto* and *la Repubblica* and feminist journals were circulating like *Donnawomanfemme*, *Memoria* and a feminist literary journal *I'Orsaminore*. The demand was for an abortion law to stop the shocks, injuries and death caused by illegal abortions, often performed by un-certified mid-wives, that affected the lower classes who did not have access to costly Swiss clinics.

Rame has never denied her admiration for feminists even though she never had much time to be involved in the movement because of the theatre and her activity in *Soccorso Rosso* (sustaining political prisoners in jail and their families). But she states "I have seen a group of girls at work, for example, those that give abortions and I was bewildered. Looking at them (both those giving and receiving abortions) they seemed... heroic. I know the term is wrong, but no other word comes to mind to describe the incredible sensation I received. Twenty year old girls risking jail... that had chosen to grab their destiny back into their hands, reacquiring their body by ripping with sheer strength their right to a free, chosen maternity. Their young age and determination are signs that the world, our world, is really changing, has in fact already changed".<sup>17</sup>

Particular attention is given to Franca Rame here as she has called for and helped write, other than acted alone, the play *Tutta casa, letto e chiesa*. As the author says "I would never have been able to write female characters that were substantial enough, and - without being modest about it - which have a certain weight if Franca hadn't been there. They have been written with Franca and not tailored on her".<sup>18</sup> The various pieces represent situations a woman is faced with in ordinary life - work, house care, aging, rejection, sexual harassment - and others that are pertinent mainly to the female gender - motherhood, abortion, rape.

As in *Mistero Buffo* the play consists of a collection of monologues, this time dealing with contemporary issues and carrying a stronger tragic accent. A great number of episodes many were tried and later discarded because they did not manage to convey the political message, were outdated, or did not translate to the stage; it is thus difficult to judge which stories belong under the original title. Only some episodes will be examined in the following paragraphs for the peculiarity of the single characters and/or the issues they raise.

The difference between characters of earlier plays and monologues is noticeable in *Il risveglio*, where the mother figure becomes universal. Here a working mother trying to locate her keys reconstructs the previous day, the argument with her husband, the chores, all with such clarity, without a hint of *immedesimazione* and naturalism, that all injustice in her situation is clearly shown without resorting to any drama; in fact the piece has its comic side. The woman lives a nightmare most proletarian working mothers everywhere have to face: factory work with the physical dangers implied, diapers, school hours, train delays, house chores, shopping. This topic has been dealt with by most feminist literature in many ways and by C. Ravaioli in *La donna contro se stessa*, the section titled *L'assurdo del doppio lavoro*<sup>19</sup>, and partly solved through palliative parliamentary bills in the early Seventies and later reforms; Fo highlights the injustice with a single

strategic presence... the husband lies sleeping while the action takes place.

In treating the subject, Fo's comical effects are obtained through absurd errors continuously incurred due to the misplacement of sprays, milk and so on, but the main theme is extremely real and portrays the strain of woman's condition. It is a theatrical, adjourned female version of Chaplin's *Modern Times*. In the end she discovers it's Sunday and all the frantic groping has been unnecessary: the spectator is left with a sense of emptiness that cannot be discarded lightly. This effect confirms Franca Rame as being "the exponent of his [Fo's] theatre's power to drive straight to the heart of an issue and make the audience through anger will to change what is outmoded and corrupt".<sup>20</sup>

In the same group of contemporary plays falls *La madre*, where the mother of a terrorist has to undergo vaginal and anal searches to see her son in prison behind a glass wall. This piece stemmed from real life experiences of mothers, who had to undergo such humiliations only to find a beaten up son in a fish tank parlour to whom they were not able to speak to. Franca Rame represented them in all their pain and anger. Again women who had to suffer the consequences of someone else's acts and be quiet about them, women without a voice. Dario Fo voiced these complaints and Rame took them on the stage emphasizing the human reactions and issues behind terrorism, disclosing the inhumanity of the new anti-terrorism laws and the treatment reserved for political prisoners.

