

FRANCA RAME was born in 1929 in Parabiago, a little village near Milan, to a family of puppeteers who had been practicing their art for several generations. The advent of cinema forced the Rame family to pursue live theater and gave Franca the opportunity to start a prolific acting career at the age of eight. She married Dario Fo in 1954 and has since collaborated with him as stage performer, writer, and editor for dozens of plays and monologues. Franca Rame is an actress, dramatist, and lecturer of international prestige. She is co-author of many dramatic works, among them: *All Home, Bed and Church* (1977), *The Open Couple* (1983), *Female Parts* (1986), *A Woman Alone and Other Plays* (1989), *Seventh Commandment: Steal a Little Less* 2 (1992), and *Sex? Thanks, Don't Mind if I Do!* (1995).

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## SESSO? GRAZIE, TANTO PER GRADIRE

### TRAMA:

Abbiamo paura anche delle parole. La nostra società non insegna ad amare, né col corpo né con l'anima.

Certo queste sono banalità dette e ridette, però tutti hanno un disperato bisogno d'amore e questo amore amore non si trova non si sa come trattarlo.

I film ci hanno insegnato che arriva per caso, già bello e confezionato come una vincita alla lotteria, e quando si rompe è come le calcolatrici tascabili: non c'è niente da fare, tocca buttarlo via.

A scuola non ti insegnano niente sul sesso, n'è sull'amore. Poi nella vita si ha raramente il tempo e la voglia di porsi troppe domande.

FRANCA RAME

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VALERI, ED.

FRANCA RAME • A WOMAN ON STAGE

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FRANCA RAME

A Woman on Stage



Edited by

WALTER VALERI

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## FRANCA RAME: UNA DONNA IN SCENA

Walter Valeri

*American Repertory Theatre Institute, Cambridge*

**A**t the first *International Women Playwrights Conference*, held in Buffalo, NY in 1988, actor/playwright Bai Fengxin of the People's Republic of China said, with rare candor:

I am considered, in my own country, a woman playwright who specializes in writing drama about women. Ever since my first play came out, I've been advancing amidst tremendous controversy. Some of my foreign friends say to me that China has made rapid progress in the liberation of women. I think there is some superficiality in such views. New China has been established for 40 years. In legal documents, women enjoy rights with men. However, conventions and customs cultivated for thousands of years cannot be changed completely in a short period of time. . . . As a playwright, when confronted with such changing tides, I need to do serious and deep thinking. . . . I want to faithfully write down their hard and bitter experiences in love, marriage, family and career — their struggle towards liberation.

I have chosen these words in my introduction to a book dedicated to Franca Rame because I am certain that she would agree with them completely. Often, during our long journeys by car or air, she would tell me that women's condition is the same throughout the world. A little more advanced here, a little more backward there, but in essence, the same plight. Change is more than a mental process. It requires time and perseverance for change to occur in actuality and not just in our minds. Franca Rame's first play dedicated to women's issues, "Tutto casa, letto e chiesa" (*All House, Bed and Church*), appeared in 1977 when Italy's political and social upheaval, initiated in the 1960s, was drawing to its progressive conclusion without truly addressing the question of women's status. Like Bai Fengxin, Rame knew that the changes that had occurred on paper were far from a reality steeped in ancient tradition, cultural expectations and censorship. Italy's history of censorship of Rame's works is too lengthy to be recounted in these pages. It is worthy of note, however, that as recently as 1994 her play *Sesso?*

*Grazie, tanto per gradire* was censored by the Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri.

In examining the public persona Rame has become today, it is easy to forget her personal and often painful journey from child actress and young show girl of the Italian variety stage, to a leader of the feminist movement, a staunch defender of society's most vulnerable, and an outspoken critic of Italy's political establishment.

In the theatrical family in which she was raised, Rame has often recounted in interviews and during performances the status of the female members of the company:

We prepared the costumes, we were given charge of the box office, we were allowed to assist in putting up sets, we were expected to attend to the household chores and the cooking, but on the stage we never appeared up front to speak directly with audience. Only my father, who was actor-manager and company director, knew how to address the audience directly, to entertain them, to crack jokes or to provoke them in the prologues. And even after forming a company with Dario, I went on accepting the role and logic of the humble performer who shield away from directly entertaining, or provoking, the audience.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the limitations imposed on her as a young woman, Rame considers her training invaluable:

All our training and instincts led us to abhor over-emphasis, to avoid melodramatic or rhetorical effects. For us, acting never involved problems of stylistic research, because it was based on simple models and on more or less natural practice. I learned to move and speak on stage, quite unselfconsciously, and picked up the parts by listening to my mother and older sisters act them out night after night. Only later, while working with the supposed "companies," did I realize that ours was an infinitely more pure and productive style than the chaotic, mannered diction spouted by actors in those companies. We were no more than hired bodies with a gift for communication. No words were ever allowed to disappear between the boards of the stage; they were all projected toward the audience.<sup>2</sup>

After years of success with traditional Italian theatre, Franca Rame and Dario Fo chose to definitively alter their theatrical course

toward the political and politicized. Franca made the leap from an actress merely fulfilling the duties of a scribe, to an actress and playwright with a profound civil conscience and theatrical maturity that continue to distinguish her today. The transformation required Franca to find new ways of addressing her public.

"Only when Dario and I decided to abandon the official theatre circuit, did I find myself compelled to learn to hold an audience by speaking directly to the stalls." In today's world of female stand-up comics and one-woman shows, it is hard to imagine the pioneering courage that was necessary 35 years ago for a woman to engage in this act of theatrical "virility."

Rame could not have foreseen the impact these 'theatrical conversations' would have on her theatre and her public. She did not speak *at* her audience, but *with* them. And as is vital to any conversation, she listened too. I remember a statement she once made during an interview with a London journalist:

Many times actors and directors are in danger of making the audience irrelevant to their art form. I believe audiences shy away from theatre when they sense, intuitively, that they are unimportant to the play. How many times have you gone to the theatre and seen a piece that would be performed no differently to an empty house?

Not surprisingly, the journalist did not comprehend the importance of these words and cut them from the interview that was published a few days later. It is Rame's singular ability to combine, and sometimes confound, the roles of performer and listener that has, more than any other aspect, distinguished her theatre. Her ability to hear the audience, perceive their reactions and connect with them, influences her performance as it is unfolding and leads her to introduce new elements — jokes, lines, pauses, and timing, in every successive performance. Hers is a unique approach to writing: a theatrical literature. That is why her monologues, which speak directly to Italy's feminist struggle, have also enjoyed such remarkable success and consensus throughout the world.

In 1976 Rame collaborated with Fo for the first time on the writing of a play, *Mother's Marijuanna Is the Best*. Encouraged by Fo, she intensified her efforts as a playwright for the 1977 text "All House, Bed and Church" — a work that completed her metamorphosis as a writer. She has performed it over a 1,000 times throughout Italy and in London, Paris, Berlin, New York, Moscow,

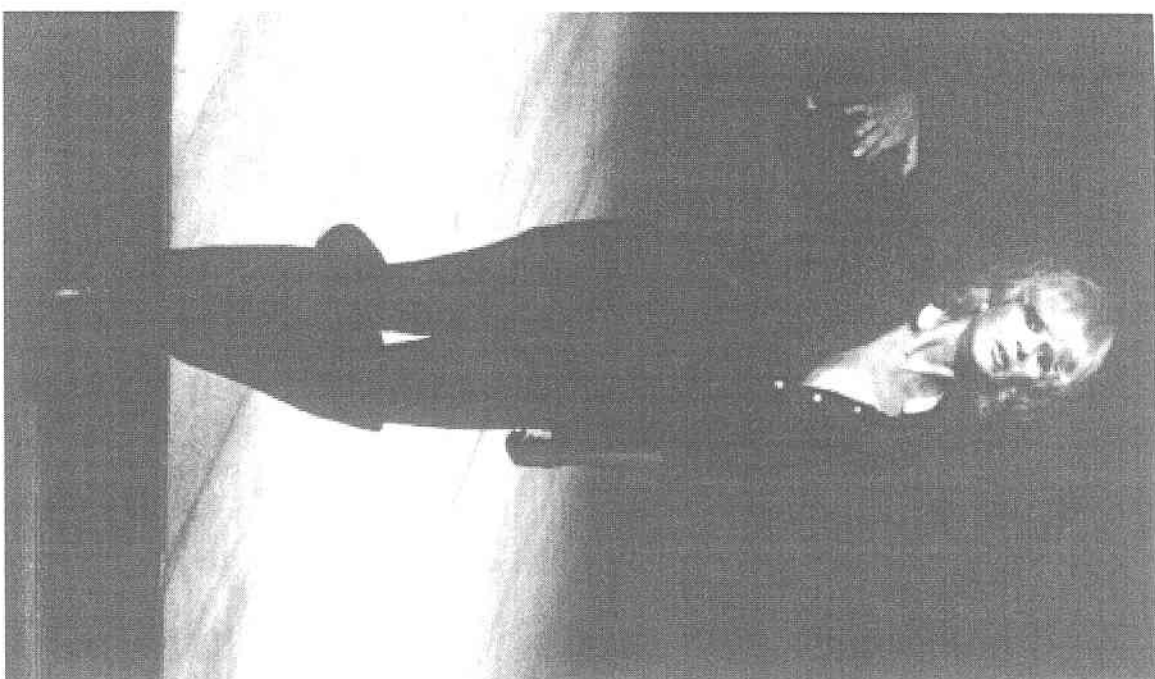
<sup>1</sup> Mentioned in Fo, *The Tricks of the Trade* (London: Methuen, 1991) 190-91.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

Madrid, and beyond. Through her frighteningly real portrayals of Italian women at that time, from the uneducated factory worker to the affluent housewife, she skillfully reveals how each was powerless in a society in which men — be them boss or husband — held economical way.

The play cemented Rame's place in Italy's feminist movement. The work has also been widely produced and performed by other actresses abroad, where it is considered a breakthrough moment in the history of women's theatre.

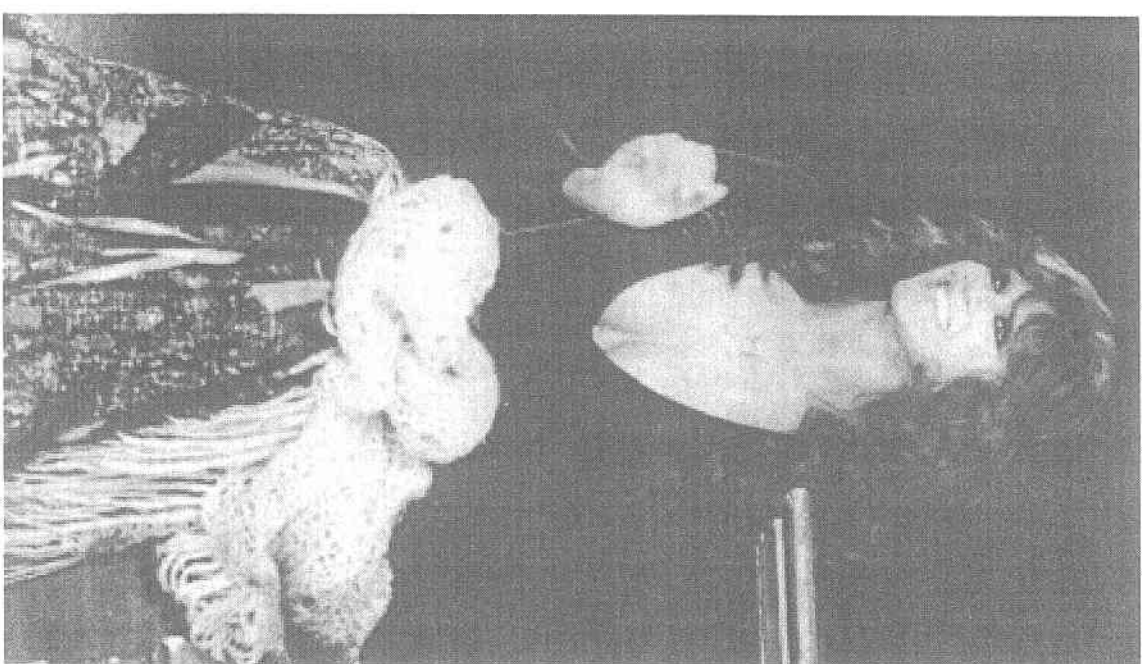
Like no other theatre performer today, Franca has created a stage persona that artfully combines powerful acting with formidable presence of personality. What makes Rame's contribution to the theatre so valuable, however, is not her personal charisma, great as it may be, but her consistent ability to interpret for her audience the significance of current socio-political events. She has devoted her professional life to developing and creating an essential comic space for her satire that is directed first at social conventions and then focuses more sharply on the unfairness of the economic and political conditions of contemporary society. Despite her passionate commitment to social change, Franca has managed to maintain her identity first and foremost as a person — not a martyr to a cause, or a publicity seeking actress, or a political junkie ready to take on the next campaign. Women identify with Franca's characters because they know that Franca herself identifies with them. It may be argued that her greatest talent is her ability to communicate this both on and off stage. Her skill at breaking character to directly address the audience before, after, and sometimes during, a performance is more than just an acting technique. It is an act of communication that she established with her audience because for Franca theatre and communication are inseparable; she is not interested in the former if it does not offer the latter. The ease with which Rame can slip between theatrical performance and direct communication mirrors the ease with which she can move between the roles of actress and woman without losing credibility in either of them. It is nothing less than astounding. It is also the natural result of a life in which certain values — individual freedom, social justice, personal dignity — were never sacrificed in the name of career advancement. To the contrary, Rame has chosen to place her exceptional acting talent at the service of these values. And in the process, she has produced dramatic works of art that will forever occupy a place in the history of the theatre.



Franca Rame, "I uta casa, letto e chiesa"



Franca Rame, "Tutta casa, letto e chiesa"



Franca Rame, "Tutta casa, letto e chiesa"

## THE TRANSGRESSIVE VOICE OF A RESISTING WOMAN

Marga Cottino-Jones  
University of California, Los Angeles

Franca Rame is a very important contemporary woman performer and playwright, and yet, whenever her name comes up, it is immediately preceded by that of her husband, Dario Fo. Indeed in Italy, for the last four decades, Dario Fo and Franca Rame have been very significant theater personalities. They have performed not only on the traditional stages of the most reputable theaters in Italy and abroad, but also in the marginal, improvised performing "spaces" of *Camere del Lavoro*, factories, public parks, city squares, and village fairgrounds. Their innovative experimental performances have thrilled as well as shocked Italian and foreign audiences of all ages and social classes.

The theater of Fo and Rame has been identified as militant and popular — and even *popular-national* in Gramscian terms — because of its provocative and, at the same time, realistic discourse and subject-matter. Indeed its intention has been to show the hidden face of power as realistically as possible, as Fo himself stated in 1973 in an interview for the magazine *Panorama*: "Quel che ho sempre cercato di fare in questi anni è stato di far vedere alla gente la dimensione vera del potere, di scoprirne la facciata. . . ." <sup>1</sup> In order to convey its message, their theater avails itself of a very vast repertoire and of performing techniques characteristic of the most valid European theatrical traditions, combining the improvisation technique and use of masks and dialect typical of the *commedia dell'arte*, with the rigorous facial gymnicks of mimes, or the contortions and physical exhibitions of acrobats, or the comic farces of clowns, etc. <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Mentioned in Valentini 8. This is a longer version of an earlier essay presented at a 1993 conference on Fo and Rame at The Ohio State University and later published in *Italica*, Special Number on Italian Theater (1995): 323–39.

<sup>2</sup> See Fo, *Manuale minimo dell'attore*, especially "Prima giornata" 7–79.

A main goal of their theater has been to establish and maintain close relations between spectators and actors throughout the performance. This allows the actors to be constantly in tune with their audience and thus sense immediately the minimal variations in their reactions and consequently propose new, often extemporaneous performing solutions aimed at reactivating the audience's potential for reception. To this purpose the scripts have a wide margin of openness that allows for improvisation even on an open stage, as dictated by the audience's reactions and by the actors' perceptions of them.

The method of script-writing utilized by Fo and Rame is very captivating. As Rame explains, this consists of all the members of the company musing collectively over an idea brought forth by one of them and developed through additions and changes until it is "rehearsed" several times as a piece. When the play is ready, it comes up for the final "rehearsal" in front of the public who is asked to comment and take an active part in discussing the performance. <sup>3</sup> Their collective form of script writing has always made it difficult to separate Rame's writing from Fo's.

If compared to traditional theater, Dario Fo and Franca Rame's has been and continues to be very unusual and innovative. The *spettacoli* that they produce address the audience with a transgressive and defiant discourse aimed at denouncing, mostly through comedy and laughter, social injustice, political corruption, religious and social hypocrisy and private and institutional intolerance. Indeed Fo himself has stated several times that farce and comedy are the ideal tools for political denunciation. As a matter of fact, the intentions of their theater is to amuse as well as to provoke its audiences.

Because of their militancy and provocative disruptiveness, both Fo and Rame have been denied regular public subsidies or performing spaces, and Dario Fo has been incarcerated under the accusation of "*oltraggio alle forze pubbliche*," and minors have been prohibited from viewing their works on immorality charges. Because their popular theater reeters on the fringes of the bourgeois establishment, denouncing its power system, they give voice to the views and needs of the lower classes, the factory workers, the peasants, and of marginalized people such as the poor, the neglected,

<sup>3</sup> In "Una testimonianza di Franca Rame," *Introduzione a Le commedie di Dario Fo*, vol. 3 (Torino: Einaudi, 1975) v–xv.



the exploited. Consequently the middle class has also viciously opposed Fo and Rame (as when Franca Rame was kidnapped, beaten, and subjected to physical violence by a gang of youths from the extreme right).

Being so openly critical of the political and social system in power, both Dario Fo and Franca Rame have become themselves the object of a political and socially repressive campaign aimed at controlling and even silencing their transgressive and disruptive discourse. They, however, have resisted this control, and have not been silenced. On the contrary, both as playwrights and actors, they have strived to maintain their theater as an open space for this crucial discourse of resistance. This is visible in the choice not only of disruptive representational topics, but also of unconventional performing spaces (such as factories, market places, parks, etc.) clearly out of line with traditional theater. By such choices, Fo and Rame have launched their attack on the mainstream system from outside, rather than from within that system.

