

**Dynamics of History, Power and Dissent:
A Study of Theatrical Tradition of Dario Fo**

Monika Dhillon, UGC NET, M.Phil.



Dario Fo (1926-2016)

Courtesy:

https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1997/fo-bio.html

Abstract

Italian playwright Dario Fo, who got the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1997, views theatre as a dialectical space in constant conflict with the historical space and believes that theatrical space should engage in constant dialogue with a critical audience leading to continuous rewriting and sharpening of political message. Fo invents the dissident potential and carnivalesque aspects of Italian Commedia dell' arte for specific political purposes and redefines the image of the guillare, the popular, unofficial mouth piece of the peasant population, who is essentially *pre-*

commedia. The present paper aims to demonstrate how Dario Fo employs the tradition of amateur theatre groups and Commedia dell'arte to restore the dignity of the downtrodden masses with his own interpretation of history. He believes that there is a need to reinterpret history from the prism of writers and performers who are more frequently regarded as purveyors of mere entertainment, strolling players, clowns, local story tellers, variety performers, farceurs and scriptwriters for various popular carnivals and fêtes. He shows distrust in the quasi-divine image of a historian and alleges that historian is also a performer who cooks several historical details and serve them to the readers as facts. He redefines the concept of tradition in his theatre by applying the historicity of past facts to the present leading to a cultural revolution.

Keywords: Dario Fo, Tradition, Cultural Revolution, Popular Tradition, History, Carnavalesque, Theatrical Space, Power.

Introduction

Theatre is a living, dynamic art whose completed form is the performance, an ephemeral product that changes with each audience. No performance lasts beyond its duration. (Lorch 17)

The Italian playwright Dario Fo, who got the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1997, is rooted in the tradition of amateur theatre groups and the popular Commedia dell arte. He was the most significant figure in the history of political theatre since Vsevolod Meyerhold, Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht. He views theatre as an enterprise to critically reinterpret and revise historical narratives. He emphasizes the performance oriented nature of most texts and employs the dissident potential of *commedia dell' arte* to unfold the multiple layers of past. Fo believes that theatre can reconfigure history by questioning the authenticity of past narratives, and dismantle hegemonic assumptions of “religion centric” historical discourse. The purpose of the present paper is to analyze Fo’s theatre as a dialectical space which is in constant conflict with the historical space and believes that theatrical space should engage in constant dialogue with a critical audience leading to continuous rewriting and a sharpening of political message. He shows distrust in the quasi-divine image of a historian and alleges that historian is also a performer who cooks several historical details and serve them to the readers as facts. Image of a

historian or a writer is tainted with political consideration and, therefore, in a Fo's performance, historical narrative is treated as a multidimensional trope where writing and performing occur at a given moment in time, in a specific political situation. But his greatest influence comes from the local storytellers he refers to as *fabulatori*. (Scuderi 27)

Fo's theatre becomes an agitprop theatre with a difference, as he breaks the stereotype of humourless left-wingers in his plays and uses laughter as a theatrical strategy to expose the dynamics of power struggle in society, expressing his tirade against the Italian government and The Roman Catholic Church. The theatrical tradition of farce and comedy in Fo's theatre not only stems solely from the Commedia dell'arte. He is equally influenced by the *guillare*, the popular, unofficial mouth pieces of the peasant population, who are essentially pre-commedia. The performers of the commedia are regarded by Fo as the professional court jesters officially recognized by the ruling classes. Fo experienced the acclaim and stature of a bourgeois court jester when he became a prominent figure in the established, mainstream Italian theatre during the mid-sixties. Fo takes the credit of employing laughter as a theatrical strategy to show his tirade against the monopoly of religious and political institutions. His mission is to restore the dignity of the downtrodden masses with his own interpretation of history. Apart from Brecht and Moliere, Fo acknowledges his debt to the writers and performers who are more frequently regarded as purveyors of mere entertainment, strolling players, clowns, variety performers, farceurs and scriptwriters for various popular carnivals and fêtes. He uses techniques from popular traditions for specific political purposes.