Once again the playwright touched a contemporary issue: political kidnappings and homicides were common practice in the Seventies and only a year later (1978) the leader of the democratic party Aldo Moro was kidnapped and killed. Two other monologues dedicated to two German women terrorists, Meinhof and Moeller, will be discussed later under the section dedicated to political theatre. What is to be observed here is the universality of the author's plays and their effectiveness in bringing to public attention various injustices suffered by women, in some

cases brought about by other women - thus shattering a common-place belief in women's solidarity. In the case of *La madre* "Rame's performance of it in London in 1983 served to bolster a campaign against similar practices (strip-searching) in Armagh Jail in Northern Ireland"<sup>21</sup>.

In the episode *Una donna sola* Fo creates a tragicomic pastiche of the miseries common to the condition of housewives all concentrated in one character. In her dialogue with an unseen new neighbour we are led through the feeling of loneliness, suppressed by the simultaneous noises of radio, TV and record player, to gradually discover the plague of alcoholism due to a loveless marriage and bland sexual life livened by a guilt-ridden relationship with a younger man. We also see suicidal tendencies that stem from her being locked in the house under strict 'phone control by a jealous husband who has gotten an under-age girl pregnant! Moreover she carries the burden of a small child and a sick brother-in-law, all the while having to suffer various kinds of sexual harassment. The situation spins out of control and leads up to her final cry of anguish "Mi ammazzo, mi ammazzo..." (literally a repeated I'll kill myself). This would have been acceptable to society, but the woman - prompted by something the neighbour says - throws the brother-in-law down the stairs, shoots the peeping-Tom and sits down calmly waiting to take on her husband - and all the oppression he stands for - gun in hand: Fo's female characters are starting to react.

A superficial exam shows the author as undecided as to which plague to deal with and ending up facing them all together. In fact, he is facing the worst one: the fear of speaking up, the nonsensical feeling of guilt at denouncing a wrong-doing (how many are illustrated here!), the difficulties of taking a stand - something common to these episodes and to many women. Fo was accused of teaching violence with this piece but he replied "I veri violenti sono i violentati, soprattutto se si permettono di difendersi e reagire"<sup>22</sup> (victims are the real violent offenders, especially if they react and defend themselves).

Still part of the same group of short plays is *Abbiamo tutte la stessa storia*, a scabrous fairy-tale on the man-woman relationship, abortion, maturity and taking a moral stand. These themes were again central to feminist literature of the Seventies. Abortion needs a special mention due to an inquiry into Franca Rame's political activities carried out in 1973 by Mario Sossi (an Italian magistrate later kidnapped by the Red Brigades) which yielded nothing incriminating and to the mass mobilisation that occurred between 1974 and 1978.

Two impressive demonstrations uniting most women's movements were held in Rome (3rd April 1976 and 10th June 1977) following impediments from the Democrazia Cristiana and the Movimento Sociale Italiano to the passing of the abortion bill. The scarce number of women in parliament, the two defeats mentioned and the law proposed by the *Movimento per la vita* (punishing all abortion and proposing a pre-adoption entrustment to the mother thus considering her an incubator, a proposal that gathered more than one million sustaining signatures) brought thousands of women in the streets for the celebrative *contestazione* of the 8th of March 1978: international women's day. This regardless of the fear of left and right wing terrorism (extremely active at the time) that 8 days later was to hit the Italian State and its Institutions through the kidnapping of the president of the Democrazia Cristiana, Aldo Moro. Soon after the hostage was killed the abortion bill was passed as law 194, on the 19th May 1978. The law encountered many enacting difficulties and had to suffer through two abrogative referendums in May 1981 both of which failed badly.<sup>23</sup>

This long political parenthesis allows a better understanding of the specific cultural weight this episode carried on stage, especially when contextualizing it to the maturity and ethical stand of the person, as per Rame's prologue

We have a splendid little girl, beautiful, blonde, blue-eyed, and a rag-doll who talks dirty. These two figures

are we women ourselves. The sweet little girl is that part of us which is docile, which gives in, which accepts; the doll, by contrast, represents our rebellion. The 'red cat' is our companion. The 'wolf' represents all those male figures who oppress us right from infancy: father, brother, head of the office, etc. Then we grow up, the two parts intermingle, we become a single entity, there follows maturity and the taking of a moral stand.<sup>24</sup>

But the piece also carries with it the acceptance of forced sex and the strength of a remembered illegal abortion: the pain and the shame. It denounces the lack of sexual education, the difficulties found in trying to obtain a legal abortion within the prescribed time limits in a national hospital and the larceny the private practices organized in offering an alternative. This female character, as girl and as doll, is deeply rooted in contemporary life and reflects the awareness women had, or should have had, in the 70s with all the contradictions: in the end she has the baby anyway passing it as her own choice and joins the other "girls" that have become aware of their oppression.