Because of this resistance to authoritarian control, their theatrical discourse closely relates to the feminist discourse, which is equally intent at resisting the control of patriarchal authorities from a marginalized perspective, while "examining the processes whereby woman is given or refused access to discourse" (Wright 150). Although, as I have suggested before, it seems difficult to separate these two great theater personalities who have worked together so long toward a very special and unique form of contemporary theater. I feel, however, that, in the last decades, Franca Rame has achieved a stature as a scriptwriter and performer that deserves to be considered on its own and be appreciated in its uniqueness. To this purpose and within the context of resistance against authoritarian control over discourse, I intend to review and appraise her work as an actress and as co-writer of the plays to which she has largely contributed and in which she has been performing from the late '60s on.

Franca Rame is not only an exceptional actress, but a theatrical personality of unmatched talent on the contemporary Italian stage and endowed with extraordinary intellectual and professional resources. Her comic talent is particularly unusual, especially if we think that the comic is a quality often denied to women, should we accept the point of view of great thinkers and philosophers like Schopenhauer, Bergson, or Freud. As a superb comic performer, Rame has overcome the institutional taboo that sets the comic

musé out of the reach of women, and has established herself as an internationally recognized comic interpreter and writer.

Rame has devoted her professional life to make of hers and Fo's theater the essential comic space for a satire aimed first at social conventions and then more and more precisely targeted at the unfairness of the economic and political conditions of contemporary society. Episodes are taken from real life where the victims, mostly proletarians and women, are inevitably positioned as weak and powerless, wanting in political or economic connections. Especially in relation to the women issue, Franca Rame's role in the Fo-Rame theater has become predominant, as she has been increasing her influence at the level both of script-writing and of stage performance.

As an actress, Franca Rame became very well known in the '50s, as the *stampana* of the earlier plays, a role that was a combination of the dumb-blond type of the Hollywood cinema and the chattering housewife of popular Italian theater. In the late '60s, she became involved with more and more politically engaged roles and from 1977 (with the first version of *Parliamolo di donne*) on, she has interpreted several important transgressive female characters. In a 1977 interview, at the time of *Parliamolo di donne* (*Female Parts*), a series of four plays planned that year for television staging and then published later as *Tutta casa, letto e chiesa*, Franca Rame openly revealed her and Fo's concern for the condition of women in Italy:

Il gran tormentone mio e di Dario è sempre stato quello della condizione femminile . . . (e) per un teatro come il nostro . . . mancare il collegamento con la questione delle donne, sarebbe gravissimo. Il problema femminile oggi è troppo importante. (Valentini 173-74)

And indeed from that point in time, Franca Rame has become the most important woman performer voicing the most challenging feminist discourses on the contemporary Italian stage.<sup>4</sup>

Previous to that time, Rame had already given considerable attention to some important, even if not yet fully developed female characters, who, in their seemingly unaware transgressiveness, foreshadow the more self-conscious characters of the later plays. One of

<sup>4</sup>Indeed Franca Rame's role as "performer" fits perfectly in what Elizabeth Goodman discusses in her *Contemporary Feminist Theatres*. On the topic of women performers and theater, see also Case and Suleiman.

the first among such characters was the woman protagonist of *La casellante*, a short play performed on television in 1962 and published later in *Coppia aperta quasi spalancata*. The play is a very biting satire of the awful conditions of life experienced by women and their family compelled to accept health-threatening jobs in order to survive. Alternating short descriptions of the disastrous effects of her job on her family life with comments clearly voicing the authority's point of view, the woman's discourse ironically reveals the unfairness of her situation. The thick black smoke of the train-engines roaring by, day and night, slowly poisons children and animals, while the unnerving noise of those same trains makes nervous wrecks not only of the humans but also of the animals, like the cock, who "si ammalà di strissite per via dei continui spaventì (e) invece di chicchiricchi fa bee . . ." or the hens, who "fanno le uova senza rosso, come alle donne per via dello spavento va via il latte, a loro ci va via il rosso . . . povere figlie!" (Fo, *La casellante* 79). Sarcastic irony surfaces when she tries to minimize the responsibilities of the authorities in charge. In pointing out the so-called advantages of her government job, she specifies that they do not have to pay for

la luce elettrica, il gas e il riscaldamento . . . e non lo paghiamo perché non c'è . . . Le ferrovie sono oneste . . . mica ci fanno pagare quello che non danno . . . infatti l'illuminazione ad acetilene che ci abbiamo ce la fanno pagare . . . ed è giusto. (76)

Eventually, in admitting that neither she nor her husband have "diritto a nessuna pensione," she hurries on to specify that they both had been employed "senza contratto fisso . . . siamo, come dire, avventizi . . . avventizi da quindici anni" and then goes on minimizing the responsibilities of the railroad system "cosa vuoi prendertela colle povere FS con tutto quello che le Ferrovie dello Stato hanno passato e continuano a passare . . . Poverine! Povere FFSS!" In the end, however, this trend to minimize the political system's responsibilities is dramatically reversed by her lucid expose in indisputably transgressive terms:

D'accordo, ho il marito in galera, i figli stremati coi tic nervosi, manca la luce, le galline fanno tutti, il gallo fa beh, il bambino piccolo bau bau, mi passano uno stipendio da fame nera . . . però mi devo contentare . . . anche perché, se no, mi sbattono via sui due piedi. (80)

This discourse, highly critical of government exploitation, was voiced publicly through RAI, the official government television, and raised an enormous controversy at the time. It was the first time that Rame's transgressive voice shocked the Italian political system, and it would not be the last. Again and again, the powerful comic as well as tragic voice speaks boldly on the stage, interpreting the past and the present, as well as her own personal experience of life in the feminine.

Another important stage character among the very first she interpreted was Enea, the gravedigger of *Settimo: ruba un po' meno* (1964). While playing the role of the gullible victim of her colleagues' jokes, Enea ends up as the only one who holds true to fundamental human values, in spite of pressures and bribes for petty compromises. This character became a favorite of the audiences of that time, in her mixture of gullibility and naïveté on one side, and strong commitment to honesty and fairness on the other. To our purpose, Enea is also important because, while acting out the roles imposed on women by traditional representation — such as, unquestioning acceptance of men's rules and discourse, low self-esteem, emotional frailty, etc. — her discourse ends up by exposing "the ideology of authority and power" (Little 19–20) represented by the male characters. Indeed, while all male characters, even if critical of the system at first, eventually accept or bow to the corruption and unfairness of the political establishment, Enea, in all her simple-mindedness and naïveté, is the only one to defy it and to stand in opposition to it: "A me non ce la farete a mettermi l'elica in testa, né gli occhiali verdi per farmi mangiar la paglia e farmi credere che sia erba . . . (io) me ne vado . . ." (Fo, *Settimo* 207).

Both *La casellante* and Enea have a lot in common with the proletarian women characters who carry on, at the level of comic parody, the satire against the capitalist system in Fo and Rame's works between 1968–71. All these plays are strongly supportive of the working class's struggle against capitalism and government that was being carried on in Italy around that time. With the exception of *Grande Pantomima con bandiere e pupazzi piccoli e medi* (1968) and *Vorrei morire anche stasera se dovessi pensare che non è servito a niente* (1970), most of the plays reveal in the title itself the dialectics between establishment and workers (i.e., *L'operaio conosce 300 parole, il padrone 1000, per questo è il padrone* [1969], *Il funerale del padrone* [1969], *Tutti uniti, tutti insieme! Ma senza quello non è il padrone?* [1971], etc.).



The role that women play in these works is increasingly more significant and the feminist discourse voiced by them (feminist in the sense of a discourse "which aims to achieve positive re-evaluation of women's roles and/or to effect social change" [Goodman 36–37]) provides a very effective parody of the contemporary ideology of power. The best example is offered by Ricciolona, the factory worker of *Grande Pantomima con bandiere e pupazzi piccoli e medi*, who conveys a powerful indictment of the capitalistic methods of labor exploitation. The play was devised as a grandiose allegory of Italian history from the Liberation to the late '60s. The last part of the play concentrates on the strategies of labor exploitation imposed by the capitalistic system upon factory workers, especially women.

The staging of a dancing test "la catena 'tuttradanza'" (Fo, *Grande Pantomima* 53), to screen potential candidates for assembly line jobs, provides a representation of women workers in traditional terms through a patriarchal-capitalistic discourse. Indeed women are viewed as

uniche a sapersi adattare con profitto a quel sistema di montaggio: primo: per l'istinto armonico ritmico corporeale di cui sono dotate naturalmente . . . secondo perché sono più docili . . . non reagiscono . . . costano meno.

The female candidates are asked to perform a whole series of rhythmic movements to pass the so-called "tuttradanza" assembly-line cycle test projected as "semplice . . . non faticoso . . . perfino elegante e divertente" (56). The examiner's language — the dance teacher played by Franca Rame — projects a childish, feeble-minded, frivolous image of femaleness (proposed through the expressions "tesorini miei" and "carine mie" as well as through the diminutives applied to their body parts, such as, "nasino, manine, dentini, pancino," etc), against an all too real representation of factory workers reduced to Chaplin-like machines by the debasing, robot-like 24 movements of the "tuttradanza" assembly-line cycle (i.e., "avvitare le viti . . . con le manine," "infilare le spolette . . . con i dentini," "infilare i gommini . . . con i nasini," "Bloccare i pistoni con i fianchi," "sbattere . . . i glutei . . . sulla sbarra tit-mone," etc.).

This dialogic opposition between female frailty and dehumanizing labor, aiming at parodying the relationship between an ex-

plotting employer and working girls all too anxious for a job, re-surfaces also in Ricciolona's description of her own assembly-line experience. Her discourse works indeed on two different registers, projecting the traditional image of femaleness as passive, resigned, and feeble-minded as traditionally constructed, while voicing, as expected, the establishment's directives. At the same time, by speaking the language of the exploiting employer, Ricciolona's discourse succeeds in "carnivalizing" that language, ridiculing its ideology by promoting to the absurd the role that capitalistic ideology, or "legge del profitto" had imposed on women (Little 20).

Per riuscire a stare nella media, che è un po' altina, qualcuna si droga . . . e allora si tira bene, ma poi a forza di tirare . . . ogni tanto c'è qualcuna che si sbatte là come secca . . . al capo ci rincresce la gente che ci viene i malori . . . ma la responsabilità non è della direzione . . . mica è colpa del signor padrone . . . lui è buono . . . la colpa è della legge del profitto. . . . (60–61)

This dialogic tension of Ricciolona's discourse reaches its peak in the song that she and the women workers sing unfavorably about their sexual status as virgins, imposed on them by the "macchina . . . bastarda." At this point the women workers' voice exposes the hypocrisy of both the industrial and religious establishments that speak the same language of power through the intimidating presence of the machine, the new embodiment of God's word:

La macchina . . .  
ci tiene lontane dal peccato:  
è la nostra salvezion per tutte le tentazion.  
In questo mondo di vizio carnale  
sola una voce a salvarci che sale,  
la voce paterna dell'industriale,  
che tornando alla regola del monacale  
"prega e lavora" e non scioperare  
ti dice "sta' buona lì  
prega e lavora e fai cucucia lì. (65)

The message embedded in the modern world of technology repropose thus, for an ideal well-behaved female, the traditional Christian ideology of the "monacale/prega e lavora" extending its control to the factory space with the addition "non scioperare"! In

this passage surfaces also the topic of sexual politics, that, according to Michèle Waldorf's definition

introduces another kind of radical critique to its [the theatre] vocabulary by raising questions about a division of labor based on gender, and about distorted and debasing representations of sexuality. (xix)

Indeed the language used to construct the image of the "good girl" at the end of the song, "fai cuccia lì" degrades the working woman to the condition of an animal, of a dog, better, a bitch in need to be controlled. This debasing representation of femaleness will become one of the dominant topics of Rame's theater and particularly of the series of plays *Tutta casa, letto e chiesa* (1977) and *Coppia aperta, quasi spalancata* (1983-86).

In these plays Franca Rame is physically appropriating the stage as a woman, in as much as in most of them she is the only character on stage and her voice is the only one that the audience hears. This is particularly threatening for theater audiences who are accustomed to the traditional patriarchal standards that dominate mainstream theater and are unwilling to be intellectually or emotionally challenged by a polemically transgressive play. Indeed middle-class audiences usually feel at ease with plays that project familiar characters and situations and produce recognizable and unthreatening forms of discourse, devoid of disturbing material. An alternative theater, like Fo and Rame's, is based on a different conception of the dramatic apparatus and rather than reassuring the audience, it aims at provoking it to a new way of thinking, by questioning and undermining "the habitual performance codes of the majority (male) culture" (Goodman 20). The function of the exclusively female voice in such a theater is therefore to provoke the audience into a controversial relationship that questions the exclusively male outlook in order to create a context wherein "to think about issues differently" (Goodman 16).

The best examples from the earlier group of one-act plays, which are all articulated in monologues, are provided by *Il risveglio* (*Waking up*) and *Medea*. In the first one the protagonist is a factory worker who is also wife, mother, and housewife and whose discourse projects in dialogic tension the disturbing effects of sexual politics both at work and in the family. Rame herself has voiced her personal involvement with this piece: "di mio forse c'è più di

quanto non m'aspettassi si potesse utilizzare," she says in a 1977 interview and she has performed it constantly from that time on. Overworked, close to a nervous breakdown, this woman without a name, besides holding a full-time factory job like her husband, is wholly responsible for all domestic activities in her household, motherhood included. Her discourse betrays an intention to muse in first person about "woman's peripheral yet invested position within a male-dominated culture" (Little 19), voicing what Gilbert calls rebellious "hysteria" that "mocks both itself and the phrases borrowed from a language of power" (in Cixous and Clément xv).

The young woman of the "monologo del risveglio" in Franca Rame's own summary of the play:

si sveglia rimbambita, stordita dalla fatica e dal sonno mai smaltito, per andare a lavorare in fabbrica. . . . E, come al solito in ritardo, deve ancora andare a portare il bambino all'asilo nido. . . . e quando finalmente è pronta per uscire, non trova la chiave per riaprire la porta. . . . ("Da Isabella a Partiamo di donne" 143-44)

Even in her sleep, the unnerving experience of factory life haunts her through nightmarish projections: "Tre pezzi, una saldatura, un colpo di trapano, due bulloni. . . . una saldatura, un colpo di trancia, un colpo di trapano. . . ." that eventually wake her up "di soprassalto" (Fo and Rame, "Il risveglio," *Tutta casa* 9). Her reaction to the world around her is verbalized through a language that combines stereotyped comic tonalities with realistic representation of an everyday life subject to restrictions that authorities outside her control have imposed on her and her family, such as the ones imposed by the nuns of the "asilo nido" who "se arriviamo dopo le sette non ti accettano. . . ."; or by the shortcomings of popular buildings where 300 families live together and use water all at the same time, so "non c'è mai l'acqua. . . ." etc. This comic verbal tension infiltrates her language all throughout the monologue, but especially from the point when, not finding the key to lock the door, she has to reconstruct move by move and eventually word by word, all that had gone on the night before.

She keeps on projecting the image of a rather disorganized and scatterbrain mother and housewife, who forgets the baby in the closet: "Metro la vaschetta qui, cerco il bambino. . . . non c'è più il bambino. Dove ho messo il bambino? Nel frigorifero, nella lavatrice, nell'armadio. . . . Avevo messo il bambino nell'armadio

...” (12); bathes him in sugar and water so that he becomes the preferred pastime of bees and flies; “ecco perché la suora all’asilo mi ha detto: ‘Devo tenere il suo bambino sempre al chiuso ... come lo metto fuori, api, calabroni e mosche gli volano addosso ...’” (13); or places the detergent box in the refrigerator instead of the milk bottle, etc. In this way she applies the formula created by what Sheppard would call conventional “male role-consistent humour” (Sheppard 44), that projects women as dimwitted and bumbling housewives and mothers. Rame, however, innovates this formula by having her character musing over her own “domestic” shortcomings with what looks like short *a parte* to the audience. Thus her discourse becomes ironically transgressive of the language of the establishment that had always encouraged the notion that domesticity is women’s major social function in life.

Through humour and transgressivity, then, the woman on stage constantly provokes or surprises her spectators, as when she sees the detergent with a scent of lemon in the refrigerator and comments: “nel frigorifero non ci ho messo il latte ... però c’è il detersivo al limone per la lavatrice ... e perché è giusto: il limone si mette sempre nel frigorifero” (12); or when, wanting to put talcum powder on the baby, covers him with parmesan cheese:

ora ti sciungo, una bella spolveratina di formaggio grattugiato ...  
ma cosa c’entra il formaggio? Chi mi ha spostato il borotalco?  
Con quello che costa il formaggio! Aspetta che lo tiro su, tanto il  
sedere del mio bambino è pulito ... (10)

With this parody of herself as a woman who realizes she cannot accomplish all that is expected of her, she also questions those expectations, and consequently succeeds in countering her domestic inefficiency by what Zita Dresner calls the “ability to recognize and laugh at the incongruities between the ideal ‘norm’ and the realities of the average woman’s life” (99). While up to this point this woman’s voice in first person has projected exclusively her own personal situation as mother and housewife, the introduction of Luigino, her husband, in her reconstruction of the night before, activates also her discourse on her condition as wife. It becomes at first a minority discourse in unison without gender discrimination, as she recognizes her own and her husband’s common inferior class-positioning as low paid, overworked factory workers reduced to animal level, “Lavoriamo come due cani ...” (15). Together

they voice their frustration against the “padrone” or better the “multinazionale” as nowadays “non si dice più padrone ... oggi il padrone ce l’hanno solo i cani” (14).

