

ARTS



Nick Lacey

Translator Ron Jenkins, right, with Nobel laureate Dario Fo and actress Franca Rame.

Translator draws on experience, from ridiculous to sublime

By E. Kyle Minor

RON JENKINS HAS BEEN A CLOWN, a college professor, an author and an actor, but he considers himself foremost a translator "in the widest sense of the word."

"I translate one culture to another," Jenkins said from his office at Wesleyan University, where he is artistic director of the theater department.

"Sometimes that means translating a Dario Fo play from Italian to English. Sometimes it means translating the basic human experience into the slapstick of a clown."

This week Jenkins will present the American premiere of his version of Israeli playwright Joshua Sobol's award-winning drama, "Ghetto," at the Wesleyan University Center for the Arts. Running Friday through Nov. 12, the production will close

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Translator draws on experiences in many cultures

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Wesleyan's multimedia series, "Echoes of Vilna," exploring the Jewish culture that flourished in Vilna, Lithuania, before and during the Nazi occupation.

Featuring Wesleyan theater students, the play will be directed by Sobol, who is in residence there this fall.

"My work with Joshua is not really a translation but an adaptation," said Jenkins, who arrived in Middletown last year from Emerson College in Boston. "We actually translated it together, and I adapted from that into English."

"Ghetto" is based on historic documents and interviews from the Zionist settlers who came to Galilee unprepared for the hardships that awaited them in Palestine in the early 1900s. Sobol's play depicts a theater company run by the Jews of Vilna during the Nazi occupation of Lithuania in World War II.

"We adapted 'Ghetto' 11 years ago," Jenkins said. "We were doing a residency together on stage adaptations."

By then, "Ghetto" already had won Israel's Davidis Harp Award for best play of 1984 as well as London's Evening Standard best play award in 1989. The pair collaborated on "Ghetto" at the Atlantic Theater Conference in Florida that year.

Like Sobol, Jenkins has a passion for gathering oral history. He spent a year in South Africa researching the uses of satire as a weapon against apartheid. His observations and interviews became the source of his book, "Subversive Laughter." His most memorable experience of that time was being briefly jailed along with hundreds of other protestors.

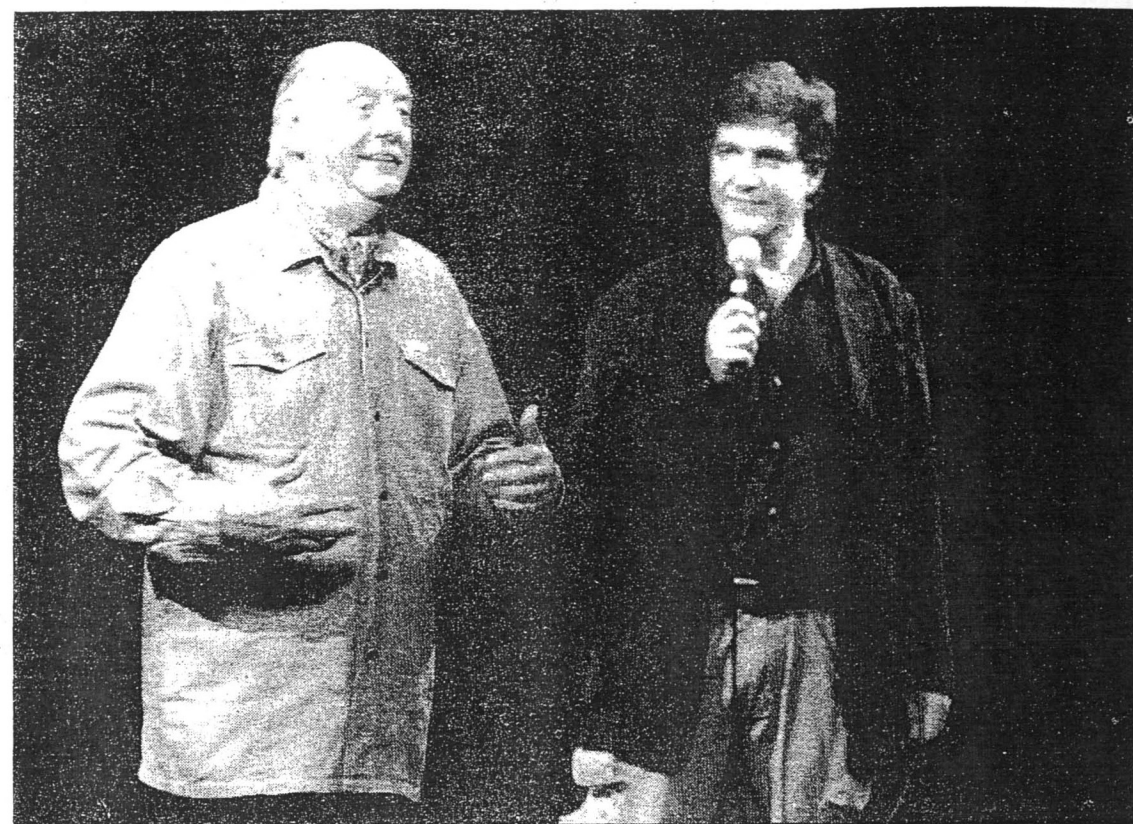
"There I learned a lot from 600 men, all singing, acting out stories for each other," he said. "They were beat up but not defeated."