The dramatic episode *Lo stupro* (1975) on rape, a terrible experience Rame personally lived through, was performed in 1978 only "when discussions started on the law on sexual violence"<sup>25</sup>. In Italy rape has been considered a moral crime until 1996, when by law it has become a crime against the person and, in worst cases, can be supported by the severe kidnapping laws. The prologue first reports the absurdity of the repeated, this time, psychological rape a woman must undergo when questioned by the police on the happening and then in court by lawyers and judges - thus allowing a glimpse at the greater number of such crimes that go unreported. This common procedure of turning a victim into a culprit during rape trials was also reported by a group of six women in a TV documentary (1979) on a gang rape that happened in Latina.<sup>26</sup>

Before starting the episode Rame, keeping in line with her epic acting, tells the audience she has read the

story on *Quotidiano Donna*, this to avoid identification with her as an individual and keeping intact the force of the social implications of rape.<sup>27</sup> Then proceeds to stage the internal dialogue of the victim undergoing the rape bringing out the bestiality of the act and leaving the audience with a sour feeling of injustice in the last words "I will denounce it tomorrow".

The monologue that closes the variable mix is usually the mediaeval *Medea*, an unorthodox adaptation of the popular version, acted in Umbrian dialect. The long prologue warns the audience of the "profoundly dramatic [character] and highest political substance" of the play, where the female protagonist refuses to follow society's rules and be set aside when her husband leaves to be married to the king's young daughter taking their children with him. Medea realises that woman's weakness rests in her children, everything she is put through is accepted because of her offspring. The reaction is terrible: she shatters the yoke of motherhood by killing her own children, not without anguish, thus freeing herself from man's oppression. It is a kind of exhortation to act and liberate woman from her age-old domestic oppression and taboos, from male rule and false acceptability (a man can have a younger lover while a woman cannot), through Medea's clear allegory.

*La mamma fricchettone*, Michele lu Lanzone, *Alice nel paese senza meraviglie* and other plays, touching various issues tied to the woman's condition, were added and removed at different times according to the needs and politics of the moment. All had in common "female rage at female impotence in a male-dominated system of repression"<sup>28</sup>. The female characters were lightly sketched so as to represent all and every woman, the tempo kept a faster pace, inherited from the TV show, that matched the increased speed of everyday life and kept alive audience attention. The contents, setting and language were contemporary, except for *Medea* and *Lisistrata romana*.

All these factors contributed to the play's success and to draw female - and male - public from all social classes.

In light of this, performances also returned to the bourgeois theatre as, in the actress' own words

I realised that in turning our back on the so-called bourgeois theatre, we were refusing a portion of spectators who would never have come to a stadium or under a tent, but still has the right to be entertained, to laugh, and at the same time to see certain problems dealt with.<sup>29</sup>

The centrality Fo has given the main characters, together with Rame's *bravura* in epic acting, demanded great sympathy for them, a "more intense emotional response from... [the] audience, requiring them to enter more completely into the situation so that they may be the more disturbed, the more inclined to respond and change matters"<sup>30</sup> and carried greater didactic strength.

*Il fabulazzo osceno* (1982) is another theatrical work of this kind. The episode *La parpaja topola* is a mediaeval sexual *giullarata* against sexual oppression and censorship performed by Fo. The author keeps pursuing his idea of an experimental theatre deeply rooted in the relevant aspects of the past "which derive from the people's manifestations of life and culture,... and which enable the expression of new research and new investigations on the basis of the 'new within the traditional', which ... [he is] concerned with"<sup>31</sup>. In this play a sexually ignorant male goat herd, who has inherited a large fortune, is made to marry a beautiful woman. This to cover up an affair she is having with the local priest and to acquire a better social position and to avoid scandal. Again Fo is stressing the importance of sexual education while condemning the practice of marriage as a means of social climbing. Another sore point is touched by the "religious" secret relationship the woman is having - something the Catholic Church tolerates in spite of the chastity vows. The episode has a happy ending: the newly wedded wife realises her mistake and how she is being sexually exploited and accepts her candid husband turning her back to the scheming priest.