Sexual politics, however, soon surfaces as she comments on her inferior positioning in relation to her own husband within the family structure: “a me, che oltre che lavorare ... ti faccio anche la serva gratis” (14). At this point, she clearly questions “woman’s peripheral yet invested position” within the male-dominated world of the factory by polemically projecting the establishment’s point of view on the function that family and wives play in the working men’s life:

La famiglia, ‘sta sacra famiglia l’hanno inventata apposta perché tutti quelli sballati dalla nevrosi dei ritmi di lavoro bestiali come te ritrovino in noi mogli tuttofare, il materassone! Noi vi ringenziamo ... gratis, per essere pronti l’indomani a tornare belli scaricati a produrre ancora meglio per lui, il multinazionale! (14)

Conveyed by the woman’s voice, this point of view is thus openly exposed and parodied and the woman undertakes the function of denouncing the system both in its public (the factory) and private (family) dimension. This still comic tone, however, is immediately followed by the more dramatic realization of her own exploitation at home as wife, which is voiced with a pressing crescendo of personal frustration and unfulfilled needs:

‘Ti viene mai in mente che anch’io possa avere dei problemi? Mi chiedi mai ‘sei stanca? vuoi una mano?’ Chi fa il mangiare? Io. Chi lava i piatti? Io. Chi fa la spesa? Io. Chi fa i salti mortali per arrivare a fine mese? Eppure lavoro anch’io! Io, io, io ... Le calze che sporchi, chi le lava? Io. Quante volte hai lavato le mie calze? Io voglio poter parlare con te ... Voglio che i miei problemi siano i tuoi, e non soltanto i tuoi i miei! Io voglio che si viva insieme, non che si stia insieme! Voglio parlare, parlare con te ... (15)

In this tirade, the female voice constructs a traditional representation of a woman’s domestic functions: “fare il mangiare, lavare i piatti, fare la spesa, lavare le calze sporche” all belong to the realm of the low domestic and as such constitute “the realities of an average woman’s life.” In the woman’s view, however, “domesticity” is far from representing the “ideal” female space; rather, it makes her

aware of her longings for a different relationship with her husband. The comic undertone is dropped while she dramatically emphasizes her need for communication, "Io voglio poter parlare con te," and for fairness in their male-female relationship: "Voglio che i miei problemi siano i tuoi, non soltanto i tuoi i miei. Io voglio che si viva insieme, non che si stia insieme." With these words, the woman clearly projects a female personality highly transgressive of the stereotyped representation of the bungling and dimwitted housewife, typical of a male-dominated type of humour. She now projects herself as a clear-minded, direct, and perceptive woman, aware of her problems and able to verbalize them to influence her partner.

And Luigino recognizes the rightfulness of her plea and acknowledges his flaws, using an emotional self-incriminating language, far from a typical male discourse: "ha cominciato . . . a dire che sî, che ci avevo ragione, che era tutto sbagliato, che doveva cambiare, e si è fatto, insomma, la cosiddetta 'autocritica'." At this point, the woman too verbalizes her own feelings: "E mi stringeva, mi stringeva . . . e più mi stringeva e più io piangevo, . . . com'era bello piangere ieri sera! Come mi è piaciuto!" (16). By now the woman has fallen back into her role of wife within the family boundaries and her language shows the transition. Her discourse strikes the same comic note as in the beginning when she realizes that it's actually Sunday and not a working day and ends up parodying herself, her own "hysteria" and the situation she herself has created:

il tesserino del tram . . . sei buchi? Sei buchi di andata e sei buchi di ritorno! Sei buchi di andata sei buchi di ritorno? Domenica! E' domenica! . . . Ma roba da pazzi, volevo andare a lavorare anche di domenica! Sono pazzo! E' domenica. Di domenica non si lavora e fino a tarda ora si sta a dormire! Che bella la domenica! A letto bambino! . . . Si ritorna a letto, e giuraddio se mi sogno un'altra volta di lavorare, mi strozzo da sola . . . (16)

In this monologue the female voice that has exclusively dominated the stage has actively involved her audience mostly through humour in a provocative questioning of domestic and sexual politics issues highly charged with gender discrimination. In particular, the issues confronting "the couple" are here (and for the first time in the theater of Fo and Rame) faced exclusively from the

woman's viewpoint and actually solved in a way that is, at least momentarily, positive. The projection of the male voice in an atypical male discourse contributes to such a solution as it shows that through communication and mutual understanding a man can accept change in order to respond to his partner's needs, thus creating a context in which it is possible "to think about issues differently" (Kaplan, *Women and Film* 9).

Similar issues are also confronted in *Medea*, even if no positive solution is offered. *Medea* indeed is the only intentionally tragic piece of their theater (tragic in the traditional sense of a story involving high social level characters), modeled after Euripides's play as Franca herself admits:

La nostra Medea si rifà ai maggi umbro-toscani, è una Medea popolare, che ricalca la tragedia scritta da Euripide . . . un pezzo di teatro straordinario, recitato in un linguaggio arcaico . . . un dialetto dell'Italia centrale. (*Medea* 69, 70)

The main conflict here seems to center on desire. Desire has indeed been viewed in several studies on narrative as the promoting force of narrative action. Plots of any type, whether of literary, cinematic, or dramatic narrative, are usually constructed around the male's desire for a female object and they develop out of the male's actions to convince, to change, or to seduce the female into accepting his desire. As soon as the female accepts it, the plot normally reaches narrative closure.<sup>5</sup> If this is the expected progression of narrative, most of Fo and Rame's plays dealing with the condition of women show a drastically different dramatic development. While traditional discourse in literature, cinema, and theater aims at narrative closure where the male subject's desire achieves its goal of possessing and controlling the female object, Rame's discourse on stage is quite different from what traditional audiences or readers are accustomed to hearing. Indeed, Rame's female characters dominating the stage with their presence and addressing the spectators

<sup>5</sup> Several examples come to mind beginning with Boccaccio's famous story of Nastagio degli Onesti (*Decameron* V, 8) where the narrative develops out of Nastagio's desire for the Traversari woman who resists him, but who eventually is forced to accept his love out of fear (see Fleming); to Goldoni's *La Locandiera*, where Mirandolina plays the resisting woman up to the point when she too is forced to accept her lover in marriage, in order for the play to reach narrative closure.

with a very strong subversive voice, strike traditional audiences as unusual at least, often transgressive and therefore unacceptable and/or incomprehensible. The discourse of these characters constructs the female as a point of resistance to the male's control so that she can break down a centuries-old silence with a subversive voice that calls attention to the unfairness of the woman's condition, especially in her role as mother. This is particularly true of *Medea*, where Franca Rame performs as Medea.

If we consider this one-act monologue in relation to its subtext, Euripides's *Medea*, a play already quite transgressive in its own way, we notice that in both plays the main female character is a wife who sets herself in opposition to her husband's desire for another woman, younger and more politically influential than herself. Her female voice strikes the audience as subversive in her opposition to the male's desire, and yet in Euripides's play, this opposition is framed within her own role as jealous wife very strongly embedded in a patriarchal society where only the will and desire of men count and the females' lot depends exclusively on their husbands' or fathers' will. Thus even if both these plays stage an important female character and give her a strong voice critical of the male hero, their discourse would not necessarily be transgressive. This holds true of Euripides's play, while Rame's *Medea*, instead, goes further in her opposition to the male's control toward the construction of a female subject charged with a new political awareness of her own rights and needs.

In Euripides's play, although *Medea* succeeds in destroying Jason's new object of desire as well as as the source of his fatherly pride, that is his children, the plot still belongs to the traditional maternal narrative where woman moves within very well defined patriarchal parameters that frame her only as wife and mother, that is, exclusively as the object of the needs of her immediate family.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, she also views the others, such as Jason and the children, exclusively from this perspective, Jason as husband and father, and the children as sons. Furthermore, her voice always expresses her exclusive concern as a betrayed wife, hardly different from that of all the other women around her. Her revenge thus

aims at punishing Jason as husband, by killing his new wife, and as father, by killing his sons.

For never living shall he see henceforth  
The sons I bore him, nor shall he beget

A son from his new bride, that wretch foredoomed  
In agony to die by drugs of mine. (Euripides 801–86)

As the Chorus questions her as “of wives most wretched” whether she will “have the heart to slay (her) sons,” she replies “yes: so mine husband's heart shall most be wrung” (816–18).

Jason's reaction to the murder of his sons shows that *Medea* was well aware of the importance that patriarchal society placed on fatherly pride. When the Chorus reveals to him the murderous deed: “Thy sons are dead, slain by the mother,” his reply clearly reveals the depth of the wound inflicted on him who, as father, is now dead: “Ah me! . . . then hast thou killed me!” (1309–10). At the end, *Medea*'s voice is overpowered by Jason's in his unrelenting projection of the male's value judgment on her murder in the name of “justice that looketh on murder” (1390) and that will punish the “abhorred child-murderess” (1407). Eventually Jason as a man, within a society, both divine and human, of men, voices a final repudiation against *Medea* as “woman hatefullest” to the “Gods, . . . me, . . . all the race of men,” for “me hast made a childless ruin” (1323–26).

The main conflict of Euripides's play is then reduced to a mother/father opposition over the sons as instrument for the mother's/wife's vengeance against the husband, guilty of having desired another woman. What had started as a potentially transgressive female voice expressing resistance against a male's desire, turns into a traditional maternal narrative, where the masculine discourse condemns, in the name of the father, the mother's actions against father and sons. Euripides's *Medea* confirms therefore Elizabeth Wright's statement that “mothers don't write,” but they rather “are written and always from the viewpoint of those who lay claim to them” (145).

Rame's *Medea*, instead, seems to comply with the urging of feminist criticism, that women “write rebelliously . . . thereby bringing a woman subject into existence and history” (Wright 149). In this play, *Medea* challenges the patriarchal representation of woman as wife and mother and her own exclusively sacrificial

<sup>6</sup>For a thorough discussion of maternal narrative, see “The Moving Image: Pathos and the Maternal,” in Doane 70–95, esp. 73, and “The materna melodrama” in Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation* 77.

role that the women of the chorus project in their discourse of ap-parent solidarity with her:

Non a te ma a' figlioli toi hai da penzare! . . . Per l'amore che teni a 'sti figlioli, Medea, te de' sacrificare! Che de madre degna, non de donna orgogliosa hai da penzare . . . Che anco a noiatre li nostri ommeni ne hanno fatto torto e noi te se pole capire . . . E cusi da sempre è la legge de lu monno . . . (65-66)

But this law easily accepted by the women of the chorus is instead fiercely questioned by Medea:

La legge de lu monno? De quale legge me annate parlando? . . . De una legge che voiatre amiche avite penzato, e detto, e scritto? E poi hardito? E battuto tamburo voi nella piazza per dare avvisata che 'sta legge è sacrata? L'ommini, l'ommini . . . L'ommini contro de noiatre femmene l'hanno penzata e segnata e sacrata 'sta legge. E sacra fatta per scrittura dello re . . .

Medea's discourse polemically mimics the working of the patriarchal mind controlling with the law of the father the role of women, according to the male's wills and desires:

ora n'avvedo bene donne mee che la migliore penzata che l'omo ha fatto a vantaggio sojo è d'averne ben allevate alla soa dottrina . . . a scola v'ha mannate . . . e voiatre ne ripetete la lezione e ve fate contente, chinate state, nun ve rebellate . . . (67)

By juxtaposing the working of the patriarchal mind with her own awareness of its impact on women's lot and of the rules of complicity that affect women's life, Medea voices her own polemic stand against the law of the father.

This technique of juxtaposition surfaces also in her encounter with Jason, when she again mimics his patriarchal view of the woman's role within the family and ironically resists it, verbalizing her own awareness of this constrictive and oppressive view. During these scenes, Jason is on stage with her, but keeps silent all the time. As a result, all patriarchal standards by which the male voice is the controlling force over the female are here clearly subverted and the audience is polemically provoked by this unexpected representational strategy. At the same time, Medea, even if clearly in control of the situation and of the stage, chooses to adopt the language of

male authority, re-proposing a traditional view of woman that reassures the spectators and puts them at ease.

By faithfully interpreting the male point of view, she first constructs herself negatively as a resisting woman, mad with "rabbia storta e giallusia de donna corra" and full of anger and complaints because "debole è la femmena . . . pe' soa natura . . . fazzile a rancore, envidia e 'llamento" (70). Then, using the same linguistic strategy, she reverses the process and constructs herself positively as the "good wife" demanded by her husband, who shows understanding for his needs as a man and a politician, "Tu savio se' stato che te procura giovinezza nova dentro novo letto . . . e de gente maggiore t'acquista nova parentela," who is happy for his success "e ne fo gran contento," and wants to help his new wife to please him more "vegnèrò . . . apparecchiare lo letto, con fresche lenzuola de genziana odorose, e darne consiglio alla giovine sposa come portarse con te all'ammore." Eventually she constructs herself also as the "good mother," exalting the rewards to be found in motherhood: "E donna abbisogna che se contenta d'essere madre che è già gran premio" (70). At this point, her audience, both on and off stage, is now at ease with the familiar representation of a woman that Medea has delivered in a reassuring traditional authoritarian discourse.

But provocation starts again when Medea proposes herself once more as a resisting woman. She does it, however, at first, still in a reassuring way, projecting it to the past "penzavo," as an experience long gone: first as a betrayed wife "E pensare che traditore t'avea chiamato. E penzavo che fusse enfame recatto de vostra legge d'ommeni de poterce scambiare"; and then as an oppressed mother "E penzavo che 'sta gabbia dentro la quale voi ci avete impigionato fusse la peggio infanità, con alligati, incatenati al collo li figlioli come basto de legno duro alla vacca per meglio tenere sotto manzuete a noi femmene, e per meglio poterce mungere, per meglio poterce montare . . . Coteeste follie penzavo, Giasone . . ." (70). The repetition of the past tense "penzavo" connected at the end with "follie" clearly aims at reassuring Jason and the audience with the language of male authority cleverly appropriated by Medea in her ingenious imitation of patriarchal discourse.

But, the brief sentence that follows: "E lo penzo ancora . . ." abruptly and unequivocally disclaims all preceding reassurances and imposes Medea's definitive and inflexible stand in the present

against "the laws of men." This reversal opens the stage for the final act of Medea's rebellious challenge as "donna nova" that combines murder, social destruction and rebirth: "È 'sta gabbia che te voj spezzare, è 'sto basto che te voj schiantare. Necessità è che sti figlioli a mia abbino a morire, perchè tu, Giasone, e tue leggi infami abbiate a schiattare" (74). Medea's voice here is the voice of rebellion against the law of men that has invented the cage where to enclose women, the yoke under which to control them, the blackmailing with which to silence them. No male voice, Jason's or others' interrupts or silences Medea's and it is still her only voice that is heard at the end as she mimics the reactions of the people to her murderous deed and delivers her message of rebirth as a new woman: "e fora delle porta tutta gente faranno crido: mostro! cagnal scellerata! Matrie for de natural! Zozza! e eo me dirò chagnendo: mori, mori! pe' fa nascere 'na donna nova . . . 'na donna nova!"

The maternal narrative has turned here into a provocative opening, rather than into narrative closure, with the challenge delivered by Medea in favor of a new formulation of woman: "'na donna nova!" The end of the play thus leads to a new beginning, bringing into existence and into history a new woman subject. The play's transgressiveness, mostly produced by the subversive female voice exclusively dominating the stage, makes of it one of the most disruptive texts in Italian theater.

This disruptiveness continues also in more contemporary texts written "a due mani" by Fo and Rame and performed on stage by Franca Rame, such as those included in the series *Coppia aperta*, *quasi spalancata*. And yet, *Medea* represents the highest point of Rame's quest for that "collegamento con la questione della donna" mentioned in 1977. Indeed this play highlights the main controversial factors that make up a woman's life, her potentially conflicting relations with husband, children, society, and her own self, and brings them to shocking, and yet unavoidable, tragic results. *Medea* shows the growing relevance that the women issue has acquired in the Fo-Rame theater, from the exclusively comic plays of the early period, through the combination of comic and dramatic discourse, as noticed particularly in *Il risveglio*, to this highly ironic drama. What this progression ultimately shows is the significant place that in the last decades this particular discourse, the feminist discourse, has taken in the Fo-Rame theater; a discourse constructed, just like their theater, as resistance against authoritarian

control. And there is no doubt that this place in their theater has been carved by Franca Rame's invaluable collaboration as a writer and performer with the goal of creating a truly feminist theater, that is, in Liz Goodman's words: "a theatre which aims to achieve positive re-evaluation of women's roles and/or to effect social change" (36–37). These aims, while being a powerful incentive of all of Rame's works and performances, are clearly the basic assumptions of her latest stage works, the two plays *L'eroina* and *La donna grassa* of *Parliamo di donne* (1991), and *Sesso? Grazie, tanto per gradire!* (1996), which are seen by the critics as "Un nuovo spaccato della società contemporanea, in forma di dolente satira, nella più classica tradizione di quel teatro popolare impegnato, del quale Franca Rame e Dario Fo sono da molti anni i più prestigiosi autori e protagonisti."<sup>7</sup> In these latest works, Franca Rame as writer and performer, may be viewed as one of those women comic performers that June Sochen carefully describes in her work as women who: "As outsiders, looking in, became sensitive commentators on the life [of their society], and as survivors, they laughed rather than cried at their observations; as generous women, they shared their humor with others, so that they too could laugh and not cry" (14). This is particularly true of *L'eroina* [Heroin] and *La donna grassa* [The Fat Woman] that bring to the foreground women protagonists as mothers positioned particularly in the relationship they establish with their daughters, a relationship which is of particular concern to contemporary feminist criticism but had been seldom represented in contemporary Italian theater or even in Rame and Fo's alternative theater. These plays deal also with specific problems and attitudes of contemporary society, such as drug addiction, AIDS, violence, the pain of solitude and alienation and the troublesome changes taking place in family relationships and religious beliefs; all these topics are handled with the comic irony typical of Rame and Fo's theater, mitigated here, however, by a more evident compassionate touch. The outcome is a powerful comic type of theater that uplifts and enlightens even the darkest corners of the human heart.

These pieces are innovatively anti-traditional and not only in their subject matter, but also structurally, as Rame uses several distancing anti-narrative devices that break or ignore the rules of traditional narrative and its logic, thus leaving the text open to the

<sup>7</sup>Quoted on the back cover of the edition of Rame, *Parliamo di donne*.



spectators' speculations. As spectators, we indeed have to construct the text ourselves, and as Kaplan suggests: "in so doing, we learn a lot about how relationships position women in certain ways and about the pain that women endure" (*Women and Film* 9).

