

THE THEATRE OF DARIO FO AND FRANCA RAME:
LAUGHING ALL THE WAY TO THE REVOLUTION

by Angela Montgomery

DARIO FO AND FRANCA RAME

Dario Fo is one of the most prolific and best-loved contemporary European playwrights. To speak of his work in terms of 'text' is to misunderstand his living art, to speak of it excluding Franca Rame is impossible. As a team they have worked tirelessly at mounting their scathing, and often hilarious satires of Italian society and politics. These plays, which are true theatrical events, are aimed at raising the proletariat awareness of the suppression of popular culture by the ruling classes, and the necessity of dismantling bourgeois society. In this aim, and often in method, they take their inspiration from the medieval 'giullare' (a travelling jester) who sought to combat the ruling class with the potent weapon of laughter. Their work has always been directly linked to the class struggle, in particular the problems of the rights of workers, students, prisoners and women.

Dario Fo's theatre is a theatre of situation, and as the situations Fo chooses to represent are those of immediate political and social relevance, these are the events which have shaped the development of his work. To consider his work is to consider also its social, political and historical context; it is essentially dialectical. The form and content of Fo's theatre has acted as a kind of barometer of the times. It is impossible to consider Fo and Rame's theatre separately from their lives and their political work. I would therefore like to give a summary of

their activities over the years, highlighting particular plays as space does not allow a discussion of their entire and considerable output.

Fo was born into a working-class family in the north of Italy, his father was a railway worker and his mother came from a peasant family. He moved to Milan in 1940 to study Art. His studies were interrupted by the war, during which he helped the Resistance, and by a nervous breakdown in 1950. As a form of therapy, Fo immersed himself in a favourite activity: writing and performing. This 'therapy' became the work of his life, and he remains one of the most outstanding writers and stage performers of our time.

Franca Rame, unlike Fo, is a 'figlia d'arte' [lit. 'daughter of art'.] She was born into a famous travelling theatrical family and has acted since she was eight years old. The methods used by her family of dramatising local histories as they travelled, combined with Rame's irreproachable theatrical instinct, have been major contributing factors in Fo's work. They met during a summer Revue in Milan in 1951, and married in 1954.

We might be tempted to say that Fo's theatre falls into two periods - before and after 1968. Some of the most outstanding events of the post-war years were the revolutionary struggles of students and workers which, following the riots in Berkeley University, California, in

1964, reached their violent climax in May 1968 in France, and in the 'hot autumn' of 1969 in Italy. While the repercussions of this movement were only slightly felt in Great Britain, they had enormous impact in Italy, and are still frequently referred to. It was an unprecedented expression of solidarity against the oppressive ruling regime, and it united factory workers, students and intellectuals in the class struggle. It was the expression of the emergence of a new generation. Following the false promises of the economic boom of the early sixties, the desires of workers and students coincided in their demands for greater working rights and a more informal culture, one which was not dominated purely by the interests of the bosses.

It was following these events that Fo and Rame revolutionised their way of doing theatre. Up until then they had performed their political satires in conventional commercial theatres. Fo had already caused a stir in 1953 with his play Un dito nell'occhio [A Finger in the Eye] (1953), written together with Franco Parenti and Giustino Durano. For Italy this was a completely new kind of review. A potted history of the world, it was an innovation both in its format and its political comment. This was followed by a similarly intentioned Sani da legare [Sane to be locked up] (1954) which was mercilessly censured. This led to the end of the collaboration between Fo, Durano and Parenti. After some work in cinema, Fo and

Rame formed the 'Compagnia Fo-Rame' in 1958. Indeed, the years between 1959 and 1967 are referred to as Fo's bourgeois period. These years saw the production of the plays Gli arcangeli non giocano a flipper [Archangels don't play pin-ball] (1959), Aveva due pistole con gli occhi bianchi e nero [He had two pistols with white and black eyes] (1960), Chi ruba un piede é fortunato in amore [Steal a foot and you'll be lucky in love] (1961), Isabella, tre cavalli e un cacciaballe [Isabella, three horses and a con man] (1963), Settimo: ruba un po' meno [Seventh commandment: steal a bit less] (1964), La colpa é sempre del diavolo [It's always the devil's fault] (1965), Ci ragiono e canto [I think things out and I sing] (1966), and La Signora é da buttare [The lady's for dumping] (1967).