The piece was to be performed by Rame but she gave up because "certain passages which were so crude in their erotic satire, and so ruthless in their paradoxicality, that they made me feel uneasy. I would have had to do violence to myself to manage to play it: the perennial condition of sexual inhibition of a woman faced with the blackmailing myth of modesty and shame".<sup>32</sup> Her own words are self explanatory of the woman's condition and upbringing in Italy and the general lack of sexual education for both sexes.

This would become a topic for a later show/crusade, *Sesso? Grazie, tanto per gradire*, that Rame has taken all around Italy in 1996, stemming from the absence, and the consequential debate started in the Seventies<sup>33</sup>, of sexual education in state schools. This is seen as the mother of most evil: ignorance of sexual behaviour, tolerance of violent behaviour, gender differentiation, role assignment, lack of female culture in literature, history and evolution. Their son, Jacopo Fo, partly shares his parent's battle and is touring in 1997 *Lo Zen e l'arte di scopare*, also on sexual education (although the tenor is more didactic than artistic).

Fo's female characters in his "epic" theatre have matured greatly if compared to Francisca or Marcolfa from the previous section on situation comedy. In these new characters there is a universality that could not be found before in their *maschere* and in their message. They are no mere puppets serving the purpose of situation, rather the situation highlights the character and helps carry across the message. These women are conscious of their rights and aware of their exploitation; there is no man explaining what is right or wrong, these women can see it by themselves, there is no longer a need for a leading hand. Fo's female characters are now individuals aware of their role in society.

## Political theatre.

On looking at Fo's biography the first thing one realises is that his life has always been imbued with politics and popular culture: his father was a socialist railroad worker (before the Partito Comunista Italiano existed); his mother came from a peasant family; the Lake Maggiore region he grew up in fostered travelling story-tellers or *fabulatori*; during the war he helped his father in the *Resistenza* and deserted the navy; after the war he moved in predominantly left-wing circles and read the periodical *Politecnico*. His first farces and radio comedy series already showed the signs of what was to become the basis of the author's work: satire against the Church and politics, reversals of commonplaces, historical facts, biblical stories; presentation of the underdog's point of view.<sup>34</sup>

Fo's political stand, as he says "all theatre, and all art, is political", has always been clear in his work but his satire still provoked a *risata liberatoria* (releasing laughter) in his audience, even though it gradually began to show a didactic end. This until he left in 1968, on the spur of political worldwide events, the state theatrical circuit and the classic theatre company structure to set up a theatre cooperative - Nuova Scena - that was to perform in the ARCI's cultural centres Fo's *Grande pantomima con bandiere e pupazzi piccoli e medi*. Although Fo has never become a member of the Partito Comunista Italiano, whilst Rame joined it in 1967, during the late Sixties he shared with many others the illusion of a political revolution and followed "Gramsci's emphasis on the importance of popular culture and the guiding role of the intellectual in reaffirming that culture"<sup>35</sup>. The Fos thus decided to place their theatrical activities at the service of class struggle.

This major change caused his work to move in an anti-literary direction partly to detach himself from the Italian tradition of the theatre as high culture, partly in response to a very different audience: non-theatre going, indifferent to literary activity and used to mass media communication. This was compensated by his overpowering body mimicry; "the first functions of this

primordial language are to establish, and nourish, a non-verbal contact between stage and auditorium... which creates... an atmosphere of magical complicity with the public".<sup>36</sup> From 1968 Fo became determined to use this mix as a means of political propaganda: "his earnest attempt to give this [pre-rational] flow an ideologically directed rational charge, so that the performance refers beyond itself and encourages spectators to become aware of themselves, and their roles in society"<sup>37</sup>.

