

# Bringing People Down to Earth With Just a Laugh

By MEL GUSSOW

Winning a Nobel Prize in Literature can be an albatross, making it more difficult for a writer to create work after he has been anointed by the Swedish Academy. Not so with Dario Fo, whose Nobel in 1997 — the first, as the playwright and comic actor says, for a buffoon — has increased his productivity and improved his standing as an artist.

Since the award, he said, he has written five plays and staged them all and has been encouraged to speak out on public as well as theatrical issues. He has been deluged by requests to lecture at universities.

With a smile as jaunty as his straw hat, Mr. Fo arrived in New York this week for the Woman of the World Festival of Performance at Barnard College. Or rather, his wife and collaborator, Franca Rame, was invited to the festival. He had planned to stay home in Milan writing, but at the last minute decided to join her. This is quite a change from the period when, for political reasons, he was denied a visa to come to United States. On Thursday the two performed extracts from their work at the Minor Latham Playhouse at Barnard, and yesterday they led a master class.

This was his first trip to New York since 1986, when he performed his signature play "Mistero Buffo" ("Comic Mystery"), and his first visit to the United States since winning the Nobel. In an interview at Barnard (with Ron Jenkins as interpreter), he seemed sanguine about his expanding role. Now 74, he has fully recovered from a stroke in 1995.

Although he spoke with gravity about issues that concern him, he seemed to retain his sense of equilibrium and his sense of fun. Occasionally his wife clarified an answer. As he spoke he sipped an espresso and frequently jabbed his finger into the air to punctuate a point.

As he learned several years ago, he is "the most translated living writer in the world." He was always famous. Now, he said, he is more famous, and more people are paying attention to him. But he made it clear that he had not altered his work; it remains political, populist and, of course, comic. "I have just had the courage to go back to themes I left unfinished," he said.

In the world of Mr. Fo, anything is subject to ridicule when he finds greed or hypocrisy: the larger the target the more malicious the satire. With "Accidental Death of an Anarchist," he attacked police corruption; in "We Won't



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Dario Fo

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Pay! We Won't Pay!," he staunchly defended beleaguered consumers, and in "About Face," he crosscut the effects of terrorism and capitalism.

With "Mistero Buffo," which he performs partly in double talk, he mocks doublespeak in religion and politics. That show constantly changes. Years ago the Vatican said that one version was the "most blasphemous show in the history of television." In these and scores of other comedies he has been a perpetual gadfly and renegade, fearless about assailing all those who he believes limit freedom.

For years he was persona non grata in the United States and was twice denied visas. When he was finally allowed to visit in 1984, he saluted President Ronald Reagan as a fellow actor. This, he said, was "a gesture of a colleague."

Recently he and his wife have been particularly outspoken against genetic engineering and capital punishment, and he is writing a play about noise and air pollution. "In Italy, we've discovered that at least 10 people a day die of ailments related

to pollution," he said. With the Nobel Prize money, the Fos have also created a foundation to help the handicapped in Italy.

Because Mr. Fo is so distant in style and form from other Nobel laureates — as a clown and playwright who performs his own plays — the award shocked many. He greeted the outrage with his customary nonchalance as if to say: "Fo? Why not." He made it clear, however, that he was honored to be in the company of Nobel playwrights like Pirandello and Beckett.

He said he never thought about rejecting the prize, as Jean-Paul Sartre did. The adverse reaction to his elevation, what he called "the scandal that erupted in Italy," bolstered his feeling that the award was deserved. Some of the resentment, he said, could be categorized as envy: "There were many writers who had been waiting in line for years to get the prize, and they were in crisis. Some scholars even insulted the King of Sweden. But the open-minded, progressive, liberal people were very happy." His candidate for a future Nobel is Stefano Benni, "who is well known for his comic, satiric writing."

### Dario Fo tags along, pricking balloons all over.

Traditionally the winner delivers a formal lecture. In that sense, Mr. Fo was the anti-Faulkner. Ever the clown, he gave a performance, a kind of variation of "Mistero Buffo." He charged the august members of the academy with being reckless in their choice. An artist as well as a playwright, he distributed copies of a comic book he designed as a guide for those at the ceremony. In it he told the story of the travails and harassment he and his wife have endured over their years in the theater.

"It was an ironic, comic and grotesque speech," he said. "It was not a triumphant speech." And, he said, the audience laughed, another first.

Since then he has continued to improvise, traveling through Europe performing his work. Among his many projects was a public celebration, "a theatrical illustration" that

he staged for the unveiling of the restored "Last Supper" in Milan. That event was broadcast throughout Italy.

His first stop on this visit to the United States was to receive a humanitarian award at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Conn. Then it was off to Barnard. About his master class, he said that he and Ms. Rame would do what they always do. He explained, "We're going to talk more or less about improvisation, about the techniques you can use to destroy the fourth wall, to create false accidents," things that happen "outside the text, that force the public to enter into the performance."

Asked about his legacy, he appeared to give the question careful thought and said: "I am speaking not only as a writer. I have tried to make it clear to young people that a writer should be linked to his times and that the writer who is linked to his times should put his hands into the awful things of life. You have to plunge into the muck." Evoking the names of fellow playwrights, Aristophanes, Shakespeare and Molière, he added, "There is no such thing as living comedy unless it has its roots in things that are tragic."

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