Use of Tradition

Dario Fo uses "tradition" not in its historical sense but in a modern sense. He analyzes the discourse of history with his torch of cynicism and concludes that it has sacrificed reason at the altar of political expediency. Fo vehemently attacks the so called objectivity of historical discourses and comes up with his own versions of history from below. He maintains that historical space has been a battleground for politics where popular traditions have been denigrated and denied their rightful place by the elite culture. C.H. Carr points out: "in the first place, the facts of history never come to us 'pure', since they don't exist in a pure form, they are always refracted through the mirror of the recorder" (16). History has been called an "enormous

jig-saw with a lot of missing parts” (Carr 7). So a historian can only recover fragments of past and, therefore, past remains incomplete. Renowned Italian historian and philosopher Benedetto Croce in his book *History as the Story of Liberty* states that all history is contemporary history. The main work of the historian is not to record, but to evaluate, for, if he does not evaluate, how can he know what is worth recording:

The practical requirements which underlie every historical judgement give to all history the character of ‘contemporary history’, because, however remote in time events thus recounted may seem to be, the history in reality refers to present needs and present situations wherein those events vibrate. (qtd. in Carr 21)

Apart from the emphasis on performance oriented nature of theatrical texts Fo also emphasizes their topicality. He believes in the power of spoken word more than the written word. His texts are always open to change.

Grammelot

Fo uses *grammelot*, an onomatopoeic device dating back to the fifteenth century, as an oppositional strategy in his plays. It refers to those sounds which, nonetheless, manage to convey the sense of a speech. In order to make themselves understood in foreign countries, Italian performers adapted the rhythms, sounds and certain key words of various regional dialects and create anti-authoritarian satires throughout Europe. More than an opposition to privileged language, *grammelot* is an anti-textual element, defined entirely in the moment of performance through cadence, intonation, gesture and context. Joylynn Wing holds the view that Fo uses *grammelot* as, “interruption, as oscillation, as explication to counter the literary, cultivated language of the foregrounded figures and to disrupt both the linearity and the propriety of the normative discourse. The gibberish of the clown upstages the cultured language of the court” (12). Fo coins the term “lexical terrorism” for the excessive use of annotations, use of little known words or scarcely known historical figures. He believes that a linguistic content of this nature performed to a working class audience could easily give rise to lexical terrorism where words are used to terrify people. This leads to a virtual division among the audience. The result is, alleges Fo, embarrassment for the majority and the prestigious elevation of those few who

know the origin or the synonyms of these words (Behan 99). Consequently, the dominant class managed to appropriate what it wanted from popular culture, stripped it of its dignity and validity, and presented it back to the people as substandard and inferior.

Popular Storytelling

In an attempt to restore the dignity of popular traditions, Fo based his theatrical style in popular storytelling and variety rather than classical or avant-garde theatre. This interest later encouraged him to research popular medieval theatre in Italy, and he became particularly interested in the role of the *giullari*, the travelling players who performed to townspeople or peasants in public squares. This was a common art form throughout European society, given that similar figures can be identified such as the French *jongleurs* and Spanish *juglars* (Behan 96). According to Fo, the task of the *giullari* was to articulate through gesture, when words were censored, both the real conditions of oppression and the potential, shown through grotesque and laughter, of liberation from that condition (Wing 43). His play *Mistero Buffo* is a dramatic representation of Biblical stories as performed by itinerant plebeian performers of the Middle Ages. Fo's wife Franca Rame once remarked, "Besides being a play, *Mistero Buffo* is also a living newspaper, continuously incorporating current news events and political and cultural satire into performances" (qtd. in Malick). In *Mistero Buffo*, Fo's irreverent re-telling of sacred stories in diverse narrative modes subverts orthodox religion. In most of these stories, Christ's miracles are seen through the eyes of the common people. Just like a *giullare*, Fo, in his plays, attempts to make audience become aware that their position in society is a consequence of the privileges and oppression perpetrated at their expense by another group in society, the ruling class.