In 1969, while Fo was performing *Mistero Buffo*, Franca Rame toured his play *L'operaio conosce 300 parole il padrone 1000 per questo lui è il padrone*. Here a group of workers is clearing out a library from a *casa del popolo* to make room for pool tables, while stacking the books one of the female workers loudly quotes Mao Tze-tung, Lenin then Gramsci on culture and as the workers read and discuss, some of the literary characters come to life. In the second act an elderly Sicilian woman (Rame's first "epic" monologue and non-becoming character) who is locked in a mental asylum tells her son's story: Michele lu Lanzone, a unionist, discovers a spring that will enable peasants of a drought stricken region to farm their own land. He is eventually killed by the mafia to restore social order and his body placed to plug the waterflow. The play closes with Mayakovsky's suicide and the reasons behind it.

*L'operaio* was the first play to be written by Fo for a group of actors of equal importance, following the concept of a theatrical cooperative. However it did not turn out that way. The three main parts were for actresses and were eventually all played by Franca Rame: in the worker role she started the political discussion on culture, as Michele's mother took a stand against the judicial system and mafia, as Anna Janaceskaja (Mayakovsky's lover and leading actress) she takes a stand against bureaucratic censors and theatre establishment. Aside from the political message, that won them bitter critique from the Partito Comunista Italiano. The new factor to be noticed in this play is this strong, active role of the female characters.

This determining female role can also be found in both the one-act plays of *Legami pure che tanto io spacco tutto lo stesso* (1969). The mother figure in *Il telaio* worries about keeping the loom working to make ends meet. She reads the party newspaper religiously and dreams of a new communist party where they will "kick out all the politickers... this party isn't for just anyone... It's not enough to be exploited, you have to be totally committed - not just go to Mass on Sundays! You must have the courage to criticise and be criticised..."<sup>38</sup>. On the other hand the father - also a communist - is shocked by the fact that his daughter is taking the pill with her mother's consent and goes as far as smashing the loom and hitting his wife. In the second play Franca, a female worker in *Il funerale del padrone*, invents the funeral escamotage to obtain the other workers' attention. Both show great initiative and a direct, active approach to politics that is new in Fo's female characters.

The repeated criticism aimed at the PCI lead, in 1970, to a break with the ARCI circuit for the environment of the extraparliamentary left and to a new group: the Collettivo teatrale 'La Comune'. This allowed to experiment new forms of theatre and to directly attack contemporary political issues, providing at the same time *controinformazione* (counter-information), as in *Morte accidentale di un anarchico* (1970) - a farse on the investigation of the Piazza Fontana bombs and the death of Pinelli. This play seemingly left little room for women as Police Headquarters, at the time, were a man's world. But a very important female character, a reporter, is introduced in the second act. This journalist<sup>39</sup> professionally takes out a notepad, a tape recorder and proceeds to ask very straight-forward questions on the facts preceding the "suicide" of the anarchist and the various contradictions noted in the reports. Fo places a woman on the key-quest for truth, she can produce the scandal, unveil the political connections to right-wing terrorism and the use of strategical "pre-election" bombs.

A woman again holds a key-role in *Tutti uniti! Tutti insieme! Ma scusa, quello non è il padrone?* (1971): Antonia, an apolitical dress-maker, develops a political stand and becomes a revolutionary activist during the 1920s insurrectionary struggles. Fo uses a metaphoric filter once again (as per *Mistero Buffo*) through which it is easy to recognize the gradual *presa di coscienza* of an exploited woman during the '70s struggles and the widespread belief in the need for a "revolutionary party".

At first Antonia, representing the typical proletarian woman, does not want to believe the outrageous things she heard during an assembly: "I beg of you Captain, please tell me it isn't true... reassure me, tell me that all citizens are respected..."<sup>40</sup>. She then faces the first contradictions when studying politics in the shop while making the traditional wedding dress she is to borrow: civil ceremony - long gown, participation in politics - no vote for women. In the end she kills the fascist responsible for her husband's death but her complete political redemption comes a few lines later, when she admits it was wrong to kill the one because "...we must kill all of you.. one, two, ten thousand... rulers, thieves, exploiters. All ten thousand of you that live off the back-breaking work of millions of hard workers..."<sup>41</sup>. Antonia summarises all the evolutionary traits of Fo's new female characters: starts as an apolitical puppet that highlights a situation, conflictually matures into an individual by following external advice, stands alone denouncing injustice and lastly becomes a political militant, an autonomous individual able to fight for her beliefs.