In *L'eroina*, we, the spectators, are immediately faced with a chaotic situation around Carla, the protagonist, an older woman who is peddling a lot of rather questionable merchandise, such as porno-videocassettes, contraceptives, and fake cellular phones displayed on a stand strategically placed at the entrance of a suburban park in a large industrial Italian city. Here, groups of young people, mostly drug addicts, stroll by, addressing her as "Mater Tossicorum," and are constantly put to flight by armed gangs of bandits and drug-dealers, shooting at one another under the eyes of a thoroughly inefficient police force. When we finally construct the protagonist's life and background, we realize that she, a former Latin high school teacher, has been positioned in such a chaotic situation by her relationship with her three children. She had indeed mothered two sons who by now are deceased, one killed by AIDS and the other by an overdose, and one younger daughter, a drug-addict as well, whose rehabilitation has become the only concern of her life. The mother is indeed determined to save her daughter from cheap heroine and AIDS, by doing all she can, even prostituting herself, to find the money needed to assist her and eventually enroll her in a drug-rehabilitation program. In short, we find out that this chaotic situation is the result of the protagonist's relationship with her children, for whom she endures all the horrors of contemporary life that a lonely, unprotected, powerless woman-mother can be exposed to. This situation seems to be the result also of her conviction that she has to take a stand against the social injustice that dominates her world and makes her unable to help her children to survive in a society controlled by drugs and violence. Her powerlessness becomes particularly evident in her several appeals to God, whose answers consist exclusively of loud thunder noises and lightning. The main motivation of her appeals to God is to try to shake the divine indifference. He shows to poor people like herself. When she discovers the disappearance of the bags full of money that she thought she had found near her stand and securely tied on the tree over her stand, she addresses God in bitter disappointment:

Allora l'ho sognata tutta sta storia . . . o sognato anche le borse sull'albero . . . [*... corre all'albero, tira la corda, ma appeso non c'è nulla*] Ecco, infatti non ci stanno . . . c'è solo la corda . . . per impiccarmi . . . volendo . . . [*A Dio*] Cos'è, un incentivo? Compiamenti Eterno . . . proprio una bella trovata! Figurati se ti potevi lasciare andare in un ribaltone pazzesco . . . in uno slancio di generosità iperbolica come questa . . . farmi arrivare a sognare le borse piene di quattrini e poi farmele anche ritrovare appena sveglia . . . T'immagini . . . io che arrivo qui e afferro la corda e tiro . . . e alé! E invece no . . . tutto normale, tutto logico . . . Piovono quattrini solo su balordi, mafiosi, camorristi, sui furbi, i papponi della politica, la gente degli affari . . . Noi poveri cristi [*tuoni e lampi*] si cristi, bisogna scannarci . . . battere, rubare, e poi ci sbatti all'inferno! Ma non è colpa tua . . . a parte il bel gesto, non ce la potevi fare mai, creatore, perché non sei creativo . . . sei un creatore senza creatività . . . Piatto, conseguente, logico, prevedibile, standard . . . Non sei spiritoso . . . non hai spirito. [*Tuoni e lampi*. . .]

This monologue plays on two different modalities. One decidedly comic, developing out of the downgrading image of a God caught in a preposterous figurative head over heels somersault (*un ribaltone pazzesco*), and another more somberly satirical, based on the bitter realization of social injustices, hardly ever alleviated by divine intervention: "Piovono quattrini solo su balordi, mafiosi, camorristi, sui furbi, i papponi della politica, la gente degli affari . . . Noi poveri cristi [*tuoni e lampi*] si cristi, bisogna scannarci . . . battere, rubare, e poi ci sbatti all'inferno!" The divine commentary provided by the natural phenomena of thunder and lightning, allows for Rame's female voice to be the only human voice on stage, thus promoting it to the dominant role in the piece, as already attempted in *Medea*. This type of monologue is repeated in the last scene, before the protagonist's death, caused by a bullet that hits her by chance, when two bandits start a gun fight in front of her stand. The protagonist's death is no longer projected in the future, as in *Medea*'s case, but takes place on stage under the audience's very eyes, while her voice, still questioning God's motivations and still showing her motherly concern for her daughter, fills the theater space even while growing weaker and weaker:

E questo che è? [*Perde il controllo e comincia a gridare*] Perché? Cosa mi stai facendo? Perché mi spari addosso? Ma che ti ho fatto? Mi dai illusioni, e poi non è vero . . . Quest'altra storia, e



poi anche questa non è vera . . . E adesso che succede? mi fai venire a casa tua . . . e la Maria . . . Maria! [*Implorente*] Poi tu, quando vengo su . . . mi fai scendere ancora ch . . . L'Anna . . . lo sai che L'Anna [*Le manca via-via, la voce*] Mi fai scendere? . . . Io ho pazienza, lo sai . . . io aspetto . . . E quando scendo i soldi me li fai trovare per davvero . . . O no? [*quasi un sospiro*] O no? . . . L'Anna . . . Rispondi! . . . Rispondete . . .

But the only reply to this imploring appeal is provided by the same thunders and lightening as before, showing the same lack of concern on the side of the Eternal Father, even at Carla's death acknowledged only in the stage directions by the darkness that falls on her. ("*Tuoni e fulmini. Sottofondo: 'Sabat Mater? Su Carla che muore scende il buio.*") (*L'eroina* 57). Carla's last monologue, in its show of desperation and anger against an unjust God highlights the two modalities of her transgressive voice (1) the bitterly sarcastic one, hitting hard at God and his patriarchal ideology of authoritarianism, and fed by the realization of the overwhelming injustice investing not only the world of men, but God the Father's as well; and (2) the pathetic one created by Carla's personal anguish and sense of defeat arising from her institutionalized positioning as a powerless mother, unable to protect her own daughter. This voice makes of Carla a strong transgressive heroine, fully aware not only of her own powerlessness as a mother, but also of all the evils that the traditional patriarchal laws, based on uncontrolled power, money and violence, have brought to contemporary society. The only positive relationship, formulated in this part of the text, is the one that Carla projects with Mary, the Heavenly Mother, whom she imploringly addresses three times in this last monologue, as the only positive, beneficial presence available to her in her moment of need. The *Sabat Mother* theme hinted at in the stage directions at the end of the play suggests a much more soothing and sympathetic sound than God's thundering commentary and reaffirms the positive, helping effects of a Motherly presence, even at the time of death. *L'eroina* seems therefore to be a play mostly dedicated to the issue of woman-as-mother in contemporary society, and to elevate the mother's role to a much more complex and richly endowed level, than the exclusively sacrificial mother melodrama we are accustomed to seeing. Even if Carla sacrifices all she has for her children, fulfilling therefore the maternal sacrificial role expected of melodramatic motherly narrative, her bitterly satirical attacks

against God, the archetypal Father, and his unjust laws, makes of her a clearly transgressive heroine of the same type as Medea.

In *L'eroina*, Rame's is again a highly polemical voice conveying a woman-mother's resistance not against an earthly father and king, but against what is traditionally viewed as the highest authority in the world, the Eternal father and divine king, whose laws dramatically affect all his children, males as well as females, although in this particular case, women seem to be the most hardly hit. Rame's concern with "la questione della donna" is powerfully reflected by her choice of a lonely powerless woman, constructed with sympathetic respect, as the resisting and transgressive protagonist of this compellingly touching contemporary drama.

The other play, *La donna grassa*, that is included in the *Parlino di donne* volume, investigates the relationship between mother and daughter even more thoroughly than *L'eroina* and at the same time it changes *Medea's* tragic mood to a contemporary comedy animated by very witty topics, such as the insertion of a disembodied voice to represent the male lover and to highlight the problem of human alienation in our society. The play also introduces very recognisable low-mimetic characters, such as, Mattea, the protagonist, whose food-addiction and its gaining-weight consequences project a problem with whom many of its female spectators would easily identify.

The same "distancing narrative devices," noticed in *L'eroina*, are used in this play to keep the spectators in suspense about the protagonist's life and background, so that they will have to find out on their own what relationships have positioned her in the situation where they find her. The play opens on what appears to be an affectionate dialogue between two lovers:

*Voce uomo:* Buongiorno tesoro sono già le nove! . . . Svegliati, amore.  
*Voce Mattea:* Oh nooo! Ancora un pisolino . . . ti prego! Bacio . . . accareziami . . .  
*Voce uomo:* (*molto preso*) Sì, sì . . . Ora alzati! Amore . . . sono le nove in punto . . .  
*Voce Mattea:* Sei cattivo! Stanotte m'hai distrutta e adesso pretendi . . . Mostro . . .  
*Voce uomo:* Sì sì sono il tuo mostro! Quanto ti amo! Bella, dolce, calda, amore!  
*Voce Mattea:* Oh sì, ancora . . . ancora . . . amore . . .

The spectators will find out later that they have been deceived and that such a relationship is nonexistent due to the fact that the male's is a disembodied voice and the male body is actually nowhere to be found in the large bed in the center of the stage, which, as soon as Mattrea decides to strip it down, reveals that the male voice, lovingly addressing her, was exclusively the fabrication of a machine, that is a tape recorder.

Adesso basta tesoro, ti devo proprio strappare dalle lenzuola! ... [*Solleva con forza le lenzuola tirandole a sé. Appaiono due cuscini disposti a lasciare immaginare una persona.*] Oh, mio Dio, ... dove sei / Non fare scherzi! [*Solleva i cuscini e li butta.*] Mi hanno rubato l'amante ... o forse è scappato ... Mi ammazzo! Dove sei? ... Ah sei qui! [*Solleva un registratore*] Mi avevi fatto prendere un colpo! [*La bacia*] Come avrei fatto senza di te? Mangianastri del mio cuore! [*Preme un tasto e si risente la voce dell'uomo*]

*Voce uomo:* Sveglia tesoro ... Sono già le nove! ... Quanto ti amo! ... anche se ieri sera sei stata cattiva ... Sgogliati ... andiamo sotto la doccia ... ti voglio insonnare dalla testa ai piedi. (69-70)

Mattrea actually plays up the situation, fictionalizing her male lover being kidnapped or in flight and herself on the verge of suicide for his disappearance, so that the spectators may wonder whether she is actually aware of what is happening. Only later on, the audience finds out that it was actually her idea to create those disembodied voices of lovers. On the other hand Mattrea's emotional showing of affection for a machine "mangianastri del mio cuore!" emitting sounds mimicking true feelings of love and passion, turns the situation from comic to pathetic, as it hints at Mattrea's loneliness and her feelings of alienation. These feelings are here only guessed, but they will be openly revealed later on in her dialogue with her male collaborator who informs her of the success of her recorded audiotape invention:

*Gionane:* Le tue registrazioni, la sveglia con le coccole, stanno riscuotendo un successo incredibile. E in particolare quelle con l'allusione dell'amante nel letto pieno di dolcezze e sbaciucchiamenti ... La ricerca di mercato è stata un trionfo ... Lo sai che nel giro di un mese sono sparite da tutti i negozi? ... Vanno a ruba. Non si fa in tempo a riprodurre una serie che: wuomh! Esaurite! ... E sai qual'è la cosa davvero incredibile? Che i più

fanatici sono gli uomini. Sono loro che comprano più cassette. La tua voce è un trionfo. ... Sei già una diva! (78-79)

Instead of being thrilled by this news and by the fat contract that comes with it, Mattrea instead feels "colpevole come la peggior delle criminali" and the reasons she gives are embedded in her realization of the sense of alienation that is dominating not only her, but her whole society. She confesses:

*Mattrea:* Io sto approfittando come la più subdola delle furbastre della situazione di angoscia e frustrazioni in cui è caduta la maggior parte della gente, me compresa ... Tutti questi poveri alienati che comprano le mie cassette con voci di falsi innamorati, lo fanno perché hanno paura delle voci vere. Un rapporto autentico t'impegna, ti costringe a spaccarti in due a favore dell'altro. Meglio allora imbecuirsi di una registrazione con parole e magari immagini di un amante prefabbricato, asettico, che puoi spegnere con il telecomando. (79)

So Mattrea, as well as her public, fears true commitments or relationships that involve the physical presence of another person. The disembodied voice becomes therefore the preferred other partner in relationships that do not go past the audio level and do not involve physical contracts or personal self-denial in favor of the other. The individual thus renounces all forms of connection with the outside world and concentrates exclusively on herself. Mattrea's concern is indeed exclusively focused on her own huge body, and it's not a very sympathetic concern. Indeed Mattrea's voice, all throughout the play, projects the image of a woman in self-denial, constantly viewing herself and especially her body in self-deprecating and degrading terms, such as, for instance when she calls herself: "Trippante, strabordante buseccona ... Gomma Michelin!" Or when she sarcastically comments: "Che ci metti giusto un mese e mezzo," thus joking about her size in her reply to the male voice who had expressed an urge to take a shower with her and to wash her; or when she, recalling that her ex-husband used to call her "un astronave piena di luci," bitterly retorts: "da astronave mi sono ridotta a un pallone aereostatico, rigonfio di sconfitto." Or still, when to the girl on the phone who maintains that in a woman "tutto deve risultare armonioso ..." she bitterly retorts "Armonioso? C'è chi riesce a essere armoniosa a centocinquanta chili? Un

elefante col tuttù!" Even the objects, such as the scales,<sup>8</sup> to which she refers as part of her daily life, are used by her as additional tools with which to conduct the self-degrading process that seems to be the goal of her life, and that involves often a reversal procedure by which objects, such as the scales, become animated and her own body transforms itself into a heavy object, like a heavy sack, showing her obsessive wishes to annihilate it, or project it as a potential instrument of death, as when she tries to get rid of the man who has taken her for his former wife: "se ne vada . . . se no fingo di inciampare, le frano addosso . . . e la uccido!" (77). Also in this case the language used tends to metamorphosize her body into an object of huge proportions, as in the above case of the scales: here, it is the verb "franare" that reveals this intention, as this term is usually connected with a mountain, rather than with a human being.

At the end of the first part of the play, we, the spectators, have finally an overall view of the protagonist and particularly of her deep sense of alienation and of her self-denigration. At this point we are confronted with Mattea's positioning as mother. While *L'ermina* had also concerned itself with the positioning of woman as mother in contemporary society, it presented a view of mothering exclusively from the mother's point of view (as her daughter is never on stage), thus revealing the influence of the romanticized myth of the sacrificial mother.<sup>9</sup> *La donna grassa*, instead, in the second part of the play, introduces on the stage the questioning character of Anna, Mattea's daughter, thus projecting mothering also from the daughter's point of view, and constructing a more complete mother-daughter relationship. This choice allows the text to position women, both mothers and daughters, within the traditional patriarchal ideology, thus allowing for a critical review of it from the inside.

The exchange between mother and daughter, about mothering as well as about women's life in general, develops out of Mattea's

<sup>8</sup>When she realizes that her bathroom scales do not support her any longer, they become animated by a life of their own while she becomes an object herself, in this case a big heavy sack full of merchandise: "oltre un certo peso le bilance da bagno si ribellano. . . . Dica pure che si suicidano. Per signore della nostra stazza . . . ormai, ci vogliono quelle da drogheria, da granaglie all'ingrosso che pesano i sacchi!" (65).

<sup>9</sup>See Kaplan, "The maternal melodrama," *Motherhood and Representation* 76-106; esp. 77.

critical reaction to what she sees as Anna's sexual promiscuity. This provokes Anna's resentment against her and makes her remind Mattea of her same resentment against her own mother when Mattea was still playing the role of daughter in her life: "Anna: mamma, bestemmiavi per la bigottaria di tua madre, e adesso mi stai facendo la stessa inquisizione che lei faceva a te."

Mattea backs off at this point, acknowledging the power of the traditional codification of women's behavior: "Mattea: oddio che figural . . . E' stato un riflesso condizionato . . . scusa!"

This retraction does not last too long and Mattea reacts again very violently to Anna's latest adventure with Carlo, a married man who had assured her that he would soon leave his wife, whom he had repeatedly described as ugly, old and having nothing in common with him. But then, when Anna meets her, Carlo's wife turns out to be a very beautiful and intelligent woman, with a strong hold on her husband. It is then that Anna realizes that all Carlo had ever told her about his marriage was a lie and that he will never leave his wife for her. Seriously wounded by such a discovery, Anna pathetically appeals to her mother for help: "Anna: Mamma aiutami tu! . . . Adesso dimmi tu, che faccio?"

To which Mattea replies with ungenerous sarcasm:

Mattea: Senti, cara, ne ho piena l'anima di sentire ogni momento storie di donne . . . tutte uguali, compresa la mia. Un po' di fantasia, per dio! Ma è possibile che ci si caschi sempre! Ma possibile che sappiamo solo disperarci quando ci portano via i nostri uomini, ma non ci pensiamo un attimo quando abbiamo deciso di farcela con il marito di un'altra?

We realize that Mattea's violent and angry reaction to Anna's story is due to the process of identification that she is undergoing while confronting the pathetic story of so many women's failure, and interpreting them as a repetition of her own story. This is revealed also linguistically by the use of the first person plural for most verbs used and personal pronouns, instead of the second singular that would refer exclusively to Anna, "*ci si caschi, sappiamo disperarci, pensiamo, abbiamo deciso di farcela*, and with her own admission, "*compresa la mia*," that includes her own story within the "storie di donne," that she despises. This process of identification brings out the self-degrading tendency noticed earlier in her personal view of herself. Together these two trends bring Mattea to formulate a very negative view, not only of herself, but

also of her daughter and of all the other women caught in the same unbalanced love situation as Anna or herself. This is voiced particularly in the strong anti-women statement that she formulates shortly afterwards, and speaks against women solidarity:

*Mattea:* In tanti anni di vita . . . di esperienze personali . . . e delle donne che conosco . . . mi è venuto un gran dubbio . . . che in certe situazioni la peggior nemica della donna . . . sia proprio la donna.

Such a statement clearly reformulates the patriarchal view of woman as evil and dangerous. This device of using a female voice, borrowing from the language of patriarchal criticism of women, is to be found also in the continuation of the dialogue between the two women.

*Mattea:* Non me ne importa un cavolo delle tue tragedie da tele-novela brasiliana. . . .

*Anna:* Ma bene, ho trovato proprio un buon appoggio. Io sono in terribili casini e lei, mia madre, se ne frega, mi sbatte in una telenovela brasiliana. Mi tratta come una puttana isterica e non gliene importa un cavolo se sto male . . . Ma mamma sono tua figlia!