Dario Fo believes that the *giullare* has something in common with the Shakespearian fool, but nothing at all with the aristocratic pet who was the court jester. He made his living from what he could earn as he travelled from town to town, and he was willing to turn his hand to storytelling, to acting in the piazzas, to singing, dancing, and acrobatics (*The Tricks* 6). Many of the performances of the *giullari* were based on their reading of the Bible and the Gospels, but the written versions, which were generally commissioned by either the Church or local princes, tended to omit the critical content and irreverent tones which dominated these performances.

Therefore, the relationship between the giullare and Christ is crucial to an understanding of Fo's use of the gospel stories in his plays. As he explains it:

The giullare received that kiss because he was a "poor Christ" too, an underdog who had endured at the hands of the padrone the worst possible sufferings that a slave could imagine. It's that experience which gave him the possibility of opening his mind to others through his buffoonery. It wasn't the miracle of the kiss that gave the peasant the new skills of a giullare. It's the realization of the necessity of rousing all the poor Christs of the world to rebellious anger, and that's what stimulates the comedian of today to become a giullare. (qtd. in Wing 45)

Propaganda Theatre

With his theatrical style rooted in popular forms, Fo introduces a colourful propaganda theatre with a difference. As an intellectual, Fo is engaged in a type of theatrical event which actively incorporates the spectator in the artistic creation of a representation in which both human beings and the world are experienced as "alterable and able to alter" (Brecht 33). He accomplishes this task, both by borrowing liberally from the discoveries of his predecessor, Bertolt Brecht, and by incorporating techniques from his own theatrical tradition in Italy (Wing 165). Like Brecht, and for precisely the same reasons, Fo's strategy is to abolish the naturalistic 'fourth wall' illusion and to establish the actor as an epic storyteller, rather than an incarnation of a psychologically integrated persona. Theatrical representation of either personality or plot as integrated and continuous is objectively false and dangerously misleading according to Brecht:

The continuity of the ego is a myth. A man is an atom that perpetually breaks up and forms anew. We have to show things as they are . . . The bourgeois theatre's performances always aim at smoothing over contradictions, at creating false harmony, at idealization. Conditions are reported as if they could not be otherwise. . . If there is any development it is always steady, never by jerks; the developments always take place within a definite framework which cannot be

broken through. None of this is like reality, so a realistic theatre must give it up.
(277)

Illusion

The danger of a homogenous presentation is that it can lull the audience into a sentimental illusion of identification with the portrayed situation, rather than provoke it into an interaction with a present-time conflict. Disgusted with what he termed a “culinary theatre,” which could be consumed as served, without active engagement on the part of the spectator, Brecht suggests that theatre make use of various distancing effects, to constantly remind the audience of its actual surroundings and to encourage its participation in an active interchange. Ideally, employment of the “Verfremdungseffekt” would facilitate a sense of critical detachment on the part of performer and spectator alike, with socially productive results. As Brechtian scholar Martin Esslin observes:

The destruction of stage illusion, however, is not an end in itself. The “Verfremdungseffekt” has its positive side. By inhibiting the process of identification between the spectator and the characters, by creating a distance between them and enabling the audience to look at the action in a detached and critical spirit, familiar things, attitudes, and situations appear in a new and strange light, and create, through astonishment and wonder, a new understanding of the human situation. (Esslin 119)

Perception of Character

The idea of the actor as a performer who can step in and out of his role, or roles, at will is central to the philosophy of both Brecht and Fo, for the perception of character which is created by a given method of performance has intrinsic social and political implications. Fo states:

In bourgeois theatre the actors tend to speak to one another, and thus the spectator eavesdrops on a story which doesn't involve him, but he empathizes with it, and the actor takes pains to make it his (the story). In this way, he becomes the center of the play, and the audience tries to see itself in the character he represents.