The play also deals with the inhumane treatment of political prisoners (male and female) in Italy, a topic that has been particularly dear to the Fos, on stage and in their private life, because they believe in the dignity of the human being<sup>42</sup>. The opening scene shows Antonia being seven months pregnant as she is transferred, together with other convicts, to a high security prison in a truck: treated like cattle. It is a fact inserted in the play, Rossella Cagliari had given birth to her baby in the same conditions with her three Carabinieri escorts<sup>43</sup>.

A different Antonia in *Non si paga, non si paga!* (1974) is faced with the problem of running a household during an economic crisis and does not hesitate to indulge in *autoriduzione*. The playwright also addresses the problem of working women that were forced to leave their jobs due to maternity: Margherita, another female character, has to wrap herself tightly to hide her pregnancy. Here, as in many other plays, we see these "universal" women being aware of their social condition and reacting long before their husbands do (Antonia's husband has to lose his job before looting). They precede man, have their own opinions and react to situations. In the '70s Fo will stress women and their political possibilities. As in *Fedayn* (1972) where in two episodes Arab women tell "their" war stories and assassinations or in *Fabulazioni della resistenza* (1970-73) where some of the plays are about women that had taken part in the Resistenza and that share their stories, fight, imprisonment, torture.

A separate analysis on *Discorsi sul terrorismo e la repressione* (1975-80) is needed because it deals with extreme acts of political militancy: terrorism. The *Discorsi* are made up of three distinct episodes: *La madre, Io, Ulrike, grido... e Accadde domani*. The first episode has already been discussed in the epic theatre section since it first belonged to *Tutta casa letto e chiesa* then to *Fabulazzo osceno* - it deals with the repercussions of terrorism on the family members and their social and emotional lives, with an occasional spot light on the torture and inhumane treatment reserved to their offspring. The remaining monologues deal with the imprisonment of two female German terrorists: Ulrike Meinhof and Irmgard Moeller. Once again we see representatives of female rage and impotence in a male-dominated society but carrying a great dignity and the meager satisfaction of being punished (and "suicided") like their male comrades: "your laws are really the same for everybody, except for those who don't agree with your laws. You have taken me to the highest grade of female emancipation; as a woman you punish me exactly like a man"<sup>44</sup>.

Although the playwright never excused terrorism because it "never destabilizes the established rule; rather it strengthens it, since it destabilizes the opposition"<sup>45</sup> he was accused many times, but never charged, with supporting terrorism, mainly because of the said *Soccorso Rosso* activities. This did not stop his courageous accusations against state torture in Italy and abroad even though he trod on water because of the laws against illegal apology of crime. The Fos' efforts did not go unrewarded as a few prisoners were temporarily released and investigations were held on "state" crimes, such as Stammheim.

The female characters in this last section combine the added political charge with their previous features. This results in their taking action. Fo's women now move on the stage with a strength and dignity drawn from their possibility to act: they can change their condition. The female characters take a final step forward and become independent individuals aware of their role in society and their strength

a hundred thousand and a hundred thousand and a hundred thousand women's arms will lift this immense mountain and will drop it on you like a landslide with a great laugh!<sup>46</sup>

A few years later, in 1983, Fo returns to situation comedy with *The Open Couple* where the woman's condition is once again the issue. In the author's own words "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... it works from the husband's point of view as long as he has other relationships, but when his wife does likewise, he breaks down and wants to go back to the conventional couple situation".<sup>47</sup> In the play the main female character, Antonia, is a wife and mother who has given up her womanhood for her family and finds herself with no life and no husband, sanctified to the role of "mother". Gradually through a process of *autocoscienza* she

acquires a strength unknown before and begins a new life with another man, not giving in to her husbands' final blackmail.

Times had changed, political militancy had dwindled, the Italian feminist movement had been reabsorbed into the large parties of the left, major feminist battles had been won by 1983 (new law on divorce, lifting of the ban on the advertising of contraception, reform of the family law, revision of the law on working mothers, national plan for nurseries, establishment of family planning clinics<sup>48</sup>, abortion law, enrollment of women in the police force). Families had grown smaller and women had a greater access to jobs but all these novelties had not brought about any real social and cultural changes in the man/woman relationship. As Fo showed in his play, man still needed to exercise the "master's privileges" he had enjoyed for so long.