*Mattea:* Tu sei mia figlia solo quando ti serve. Sono la mamma 'a ore' . . . pardon, a minuti. Lasciami in pace. Non m'importa dei tuoi casini, e forse . . . me ne importa poco anche di te.

Again Mattea voices a typical patriarchal view of Anna by tracing a brief and negative summary of her life. Her daughter's failure is her own fault as a mother, for not having dealt with her with physically abusive disciplinary methods, "non ti ho preso a calci nelle gengive" more suitable to the violent world of men than to an affectionate bond between mother and daughter:

*Mattea:* "Hai sempre fatto tutto quello che ti è girato per la testa; e qui davvero la colpa è mia, che non ti ho preso a calci nelle gengive. Incinta a quindici anni . . . con aborto annesso . . . il primo . . . Convinta di essere intelligente per quello straccio di titolo di studio che ti sei presa, mentre sei ignorante come una capra . . . laureata in cretinologia comparata. E lo sai perché? perché ti mancano i sentimenti! Non ti conosco un solo gesto di generosità. Non hai interesse alcuno se non del tuo coppiolino, della tua cellulitina, le rughetine . . . T'importa solo andare in giro,

chiacchierare, e dire cazzate . . . "firmata" dalla testa ai piedi . . . a scopacchiare a destra e a manca, senza discernimento, senza morale, contenta di essere una donna liberata. No cara, non sei una donna liberata. . . . sei solo una donna disponibile, scopabile. La liberazione della donna è tutta un'altra cosa."

Here the humor displays what Sochen would call, the "raucous, screaming, demonstrative stuff" typical of male's humor, rather than of women's and it spells out all the main areas that a male's criticism of women would attack, such as, sexual freedom, intelligence, bodily care and interest for fashion, topped by a lack of the typical sacrificial motivations, requested from women of all ages. Anna does not appreciate her mother's criticism and strikes back in the same way, using the same patriarchal language to take her father's side and to criticize her as wife, and indirectly also as mother, unable or unwilling to make life easy for the family.

*Anna:* Perché sei mia madre credi di potermi insultare così? Tu? Io sono scopabile . . . disponibile? Senti da che pulpito viene la predica! Cosa ti credi? Che mi sia dimenticata delle tue storie? Delle tue liti d'inferno con mio padre? Tu non l'hai mai capito, quel pover'uomo! Non hai fatto altro per tutta la vita che fargli sentire sensi di colpa . . . scenate . . . tragedie! Lui ti amava . . . E' vero che tu non ami nessuno! E poi ti meravigli se tuo marito ti lascia, si mette con un'altra donna. . . .

This exchange brings to the surface the deep feelings of resentment that torment the two women, both unable to free themselves from the institutionalized role in which the patriarchy has positioned women for centuries, and thus, instead of reaching for gender solidarity, they feel threatened by and turn against each other, adopting the patriarchal language in self-degradation. Each accuses the other for her failure, which is the failure of contemporary women and men, for whom only disembodied voices have become acceptable for a durable relationship. In such a dilemma the only solution is offered by solitude, slightly mitigated by the presence of a disembodied voice that at least speaks of love and closeness without the drastic effects of a bodily presence and a frail ego that can get easily get hurt at any word pronounced or movement made by the other partner. Mattea's last words are very revealing to this effect. After having retracted her accusations against Anna and expressed her happiness for her husband's new involvement with

another woman and a new family, she looks again at herself with what sounds at first like a deep sense of relief and looks like a new respect for herself.

*Martta:* Finalmente riesco a togliermi di dosso 'sto complesso di colpa cretina; che mi tenevo . . . di aver sfasciato la famiglia. Sono libera! Sono una donna di successo. Sto per firmare un contratto . . . un sacco di soldi. Finalmente mi sto realizzando. Finalmente mi ritrovo sola. Sola con me stessa! E' per questo che mi viene da vomitare . . . veramente . . . sono felice. . . .

Here, Mattea seems to project a very positive image of herself for the first time in the play, as she sees herself as a successful liberated woman, with a life of her own, money and a good job. Her claim of being happy is, however contradicted first by her physical need of throwing up, and then by her actions after her daughter and her male collaborator leave her. She starts crying and appears to be nervous. Eventually she reactivates the disembodied male-voice through the electronic armchair in which she lets herself sink.

*Voce uomo:* Cara dove sei stata fino adesso? Mi sei mancata tanto . . . Vieni che ti abbraccio . . . sprofondati addosso a me . . . splendida creatura. Ti amo . . . lasciati andare . . . non pensare a niente . . . a niente . . . (*Si abbrassano le luci*)

The play ends with these words projecting again a perfect love relationship, which we all know by now to be totally nonexistent. The advice given Mattea by the disembodied voice at the end of its speech "non pensare a niente" conjures the image of an idyllic one size relationship, that does not ask anything from the other person involved, underlying a total indifference for the basic needs that human beings caught up in a real relationship usually have instead to fulfill, as Mattea had suggested in the first part of the play and as it has surfaced again in the dialogue between the two women.

The mother-daughter relationship in this play has been used to uncover the depth of the contradiction tormenting the feminine self, constantly torn between her positioning within the family system and her search for appeasing her inner needs, both sexual and affective. The self-destructive drives that dominate both women develop out of their inability to solve their inner contradictions, because of the unshakable impact made on them by their institu-

tionized positioning within the patriarchal family system even when no overwhelmingly authoritarian male figure is present.

This brilliant play with its lively representation of a mother-daughter confrontation, and its witty device of the disembodied male voice, focuses even more intensely than *L'eroina* or *Medea* on the debate about women, by centering exclusively on women without even vocal allusions to any overpowering male figure representative of the patriarchal system authoritarianism. Indeed the only male figure on the stage is Mattea's young collaborator who plays a rather unauthoritative role as the one being bossed around all the time by Mattea and who tries to tone down Mattea's harsh words against her daughter and eventually succeeds in reconciling the two women. Even when the figure of the father (Mattea's husband and Anna's father) is mentioned by Anna, this figure never has a threatening authoritarian aura, but rather impersonates, in Anna's view, the role of the victim (poveruomo. Lui ti amava. Come ha sofferto!), thus opening the possibility of viewing Mattea in the role of the castrating woman, so feared by the patriarchal mentality. We are faced therefore with the ultimate accomplishment achieved by the laws of the Father, that is, we are shown a situation where these laws, even if they are not actively imposed by men, still work effectively against women and influence deeply their inner self so that they themselves become the voice of patriarchy and seriously hinder their own growth into human subjects capable to accept themselves fully. The mother's and daughter's voices accusing each other of selfishness and disinterest in *La donna grassa* become indeed the voice of patriarchy condemning women for avoiding their institutionalized dutiful roles as loving and sacrificial mothers, daughters, and wives within the family system.

This brilliant play may have been hard to accept for some feminists, but I feel instead that it masterfully conveys in a playful ironic way the same criticism made by Medea to her women friends when she warned them against men's cunning plan to make women complicit in their (men's) positioning of women as docile mothers and wives: "ora m'avvedo bene donne mee che la migliore penzata che l'omo ha fatto a vantaggio sojo è d'averve ben allevate alla soa dottrina . . . a scola v'ha mannate . . . e voialtre ne ripetete la lezione e ve fate contente, cinate state, nun ve rebellate . . ."

I would like to close now by briefly considering Franca Rame's "Nuovo testo 1996," called *Sesso? Grazie tanto per gradire*, coauthored with Dario Fo and their son Jacopo Fo. This seems to

be a much more autobiographical piece than most of the works we have analyzed in this essay. It was inspired by Jacopo Fo's book *Lo Zen e l'arte di scopare* and was intended for an audience of school children in an attempt to dispel some of the tabus and ignorance that still surround sex today especially among the young generation of Italians. Unfortunately also this piece shocked the Italian government representatives and provoked their censorship, proving again how provocatively dangerous Rame's voice is held by the official representatives of the system in power, even at the time when we are approaching the beginning of a new millennium.

The words used by the "Commissione-censura del Dipartimento dello Spettacolo" to motivate its X rating of the play<sup>10</sup> is a blend of vague statements and hypocritical attitudes which have not escaped Rame's sharp satirical mind, as demonstrated by her lucid and ironic rebuttal. In this rebuttal she alternates general statements summarizing the close-minded, politically inspired misconception that seems to have inspired such as censorship, with sharp criticism of specific words and sentences:

"Il linguaggio e lo stile con cui è stato formulato il divieto è di per sé degno di essere studiato come esempio di ottusità archeologica atta a dire tutto e a non dire niente. Già riappare un'espressione classica dell'antico bacchettonismo democristiano, cioè "si reca offesa al sentimento comune." Che è da brividi! Ma cos'è il sentimento comune? Chi ne stabilisce i valori? I livelli? Esiste un trattato, un codice sull'argomento? No! pura astrazione da controforma. Poi c'è l'altra espressione capolavoro che parla del rispetto della "sfera intima." Che meraviglia! Cos'è la sfera intima? Si dovrebbe indire un'inchiesta o meglio, importa come tema di maturità classica: parlateci della vostra sfera intima . . . e

<sup>10</sup> I want to quote here the official government text, with which Walter Valeri, Fo and Rame's long time personal assistant, has kindly provided me: "Il testo, venato di satirico umorismo, nonostante un fine didascalico esplicitamente menzionato, in realtà attraverso il crudo linguaggio utilizzato, non integralmente scientifico, potrebbe recare offesa al sentimento comune che richiede rispetto della propria sfera intima provocando nel mondo adolescenziale degli spettatori un turbamento con eventuali futuri riflessi in ordine al loro atteggiarsi nei confronti del sesso, il quale non è solo un elenco minuzioso di parti e di condotte anatomiche." I take this opportunity to thank here officially Walter Valeri for his generosity in sharing with me important plays and documents that I was able to use in this essay. I like to thank him also for the privilege he has given me to be a part of this collection in honor of Franca Rame.

dei vostri turbamenti con eventuali riflessi futuri che un simile spettacolo (questo mio) può provocare nei confronti del vostro sesso. Ciò che traspare in tutta la "sentenza" è che l'analisi dei censori non è tesa a valutare l'espressione o la morale o gli intenti dello spettacolo, ma solo i termini. Si parla di "crudo linguaggio utilizzato"! E qui siamo al solito gioco dei bussolotti: forma e contenuto! . . . I censori ci accusano di non usare un linguaggio scientifico. Ci mancherebbe altro! Io faccio teatro, non voglio annoiare la gente!"

In answering the question why she and Fo chose the topic of sex in this specific play, Rame replies: "Abbiamo pensato che in questo momento di gran confusione, fosse indispensabile tornare al personale, ripartire dalle cose essenziali della vita . . . L'amore, i sentimenti, il piacere."

It does not surprise us spectators, then, that this "spettacolo" comes right after the two plays from *Parliamo di donne*, and especially after *La donna grassa* where, as we have noticed, *amore e i sentimenti* seem to have been replaced by alienation and disembodied lovers.

The most important goal of *Sesso? Grazie, tanto per girare* seems to be to give reliable information about sex while teaching especially young people to care and respect for the other in their life, and to search for love, pleasure, and long-term commitments together, keeping in mind that sex within these parameters may become a very (if not the most) important reason for a successful outcome of such a search. Ignorance and prohibitions, often dictated by moralism and bigotry are highly ineffective in handling the natural sexual urge of healthy young human beings, and to this purpose Rame opens her play with a pleasant story derived from the *Decameron* of Giovanni Boccaccio, a very significant XIVth century writer, who was the first in Italian literature to openly view sex as a natural human need to be satisfied without moralistic prohibitions or condemnations. As noticed earlier, *Sesso? Grazie, tanto per girare* is very unusual even within Fo and Rame's untraditional theater repertoire and could be seen as an outstanding example of what Goodman calls "feminist performance art theater," which she defines as

physical and conceptual theatre which emphasizes the role of the performer as the representer of herself — her body as text; her self as character . . . her movements as symbolic of the gestures

and rituals of everyday life. The artist's body becomes a metaphor — a medium through which she negotiates and conveys meanings to her audience. . . . (Goodman 183)

She further comments about contemporary theater by stating: "Some contemporary feminist theatres use performance art as a way of moving away from text-based theatre, into more physical exploration of body language, gesture, and movements (Goodman 183). For sure Fo and Rame's theater has been experimenting with this type of exploration for several decades. And yet *Sesso? Grazie, tanto per gridare* moves even further into feminist performance art theater, by concentrating, in its central part, on Rame as performer representing herself . . . "her body as text; . . . herself as characters, her movements (and, I would add, voice) symbolic of the gestures, rituals (and voices) of everyday life." Rame here constantly uses herself and her own body as text on which the sexual history of Italian women is inscribed, and as "metaphor . . . through which she negotiates and conveys" the need to reconsider women's sexuality, while her voice reformulates her resistance to the laws of the father that insist on keeping women in ignorance and submission.

While the play clearly fits Goodman's definition of feminist performance art theater, its structure, as well as its linguistic apparatus, shows additional elements that make of it a very complex and innovative theatrical text. Indeed its structure does not follow any well-organized or tight plot development and is articulated in three parts, a central one, framed by two other parts consisting of two short stories dealing with sex, love, confusion and excesses, respectively opening and closing the play. The main protagonists of both these stories are female characters different from Rame. The story that opens the play is, as we have already mentioned, a reformulation in more mythic terms of the famous Albech and Rustico story from the Third Day of Boccaccio's *Decameron*. The story that closes the play is also a reformulation, this time of a Provençal fabliaux, disguised linguistically under a rougher Northern Dialect rendition. The first story, called "Il primo rapporto sessuale sulla terra," reinteprets from a new angle the mythical story of Adam and Eve in the Earthly Paradise, and positions them in the state of confusion in which they have fallen after the Angel's message, ordering them in the name of God the Father to be aware of the Devil's presence and asking them, once they have found it, to dispose of it by putting him back in Hell.

The whole situation is projected from Eve's point of view, which is also an innovation in respect to the Christian interpretation of our first parents' ordeal which always positioned Eve as the cause of Adam's ruin and of the all evils the whole Mankind has incurred from that day on. Here, instead, Eve's view of the situation in terms of confusion and ignorance in front of the mysterious will of God is naive and at the same time humorous in its irresistibly simple and uncultured language. It conveys, with its Romanesque intonation, a very human and understandable interpretation of our ancestors' first realization of and confusion about sex, while hinting also at a resentment against the authoritarianism displayed in the laws imposed by the Heavenly Father, laws often appearing to be intended to confuse or scare people into obedience rather than to explain His mysterious ways or help people to understand and think on their own. The linguistic representational technique used often produces very humorous effects triggered especially by the role-reversal configuration that projects the male character as confused and frightened by the divine mandate issued by the Angel. Also the language, with its romanese choice of words and pronunciation, adds to the humorous effects of the situation by highlighting its role-reversal technique, through the connections it immediately projects with the traditionally "Romanesque" cinematic genre of the "commedia all'italiana" where the male is always positioned in a very strong dominating, sexual role.

*Eve:* Io non so cosa gli è sia preso all'Adamo. Da un po' di tempo ce ha lo zervello abbrancato all'idea dello Demonio . . . che io manco so chi s'ì 'sto Demonio e nemanco lui ce se raccapizza.

Tutta colpa di quell'anzelo che l'è apparuto tutt'un tratto nel zielo . . . Esso volatile, coll'ali spalancate zirava a ruota sovra de noi come 'na gran poiana e gridava: "Temete lo Diavolo-Demonio che s'annida en ogni creatura, trasvestito de bellezzal! Come l'avetece riconosciuto, ricacciatelo nello so' inferno a castigare!

E vum, vum, vum." Via se n'è ito . . . Desparuto!

Ma dico, è lo modo de venire a porti un messaggio? Torna qua gallinaccio . . . restate almeno un atemo, no? Dace 'na spiegatal! E' per 'sta gridata che, povero fijo mio, l'Adamo c'è remaso stravolto e me gridava: "Eva, Eva . . . ma chi l'è sto Diavolo-Demonio?"

"Adamo, non gridare che semo soli al mondo e ce sento benissimo! . . . Dev'essere qualcuno che sta de contro allo Signore."

(Fo, Rame, Fo, *Sesso?* 4)



We find here again that tendency so typical of Rame's comic mode to demythicize and bring down to a level of everyday low mimetic experience, figures who have been rated very highly in the popular imagination; in this case, it is the angel, God's messenger, that has been reduced to a domesticated type of flying creature ("Volatile coll'ali spalancate . . . poiana") and eventually even lower, to the more humble poultry yard type ("gallinaccio"), whom Eve accuses also of bad manners, as an uncouth messenger who doesn't even take the time to explain his message: "Ma dico, è lo modo de porti un messaggio? Dacce 'na spiegata!" This need for explanation seems to be dictated especially by her realization of Adam's shock in hearing and not understanding God's message. Eve shows her caring for Adam, also by addressing him with endearing concern (povero fijo mio) as well as by trying to find ways to calm him down without losing her own temper even when he, in his uncontrollable fear of the Devil, throws her out of the cave and lets her out in the storm until she is overcome by the cold "M'acchiappa el freddo co'li tremori, nun sento più le mani . . . le gambe. Me lamento." When he finally lets her in again and warms her up, what may be seen as the world's primal sexual encounter is acted out for the first time: "Desconvolto . . . m'abbrazza. Me strigne . . . Me alita sul viso . . . me lecca la faccia. Piagne."

And here Eve cannot help showing her surprise for such an unexpected role-reversal in a man: she repeats "L'omo piagne!" as if she needed to convince herself and the audience of this unheard of behavior! Then she goes on with her description of their sexual relation:

*Eva:* "Lo abbrazzo anch'io.

Sento uno qualche coso che punza contro lo ventre meo . . .

"Deo Santo che d'è? E' uno essere vivente?"

Adamo se discosta appena: 'nun so' - risponde imbarazzato 'pur anco lo zorno passato me era accaduto nel sollevarte in fra le braccia mie, quando se ziocava. E' per sta ragione che te ho de-scacciata!

'Ma perchè? che c'entro io con quella tua propaggine che diventa viscola e se spigne in fora? . . . Penzi che ce sia de mezzo lo Demonio?"

