



## Comedy drama of reform and Dario Fo

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### Abstract

Dario Fo stands distinct in the contemporary dramatic arena for as much as he is popular in Italy and abroad, he is equally controversial. Having been arrested over twenty times, been the victim of numerous lawsuits, slandered for lampooning and exposing the corruption and oppressive policies of Italian politics, religious institutions, and media, banned from entering various countries. In the present research paper an attempt has been made to analyze certain elements of ancient, medieval and renaissance performance tradition that stem both directly and indirectly from Roman ancestry to show how Fo adapts them to suit the contemporary climate of his age. Finally, by tracing the parallel coordination of tradition and modernity, an attempt will be made to show how Fo's innate talent for innovation and improvisation helps achieve social reform and a Marxist appeal. media, politics.

**Keywords:** Dramatic, drama, reform, controversial, politics

### Introduction

Despite writing in the post-modern era, i.e., since 1952, he does not emulate tenets of post-modern drama which depict crises in relationships, disintegration of communication, spiritual dilemmas, acute loneliness, schizophrenia and a breach with reality-Instead, as a refreshing change, Fo takes inspiration from the dramatic traditions of the past centuries common to the whole of European ancestry and not to Italy alone. These dramatic traditions are different from the conventionally accepted ones such as tragedy, comedy or the epic form. Fo's drama gains rareness in emulating the popular tradition of farce and parody found in the rich tradition of oral popular theatre of the ancient Roman and Greek mime, "...the Saturnalias carnivalesque, medieval jester routines, the renaissance commedia deff'arte and the fabulatori or story-telling tradition" (Farrell 45).

Dario Fo's idiosyncratic appeal is his parallel proclivity towards the depiction of hot, topical socio-political issues obsessing the Italian fabric. This Janus-faced and distinctive tendency to look at current socio-political debates for inspiration while simultaneously using the popular dramatic techniques evolved centuries ago as a medium to debunk the nexus of hypocrisy and prevarications of truth by the power hungry authorities, is what makes Fo at once extremely traditional and extremely modern and exceptional.

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equally controversial. Having been arrested over twenty times, been the victim of numerous lawsuits, slandered for lampooning and exposing the corruption and oppressive policies of Italian politics, religious institutions, and media, banned from entering various countries. Dario Fo's dramatic art is his ability to "draw both consciously and intuitively from the rich tradition of western comedy, adapting principles and techniques of ancient and medieval spectacle to a contemporary context, interpreting it through Marxist ideology" (Cairns 35).

Despite writing in the post-modern era, i.e., since 1952, he does not emulate tenets of post-modern drama which depict crises in relationship, disintegration of communication, spiritual dilemmas, acute loneliness, schizophrenia and a breach with reality-Instead, as a refreshing change, Fo takes inspiration from the dramatic tradition of the past centuries common to the whole of European ancestry and not to Italy alone. Fo has fashioned a theatre as a public arena where values mainly political are aired and discussed. His drama of dissent can be considered to be the first attempt in contemporary theatre to weld this seriousness of purpose on to the supposedly lightweight genre that is farce. Dario Fo follows the glorious tradition of farcical theatre. It places Fo specifically within the popular actor-author tradition of the fabulatori or story-telling tradition, the ancient Roman Saturnalias or the *carnivalesque* tradition, the medieval *giullari* or the wandering minstrel tradition, and the

renaissance *commedia dell'arte* tradition. What Fo borrows from these dramatic traditions is their penchant for subversion and parody of the conventional, love of the obscene and grotesque medium of depiction, an inverted vision of society where slaves outwit their masters and sons better their fathers, and their proclivity towards social reform voiced through the medium of satire. Fo says, "for me these farces were a very important exercise in undertaking how to write a theatrical text. I learnt how to take apart and reassemble the mechanisms of comedy, how to write directly for the stage without any literary diversion" (Behan II).