## Conclusion.

This essay has highlighted various stages of evolution of the female characters in Dario Fo's work in a relatively long time span ('60s to the '80s); it includes an overview of the most significant plays and characters that pertain to the study. It cannot be, by reason of its nature, so extensive as to comprise all the plays written by such a prolific author. However, it has traced the formation of female characters in Fo's plays in three distinct stages and "paralleled" it to the playwright's changing opinion on women, due to Franca Rame's presence in his life, as wife and actress, and the political battles fought by women during the years for social recognition:

Franca was both severe and fierce in attacking the normal logic of chauvinistic attitude. These stem from epidermic and inner education, from friends, not only from school and society. Franca was very harsh about this... I started to write on issues she was indicating and was so immersed in elaborating the issues she had proposed that I didn't realise I was speaking and writing about me as a woman, thus changing roles.<sup>49</sup>

The female parts started off as supporting characters and gradually earned room to voice their opinions and feelings. Eventually they stood for their rights, fought for them, and won the stage. This "new" well-balanced three-dimensional character is well depicted in the farse *Il Papa e la Strega* (1989) where all the theatrical stages Fo experienced are at their best: situation, epic acting and political content. The healer's character is complete with a defined first class role in the play mechanism, a well developed *maschera* and a clear, though as always controversial, political standpoint. She is the one to denounce the corruption in humanitarian missions, the absurdity of the Vatican stand against contraception homosexuality and drugs - while at the same time showing how to deal with drug addicts. The character nearly goes as far as to give the idea of the "superiority of women"<sup>50</sup>.

Dario Fo, through the development of female characters in his plays, has in fact brought about a change in these characters in Italian theatre as a whole. In 1977 he stated that "the ideological performing key of the female character in theatre is still the most conventional one. While a great conflict ... has existed in the history of theatre for male parts, as far as female parts are concerned we are still left at a racist key"<sup>51</sup>; this, thanks to his work is no longer true. Furthermore comedy is no longer "unbecoming"<sup>52</sup> for women: Fo has returned the role to the rightful owner.

## Notes

- 1 Fo, D., *Il teatro politico di Dario Fo*, G. Mazzotta, Milan, 1977, p. 142.
- 2 Birnbaum, *Literature of feminist cultural revolution*, p. 165.
- 3 Fo, in Erminia Artese, *Dario Fo parla di Dario Fo*, 1977, p.22.
- 4 "The number of legal separations has gone up from 11.2 per 100,000 inhabitants in 1952 to 40.8 per 100,000 in 1978" - Sassoon, D., *Contemporary Italy*, 1986, p. 106.
- 5 Sarogni, E., *La donna italiana: il lungo cammino verso i diritti 1861-1994*, Nuova Pratiche Editrice, Parma, 1995, pp.166-167.
- 6 Ravaioli, C., *La questione femminile: intervista col PCI*, Bompiani, Milano, 1976, p. 213.
- 7 Sassoon, D., *Contemporary Italy*, 1986, p.107.
- 8 Ferrone, S., *Attori mercanti corsari*, Einaudi, Torino, 1993, Introduction p. XVI.
- 9 Mitchell, T., *Dario Fo People's court jester*, Methuen, London, 1984, p. 53.
- 10 Birnbaum, *Literature of feminist cultural revolution*, pp. 167 and 181.
- 11 Caldwell, L., *Italian Feminism: Some Considerations*, p.100.
- 12 Fo, D., *Le commedie di Dario Fo - Marcolfa*, Einaudi, Torino, 1984, p. 32.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 33-34.
- 14 Mitchell, T., *Dario Fo People's court jester*, Methuen, London, 1984, pp.10-12.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p.52.
- 16 Fo, D., *Il teatro politico di Dario Fo*, Mazzotta, Milano, 1977, pp. 144-5.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 144-5.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 148.
- 19 Ravaioli, C., *La donna contro se stessa*, Laterza, Bari, 1969, pp. 90-93.
- 20 Hirst, D.L., *Dario Fo and Franca Rame*, Macmillan, London, 1989, pp. 110-111.
- 21 Mitchell T., *Dario Fo People's court jester*, Methuen, London, 1984, p. 82.
- 22 Fo, D., *Fabulazzo*, Kaos, Milano, 1992, p. 208.
- 23 Tiso, A., *Il movimento delle donne in Italia (1976/1983)*, Salemi, Roma, 1984, pp. 18-20, 46-51, 65-68, 136-139.
- 24 Hirst, D.L., *Dario Fo and Franca Rame*, Macmillan, London, 1989, p. 147.
- 25 Rame, F., *Parliamo di donne*, Kaos, Milan, 1992, p. 117.