'Sì . . . io penzo che sì, Eva . . . Costoro creò che lo sia proprio lo Demonio istesso in della soa peizona . . . Illo . . . travestito de bellezzai!" (Sesso? 4-5)

Eva does not seem to be too impressed by the beauty of Adam's Devil: "Beh, nun esaggeramo . . . Nun me pare sta gran bellezza. Nun c'ha manco l'ucchi!" Shortly after, Eve too discovers that she has an important part in her body that will allow both of them to fulfil God's mandate to put the Devil in Hell. "Non te voio far offesa, Eva — me fiata con fatica Adamo mio — io ce giurerebbe che en te 'sta nasconduto 'st'inferno" to which she replies, "E io credo Adamo de saverlo in dov'è 'sto loco . . . che me ce sento lo foco proprio de lo inferno!" At this point Adam makes the ultimate connection between their Devil and Hell and God's mandate:

Ce dobbiamo l'obbedienza all'angelo de Dio che ci ha dicciuto:  
"Non appena che averete recognosciuto 'sto demonio, recaciatelo ne lo so' inferno a castegare. E casteghamolo sto diavolone, casteghamolo!"

This pleasant story about how to interpret God's messages and commandments to benefit human beings ends with Eve's omniscient on the foresight of God in his ways: a commentary that, in its naïveté, concludes the story of Adam and Eve on a humorous note of comic irony:

"che idea che te ce avuto Signore Iddio, de emporre a lui, all'Adamo, lo Demonio, e a me l'inferno fondo! Che stramencolo t'ha fatto, meo Signore . . . Tu sì 'nu Padreterno! Oh Alluia, Segnore! . . . E anco, amen!" (Sesso? 6)

After this introduction, the play moves on to its well-defined goal to grant women and men full, informed mastery over their own bodies. In order to reach this goal, the text has to become woman itself, and Rame succeeds in doing just that by using her own body as text and revealing its story in a methodic review of some of the most important steps that she as a woman had to go through in her life. The chapters in this text correspond to these steps, starting with the most significant encounters and influences in her life: 'Mia madre' and 'Ecco l'uomo,' followed by the steps and myths that confront women even nowadays: "Mestruazioni, Verginità, Orgasmo, Frigidità." After this concentration on her own body and story, Rame opens her performance to include the male body and its attempts to enjoy as well as a satisfactory sex life.



The chapters of this part of the text are indicative of this inclusion: "L'uomo che sbruffone!", "L'impotenza," "Mio figlio e le sue insicurezze," and "Lo Zen." In the last few pages of this central part of the text, the female body recuperates her dominant role on the stage, especially its inner anatomical parts, and it becomes again the metaphor needed to convey the text's deep meaning, here especially involving both the female and male body and their heterosexual relationships, through chapters such as "Il clitoride," "Fantasia, ragazzi," and "Canta" that deals with the importance for women to exercise their pubic muscles in order to make their vagina "sing" for their partners!

The same ability shown by Eye, to joke about sex, is present everywhere in the central part of the play which highlight, while making fun of it, the curtain of silence drawn especially by parents around all that involves sex, starting with Rame's own mother. Here are Rame's words describing her:

"Maestra. Cattolica fervente, praticante . . . e anche votante . . . Con noi figlie, non ha mai parlato di sesso. Per mia madre eravamo fatte come le bambole . . . finivamo qua (*indica sopra il pube*) Per lei, 'sesso' era uguale a osceno. Tanto per sintetizzare; il didietro lo chiamava 'sedere' e il davanti 'sedere davanti'! Bizzarro no? Poi ogni tanto, io ero lì che facevo i compiti . . . ero una bambina buonissima . . . mia madre arrivava con quell'espressione che hanno le mamme nei momenti solenni, e mi diceva con una voce . . . una voce . . . pareva quella di Dio! «Stai attenta, bambina! Che gli uomini vogliono solo quella cosa là . . .» Oh, non mi ha mai detto che cosa!!

In a text like this one, aiming at informing especially young people about sex and uncovering the apparatus of misinformation and prohibitions that surround it, it is important that a very strong relationship of trust and confidence be established between the performing actress and her audience, Rame's own body and its experiences become therefore essential to impress her spectators with the difficulties encountered by women like herself, because of their ignorance of even the basic elements of sex education. She creates this bond with her audience by dealing with her own experiences with the usual humour and irony, adding amusing vignettes catching the zest of everyday life, to illustrate general concepts, while animating her presentation with several narrative techniques, such

as brief highly spirited dialogues, and rhetorical questions or loud commands that shake the spectators and call them to attention:

"Mia madre non mi ha preparata alla vita. Le uniche cose sul sesso le ho sapute da una mia amica . . . una bricchina tremenda . . . 12 anni . . . Era un po' che non la vedevo: 'Sono molto stanca.' Perché sei stanca? cosa hai fatto?' 'Ho fatto l'amore!' 'L'amore?' Che io manco sapevo cosa fosse. 'Con chi?' 'Col mio cuginetto . . . 10 anni . . . un imbranato!' 'Cosa avete fatto?' 'Noi non sapevamo niente di quelle cose lì . . . sapevamo solo che i bambini nascono nella pancia . . . E allora lui col suo coso spingeva, spingeva! Ho avuto l'ombelico infiammato non so per quanto tempo!' Tra la mia mamma 'Stai attenta!' e l'ombelico infiammato, ero terrorizzata. Quando un ragazzo mi veniva vicino . . . gli tiravo i sassi. 'Va' via! Non l'avrai mai!' 'Che cosa?' 'Non lo so.' Poi al Liceo, i ragazzi . . . assannati, impetuosi! Mi saltavano addosso, mi abbracciavano e mi stritolavano . . . E poi cercavano di baciarmi. Non so voi, ma io ho un ricordo del primo bacio . . . terribile! Lui mi branca, tack, mi sbatte contro il muro . . . una zuccata da commozione cerebrale. Poi con quelle ventiquattro mani che si ritrovano i ragazzi, voleva toccacciarmi dappertutto, poi con la lingua, blah! nel collo . . . blah! nell'orecchio . . . 'Smettitela! Mi sembri un frullatore con quella lingua lì . . . Smettila!' Poi ad un certo punto . . . non mi vuoi infilare la lingua in bocca? . . . 'Va via con quella lingua lì, che te la stracco e la dò al gatto.' Sempre con le mani sull'ombelico! Poi un'altra cosa che non capivo . . . era che . . . tac! mi sbatte contro il muro . . . poi . . . blah! . . . blah! . . . blah! . . . e mi spingeva il suo pube contro il mio pube con una forza tremenda . . . e io pensavo: 'Ma perché questo qui va in giro con uno zucchino nelle mutande?' Vi dico la verità . . . per colpa della mia mamma, ho perso tanto tempo. (*Sesso? 6-7*)

This lively type of style is directed at signifying not only through images, but also, in true performance art, theatrical style, through direct representation of actions and movements. The verbs are mostly in the present tense, creating immediacy: i.e. "mi branca . . . mi sbatte contro il muro . . ." or in the imperative form "Smet-

tilia! . . . Va via!" to increase the direct connection with the audience. The use of slang or unrefined words, such as "imbranato; zuccata; branca; toccacciarmi; etc" makes sure that Rame, the performer, can get the attention of even the least sophisticated among the spectators. Some exaggerations i.e. "con quelle ventiquattro mani che si ritrovano i ragazzi" nearly physically convey the young girl's impotence in front of a determined assailant or her attempts at stopping him at least with some impossible threats "via con quella lingua lì che te la stacco e la dò al gatto." From all these examples it is possible to understand the impressive use Rame makes of her theatrical language, especially the control that she keeps through irony and humor over the harsh representation of juvenile violence.

Rame continues the recital of her own personal story by recounting three personal experiences of hers with the male sex in the section called "Ecco l'uomo" which brings to life her first realizations of what the male sex looked like; first through drawings she sees on a wall then from the live appendage of which she catches sight, when one of the city sex-perverts unbuttons his raincoat and exposes himself in front of her and her friends; and eventually from her experience as a nurse in one of the city's hospitals. She remembers in the following terms what she thought she saw when the sex-pervert unbuttoned his raincoat:

"Mi è venuto davanti agli occhi la testa e il collo spennacchiato di un tacchino . . . Che io chiedevo alle mie amiche: 'Perché quello là va in giro con un tacchino nelle mutande?' Che orrore! State attenti uomini . . . non farete vedere all'improvviso alle ragazze! Che ci si traumatizza tanto! . . . Mi sono talmente orripilata . . . che da quel giorno non ho più mangiato pollo." (Sesso? 8)

This representation is animated by interrupting her description of the scene with her direct humorous questioning of her friends about the turkey in the man's drawers, as well as by her order to the men in the audience, to resist acting in the same way as the sex-pervert she had encountered. The whole experience is dramatized, by deflating its impact to a caricature level, through the transformation in her mind of the potentially frightening male part into the defenseless and unthreatening image of a turkey, a domesticated animal easily disposed through eating, as confirmed by her

last connection with the chicken that she refuses to eat after such an experience.

Her third contact with the male sex was experienced while working as a nurse assisting a doctor to adapt a catheter to a young Swiss man. The situation is here also dramatized by alternating brief descriptions of the exchange between the two main characters, the commanding, brusque, and eventually understanding doctor, and the naïve, young, eager to please nurse, with her own humorous reflections on the situation. Also in his scene, the tense of the verbs changes from the past to the present in order to render the action more lively and close to the audience:

"Vado a fare un corso di infermiera a Milano alla clinica Principessa Iolanda. I medici non distinguono le allieve principianti da quelle del primo anno. Io sto uscendo da una stanza con la padella in mano, che agli inizi fai solo le cose più umili. Incontro il professor Semenza . . . si chiamava così. Mi fa: 'Signorina, mi porti subito alla camera 31 l'occorrente per il cateterismo.' Io non sapevo cosa fosse . . . ma mi sono lusingata che si fosse rivolto a me . . . ho fatto anche un inchino con la padella in mano . . . 'Subito professore.' Vado . . . 'Cateterismo' dico e mi consegnano su di un vassoio: un pappagallo, un tubicino di gomma e altri oggetti misteriosi. Entro nella stanza. . . Il degente era un ragazzo di vent'anni, svizzero, operato non mi ricordo di che. Entro e vedo il professore che sta trafficando col sesso dello svizzero. Mi blocco un momento imbarazzata . . . e il professore, perentorio: 'venga qua! Posi il vassoio . . . e tenga!' Non ho osato dire: 'Guardi, io non me ne intendo tanto.' Ho preso sto coso con due dita . . . Volevo morire . . . guardavo l'infinito! Il povero ragazzo svizzero . . . vedere quella lì . . . diciotto anni . . . tanta . . . che gli tenevo il suo coso . . . ha avuto una reazione nervosa . . . un'erezione! Per me non ha più avuto in vita sua un'erezione così! Voi ridete, ma pensate a me povera ragazza che ero rimasta allo zuccino e al collo del tacchino! Quando ho sentito . . . questa specie di coda . . . inturgidirsi . . . prender vita . . . Ho lanciato un urlo: 'Aiuto! E' vivo.' Il professore ha capito tutto? Posi pure. Vada, vada signorina? Mentre stavo uscendo mi fa: 'Si faccia trasferire al reparto pediatria . . . così s'abituata per gradi.'" (Sesso? 9)

Also in this case the rendition of actions and movements enliven the scene and accentuated its comic effect, as visible especially in the vignette of the nurse who, delighted by having been chosen by the chief physician to help him, curtsies with a bedpot in her hands and then holds the young man's penis with her fingertips keeping her eyes fixed on the horizon! while the young man embarrassed to have his penis held by a young buxom girl is unable to control his sexual excitement.

Eventually Rame brings up her first sexual experience with Dario that gets her immediately pregnant. Also in this case, she uses her own experience and ignorance on the subject to get closer to her audience and instill in them the confidence and trust that she and they both need in order to make her message meaningful to them and effective. Here Rame highlights also man's shortcomings on the subject, by including Dario in her criticism of her own ignorance:

"Noi due eravamo convinti che per restare incinta occorresse raggiungere 'quel momento' . . . e avete capito quale . . . nello stesso preciso secondo! Solo così l'ovulo si feconda. Se io no e lui anche dieci volte . . . devo stare tranquilla."

At this point, she turns directly to her audience in imperative mode and with rhetorical questions, thus intensifying her relationship with them, in order to hold their attention on the serious problem of teen-pregnancy still facing today's young girls.

"Giustamente voi ridete per tanta ignoranza, ma . . . attenzione! . . . io ero quella poveretta del sedere davanti / sedere di dietro . . . ma oggi, alle soglie del duemila, cosa credete? Che le ragazze siano tutte informate?"

She answers her own question in the negative, while sharing with her audience the information she has about the replies given in a questionnaire submitted by a women magazine to high school girls in Milan.

Some of the questions were: "Come si resta incinta? Quale metodo usate per evitare di restare incinta?" The answers ranged from: "Si può restare incinta attraverso un bacio. Io non bacio nessuno." to: "Per non restare incinta dopo un rapporto sessuale, basta una bella lavanda vaginale, con la Coca-cola e il limone, è meglio." or still: "Attraverso un rapporto orale . . . Vi fate un bel gargarismo

e via!" (*Sesso?* 9). This very tangible evidence proves Rame's point that ignorance and misinformation still cloud the issue nowadays, and valid and reliable information is needed by young people for a healthier and safer view and practice of sex. At this point Rame is ready to confront abortion, another serious problem in women's life and she does it in the same way with which she has dealt with pregnancy, that is, by using her own body and the experience it had to undergo, and then moving to the contemporary scene involving young people. In this case, she starts by setting up the issue of abortion in the context of the political situation in contemporary Italy and inserts her personal story in order to increase the chance for people to pay better attention to the needs for safer sex, and avoid abortion: "In Italia stanno per mettere in discussione la legge che ha legalizzato l'aborto, e credo che un esempio di vita vissuta è più importante di mille discorsi ideologici" (*Sesso?* 9-10). She, then, presents herself in the desperate conditions of a young woman without resources or helpful contacts, and in need of advice and assistance in order to make one of the most important decisions of her life, a decision that at that time would bring also penal consequences and that would be haunting her all her life.

Quando ho scoperto di essere un'ignorantona incinta, sono andata via di testa.

Non me l'aspettavo proprio. Ero spaventata.

In più a quel tempo, per l'aborto c'era il carcere per te e per il medico.

Then she seems to back off from her direct presentation of her own story, but only temporarily, by using the rhetorical figure of the litotes, (that is a statement in which an affirmative is conveyed by a negative) and by associating Dario in her experience: "Non me la sento qui di raccontare le difficoltà in cui ci siamo trovati. Immaturo, impreparati in tutti i sensi. . . . Insomma, non certamente in grado di mettere al mondo un figlio."

She brings up again her inability to relate to her mother and extends a warning to the audience by calling for the attention especially of all the mothers present there, and urging them to assist their daughters in conquering their fears and making the right decision.

"qui dico, mamme attenzione! . . .

Io ho avuto paura di parlare con mia madre. Ho avuto paura . . . paura della reazione . . . del dolore troppo grande che le avrei

dato. . . . La vergogna . . . il disonore . . . lo scandalo . . . e tutt'oggi è così, altrimenti non ci sarebbero tanti neonati buttati nei cassonetti dell'immondizia."

She then sums up by briefly hinting at her own way of solving her problem and the effects on her.

"Ho risolto il problema nel modo peggiore.; sono andata da un mammaia . . . lo faceva in casa . . . e senza anestesia. Ho rischiato di morire . . . è dovuto intervenire pure un medico. Questo è il ricordo più brutto della mia vita."

She jumps back to her audience and uses the imperative mode again for lecturing them, this time addressing the men there, while trying to dispell one of the false myths surrounding women and abortion.

"Uomini, amate le vostre donne. Non ingravidatele per distrazione."

E soprattutto non pensate, come tante volte si sente dire, che per noi donne, abortire sia come farsi una messinpegal . . . . Nos signori! E' un momento terribile."

Rame closes this part with a general view of the social conditions of the time that refers the text back to the beginning of this section on abortion. The tone is dramatically challenging, especially when she focuses on what abortion actually means for women, and lights up again when she ironically contrasts the Pope's view on the topic, which represents the exemplary level of male lack of knowledge, with women's, whose deep feelings and physical experience speak instead positively for what they want to do with their own bodies, especially on the issue of abortion and on the educational means that could be used to avoid it.

"A parte che, se invece di litigare sul viciario o meno, ci ci si preoccupasse di una vera educazione sessuale, prevenzione, contraccettivi, l'aborto cesserebbe di esistere . . . .

Tutte noi donne siamo contro l'aborto.

Vogliamo avere i nostri bambini quando è il giusto momento.

L'aborto è un'esperienza tragica, dolorosa . . . . per tutte.

Il Papa non lo sa, ma noi donne sì. (*Sexo?* 10)

This unrelated challenging tone changes to a more relaxed descriptive representation, under the general heading: "Da dove veniamo," of the several steps and myths that face women while growing up. Rame chooses four of them: (1) Menstruation, (2) Virginity, (3) Orgasm, and (4) Frigidity, and she reviews the myths and customs imposed on women at each of those stages by the traditional patriarchal system.

At this point I feel that the above detailed analysis of this central part of the play has shown a sampling of Rame's unusual and effective handling of her material, in this unique play.

As mentioned above, the play ends with another short story which is a sort of a parody of a fairy tale. It deals with a young couple obsessively predisposed by a wizard's advice, to making love all the time, everywhere, and in all possible positions. When a magical golden fish crosses their path and promises them to satisfy the first three wishes that they want to ask, the young man asks to be endowed by more "birilli or pendoloni" or penises all over his body, in order to be able to better satisfy his urge for making love continually with his partner, who, on her turn, asks for just as many "papape o farfalle" or female genitalia to be able to keep up with all his lover's "birilli." These additional bodily appendices turn out, however, to be rather inconvenient as neither of them can any longer either walk or show him(herself) in public. The only alternative is to use the third wish left to ask for changing back to their original bodily status. The story ends with a message concerning love, given by the old wiseman:

"L'amore si salva col rinnovarsi della tenerezza d'amore. Il fantasticare meraviglioso è quello di ritrovare insieme, femmina e maschio, maniere nuove e differenti d'offrirsi l'un l'altra in un sottile sentimento."