Popular theatre is the complete opposite: no mention is made of the individual, the isolated character above and beyond: it's about togetherness. There is a community dimension in performing theatre, and the characters are a pretext to make the people 'speak.' (*Some Aspects*135)

In Fovian theatre, audiences are not just passive consumers of meaning but creators of meaning. Walter Benjamin aptly sums up this approach: "In order to turn consumers into producers, it is necessary to turn spectators into collaborators" (306). Indeed, Fo has said that the purpose of his theatre is to create a debate, that he doesn't want his theatre to "rain down vertically on people's heads" (*Some Aspects*136). Both Brecht and Fo believe in a aggressive concept of popular culture where people can fight for themselves and bring about cultural revolution. But before people could do it, it is the task of the creative writer to make them believe that such reclamation is possible.

Harbinger of Social, Political and Cultural Revolution

Having discussed in detail, the theatre of Dario Fo we can aptly say that his theatre acts as a harbinger of social, political and cultural revolution. Rooted in the tradition of amateur theatre groups, Fo attempts to translate theatrical experience into political activism by bringing about the carnivalesque aspects of popular Commedia dell arte. As a creative artist and a social rebel, Fo uses the theatrical space to unveil the dynamics of power in society and religion. The unveiling process of his theatrical space gives way to a pugnacious anarchic discourse that puts to test the monolithic discourses of politics and religion. Javed Malick opines that radical form of leftwing resistance is losing its popularity. Leftwing resistance is no longer trendy. If one were to believe "the postmodern prophets of the 'end of history,' 'end of ideology,' and the consequent death of the 'transgressive' kind of political art, Fo's could well be the last great example of his kind in the West" ("Dario Fo's Politics"). Although his plays are rooted in Italian religion and politics, and perhaps, the particular phase of radical ferment which produced Fo is over but the timeless appeal of his plays can be established from the fact that his attack on Roman Catholic Church and its appropriation of the Christian history also seems true in the Indian context where grand narrative of Hinduism engulfed the "truth" of local devotional cults resulting in monopoly of the few and slavery for the majority. Epic conception of his plays contests the notion of a

single, monolithic and immobile truth, which is as corrupt as the notion of a unified, consistent and cohesive theatrical representation, turning spectators into collaborators that can fight for themselves and bring about a cultural revolution.

Works Cited

Behan, Tom. *Dario Fo: Revolutionary Theatre*. Pluto Press, 2000.

Benjamin, Walter. "The Author as Producer," *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, Edited by Brian Wallis. Godine, 1984.

Brecht, Bertolt. "The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre," *Brecht on Theatre*, Edited and Translated by John Willet. Hill and Wang, 1964.

Carr, E.R. *What is History*. Penguin, 1961.

Esslin, Martin. *Brecht: A Choice of Evils*. Methuen. 1959.

Fo, Dario. *The Tricks of the Trade*. Translated by Joe Farrell. Edited by Stuart Hood. New Routledge, 1987.

-----"Some Aspects of Popular Theatre," Translated by Tony Mitchell. *New Theatre Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1985.

Lorch, J. "Introduction". Dario Fo. *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*. Manchester University Press, 1997.

Malick, Javed. "Dario Fo's Politics of Subversive Laughter." *The Wire*. 30 Oct. 2016. www.thewire.in/76679/dario-fos-politics-absurdist-laughter.

Scuderi, Antonio. "Dario Fo and Oral Tradition: Creating a Thematic Context". *Oral Tradition* vol. 15, no. 1, 2000.

Wing, Joylynn W.D. *Techniques of opposition in the work of Dario Fo*. Dissertation, Stanford University, 2008. [ProQuest, search.proquest.com.vlib.interchange.at/pqdtglobal/docview/303572763/19E25FD400A34CD2PQ/3?accountid=172684](http://search.proquest.com/vlib.interchange.at/pqdtglobal/docview/303572763/19E25FD400A34CD2PQ/3?accountid=172684).

Monika Dhillon, UGC NET, M. Phil.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 17:11 November 2017

Monika Dhillon, UGC NET, M.Phil.

Dynamics of History, Power and Dissent: A Study of Theatrical Tradition of Dario Fo 208

Research Scholar
Panjab University
Chandigarh
India
monikadhillon29@gmail.com