GLI ARCANGELI NON GIOCANO A FLIPPER [Archangels don't play pin-ball]

This was Fo's first major success with the bourgeois audiences, and although it is a sparkling comedy, it is not without social comment. The play opens with some young good-for-nothings playing a practical joke on one of their gang, 'Lungo', in which they convince him that he has married a beautiful young woman, Angela. The ceremony turns out to be fake, and the woman a prostitute. There follows a complicated series of events at the end of which Lungo wakes up to discover it has all been a dream. Lungo is

devastated as he thinks he has lost his Angela. He accuses the archangels of playing pinball with him for sport. However, the dream has been a prediction; the marriage scene repeats itself, but this time Lungo is able to command the situation and wins the hand of Angela.

The play contains many elements of traditional farce and comedy, including dream sequences, mistaken identity, plays within plays and Commedia dell'Arte- type 'lazzi' (physical gags) e.g. for example when the 'doctor' listens to Lungo's chest and the gang repeats the gesture in a line, all ears to chest; the hilarious scene in the Ministry in Rome where Lungo is faced with a series of booths and closing shutters when he tries to make a claim for his pension, but he eventually manages to trap the clerks under their shutters with their rubber stamps round their necks and create a kind of stamping machine for his documents. Unfortunately he ends up classified as a dog. There then follows the comic spectacle of Lungo impersonating a dog in a kennel, and performing tricks for a retired circus magician who buys him as a 'stray'. The recurrent theme of mistaken identities continues when Lungo impersonates a Minister in which there is much burlesque losing of trousers. Although this play is a 'bourgeois' comedy, it is important for its early signs of political orientation. The character Lungo describes himself as a 'giullare' of the coffee bars. It is therefore his role in the play not just to amuse but to highlight social injustices. Thus the central comic

sequences in the Ministry in Rome and in the dog kennels are biting satires of a crippling and inhuman bureaucracy and the indignity of having a 'padrone' [boss], but served up in a way palatable for a bourgeois audience.

He and Franca Rame also appeared on State television in 1962 in a very popular musical show, 'Canzonissima'. This brought them into open conflict with the reactionary State: their contract was prematurely terminated as they would not accept the censorship of their politically controversial nature of their material.

Throughout this period, Fo had been developing his own peculiar brand of explosive satire, which found its voice ever more in the grotesque expression of the domination and exploitation of the proletariat by the ruling classes, and in its references to popular culture. His theatre became increasingly 'political'. This was particularly evident in Ci ragiono e canto, an important moment in the political development of Fo's work: 'a show which dealt with the enormous wealth of popular culture by using its songs, with a reinvention of their origins, of their profound links -
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 materialistic - with gestuality, with work.'

By 1969, however, Fo and Rame felt they had become the 'buffoni della borghesia' [clowns of the bourgeoisie]: the bourgeoisie was willing to accept their heavy satire as long as it took place within its own structures, i.e. in

the commercial theatres. They thus decided to abandon commercial theatre completely. As Franca Rame puts it:

We had realised that, despite the hostility of a few, obtuse reactionaries, the high bourgeoisie reacted to our 'spankings' almost with pleasure. Masochists? No, without realising it, we were helping their digestion. Our 'whipping' boosted their blood circulation, like some good birching after a refreshing sauna. In other words we had become the minstrels of a fat and intelligent bourgeoisie. This bourgeoisie did not mind our criticism, no matter how pitiless it had become through our use of satire and grotesque technique, but only so long as the exposure of their 'vices' occurred exclusively within the structures they controlled.

They decided to put themselves completely at the service of the working class, which meant abandoning the structures of the bourgeoisie for those of the proletariat. Fo went from being 'an artist who was "friend of the people" to an artist at the service of the proletarian revolutionary movement, "guillare" of the people among the people, in the quartieri, in occupied factories, in squares, in covered markets, in schools.'

However, according to Rame it is a mistake to consider the events of 1968 as being the real turn-about in their work,

or the moment in which they changed from doing traditional theatre to 'political' theatre:

In fact our true turning-point, the point that really mattered, we took at the very beginning of our journey, 22 years ago, when with Parenti, Durano and Lecoq we staged for the first time The Finger in the Eye. Those were the days of Scelba and his 'subculture', of Pacelli (the pope) with his civic committees, the days of total censorship. Police superintendents, ministers, bishops and cops understood it immediately: we were 'a company of communists' and we were making
⁴
 'red propaganda'.