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The synthesis of the actor-author in Dario Fo caused an uproar in the theatre communities in the nineteen-fifties when Fo began his illustrious and controversial career. Theatre not only then was conveniently divided into separate professional associations of writing and acting, but even more furore was caused amongst the literary elites when the prestigious Nobel Prize for literature was conferred upon him. Dario Fo's reaction to fifty years of criticism was typical yet biting. "Authors refuse to accept me as an author and actors refuse to accept me as an actor. Authors say I am an actor trying to be an author, while actors say I am an author trying to be-an actor. Nobody wants me in their camp. Only set designers tolerate me" (Valeri 21).

Dario Fo's idiosyncratic appeal is his parallel proclivity towards the depiction of hot, tropical socio-political issues obsessing the Italian fabric. This Janus-faced and distinctive tendency to look at current socio-political debates for inspiration while simultaneously using the popular dramatic techniques evolved centuries ago as a medium to debunk the nexus of hypocrisy and prevarications of truth by the power hungry authorities, is what makes Fo at once extremely traditional and extremely modern and exceptional. Dario Fo proposed on the one hand, to unmask the 'cultural colonialism' of the ruling class, and on the other, to contribute to the contemporary Italian political and social struggles by disinterring the fertile and irrepressible identity of the working class. While literature since the mid-fifties has tended, in a variety of ways, to distance itself from social realities and political concerns, Fo has gone in the opposite direction. Whether as the frivolous satirist of social behavior, or the ardent political provocateur, he has been an eyewitness to the cultural, social and political vicissitudes of his country since the early 1950s. While writers and thinkers were increasingly concerning themselves with the post-war, angst-ridden human condition in general, irrespective of specific historical factors, Fo anchored his dramatic strategy to contingent issues of the moment.

Dario Fo is one of the most versatile and talked about playwright Italy has ever produced. Many researchers continually work around the world to discover new dimensions in his writings. He proposed on the one hand, to

"unmask the 'cultural colonialism' of the ruling class, and on the other, to contribute to the contemporary Italian political and social struggles by disinterring the fertile and irresponsible identity of the working class". (Farrell 168). Fo's farces do not limit themselves to immediate social problems, but look at the cultural roots which allow such a situation. He is fond of quoting the Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci's statement, "If you don't know where you came from, you don't know where you can go" (Scuderi 69)

The underlying tension in Fo's works relate to a kind of culture defined by Gramsci. For Gramsci, culture meant that people were cowed down by what they had been conditioned to believe was right and proper. Drama, for him, was an instrument of working out a cultural change, by acting as "a tool for the decolonization of the mind, will and imagination" (Farrell 14). Critic Walter Valeri in his essay titled 'An Actors Theatre' defines the theatre of Fo as an instrument of social reform based on the Marxist tenets. "When an actor-playwright serves as a spokesperson for social change, it becomes a necessity to temporarily transcend the state of subordination and question the dominant powers. Then theatre becomes a historical phenomenon and an expression, of social development" (Valeri 27).

The socio-political situation of Italy compelled Dario Fo to write Drama of social change as he witnesses the loss of human values and civility in his country. Dario Fo maintains his hold on the traditional techniques of satire and farce. Fo is well aware of the ability a writer possesses to bring a social change in the society. While literature since the mid-fifties has tended, in a variety of ways, to distance itself from social realities and political concerns, Fo has gone in the opposite direction. "Whether as the frivolous satirist of social behaviour, or the ardent political provocateur, he has been an eyewitness to the cultural, social and political vicissitudes of his country since the early 1950s" (Scuderi 67). While writers and thinkers were increasingly concerning themselves with the post-war, angst-ridden human condition in general, irrespective of specific historical factors, Fo anchored his dramatic strategy to contingent issues of the moment.

Through his best known monologue, *Mistero buffo* (Comic mysteries), Dario Fo has contextualize the theatre within a socio-political milieu. *Mistero buffo* - a one-man show, it represents the most fascinating aspect of Fo's multi-faceted oeuvre. Seeing himself as the jester of the people or the street entertainer, this monologue was an immediate response to the violent workers' struggle against economic exploitations by their employers in 1968. Fo's specific aim is to re-write history, from another point of view - that of the people, thereby demystifying the official view. Consisting of a series of vignettes with an ecclesiastical background, the subject reveals the repressiveness of the Church, the land owning classes, as well as the political implications of their power.

