

Gentile

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ten bui

Milano, 5 gennaio 1984

Cara Pina Piccolo,

riceviamo la copia del tuo progetto di tesi che hai presentato all'Università di Berkeley e ti ringraziamo. Verrà con cura aggiunta alle tesi di laurea e studi critici fatti sino ad ora sul teatro di Dario Fo.

Naturalmente potrai venire a Milano quando vorrai e gli archivi della Comune sono a tua disposizione.

Ci auguriamo che tu possa continuare il tuo lavoro e possa ottenere il permesso di soggiorno per altri 6 mesi come ti auspichi.

Con i migliori saluti.

p. C.T. LA COMUNE

Bologna 12/1/83

Ciao Walter,

ho appena finito questo progetto di tesi da mandare all'Università di Berkeley, ~~per~~ con ho pensato di spedirne una copia anche a te. Purtroppo non ho avuto il tempo di tradurla, ma visto che te la cavi bene con l'inglese... Mi rendo conto che l'ultima parte, quella che riguarda gli ultimi anni del teatro di Fo, non è molto chiara, forse ne potremo parlare quando vengo su a Milano.

Ancora non so se verrò a Milano nel mese di Dicembre, perché il corso ufficiale straniero mi sta facendo un po' di problemi ^{per} con il permesso di soggiorno in Italia (come people don't want Fo to perform in the U.S., others don't want students to write dissertations on him!) - ma ad ogni modo spero di poterlo risolvere e restare in Italia per almeno altri sei mesi.

Buon lavoro e grazie di tutto!

Pier Paolo

PROSPECTUS FOR A DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

The Politics of Dramatic Structures in the
Farces of Dario Fo (1952 - 1983)

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Why a new study of Dario Fo? On the quantitative side stand a 30 year controversial presence on the Italian stage, more than 35 plays, and a recently won international recognition which makes him the most represented Italian playwright abroad. On the qualitative side stand his unceasing efforts in renovating the XX Century stage both in " revolutionizing " its forms and in confronting the relation of theater to politics, and to political commitment.

After a period of intense interest in Fo's work on the part of the press and of university circles (its high point being the years 1975-78 with the publication of major essays, biographies and theses) there has been a noticeable decline in the studies of Fo by Italian critics. Instead, in correlation to his international success there has been a resurgence of articles, interviews, and studies conducted abroad, particularly in France, but more recently also in the United States and in England.

These latest studies tend to focus either on his latest production or on single works.

The present situation of the literature on Fo leaves room, then, for an investigation attempting to relate his latest production to the previous plays.

Given the multiform character of Fo's presence as author, actor, stage director and cultural organizer a study bent on capturing all of his aspects in an organic way would be, at best, superficial and impressionistic; nor would a student of literature be equipped to carry out such task. On the other extreme, though, one should not be excessively brow-beaten by Fo's warning that " Il teatro si spiega solo con il teatro ".

At a time when scholars from such diverse disciplines as anthropology, political science and semiotics are attempting to understand the phenomenon " theater " by employing new paradigms and tools, in a century when the theatrical avant-garde has directed its main fire at literature one would be tempted to state that literary criticism cannot contribute anything new to the understanding of drama.

However, having acknowledged that theater is not literature there remains a territory which can be successfully explored and analyzed by students of literature : the dramatic text.

Recent debates within semiotic circles have centered on the importance of the dramatic text in relation to the other component parts of spectacle : some like Pagnini(1) argue that it constitutes " La struttura profonda ", others

like De Marinis (2) size it down to " istruzioni per l'uso ". Beyond this controversy, the fact remains that the dramatic text is the least ephemeral part of a performance and that as such it enables a particular work to be transmitted and staged by others, in different place, time and circumstances. Although each performance is different, and in Fo's case this diversity is accentuated by his openness to suggestions from the public, the dramatic text could contain clues as to the dramatic structures, rythm, " feeling " of a particular author. In this sense a study of Fo the author, attempting to discern a line of evolution in his dramatic structures could be helpful in illuminating what is " specific " about Fo's plays.

The two theatrical forms most frequently used by Fo are the farce and a particular type of monologue that could be termed the " Fabulatore - Giullare monologue".

This proposed study could examine both forms from the standpoint of their continuity and rupture with the tradition (both ^{the} Italian ^{one} and its foreign influences), paying particular attention to the modalities by which the political element emerges within the fabric of his work.