To operate in this new phase of their work, the theatre group 'Associazione Nuova Scena' was formed. This company put on shows within the theatrical circuit of the PCI (Italian Communist Party) and the ARCI (Cultural and Recreational Division of the PCI). The group developed a new way of presenting the plays and breaking down the 'fourth wall' involving the audience directly: the shows were followed by a debate in which the public commented and contributed to the final version of the script. There was also a general debate of political issues. This method of composition is essential as it avoids completely the danger of writing 'popularist' theatre; Fo and Rame's theatre does not condescend to the people, it comes from the people. This period includes the plays: Grande

pantomima con bandiere e pupazzi piccoli, grandi e medi
 [Grand Pantomime with flags and small big and medium-sized
 puppets] (1968), Mistero buffo (1969), Legami pure che
tanto spacco tutto lo stesso [Tie me up, do, I'll still
 smash everything] (1969), L'operaio conosce 300 parole, il
padrone 1,000, per questo lui é il padrone [The worker
 knows 300 words, the boss 1,000, that's why he's the boss]
 (1969). With Mistero buffo, Fo continues his research into
 the origins of popular culture, and with Il padrone and
Legami, the PCI is criticised for not being sufficiently
 revolutionary. This criticism gave rise to friction which
 led to a schism between the 'Nuova Scena' and the PCI and
 ARCI.

MISTERO BUFFO

The monologue for Fo is of fundamental importance in a
 theatre which takes its inspiration from the popular
 theatre of 'fabulatori' [fable tellers]. His theatre is
 naturally 'epic' as it contains this quality of story-
 telling. Mistero Buffo is a series of monologues and
 dialogues topped and tailed by speeches directed to the
 audience. This work represents a moment of crucial
 importance in Fo's 'recupero' [recovery] of the medieval,
 which he describes as 'un salto mortale a rovescio' [a
 death-defying leap backwards]. Recovering the method and
 the means of making theatre used by the 'giullare' [jester]

allows him to practise theatre as a totality, 'superando la visione esclusivamente letterario del testo' [overcoming an exclusively literary vision of the text].⁶ It is also a way of shaking the audience out of their role as pure spectators; they have to actively use their imagination. Moreover it has assisted him in discovering a centuries-long 'mystification'; that culture always originates from the ruling classes and never from the people. As an illustration of this mystification, Mistero Buffo begins with the debunking of the story 'Rosa fresca aulentissima' as a courtly love poem. Fo reveals that it is in fact a 'giullarata' which has been censored and appropriated by the ruling classes. The surname of the author, when correctly deciphered, reveals the scurrilous name of a giullare. Whereas in schoolbooks he is referred to as Cielo [Sky] d'Alcamo, his name is in fact Ciullo [Sicilian dialect for male organ] d'Alcamo. The characters are a tax collector and a serving woman who both pretend to be noble. The central theme of the poem, read in this key, is not courtly love but an abusive law which allowed the nobility and the rich to rape or murder in tranquillity; they had only to pay the 'difensa' and they were immediately excused. In this light the poem becomes an expression of social outrage and a means of raising popular consciousness.

Fo goes on to explain in the introduction the centrality of the Church for the people. It was above all a meeting

place, and the religious festivities and enacting of bible stories provided the opportunity for heavy satire at the expense of the clergy. The 'giullari' risked being burned at the stake for such activities.

The pieces which make up Mistero Buffo are religious stories, but far from reinforcing the oppressive dogmas of the Church, they are cries of social indignation. The piece about Pope Boniface VIII is a caustic satire of this corrupt and vicious Church Leader. Even when the figures are divine, it is always human dignity which is stressed. Thus 'Strage degli innocenti' [Slaughter of the Innocents] serves as an indictment of the cruelty of war and the cruelty of God who allowed such human suffering. The fable of the blind man and the cripple is not a glorification of Christ's miraculous powers, but an expression of the indignity of sweating for a boss: 'Non e' dignita' avere le gambe dritti, avere gli occhi che vedono, dignita' e' non avere un padrone che ti sottomette' [Dignity is not having straight legs and eyes that see, dignity is not having a boss over you].⁷ The story of the birth of the 'Giullare' shows him as a peasant who proudly works his own land but who is forced out by the cruelty of the jealous owner of the valley who burns the land and rapes his wife. Finally stripped of everything, he is visited by Jesus who blesses him with the gift of a loose tongue which will allow him to 'schiacciare questi padroni e i preti e tutti quelli che gli stanno intorno: i notai,

gli avvocati, ecetera.' [to crush the bosses and the priests and all those around them: the notaries, the lawyers etc.] (p.80) The Christ of Mistero Buffo is a revolutionary and humanitarian figure. He is a 'povero Cristo', a kind of suffering everyman.