In Middletown, Jenkins is working with the Italian-American community to create a play based on its experience. Once again, he plays the role of translator "in the widest sense of the word."

One reason for Jenkins' facility as a cultural translator is his broad base of study and experience. He speaks Italian, French and Indonesian. A native of Philadelphia, he went to New York University to study child psychology. He came away yearning to be a clown.

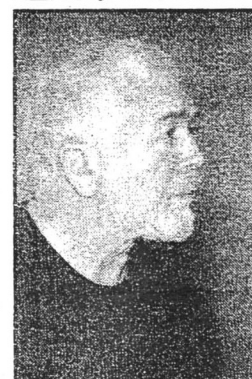
"Working with children suffering from schizophrenia and other mental illness, I saw that they responded to clowning," he said.

Jenkins studied at the Ringling Brothers College for Clowns in Sarasota, Fla., where he earned a master's degree in buffoonery. Afterward, he joined the circus, performing throughout the United States and around the world.



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ABOVE: Jenkins, right, served as Fo's simultaneous translator during performances at Wesleyan in September. LEFT: "Ghetto" playwright Joshua Sobol.



William Burkhardt

IF YOU GO

Event: "Ghetto"
Time: 8 p.m. Fri.-Sat., 7 p.m. Nov. 12
Place: Wesleyan Center for the Arts Theater, between Washington Terrace and Wyllys Avenue, Middletown
Tickets: \$5
Info: (860) 685-3355

He then went from the ridiculous to the sublime, enrolling in graduate school at Harvard, where he earned his doctorate in interdisciplinary education.

During his year in Cambridge, Mass., Jenkins wrote letters to Dario Fo, the Italian clown-playwright who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1997. Jenkins had been awarded a post-graduate fellowship from Harvard, and he wanted to use it studying with Fo. But he never heard back from the playwright.

Undaunted, he traveled to Italy in 1985 and met him there.

"When I mentioned that I was a clown, he opened right up," Jenkins said. "He didn't care a bit that I was a Ph.D. from Harvard, only that I had been a clown."

Oddly enough, Jenkins spoke not a word of Italian upon his arrival. But he was a quick and eager student.

"When you sit around the dinner table hearing everybody laughing," he said, "you want to know what's so funny."

Fo took Jenkins under his wing and taught him an invaluable lesson in verbal and, more important, nonverbal Italian.

"His language is full of poetry and music, a physical language," he said. "He is such a great physical performer, though Dario doesn't call himself a pantomime. It's about the relationship between the word and the gesture."

After spending a year traveling with Fo and his theater company, Jenkins began translating Fo's plays. He also became the playwright's onstage simultaneous translator in the United States. In 1986, Jenkins accompanied Fo on an Obie Award-winning tour of "Mistero Buffo," which played at Yale Repertory Theatre, the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., and the Joyce Theater in New York.

This September, Jenkins again played onstage translator when Fo and his wife, actress Franca Rame, performed scenes from their plays at Wesleyan.

"Actually, translating Fo is different because he starts every play with images," said Jenkins, who is writing a book on Fo and Rame. "Like a film director, he paints the play scene by scene, like a storyboard. He's very visual."

As Fo's appointed English collaborator, Jenkins looks forward to translating as many of Fo's roughly 50 plays as he can. In the meantime, he will keep translating various nonliterary experiences to his students.

"My work at Wesleyan is all about introducing different cultures to widen the horizons of our students," he said. "There's always something new."