At the heart of Fo's theatrical aim is to subvert conventions by picking up ancient models, inserting a paradox into them and finally adapting them to current debates. Drama, for Fo becomes an instrument of social reform by weaving together the modern philosophy of Marxism with the theatrical devices of the past.

Fo's main focus is on the welfare of the working class in a otherwise corrupt society. It deals specifically with two of Fo's most representative farces, *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* (1970) and *Can't Pay? Won't Pay!* (1974). Both these farces are grounded in very specific disturbing political realities, assimilating a few stereo types of the *commedia dell' arte* to reveal the darker side of Italian society seeped in corruption. These farces are not only an example of a radical alternative theatre of political satire established as a result of the violent workers movement in the 1960s, but also an instance of a theatre in service of the class struggle, in commenting on the key issues preoccupying Italy.

Fo's output forms an extra- ordinary mosaic of a popular satirical theatre spanning a period of around fifty years and can be divided into five phases corresponding to his five decades of dramatic activity. In the nineteenth- fifties, Fo and his talented actress-wife Franca Rame explored revue, French farce, Italian neo-realist drama, and the popular repertoires of Franca Rame's theatrical family. From 1959-68, popularly termed as the 'bourgeoisie period' or the blue period, he adopted the role of the jesters of the bourgeoisie with the *Campania Fo- Rame*, through which they received popular success. They performed in commercial theatre exploring tropical political issues in a mildly satirical vein, due to which they frequently encountered censorship problems that took on monstrous dimensions under the frequently encountered censorship problems that took on monstrous dimensions under the pro-fascist ruling party of the Christian Democrats. In 1968-78 began the most productive as well as the most dissident period of their carrier. In 1968, they broke away from the commercial circuit in order to propagate a popular, militant political theatre replete with class struggle influenced by the socio-political upheavals in Europe.

### Review of Literature

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### Conclusion

Thus, my objective here is to discover the reformatory zeal in Dario Fo plays. His plays are about people who have failed to adjust, align and ceased to aspire and also those who are enmeshed in the day-to-day struggle for the survival.

Dario Fo presents the problems and dilemmas of common men and working class in the society. His wishes for a corruption and exploitation free society as this will lead to contentment and bring joy and happiness on the faces of common men.

His life and plays are the celebration of the oppressed people, a mirror of those lighting against the unjust world, voicing the views and needs of the lower classes, factory workers, peasants, and marginalized people such as the poor, the neglected, and the exploited. In order to denounce social injustice, political corruption, and religious hypocrisy, Fo adopted a style of popular theatre – that of a farce stating several times that farce and comedy are ideal tools for denouncing contemporary issues. For, they not only provoke a response from the audience, but also amuse them through laughter, thereby making them accept certain ideas which they would otherwise reject. Furthermore, the genre of farce also taught Fo the art of innovation. Fo says, 'for me these farces were a very important exercise in undertaking how to write a theatrical text. I learnt how to take apart and reassemble the mechanism of comedy, how to write directly for the stage without any literary diversion.' Farce thus becomes a medium of opening the eyes of the common man to the injustice and corruption around him, and of acting as an instrument to invert values by rewriting texts, enriching and distorting their original intentions. The aim was always to elevate the dignity of the downtrodden, to provide a just platform to discuss those polemical issues such as state corruption, police torture, terrorism and socio-economic inequality which otherwise gathered dust, the reach being once again universal. Fo himself felt that:

I'm convinced that the success of our plays throughout Europe and the rest of the world is attributable to the fact that we raise issues which everybody needs to hear discussed, whether it be in Germany, France or Switzerland. I couldn't care less when people come up to me and say thanks to me that Italian theatre exists. (Hirst 19).

Fo's drama can never be reduced to mere whimsy as the paradox behind the success of plays in which people have never heard of Pinelli or of the police officer Calabresi lies in the fact that the situation, always the primal element in Fo's drama scores over the criticism of his plays being seemingly whimsical and strongly imagined. Fo, by placing his plays somewhere between wasteland and wonderland in the blending of satire and farce, the real and the surreal, has pushed the definition of the theatre much further. He is not interested in pondering and reflecting over the human conditions. Neither does he rage or anger over a restricted number of the issues studiously ignoring more weighty matters.

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