This message provokes the young woman to comment about their past way of love-making:

Che coglion! Io credo che questo di scoprire i sentimenti nuovi sia un impegno di gran lunga più difficile di quello d'incastonarsi con cento papape e cento birilli per rinnovare di continuo il godimento."

This final statement connects the end of the play with the remarks that Rame had made about the intentions of this play to

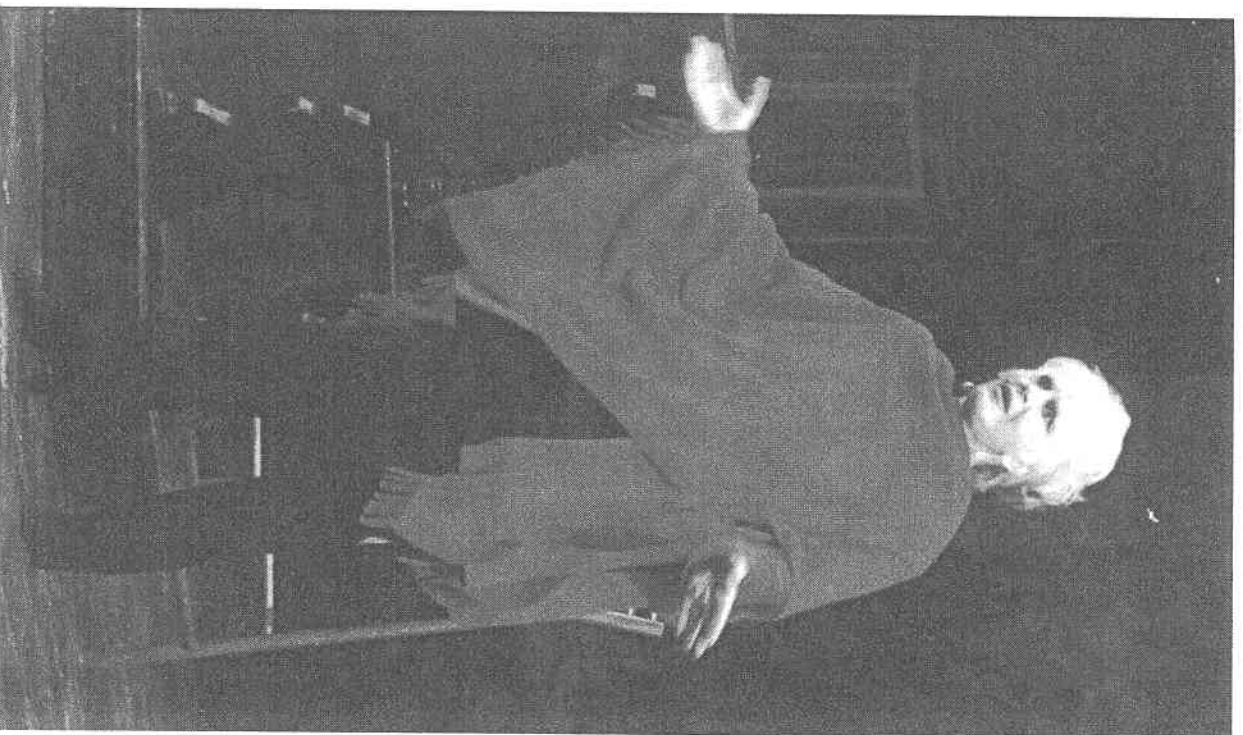
tornare al personale, ripartire dalle cose essenziali della vita . . . L'amore, i sentimenti, il piacere."

And this is what Rame has succeeded in doing throughout the whole play, never relenting her criticism of a society full of individuals unable to reach for those essential things in life, and plagued by ignorance, bigotry, and unwillingness to learn new ways to approach sex or to change their view of women and through these new ways of thinking and feeling create new valuable commitments, without fears or prohibitions. In this play Rame has used her own body as well as her voice to liberate sex, and particularly female sexuality, from its patriarchal connotations of obscenity and unlawfulness that still dominate contemporary society. Her campaign against the curtain of ignorance and misinformation spread about sex, continues her life-long resistance to authoritarianism and its never-ending despotic ruling especially over women who are positioned in inferior and oppressed roles, not only economically, but also sexually.

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Franca Rame, "Sesso?"



## TRANSLATING TRADITION THE THEATRICAL ARTISTRY OF FRANCA RAME

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Franca Rame made her theatrical debut when she was eight days old. Her mother was an actress and carried her child onto the stage in her arms. The infant did not cry. Rame has charmed audience with ease and comfort ever since. I had heard Franca tell the story of her first stage experience many times, but the tale took on deeper shades of meaning when she showed me an old photograph of her theatrical family, "La Famiglia Rame." The worn and weathered portrait pictured the entire family crowded into an automobile that looked like the Italian equivalent of a Model T Ford. "It was a deluxe model of the 1929 'Corriera,'" Franca told me with pride as she looked at the photo of herself as a child in the arms of her mother surrounded by relatives of all ages clutching bags of clothing costumes, and props. The were traveling players on their way from one engagement to another, ready to entertain audiences with comedies and melodramas whose roots went back to the Renaissance storytellers of Commedia dell'Arte. The artistry of Franca Rame's stage technique cannot be simply attributed to her early start in show business. Her mastery of acting was also shaped by the context in which those first stage experiences took place. Her family had mastered the art of improvisation. Like all the Arlechinos, Pierrots, and Columbinas before them, "La Famiglia Rame" went on stage with a knowledge of the basic scenario they would perform, but they were constantly inventing variations on those scenarios according to the demands of the situation. If an uncle fell sick, a cousin might take his role that evening on short notice, and add some new dimensions to the character. If the audience seemed to be enjoying a particular scene, the actors might stretch it out with a few extra impromptu jokes. From her family, Franca Rame learned that theater was a living organism, born of interaction between the actors, the audience, and their shared circumstances. Dario Fo continually acknowledges his debt to Franca and her family tradition for teaching him that basic principle of

performance. Anyone can read about these theatrical concepts in books. Franca Rame is one of the few living performers in the Western theatrical tradition whose theatrical knowledge has been passed down by experience through the generations of a single family. The power of Rame's family tradition strikes me most forcefully when I stand next to her on stage performing live simultaneous translation of her monologues for English-speaking audiences. Unlike some performers who work in similar situations by trying to pretend that the translator does not exist, Rame incorporates my presence on stage as part of her performance. Drawing on her family's experience of changing their texts to fit the specific circumstances of each stage venue, Franca plays theatrically with the fact that some one is standing beside her. She also plays with the knowledge that some part of the audience understands her directly in Italian, while another part relies on the English translation. "We'll have to ask the Italians in the audience to laugh a little more quietly so the rest of you can hear the translation," she quips, creating a deeper bond with the audience by turning the unusual dynamic into an improvised joke. Losing no opportunity to deepen her rapport with the public, Franca also plays with the gender paradox of the translation dynamics. Many of her monologues deal with sexual politics and there is an irony in having her satire of sexism transmitted to English speakers through the mouth of a man. To maintain the theatrical momentum of her performance, I speak her lines in first person, which might sound like a bizarre act of transsexual ventriloquism were it not for Rame's continual joking references to my onstage status. The first time I translated for her was in 1986 at the Kennedy Center in Washington DC.

On opening night the critic for the *Washington Post* noted that Franca's sexual humor often made me blush as I translated it. "You see," Franca told me the next morning, people like it when you blush. You have to do it every night." I explained to Franca that I was not a skilled enough performer to be able to blush on cue. If she wanted me to blush she would have to truly embarrass me afresh every evening. Since then Franca has taken it as a personal challenge to find a way to make me blush at every performance. In 1995 when I served as her translator at an International Theater Festival in Toronto, the play was called "Sex" and Franca teased me from the start: "Don't be surprised if the translator seems a little nervous tonight," she explained to the audience. "He's never seen the script before, so we've spent the last two days talking about

nothing but sex. He may end up in a psychiatrist's office before we're through." The audience's laughter was enhanced by the fact that I of course was obliged to translate the joke at my own expense. Video taped documentation reveals that I did in fact blush.

The experience of working with Franca onstage is invaluable to me when I sit down to translate her texts for publication. I have internalized the rhythms of her performance dynamics and try to translate those stage cadences as faithfully as I translate the literal meaning of the text. This is essential for the comedy of course, which relies on the music of vocal delivery as much as it does on the words themselves. "I'm interested in the quality of the laughter, not the quantity of the laughs," says Rame who believes that the rhythm and tone of a performance has an impact on the deep thought processes of the audience as they listen to a text. "It's important to open the audience to new ways of thinking and follow the model of Molière who said that laughter hammers the nails of reason into the brain." Standing on stage next to Franca as she performs connects me to something more than just the theatrical cadences of her speech. There is a cumulative power to Rame's performances that is transmitted through the music of her voice, but which seems to me to be rooted in the timeless theatrical traditions passed on her from "La Famiglia Rame." There is a sense of urgency and truth that could only come from a clan whose entire family history has been dedicated to reaching out to strangers from stage as they drive from town to town in an automobile loaded with the weight of actors and their accoutrements. In a family tradition of this nature there are no academic questions about the meaning of theater or the significance of audience participation. For "La Famiglia Rame" at the turn of the century and for Franca Rame today theater is an unadorned necessity. It exists to be played for the public. There is no theory, no ambiguity, no doubt. Performance is as essential as food and water. When a baby is born, she goes on the stage. It's as simple as breathing.

Most evenings when I serve as Rame's onstage interpreter, I translate only the prologues to her monologues. The text of the pieces themselves is projected overhead in superlatives. In Toronto, because of the rushed circumstances of the event, I actually stood on stage with Rame and translated the entire performance uninterrupted for over two hours. The experience was almost trance-like, as if I were possessed. Possessed by the language of the text, pos-

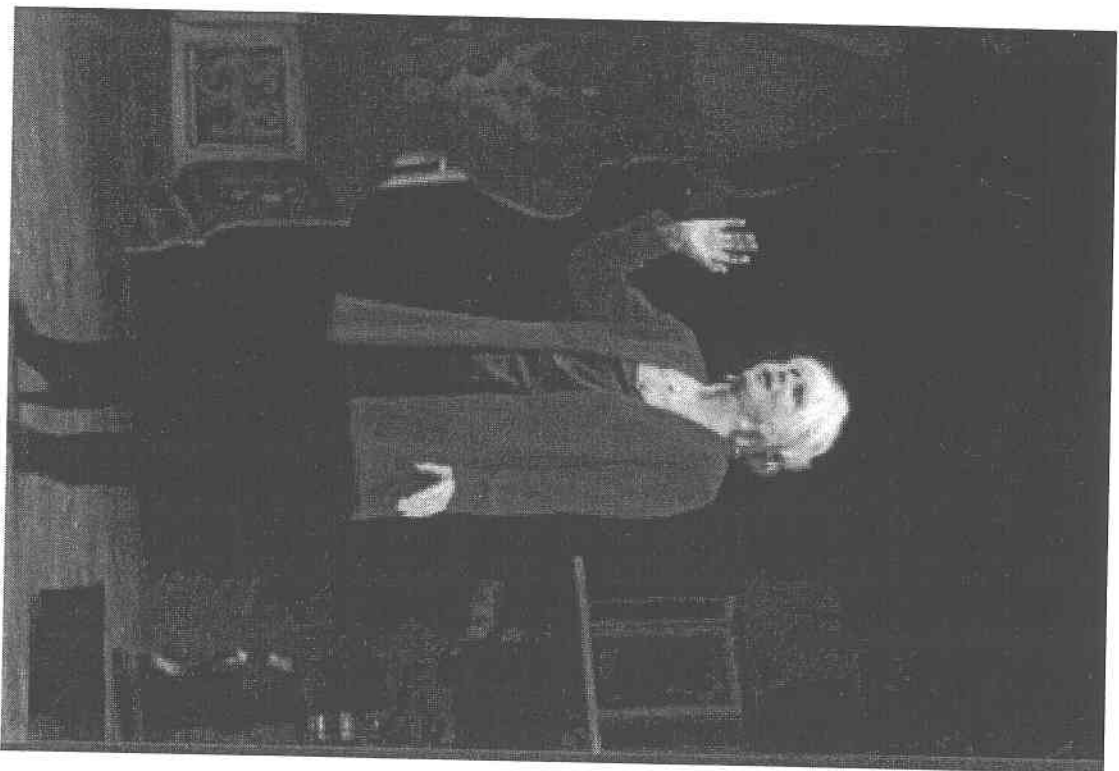
sessed by the music of Rame's voice, possessed by the strength of her connection to the audience for which I was the willing intermediary, but most of all possessed by the tradition of "La Famiglia Rame" that fueled the evening's theatrical passions. At the end of the performance I was literally breathless, on the verge of tears. At the time I attributed my exhaustion and emotion to the formidable force and stage charisma of Franca Rame herself, but in retrospect I look at the photograph of Rame's family in their turn-of-the-century automobile, and conjecture that I might have been possessed by entire Rame clan going back through uncounted generations of theatrical ancestors. No wonder I could barely stand up after the show.

Now when I translate texts like "Sex? Thanks, Don't Mind if I Do!" for publication, I try to recall and create the sense of possession I experienced in Toronto, realizing that I am responsible not only for faithfully transmitting the music and meaning of Rame's words, but also for remaining true to the dignity and tradition of her theatrical ancestry. "Many of the things I do on stage come from the heritage of my family," laughs Rame, "I guess I must have learned it all when I was still in my mother's womb."



SEX? THANKS, DON'T MIND IF I DO!

by  
Jacopo, Franca & Dario Fo  
Translated by Ron Jenkins



Franca Rame, "Sesso?"

Setting: A backdrop depicting "The Garden of Eden" with copious vegetation and many animals. The wings are demarcated by gigantic candles that recall those of Gubbio, Nola, and Catania.

[*Franca enters the stage.*]

The most beautiful moment for anyone in this profession is when you walk onto the stage and are welcomed by warm applause like yours. Thank you.

"Sex? Thanks, don't mind if I do!" How did we ever come up with the idea for a show on such an odd subject? Come on? We're on the threshold of the millennium and we still have to talk about sex? Sure we do. There's no doubt about it. We think we know all about it . . . with the constant pornographic assault that bombards us from all sides, we think we're experts. But we're not: sex is surrounded by a sea of disinformation . . . many of us are burdened by inhibitions based on ignorance and mystification. It's not enough to see two naked bodies on TV going "tran, tran, tran!" . . . At all hours of the day and night: you wake up in the morning, dead tired, you turn on the TV . . . and "tran, tran, tran!" It's not enough to let porn films educate young people . . . and lots of adults too . . . about "sex." . . . I speak from experience.

For years and years I've toured the world with shows on the condition of women: exploitation in the workplace, sexual exploitation, the family, problems with children, betrayal . . . constricting marriages, open marriages . . . her getting old and knowing it . . . him getting old and not knowing it! And as the years went by, my dressing room slowly turned into a therapist's office. I'm like a magnet: men, women, young people, very very young people come to me with their problems, ask me advice, write me letters. They tell me stories they wouldn't tell in the confession booth at church. And after listening to all these stories, I'm convinced that, more often than not, the major cause of broken hearts and failed relationships, comes down to the lack of harmony between the sexes. I ask myself why, if he loves you and you love him, the story ends? Sure, there are other reasons too: his character flaws, and hers too for pity's sake . . . etcetera, etcetera. But the principal reason, ninety-nine times out of a hundred, is when boredom creeps in . . . indifference to one another, the unwillingness to put up with each other, caused by the lack of mutual sexual understanding. Where

does it come from? From ourselves . . . from our problems about sex.

But don't let it get you down . . . Everybody has sexual problems: celebrities, porn stars, plumbers . . . terrorists . . . kings, princes . . . Remember what Prince Charles of England wrote to Camilla: "I want to be in your underpants! I want to be your 'Tampax'! If that's not a sexual problem, I don't know what is! Even presidents have sexual problems . . . in Italy . . . not to mention Clinton! These problems were making my head spin: 'you've got to do a show about them,' I said to myself. And then Jacopo's book came out, and gave me . . . how do you say . . . the last push!

I found myself in Bolzano with Dario during our tour of "Mamma! I sancelottì!", and lots of students were showing up, boys and girls, with photocopies of the book our son Jacopo had written . . . the son of me and Dario Fo . . . they wanted an autograph. Jacopo has published many books but we usually don't talk about them in public . . . this one we have to talk about, of course, because it's the subject of our little chat . . . "Why the photocopies?" — "It's sold out. We couldn't wait to get it . . . its full of things we didn't . . ." One girl whispered: "The zen of Jacopo saved my relationship with my boyfriend."

I picked it up again . . . and read it, and reread it . . . "Yes, this could be it! This is what I've been looking for!" Dario: "Are you out of your mind! You can't go on stage talking so explicitly about a theme that's so odd and intimate . . . people are already tired of talking about it in life . . . and what's more, you're a woman." "I'm also a mother and a grandmother. And that's precisely why I should do it! I've got to try to improve things! I have to do it. It's already helped a lot of young people . . . putting it on stage could help other young people, couldn't it? . . . and maybe some adults too."

The title of this book is a little naughty . . . and I, who am the daughter of my mother . . . a little later I'll tell you what my mother was like . . . I always get a little embarrassed saying it in front of so many people: "Zen and the art of fucking." But don't let the title fool you . . . it's a serious book. Jacopo speaks in a comic key about his sexual problems . . . and he's had a lot of them! . . . so that he can help young people avoid all the complexities that he had as a result of "ignorance" or simply being "unaware."

I felt responsible for the sexual difficulties of my son. Speaking with people I discovered that almost all of us are full of fears, lack

of confidence in our bodies . . . and the responsibility belongs to us . . . to the education that we received from our parents and subsequently passed on without thinking to our children . . . to the way we educate our children. How many times have we said to our sons, to our daughters, and I'm no exception: "Take you hand away from there!" One time I even said to my son: "If you don't stop touching it, I'll cut it off!" That poor child . . . how terrifying! Every time he saw me with a scissors in my hand, he hid under the bed.

I was wrong. A four- or five-year-old boy is just discovering his body. He touches it here and there without any bad intentions. We're the ones who associate his sex with bad intentions!