Fo's Mistero Buffo is far from an exercise in literary history. These revolutionary guillarde are equally relevant for today, both in their restoration of the dignity of popular culture, and their message. Indeed Fo makes constant reference to contemporary events. Thus in 'La Nascita del Villano' [The Birth of the Peasant] Fo is able to make a comparison with the bosses of today. Just as in the 'mistero' the peasant had to have special trousers so he did not have to waste time going off to urinate, Fo relates the case of a factory in Bologna where the workers were allowed only two minutes and thirty-five seconds to go to the bathroom! The key note throughout, including the Passion stories, is human suffering, compassion and dignity.

As a result of the schism with the PCI and ARCI, Fo and Rame formed a new group in 1970: 'La Collettiva Teatrale la Comune'. Alongside this was formed 'il circolo "la Comune" di Milano' which produced a series of cultural and political initiatives. This group had a new aim; to create a cultural circuit of the revolutionary left which would

provide an alternative not only to the bourgeois circuit, but also to the revisionist one. Within the revolutionary struggle, culture is of paramount importance:

For the proletariat "culture" means 'A conception of the world which is radically alternative to the bourgeois conception of the world', it means consciousness of the true reality of capitalistic exploitation, scientific consciousness of the laws which regulate it and the laws of its violent destruction, for the construction of socialism.⁸

MORTE ACCIDENTALE DI UN ANARCHICO [Accidental Death of an Anarchist]

The Colletiva Teatrale acquired performance space in via Colletta. Perhaps the most notable play of this early period of 'La Comune' was Morte accidentale di un anarchico, a grotesque farce in two acts. This comedy ostensibly tells the story of an Italian emigrant anarchist who 'fell' in a hysterical fit from the window of a police station in New York, but through an artistic 'transference' it actually refers to the 'suicide' of the anarchist Pino Pinelli at the police headquarters in Milan during the inquest into the bombings in Piazza Fontana. Pinelli was accused of being involved in the bombing which killed 16

people, but Fo and many others believed the charges to be trumped up by the State. It was an indictment of the 'strage di Stato' [lit. massacre by the State] i.e. a policy of tension by the right-wing State against the Italian left-wing in which many left-wingers lost their lives. The historical moment of the writing and performance of this play is therefore one of extreme tension. The play performs an essential function within the class struggle, that of counter-information. This is a re-interpretation of the information supplied by the ruling classes from the point of view of the proletariat. The highly provocative satire of this play is served up in an exhilaratingly farcical comedy. The play is set almost entirely in the room in the Police headquarters from which the anarchist "fell". A madman is being interrogated as he has been caught impersonating a psychiatrist; one of a series of identities which he habitually assumes. Meanwhile, the police are being investigated regarding the circumstances of the death of the anarchist. The madman, having intercepted a telephone call for the Police Inspector, and having lifted some documents, manages to pass himself off as the investigating judge come to re-open the inquest on the circumstances of the anarchist's death. Through his 'investigation' he is able to re-create the circumstances of the anarchist's death whilst thoroughly ridiculing and exposing the inconsistency of the police inspectors' version of the facts. The madman, having gained the confidence of the police, is able to suggest that the

anarchist was 'persuaded' to jump from the window by the police. The play gives full scope to a range of farcical stage business, using disguises, false limbs, funny walks and slapstick punches and kicks. The energetically farcical tone of the play acutely heightens the deadly seriousness of its insinuations. The licensed fool, in this case the madman in the guise of a judge is able to voice Fo's case against the State: a) that the police are guilty of the anarchist's death :