- 26 Tiso, A., *Il movimento delle donne in Italia (1976/1983)*, Salemi, Roma, 1984, p. 95.
- 27 Baccolini, R., Fortunati, V., Zacchi, R., *Il teatro e le donne*, Quattroventi, Urbino, 1991, p.215.
- 28 Mitchell, T., *Dario Fo People's court jester*, Methuen, London, 1984, p. 83.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Hirst, D.L., *Dario Fo and Franca Rame*, Macmillan, London, 1989, p. 149.
- 31 Mitchell T., *Dario Fo People's court jester*, Methuen, London, 1984, p. 50.
- 32 Ibid., pp. 30-31.
- 33 Tiso, A., *Il movimento delle donne in Italia (1976/1983)*, Salemi, Roma, 1984, pp. 96-97.
- 34 Mitchell T., *Dario Fo People's court jester*, Methuen, London, 1984, pp. 35-40.
- 35 Ibid., p. 53.
- 36 Pertile, L., *Dario Fo*, in *Writers & Society in Contemporary Italy* edited by M. Caesar and P. Hainsworth, Berg, Worcester, 1984, p. 167.
- 37 Ibid., p. 168.
- 38 Fo, D., *Legami pure che tanto io spacco tutto lo stesso*, in *Le commedie di Dario Fo*, Einaudi, Torino, 1994, Vol. III, p. 164.
- 39 Based on Camilla Cederna, a journalist for the weekly magazine *l'Espresso*, investigated into the Pinelli affair and wrote articles unearthing embarrassing facts on the "suicide".
- 40 Fo, D., *Tutti uniti! Tutti insieme! Ma scusa, quello non è il padrone?*, in *Le commedie di Dario Fo*, Einaudi, Torino, 1978, Vol. IV, p. 88.
- 41 Ibid., p. 165.
- 42 The Fos were part of the organisation Soccorso Rosso (Red Aid) that provided help (funds, books, letters) for political prisoners detained under the suspicion of terrorist and related offences and maintained ties with their families and lawyers. The Fos contributed by inserting real facts in their plays, by writing letters to politicians, raising funds, writing articles (or asking others to do so) and books.
- 43 Rame, F., *Alberto Buonoconto*, F.R. Edizioni, Milano, 1984, p. 155.
- 44 Fo, D., *Io, Ulrike, grido...*, in *Le commedie di Dario Fo*, Einaudi, Torino, 1989, Vol. VIII, p. 247.
- 45 *The Sandstorm Method*, translated by P. Caravetta, J. Cascaito and L. Venuti, Semiotext(e), 1980, Vol. III, No. 3, pp. 214-216.
- 46 Fo, D., *Io, Ulrike, grido...*, in *Le commedie di Dario Fo*, Einaudi, Torino, 1989, Vol. VIII, p. 251.

- 47 Mitchell, T., *Dario Fo People's court jester*, Methuen, London, 1984, pp.91-2.
- 48 Caldwell, L., *Italian Feminism: Some Considerations*, p.105.
- 49 Fo, D., *Il fabulazzo osceno*, Kaos, Milano, 1992, pp. 67-68.
- 50 Ibid., p. 191.
- 51 Fo, D., *Il teatro politico di Dario Fo*, Mazzotta, Milano, 1977.
- 52 Allegri, L., *Dario Fo dialogo provocatorio sul comico, il tragico, la follia e la ragione*, Laterza, Bari, 1990, p. 154.

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