

## PEOPLE



## American in Milan Meets Artist, Jester, and Nobel Prize Winner Dario Fo

by James Lawless

I unexpectedly spent the best part of the weekend with one of Italy's top celebrities: Dario Fo.

Not all Americans are as familiar as Italians are with the man who won the Nobel Prize in Literature 1997. The official Nobel website describes Fo as an artist *"who emulates the jesters of the Middle Ages in scourging authority and upholding the dignity of the downtrodden"*.

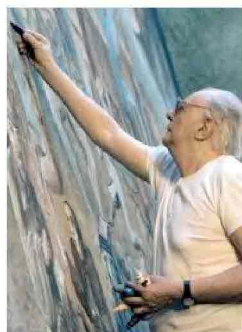
He's currently showing a number of his paintings at Milan's Royal Palace. The exhibit also includes background scenery, painted by the artist, and costumes used by him and his wife, Franca Rame, during their lifetime of theatrical performances. Franca Rame was born into a well known theatrical family that has a history in performance dating back to the 1600s.

Mixed techniques were used for the paintings on canvas, wood, cloth and other materials. Often a smaller version of a mural showed the development of the work. Informative videos of Dario and his workshop played in the major exhibition rooms. The videos illustrated painting and construction techniques; information many artists don't like to share with the public. The exhibit was very well animated.

I was going from room to room taking this all in and writing notes on the different paintings and stepped into a corridor filled with a series of satirical religious paintings. I was translating a plaque next to Dario Fo's painting of "La Cena Mistica," a painting of 5 women at a table with Jesus. It was Dario's version of the famous "Last Supper" by Leonardo. Behind me was a theater with an open door. Dario Fo was on screen/stage. I could hear his voice telling satirical jokes in a very animated way. At a certain point I heard Dario Fo's loud voice in an adjacent room as well, competing with his voice from the small theater behind me. The confusion of the two voices going on simultaneously while I translated the plaque was a challenging task. I made a face that said, 'what the hell is going on'. I turned my head to share that gesture with Dario Fo himself.

My jaw dropped. A dozen onlookers followed him down the corridor. He caught the look on my face. 'Oh I'm sorry you were reading when I arrived...' he said apologetically. 'I don't want to disturb you.'

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Dario Fo and Franca Rame

'No. No!' I said. And added in a nervous voice, 'Please continue. There's more to learn from you in person.'

His smile revealed his immense gentry and his eyes addressed his painting of "La Cena Mistica." He explained how women were subtracted from the important roles they had played in the beginning of Christianity. 'The church, at a certain point, canceled the women, which were evidenced in paintings in the catacombs. I painted this work to say, We want our women back at the table!'

Dario guided me and the entourage down the corridor past passionate paintings of Adam and Eve; one titled "Dialog of Love." He stopped at a painting titled "Kiss Between Jesus and Magdalene," a painting of Jesus kissing Mary Magdalene as if they were more than friends. Fo told us it was his favorite painting in the exhibit.

In an abutting gallery Dario Fo led us to his painting of Jesus and the apostles crossing Lake Tiberiade by boat. 'Did you know that Jesus got angry with the storm before he calmed the waters?,' Dario asked the group. He looked directly at me. 'No,' I replied.

'Well, it's in the Gospel of Mark but often ignored. A big wave got Christ wet and he slapped at the wave and began running around like a circus wrestler. Confronted with that behavior, the storm calmed and turned tranquil. "Oh! I made myself understood," said the Messiah. "And trouble to whoever wakes me again!" Then Christ wrapped himself in a cape and went to sleep.' Dario pantomimed Christ's performance as he told the story, revealing the artist's inexhaustible spirit to communicate in every way with his audience.

Another painting told the story of Peter warning Jesus of Mary Magdalene's forwardness. 'I'll bet you never heard of that either,' Dario said looking directly in my eyes. 'No, I haven't,' I said.

Dario announced he had to go. We shook hands, twice. Once with his left hand and again with his right.

The next day, Sunday, my wife Libera came to the royal palace with me. She didn't want to go at first. But I was insistent. Somehow I felt I'd run into Dario Fo again and he'd invite us both into the Italian Royal Palace for another personal tour. Well, it didn't happen that way. But we did go into the exhibit, and it wasn't long until Dario Fo arrived. Dario is 86 years old and full of life and energy.

Unlike the preceding day, instead of having just a dozen spectators in his entourage, hundreds followed him through the gallery. He recognized me and asked me for a hand while he stepped up on a makeshift wooden stage. As his hand touched mine I felt privileged to be in the company of one of Italy's finest.

I wanted to introduce my wife to Dario, but there were so many people it would have been selfish. Besides, Dario might have made me feel important by recognizing me but, really, he didn't know my name. I was just a guy. But when Dario finished his performance, hours later, Libera helped herself. She made her way through the thick crowd to lay her hand on his back. 'Thank you Dario!'

Italians call their greatest artists by their first names. They wouldn't think of calling Leonardo, Michelangelo, or Tiziano by their last names. It's the same with Dario.

*James Lawless is an American teacher and writer who lives in Milan, Italy.*