MADMAN:... first of all you arbitrarily stop a free citizen, then you abuse your authority to detain him beyond legal limits, so you traumatise this poor worker saying you've got proof that he blew up the railway, then you deliberately label him psychotic so he loses his job, seeing as his alibi of playing cards doesn't hold up, and lastly, the final blow: you say his friend and comrade from Rome has confessed himself guilty of the Milan massacre: his friend is a filthy assassin! And so he sadly comments "it's the end of anarchy", and throws himself off! Are we crazy? At this point we can hardly wonder that a poor wretch has a hysterical fit. No, no, no, I'm sorry, but in my opinion you're guilty, and how! You're completely responsible for the death of the anarchist! You should be immediately charged with instigating suicide!

and b) that the Milan bombing was deliberately engineered to detract attention from the political struggles of the left-wing during the 'hot autumn':

MADMAN: Certainly, you are a journalist and you'd really wallow in a scandal of the kind... you'd just be a bit uneasy to discover that that massacre of innocent people in the bank served solely to bury the struggles of the hot autumn... to create the right tension so that the citizens themselves, disgusted and indignant about so much subversive violence, would demand a powerful State! (p.93)

The 1970's were troubled for 'La Comune'. They were evicted from their premises in Via Colletta, Franca Rame was raped and beaten by a group of Fascists, and Dario Fo was imprisoned in Sardinia. There was also a serious crisis within the group which led to its disbandment.

However, in spite of enormous practical and personal difficulties, Fo and Rame decided that the work must go on. In response to the coup d'etat in Chile in September 1973, they mounted the show 'Guerra di popolo in Cile' [People's war in Chile]. This play had a dual purpose, both as a condemnation of the Christian Democrats in Chile and its

role in the overthrow of the 'Unidad Popular', and, by drawing an exact parallel, as an attack on the Italian Christian Democrats who were considered to be the 'principal enemy' in the struggle of the masses.

The group needed a new base, and so they occupied the disused Palazzino Liberty and obtained over 80,000 subscribers. This also became the base of 'Soccorso Rosso', a group formed by Rame in 1972 to aid prisoners. Their first performance in the new premises was Non si paga non si paga [Can't pay! Won't Pay!] about the appropriation of goods by the working classes during an economic crisis. [It is interesting to note that this play, which deals with civil disobedience, was revived in Britain during the civil protests against the Government's introduction of the 'Poll' tax in early 1990.] This play is exemplary of Fo and Rame's method of taking the material directly from the people, discussing it, reading and re-reading and finally debating the play with the people before putting it on stage. Earlier that year, they had responded in the same immediate way to a tragic event. In June 1974, a bomb exploded during an anti-fascist demonstration by trade-unions; nine were killed and ten injured. For 'La Comune' this was a clear example of fascist violence, supported by the bosses and the Christian Democrats. They immediately organised a show in the square in Brescia in order to launch a mass debate. The show consisted of a 'presentation', acting of material already within the

repertory, and finally testimonies about the massacre, followed by a debate. This format is essential to the theatre of Fo and Rame. It is a 'spettacolo d'intervento'- an immediate theatrical response to a precise political situation - with interventions by those directly involved, with the precise aim of raising consciousness of the urgency of the class struggle:

The show was not received as a consolatory moment, of passive and external 'entertainment'. It was a real moment of consciousness, which succeeded in proposing the need to wish 'to know more', to understand together how to get organized, what to do. For this reason, unlike the bourgeois theatres where, once the play has finished and been digested, the public gets up and goes, in the square in Brescia no one gets up.
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The late 1970's include the plays Il Fanfani Rapito [Fanfani Kidnapped] (1975) - a caustic satire on the Christian Democrats; La marijuana della mamma e' la piu bella [Mummy's marijuana is the best] (1976) about the problem of drugs as a means of exploiting the working classes; Tutta casa letto e chiesa [All home, bed and church] (1977)- a series of female monologues on the situation of women in society, written by Fo and Rame; and the monologue Storia di una tigre [Story of a tiger] (1979) inspired by a trip to China and dealing with the importance

of taking responsibility for one's actions. Fo and Rame also appeared again on national television, causing considerable scandal with their politically explosive material.