In a schematic way, therefore, this essay could be divided

into four parts: the first three corresponding to three broadly defined phases in Fo's development: his "bourgeois" phase (1957-1965), his "political - militant phase" (1967 - 1976) and his latest production (1978-1983). The main body of each part will consist of thematic-structural analysis of a farse and a monologue:

- 1) (Gli arcangeli non giocano a flipper (1959)) - El poer nano (1952) - phase I;
- 2) (Morte accidentale di un anarchico (*) (1970) Mistero Buffo (1969)) - phase II
- 3) L'opera dello sghignazzo (1981) - Fabulazzo o=sceno (1982)) - phase III

Finally the fourth part will attempt to draw some conclusion about Fo's specific contribution to political theatre in the XX Century as far as the question of dramatic structures is concerned.

Given that a number of essays, theses and biographies have already been written giving ample consideration to the political, social, cultural climate in which Fo's work emerged, this study will make only limited references to these other essential elements, so as to keep

(*) I'm still undecided between Morte accidentale and Non si paga, non si paga (1974) but, unfortunately, for the latter it is impossible at this stage to find a textual version approved by Dario Fo (maybe this can be solved in later months).

the *Focus* on the works themselves.

Even a superficial examination of the texts would indicate an evolution in the importance of the political element in Fo, and particularly a shift in the manner the political content is absorbed in the structure of the plays.

In his first production topical issues of political corruption abound but *only* as one of many elements of ^{a critique of man's} Fo's "balordi" move in an absurd ^{world}, in the sense used by Esslin (3), but yet they are very different from Beckett or Ionesco's characters. They are clearly not "every man" lost in a supra - temporal, supra - spatial dimension, on the contrary, their feet are firmly planted either in the Italian soil of the 50's, in the case of "Il Lungo" of Gli ^{na}angeli or in their repetitive historical epochs. While they have a fairly definite social identity within a group, Fo's "balordi" express their alterity both by their "emargination" and by their different perception of the "real" and of the "joke". While they are akin to the "types" and move in "situations" similar to those of the traditional farce it is not the parody of that particular theatrical form itself that distorts and chops up their reality, rather the farce becomes a specular structure re=

flecting reality in its absurdness without distorting it. As one of Fo's characters emblematically states :
" The joke is surpassed by the reality ".

Appropriating the traditional rythms, gags, mechanisms of the farce Fo uses them as a critique of the inhumanity of present-day mass society. Politics have not yet become the kernel of his farces.

The " rational " and the " non rational " exist side by side, at times conflictually at times peacefully. As these two categories constitute the major lines of demarcation splitting XX Century theatre almost down the middle, it would be useful to see how Fo deals with them. This could be done while examining the specific use he makes of the comic both from the viewpoint the theatrical application (using particularly Meldolesi's (4) study) and ⁱⁿ light of more recent theoretical studies (Ferroni (5), Ollbrecht - Tyteca)(6).

The shift from his first period to his " militant " phase seems to involve more than just an increment in the space assigned to political satire but rather a qualitative leap in the way the political becomes integrated in the texture of the plays. A demystification of political-economics structures of exploitation replaces the previous spontaneous siding with the underdog and the

moralistic denouncement of abuses.

Paralleling this critique focusing on the structures of capitalism there seems to be a shift in the way the paroxysm of the farce is now being applied to demystify capitalist structures posing as "natural" or "just". Rather than reflecting an absurd reality now in some plays the farce reflects the "masquerade" organized by a particular class in order to claim legitimacy; in others, instead it mimicks the delusions of false consciousness as it exists in the ranks of the oppressed.

During these years Fo's production is very uneven as he experiments in different directions. Side by side with spectacles of counterinformation barely dressed in theatrical garb others strive to pick up "emblematic events" whose dramatization can contribute to the advancement of the class struggle. Generally speaking and with different modalities one can say that the "hic et nunc" of the major questions facing the revolutionary-minded polity has become the kernel of his plays.

Some critics, Paolo Puppa in particular, see in the last period of this 'militant' phase an involution on the part of Fo, a transformation of the theatrical event into a consolatory 'festa' aimed at substituting a struggle that can no longer be carried out in the real world.