The 1980's began with the blocking of a visit to the U.S.A.: Fo and Rame were refused visas. They toured with Clacson, trombette e pernacchi [Hooters, trumpets and raspberries]' (1980), a daring satire which involves the kidnapping of Gianni Agnelli, the owner of Fiat and one of the richest and most powerful men in Italy. Using the theme of a kidnapping, Fo is able to refer throughout the play to the kidnapping of the politician Aldo Moro and the strong-arm tactics used by the government with the terrorists which led to the killing of Moro. Stuart Hood¹¹ suggests that this is Fo's last major political work. The reason for this can be found in the gradual eroding of political commitment in the 1980's within an increasingly materialistic society. However, Fo and Rame's productivity, commitment and success have continued throughout the eighties. Fo produced another one-man show, Fabulazzo osceno [Obscene fable] (1982) and he and Rame give seminars and workshops in the U.S.A., London and Edinburgh. Further shows include Quasi per caso una donna: Elisabetta [Almost by chance a woman: Elizabeth] (1984); Parti femminili: Coppia aperta, Una giornata qualunque [Female Parts: A day like any other, Open Couple] (1986); by Fo and Rame, and most recently, Il papa e la strega [The pope and the witch]

(1990).

TALKING ABOUT WOMEN: Franca Rame's Theatre

In an interview with Franca Rame I was surprised to learn that, despite her theatrical heritage, her political activity has always been more important than being on stage.¹² She is a woman who has successfully combined the roles of political activist, artist, wife and mother, and she has done this with extraordinary beauty and elegance. Acting just happens to be part of her working life. It is this all-roundedness which gives her particular authority as an interpreter of women's struggles. As Barbara Schulman puts it: 'Hers is a 'popular' approach to feminism, a blend of mime, story-telling, burlesque and stand-up comedy - all traditions rooted in popular theatre - which can be appreciated by the masses, not just the converted.'¹³ There is nothing intellectual about Rame's feminism, it is too far rooted in every day reality. On stage she has an infinite range of expression, flawless technique and an epic detachment which is at times devastating in its effect, as for example in the monologue 'Lo Stupro' which through its very detachment succeeds in being almost unbearably moving. As Dario Fo puts it: 'the public is amazed and fascinated because it's clear that they have never seen a woman act with such detachment...without forcing...and at the same time manage to achieve so much involvement.'¹⁴

It is perhaps true to say that the late 1970's and the 1980's have seen a more marked emphasis in the portrayal of women in Fo and Rame's work, although the role of women has central importance throughout, for example the earlier role of Antonia in Tutti Uniti! Tutti Insieme! Ma scusa, quello non e' il padrone? [All united! All together! Sorry, isn't that the boss?] (1971). Here the events of the class struggles from 1911-1922, the founding of the Italian Communist Party and the beginnings of Fascism are recounted through the formation of the character of a young and fun-loving woman who, through contact with left-wing activists, becomes politically conscious. It is a role which deals with 'the dignity of women, the refusal of the physical and moral Catholic subjection [of women] to men,'¹⁵ At the beginning of the play Antonia is arrested at a 'subversive' meeting place, which she innocently thought was a place for dancing. When interrogated by the police, she simply repeats what she has heard at the meeting place. This makes her the mouthpiece for some strong accusations against the police, the state, and the war in Libya. Disconcerted by what she has heard, she asks the Carabinieri Captain for assurance. She has been told that 'there is no more justice, that justice only belongs to those who command', and that 'you Carabinieri and all the police are "ever faithful", but only to the interests of the bosses.' She begs the Captain to tell her that it is not true: '...calm me down, tell me that all citizens are respected...that it's not a question of having or not having money...that

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you're not interested in anybody's wallet...' Antonia falls in love with Norbert (or Saxaphone as she calls him), one of the subversives from the meeting place, and marries him. She progresses throughout the play to the status of a real revolutionary. After shooting the fascist who killed her husband she laments that she has 'shot the dog, instead of the owner...'. What is needed is:

'to destroy all of you, all the one thousand, two thousand, ten thousand of you ...bosses, bandits, exploiters! All you ten thousand who live on the shoulders of millions of wretches, pulling them by the necks... and they talk about so many robbers...they're just a joke! Every moment, without even saying hands up, you rob someone...every hour, every minute with guns...every hour you kill someone. When will the ones who've been cheated understand...when will they decide...they just need a shake, by God! And you and all your hangers-on chop! We wont save a single one...chop!' (p165)

However, women's issues really come to the fore in a series of plays in which, for the first time, Franca Rame is also author, including Tutta Casa, Letto e Chiesa, [All home, bed and church] (1971), and Parti Femminili [Female Parts] (1986) consisting of 'Una Giornata Qualunque' [A Day like Any Other] and 'Una Coppia Aperta' [An Open Couple], and accompanied by the monologue 'Lo Stupro' [The Rape].

TUTTA CASA, LETTO E CHIESA [All home, bed and church]

Like Mistero Buffo, this is a tour de force for an actor. A series of monologues, it deals with the exploitation and repression of women, and although these are strident issues, it copes with them with strength, humour and resilience. The first piece, 'Il Risveglio' [Waking up] is a highly amusing and disturbing account of a normal day in the life of a factory worker. Waking up late, she has to quickly see to her baby before taking it to the creche on the way to work. In her rush she carries out a series of comically confused actions, and then realises she cannot find her key. This gives dramatic licence for her to re-enact the events of the previous evening in order to remember what she did with the key. There follows an action-packed and hilarious description of the tormented life of this woman which turns out to be little more than survival: her monotonous and gruelling work in the factory, her dual role as exploited worker and full-time wife and mother of a demanding baby and husband, her mental disorientation due to tiredness, the impossibility of a fulfilling sentimental life due to lack of time and energy. In spite of the energetic humour, the text states explicitly the double exploitation of the female worker: 'the multinational boss steals your travelling hours from you and you get mad, but you don't get mad about the hours he steals from me...and apart from working for him I'm

also your unpaid servant'. Even the institution of the family is seen as having sinister capitalistic ends: 'The family, this blessed family was deliberately invented so that all those like you with their nerves shot from the killing work routine come home to their do-everything wife as if she was a big comfy mattress! We turn you out, good as new, for free, so you can go back to the factory nice and refreshed to produce better for the multinational!' (p14)

'Una Donna Sola' [A Woman Alone] deals with sexual harassment. Using the device of speaking to a neighbour over the balcony, the nightmare life of this woman emerges. Her husband, utterly jealous, locks her up in the house all day where she distracts herself by having music blaring in all the rooms while she gets on with the chores. As in the previous monologue, the words are regularly interspersed with the routine actions of the speaker. She is continually pestered by all the men in her life: her husband who phones incessantly to know what she is doing and who beats her; her wheelchair-bound brother-in-law who, when not watching porno-videos, keeps trying to grope her; a peeping Tom across the way; a dirty phone-caller and a love-sick student. She is clearly regarded merely as a sexual object by all of them, even by her husband who says he loves her:

he keeps me locked up at home to protect
me...he clouts me round the ear...and then he
wants to make love...and he couldn't care less if

I want to or not. I always have to be ready, like Nescafe...washed, clean, perfumed, shaved, warm, lithe, willing and silent...I just have to breathe...and make a little noise now and then so he knows I'm there. But I'm not there at all, with my husband, I can't manage to, I don't feel, you know, that word I can't manage to say, it's not easy: orgasm. (p29)

The monologue ends violently with the surprise revolt of this woman who burns and squashes the groping hand of the student in the door, pushes the brother-in-law in the wheelchair down the stairs, shoots the peeping Tom, and awaits the arrival of her husband with gun in hand. Both in this piece and 'Il Risveglio', the male presence is humiliatingly belittled, in the first instance the inert sleeping husband and the second the paralysed brother-in-law, compared to the active and dynamic woman.

The second part begins with 'La Mamma Fricchettona' [Fricchettona is a Roman dialect word which describes a woman not restricted by the sexual and social conventions of society.] The piece is an indictment of the conventional life of the housewife and mother, as supported by the Catholic Church. Once again, the male presence is insignificant: a priest in a confessional. The protagonist, who resembles a gypsy, has run into the confessional to hide from the police. The life of the woman is revealed

with the device of confessing herself. Her life has been turned upside down by love, first by marrying her husband and so ending up with the responsibility of a house and a baby, and secondly by the love of her son, an extreme left-winger. The son runs away from home, and the mother, desperate to find him, disguises herself as a kind of hippy. She leaves behind all the order of conventional life and begins to frequent the 'drop out' circles in an effort to find her son. This becomes a process of liberation for her, and she realises that 'love is disorder! Life, liberty, imagination, they're all disorder...compared to the order you want to give us, Father!' (p53).