Whether or not one agrees with Puppa's assessment of Fo's case, he does introduce a thorny question that has historically tormented artists trying to pursue a Marxist direction : the problem of sublimation in art, and of " catharsis " when referred to drama. Fo himself acknowledges the question and has sought to develop devices to prevent it. The last part of the second section could begin to lay out the terms in which this issue has historically posed itself within marxist circles.

This discussion could be carried over to the third section following an analysis of Fo's remake of John Gay's The Beggar's opera . L'opera dello sghignazzo will be compared to Bertolt Brecht version of the same play by Gay, i.e. The three penny opera in order to reveal similarities and differences.

Also in this section some considerations will be made as to Fo's recuperation of the " popular " theater, springing from an analysis of Fabulazzo Osceno.

While the direction taken by Fo's work after 1977 is not yet clearly defined and exhibits the characteristics of " work in progress " textual analysis could reveal some novel currents and trends as well as elements of continuity.

One trend which seems to be significant is the assi=

milation of a feminist critique in his latest work, due to a closer collaboration, even at the level of playwriting, with Franca Rame. This new element has found various pitches of expression within the structures of the plays: for example, a very tragic one in 'Io, Ulrike grido' the last section of Fabulazzo Osceno, as well as a 'grottesco' treatment as found in the portrayal of the commercialization of sex in l'opera dello sghignazzo.

The critique of sexism as an all-pervasive form of oppression perpetrated not exclusively by those enjoying economic and political power can be seen as a shift towards dealing with questions that face the polity in a more mediated way than the out-front division of classes.

This is not to deny that in his previous plays he dealt with 'ideological' questions (here 'ideological' is used in its marxian meaning of world-view). Rather, previously the ideological questions were not confronted in their own right but as hurdles that needed to be overcome in order to win pressing 'political' struggles. (For example, the male protagonist of Non si paga, non si paga must confront the question of the revisionism of his party in order to join the self-reduction movement, the problem of drug addiction is posed in La marijuana della mamma é la piu bella exactly at a moment when debate about it rages in the revolutionary movement.)

In Fo's later production the trend of dealing with the

'ideological' in a manner ^{that is} merely instrumental to the attainment of urgent political goals continues in some plays (for example in Clacson, trombette e pernacchi), while in others one seems to be witnessing the birth pangs of a new structure.

Works like Fabulazzo Osceno in fact display a high degree of tension and discontinuity at the structural level in their attempt to deal with urgently political questions and with long term ideological questions within the space of the same text. For example an abrupt change takes place between the first two sections which in a comic and extroverted manner demonstrate the liberatory function of obscenity for subordinated classes, while the third part deals in a highly dramatic and subjective manner with the modern day obscenity of political torture and assassination by the State.

This discordance of structures may well reflect the difference existing between ^{the problems in} the realm of the 'ideological' and ^{those} in the realm of the political - in spite of all their interrelatedness the latter are susceptible to radical changes in the 'here and now' whereas the former, in drawing ^{er} their strength from the past and the force of habit, imply a protracted struggle also projected in the future.

Some critics may weigh this 'dissonance' as a regression in respect to the organic works belonging to Fo's previous phases and may attribute it to an exhaustion of the old forms.

This study, instead, in trying to sort out the old from the new will explore the 'work in progress' to discern whether amidst the chaos there are harbingers of a more dialectical new order, incorporating at a higher level both the ideological and the political issues.

FOOTNOTES

- 1) PAGNINI MARCELLO " Per una semiologia del teatro classico " , Strumenti critici, 12,1970,pp. 23-8
- 2) DE MARINIS MARCO - Semiotica del teatro; Milano, Bompiani, 1982 , pp. 48-59
- 3) ESSLIN MARTIN - The theatre of ^{the} absurd, N.Y. ; Doubleday anchor, 1961, pp. XV-XXIV
- 4) MELDOLESI CLAUDIO - Su un comico in rivolta : Dario Fo il bufalo e il bambino, Roma, Bulzoni, 1978
- 5) FERRONI GIULIO - Il comico nelle teorie contemporanee, Roma, Bulzoni, 1974
- 6) OLBRECHTS - TYTECA LUCIE - Il comico del discorso , Milano, Feltrinelli, 1977
- 7) PAOLO PUPPA - Il teatro di Dario Fo dalla scena alla piazza, Venezia, Marsilio, 1978,pp. 199-227

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