'Abbiamo Tutte la Stessa Storia' [We all tell the same story] is a hard hitting fairy-tale about the exploitation of women which exists even between 'comrades': 'How is it that if one of us doesn't get straight into a comfortable position , up with the slip, down with the knickers, legs spread wide, then she's a prudish shit -with-a complex, brought on by a repressed reactionary-imperialistic-capitalistic-masonic-Catholic-conformist upbringing? ' (p57) The tale is about a little girl who has a rag-doll which says terrible swear words and longs to be treated badly so she can feel like a 'real woman'. The doll quickly becomes aware of the sting of this conditioning. The little girl grows up and marries a 'highly presentable' engineer. She thinks she is happy but the doll knows better: ' You're an idiot just like I was with the naughty cat, when I

pretended to be happy, because after all I had a man, even if he did beat me up I was always his woman. So this prick of an engineer doesn't beat you, but he leaves you here all day like a dummy and he doesn't say a word to you which is even worse, you shit-head.' (p62) The figure of the rag doll acts as the inner, unrepressed voice of the woman. By listening to and accepting this inner voice the girl is eventually able to feel free.

The monologue 'Medea' is an impassioned plea against the rules of a male-dominated society in which men 'mature' with age and women 'wither'. Medea realises that the women are victims of the laws instigated for the convenience of men. Instead of resigning herself to giving up her place as mother and wife to a younger woman, which would be inkeeping with the submissive nature of women, she decides to murder her children so that 'a new woman' may be born.

The theatre of Dario Fo and Franca Rame is not easy to reproduce; the leading roles are indelibly stamped with the virtuosity of Fo and Rame, many of the situations are so Italian that they are almost impossible to translate satisfactorily into another language, the acting style must have the right degree of detachment or it may lapse into

over-generalised buffoonery. However, the issues of the plays remain universal, hence their success all over the world. Although the writing at times verges onto didacticism, and although they now have to respond to an increasingly consumerist and apathetic society, the strength, sparkling wit and committed struggle of Fo and Rame continues:

This fight for people's rights (garantismo), which has been written off by some fringes of the movement that have now collapsed and dispersed, this fact of still being present within the class struggle, getting involved in factory occupations, in problems regarding, e.g., heroin (like the groups who collect money and organise in order to save young people from addiction)... all this work is what saves us from collapse, from the disarray that most intellectuals in Italy are falling into. Were it not for that work, we would collapse in the same way.

NOTES:

1. Lanfranco Binni Attento Te..! Il teatro politico di Dario Fo, (Verona: Bertani, 1975) pp. 222-223.
2. Franca Rame in the introduction to Dario Fo's Can't Pay? Won't Pay!, (London: Methuen 1987).
3. L. Binni, op. cit., p. 224.
4. Franca Rame in the introduction to Dario Fo's Can't Pay? Won't Pay! (op. cit.).
5. Dario Fo in Luigi Allegri Dario Fo: Dialogo provocatorio sul comico, il tragico, la follia e la ragione, (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1990), p. 133.
6. Dario Fo in Luigi Allegri, op. cit., p. 135.
7. Dario Fo, Mistero Buffo, (Turin: Einaudi, 1977) p. 40.
8. L. Binni, op. cit., p.73.
9. Dario Fo, Morte accidentale di un anarchico, (Turin:

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Einaudi, 1974) p. 37.

10. L. Binni op. cit., p. 123.

11. Stuart Hood in the introduction to Dario Fo's Can't Pay? Won't Pay!, (London: Methuen, 1987).

12. Interview with Franca Rame, Teatro Quirini, Rome, May 26th, 1990.

13. Barbara Schulman, 'It's All Bed, Board and Church', Plays and Players, July 1982, p. 33.

14. Dario Fo in L. Allegri, op. cit., p.149.

15. Dario Fo in L. Binni op. cit., p. 43.

16. Dario Fo, Tutti Uniti, Tutti Insieme! Ma scusa, quello non é il padrone?, (Turin: Einaudi, 1977) p. 88.

17. Franca Rame and Dario Fo, Tutta casa, letto e chiesa, (Verona: Bertani, 1978) p. 14.

18. Dario Fo in Dario Fo and Franca Rame Theatre Workshops at Riverside Studios, (London: Red Notes, 1983) p. 60.