How many times have we responded to the embarrassed questions of our adolescent children with answers that were correct and exhaustive? Rarely, because it's difficult . . . because it's not part of our culture.

During the more than three hundred presentations of this show I've collected a series of answers that would be funny if they weren't so sad.

Twelve-year-old girl: "Mamma, what is a penis? — the mother is ironing . . . embarrassed, she doesn't know how to answer, "Always asking questions, eh! Go out and play!" — "Mamma, what is a penis? What is a penis? If you don't tell me, I'll ask the nuns at school." — "No, I'll tell you . . . It's a legal term . . . in court-rooms they always talk about crimes and punishment!"

Another girl, eighteen-years-old: "Papa, what is a prophylactic?" — "It's a tourniquet."

"Mamma, what does coitus mean?" — "It means guilty, as in 'you coitus in the act.'"

"Mamma, what is the scrotum?" The response of this mother is the height of creativity. It's a container for election ballots!"

Now we know how Clinton got re-elected!  
And then we wonder why our children don't want to go into politics.

So we're going to talk about love . . . we're going to talk about sex. But especially about love, because we are deeply convinced that in a times of tragedy like the world is living through now . . . war, racism, corruption . . . delinquency, violence . . . by the age of twenty everyone's seen hundreds of thousands of televised deaths, rapes . . . Sexual violence inflicted on children, women . . . In Italy

in 1994 (and the situation has not improved): seven thousand rapes! In America there's a rape every two minutes. High cost of living, inflation, misery, poverty and homelessness on the rise, and thousands of unemployed across the globe . . . Loneliness, depression, child suicide . . . a substandard quality of life that crushes feelings, generosity, solidarity . . . we could go on all night . . . we are more than sure that the only salvation for the human race is love . . . relationships built on love, profound love . . . love in all its fullness . . . the feeling of love and physical love that helps us rediscover the joy of living, though there's not much of that going around these days . . . and a little love of moral honesty, even if unfortunately, you can't find it any more.

When we speak of physical love, it's impossible not to talk about the great problem that concerns us all: AIDS. And it is necessary to emphasize that you can have AIDS without dying. Many of those infected have resisted for years. A person who is HIV positive can live to be a hundred or more. But we can't forget that (n.b.: be aware that these facts are from 1994 and should be updated) throughout the world, ten thousand AIDS victims die every day. In Italy approximately twenty-six boys and girls between the ages of fourteen and twenty-two are infected every day. So pay attention, parents: make your sons understand that sexual relations must be "absolutely" protected, and when they go out on Sundays with their girlfriends . . . along with the ten or twenty dollars you give them . . . slip a prophylactic into their pockets . . . maybe even three . . . because you never know how the night's going to end up!

Our backdrop represents the Garden of Eden, which Dario painted there because we maintain that it's the right place in which to locate our little chat.

I don't have any academic titles, but I have my experience, my awareness. I've tried to study, to investigate, to research the problem . . . because I'm sure of its importance. I hope our little chat will be informative . . . Without being presumptuous, I'd like it to be a "lesson of love." Let's begin in tranquility . . . relaxed . . . so we can let ourselves go . . . in this happy group therapy.

We begin with the fact that we are all in desperate need of love, and that this true love is rarely found, and when we find it, we don't know how to treat it.

To start: Maybe there's someone who's wondering: "But am I capable of love? Do I really want to open myself up, communicate, give something to someone else? Is there something I can do to make this love better? How do you take care of love? . . . Do you need a check-up every ten-thousand miles? An oil change? . . . Where do you find this oil of love? Does love bloom in springtime? How often should it be watered? What's the best fertilizer?"

And when it breaks down, it's like a pocket calculator. There's nothing to be done with broken love: it's time to throw it away.

Unfortunately love is often a grim matter of interests . . . and I'm not talking about money. One looks for the best, and wants to pay as little as possible. You can speak of love only when your feelings for another person go beyond your advantages. It's truly a shame that there is such paucity of profound emotion. But what can you do . . . if things weren't like this, the world wouldn't be in the mess it is today.

So try reflecting on this fundamental thought over the next few days: "But am I capable of love?"

The lack of awareness concerning this subject goes back a long way. We find this absence of information even in the Bible, starting with the appearance of Adam and Eve. They didn't know how to talk about love. To discover how it all came about, we'll borrow an idea from none other than Boccaccio. Adam and Eve have just been created . . . they barely know one another . . . they don't know anything about anything . . . no one has prepared them for anything, least of all love and sex. So let's look at Eve, the first woman in the universe, who in primitive and archaic language, recounts her first sexual relationship.

#### ADAM AND EVE THE FIRST SEXUAL ENCOUNTER ON EARTH

I don't know what has gotten into Adam.

For some time his mind has been seized by the idea of the Devil . . . I am at a loss to know what it is, this Devil, and even he does not understand it. It is all the fault of an angel who appeared suddenly in the sky . . . This flying thing, circled over us with its

wings spread out like a buzzard and shouted: "Fear the Demon-Devil that lurks inside every creature, disguised as beauty. When you recognize it, cast it back into its inferno as a punishment!" And vum, vum, vum . . . he was gone. Disappeared! Now I ask you. Is that any way to deliver a message. "Come back here, you big chicken," screamed Adam. "Can't you stop for a minute at least? Give us an explanation!" And as a cause of this pronouncement Adam, the poor child, has been in shock and asks me, "Eve! Eve . . . but what is this Demon-Devil?" — "Adam, there is no need to shout like that, because we are the only ones in the world and I can hear you very well! . . . It must be something opposed to the Lord." — "And where is it, Eve?" — "He said that it's hidden inside every creature . . . disguised as beauty . . ." — "Eve," he said, "Then it could even be hiding inside of me." — "Well," I said, just to calm him down, "It could also have burrowed into me." — "Yes, Eve. That is most likely, that the Demon-Devil is inside of you . . . disguised as beauty." Me! I could be the Demon disguised as beauty! I felt myself blushing so strongly that I almost fainted! Beauty! Then he thinks I'm beautiful! I could have hugged him. I would have leaped onto his neck shouting, "Yes, I am the beautiful Demon-Devil and I will take you to hell!" Hell? What is this inferno? A place. But what kind of place? Maybe it's a ravine, a prison where you have to lock up this Devil as a punishment. God, what has that big chicken wrought! Now my silly little Adam sees the Devil everywhere. And he treats me worse than before. He threw me out of the cave. "Out!" he shouted at me, "Get out of here!" — "What has gotten into you?" We were playing like two children, rolling in the grass with our arms around each other, and just as he lifted me up in his arms, he dropped me . . . no, he threw me off, deliberately! "But what is wrong?" "Go away . . . go back to your inferno," he yelled at me and shut himself in the cave, blocking the entrance with a fence. I tried to get in . . . I pleaded with him. Nothing. The barricade was impassable. "Adam, don't leave me alone . . . I'm not the Devil. I swear it! It's getting dark, Adam, and I cannot sleep alone. I am afraid."

Nothing. He did not respond at all. I squatted outside. I waited . . . I felt something tightening in my throat . . . But what could it be . . . "Sadness" . . . It is the first time I experience "sadness." I try to cry a little . . . Maybe it will console me . . . Tears do not come . . . an aching lump grows in my throat that hurts my heart. The moon goes away . . . the darkness of night arrives . . . I

can't see the stars anymore . . . Unexpectedly a lightning bolt splits the sky . . . A clap of thunder! It's raining. It's raining hard. I am so desperate that I don't even bother to run for shelter. Another flash of lightning. Bits of ice are falling. What is that? I am trembling from the cold. I do not feel my hands any more . . . my legs. I moan . . . "Ohoooo," I moan. The fence moves. Finally he's decided! A man looks out. Oh God, I feel awful . . . He lifts me up. He carries me into the den. He rubs me with leaves. He rubs me everywhere. He calls me, "Eve . . ." I am not able to answer. Even my tongue is numb. He calls me, shouting, "Eve! Eve!" What a beautiful name I have in his mouth. Devastated, he embraces me. He squeezes me. He breathes softly on my face. He licks my cheeks. He cries. Man cries! Little by little he gives me back my warmth. I succeed, with great fatigue, in moving my fingers and my arms. I also embrace him. I feel something pressing against my stomach . . . "Heavenly Saints, Adam, what is that? Is it alive?" Adam moves away from me slightly, "I do not know," he answers embarrassed. It also happened to me on another day when I lifted you up in my arms while we were playing. And that is why I threw you out." — "But why? What do I have to do with your appendage that comes alive and pushes itself out." — "It only pushes itself out when you are around . . . especially if you laugh . . . and also when it sniffs the smell of you." — "Hmmm, it responds to laughter and smell? Maybe it's some kind of disease, or a plague, Adam? Who knows: an infected tumor?" — "No, it doesn't hurt . . . on the contrary! . . . but it disconcerts me . . . it unleashes a great heat that goes all the way to my head." — "A heat in your head? Then it cannot be a natural thing. Do you think it could be a device of the Devil? — "Yes . . . I think so, Eve . . . I believe it is actually the Devil himself in person . . . it's him . . . disguised as beauty!" "Well, let's not exaggerate. It doesn't look that beautiful to me . . . it does not have any eyes." — "Obviously, the Devil is blind." — "Then how can it get all puffed up for me if it cannot see me?" — "It must be that love is also blind." — "Love! . . . love . . . where does it come from, Adam . . . this sweet word that I never heard you speak before: Love?" — "I don't know . . . it just popped out . . . all of a sudden it was on my tongue . . . love . . . when I am struck by the desire to embrace you . . . to throw my arms around you . . . I feel like shouting: love!" — "Me too. I am possessed by the same madness. Why don't we try another little hug, Adam?" And so we find ourselves embracing, wrapped up in each other's

caresses and games. "Feel that Devil again, how it pushes! . . . Where does it want to go?" — "Let it alone, Eve, . . . I want to see where it ends up. . . ." "God! It is trying to squeeze itself in down there! It's pushing! I can't breathe. . . ." — "I don't want to offend you, Eve," Adam whispered to me with difficulty. "But I could swear that it is in you . . . where that hell is hidden." I am turning pale. "And I believe that I know exactly where that place is. . . . I feel the fire of hell." — "We have to obey the angel of God," Adam told me gravely. "He said that as soon as we recognized that devil, we should cast it back into its hell as punishment. Let's throw it back in! Let's punish this devil! Let's throw it back!"

Outside the sky flashed lightning . . . gusts of wind uprooted trees whose branches were tangled together like the two of us entwined in sighing embraces. . . . the water in the sea was boiling. And also the animals were silent. Only the two of us moaned in muffled voices. God! God! If the devil of Adam finds as much crazy joy as I do, in my hell . . . when it tantalizes . . . overwhelms . . . drives me wild! My tongue is all tied in knots. I am not able to explain the topsy-turvy . . . the fluttering . . . the pleasure . . . the playfulness . . . what an idea he had the Lord God . . . to endow him, Adam, with the Devil, and to put hell inside of me! What a marvelous miracle you have wrought my Lord . . . Oh, yes, heavenly father! Oh, Hallelujah, Lord! . . . And also: amen!

And now look at us here, thousands of years later, still asking ourselves: "Is it really the devil?"

#### SEX: THE UNKNOWN TERRITORY

"Sex, the unknown territory" was the title of a letter that appeared in a newspaper in which a man from Bologna complained that society doesn't prepare our children sexually . . . In school there's a little biology and that's it, but a discourse about sexuality in all its complexity and depth is never even approached. At home it's worse: the mother is shy, the father doesn't have enough faith in his son to approach the subject . . . so our children arrive at the age of eighteen or twenty without knowing 'where it is,' let alone 'what it is.' I'm referring to what is anatomically known as — we'll be using a lot of these words tonight so don't get scared . . . — the clitoris. Boys get together with a girl, they get engaged, they marry . . . and then out of ignorance they fail to satisfy their partner sexu-

ally . . . the girl is shy, she doesn't dare ask . . . so the relationship ends . . . collapsing in the midst of tears and desperation.

I couldn't believe it. We're in the twenty-first century and young men, with pornography all around them, don't know where it is . . . You've got to be kidding.

Then, before premiering with this show, I had some open rehearsals at the university and some high schools in Milan. And during the discussion I discovered that things were just like that: on the subject of female sexuality — how the sex organ of their partner is structured, the possibilities that it offers gymnastically as well as spiritually — men . . . not all obviously, you can never make generalizations . . . know nothing. All they know is that there's a hole! And young girls don't know much more.

What does a boy of twenty know about female sexuality? What did I know when I was twenty? Nothing.

#### MY MOTHER

You can imagine that I, like everyone, had some confusing times during adolescence. Sex was a mysterious thing for me. I knew what it was, but no one ever talked to me about it.

Don't talk. Don't look. Don't touch. Those were the rules. It would have been nice if someone had explained a few things to me . . . but who? The right person would have been my mother, but I couldn't really count on her for that.

My mother was born in a middle-class family . . . her father was an engineer in the district of Bobbio who had eleven children. Engineer, yes . . . but they were poor as water . . . rich only in dignity and prejudices. In terms of prejudices, my mother was a millionaire. My mother was a very talented woman. Well brought-up. A teacher. A fervent practicing Catholic. She never talked to her daughters about sex. As far as she was concerned we were built like dolls. For my mother, sex was the same as obscenity. Me and my sisters ended here (she points to her waist). Below that didn't exist.

To put it in a nutshell: the behind, she called "the rear end." And what was in front, she called "the rear end in the front." Pretty strange, huh? Then every so often while I was doing my homework (I was very studious as a child), my mother would walk in with that look on her face that mothers get in moments of solemnity, and said in a voice that sounded like the voice of God, "Be careful, little girl. Men want only that one thing!"

But she never told me what thing.

I walked around in terror!

If a little boy came near me I'd throw stones at him, "Go away! You'll never have it."

"What?"

"I don't know."

To tell the truth, because of my mother, I lost a lot of time. The only things I knew about sex were the things my girl friend told me. She was a little devil . . . twelve-years-old . . . One time I hadn't seen her for a while: "I'm so tired" — "Why are you tired? What did you do?" — "I made love." — "Love? . . . I didn't know it was something you could make . . . What is love? What did you make? — "Love, I made it . . . with my cousin . . . he's ten . . . a numbskull!" — "What did you do?" — "We didn't know much about that thing there . . . we only knew that babies were born out of your belly . . . And so, he took out his thing, and pushed and pushed! My belly button's been sore for a long time!"

Between my mother's "Be careful!" and the inflamed belly button, I was terrorized. I always walked around with my hand here. (Indicates her belly button).

Then there was my aunt. She was on the left . . . a spinster . . . not because she was on the left . . . she just never found the right man. A teacher like my mother, she was clearly more open minded and decided to provide sex education for her nieces. One day she gathered us all together around a big table in the kitchen. We were all about twelve or thirteen, and she showed us an anatomy book . . . more specifically a drawing of a female sex organ in cross section, color coded for each part. . . . I thought it was a geographical map. And when our aunt asked: "Do you know what that is little girls?" I said, "Yes auntie, that's Florida." She was so upset she said, "Silly thing, that's not Florida . . . it's your rear end in the front." . . . that made a big impression on me!

From that day on, I always called my rear end in the front Florida . . . and my rear end in the back, California!

Then there was high school . . . the boys . . . they were devils, out of control! . . . They jumped on me, hugged me and pinched me . . . Then they tried to kiss me . . . I don't know about you, but I have a memory of my first kiss. It was awful.

He grabbed me . . . tak . . . threw me up against the wall — a knock on the head that gave me a concussion — then, with those twenty-four hands that boys always seem to have for the occasion,

he wanted to touch me everywhere . . . then with his tongue . . . blalllll . . . on my neck . . . then blalll . . . in my ear. "Stop it. It feels like there's an egg beater in there! . . . Stop!" Then, can you guess . . . he tried to put his tongue in my mouth? In my mouth?! And I'm a vegetarian! "Get that tongue out of there or I'll cut it off and give it to the cat." I still had my hand on my belly button! . . . Then another thing I didn't understand was: tac! He knocked me up against the wall . . . then (repeating the movement) blalllll . . . blallll . . . blalllll . . . he pushed his pubic bone onto my pubic bone with an incredible force . . . and I thought: "How come this guy is walking around with a zucchini in his underwear?!"

#### THE MALE SEX ORGAN

My first encounter with the other sex.

Attentions ladies and gentlemen, children and adults . . . this part of my little talk will make all of you relive some moments from your past . . . the good, the bad, and the ugly.

I was nine-years-old . . . and I saw a male sex organ . . . in fact I saw seven, all in a row . . . drawn on a wall.

What did you think? You know what those kids do . . . twelve and thirteen-year-olds all go around with chalk in their pockets . . . and every chance they get . . . zac! (She draws a giant phallus in the air.) Then zac! Zac! (She draws two circles in the air under the phallus.) It's their emblem, their signature! I was looking at it without understanding . . . It looked to me like some kind of deep sea diving suit with a helmet . . . with two wheels underneath . . . and I asked myself . . . "What kind of bicycle is that? Where's the handlebars?" It was a good thing I didn't ask my mother: "Hey, Mom, can I have a bicycle like that for Christmas?" She would have died. Then when I counted seven I figured it out in a flash: "It's the seven dwarves . . . dressed up in diving suits, taking a ride on their bikes!"

The second time . . . a live encounter . . . Was when I met a dirty old man . . . we women all meet them at least once in our lives . . . (aside) if you haven't met one yet, don't worry, you will! Where was the dirty old man standing? Next to a public urinal. What was the dirty old man wearing? A raincoat, even though it was August. We were leaving school . . . five or six of us were pass-



ing by and he shouted: "Little girls! Look over here!" And zaci! (Pantomimes opening a raincoat.) My friends said, "Don't look! Don't look!" They knew already . . . but I looked . . . I was a very obedient child! He covered it up right away, but what I saw left a tremendous impression on me, because underneath the raincoat he was dressed all in black . . . so it stood out very clearly! . . . It looked to me like the head and neck of a plucked turkey! So I said to my friends. Is that guy crazy? Why is he walking around with a turkey in his underpants? What a horror! It left a tremendous impression on me!

Men, don't show it to children all of a sudden . . . it will traumatize them! I was so horrified that from that day on I could never eat chicken again. I was finished with poultry.

The third time . . . an even closer encounter! At eighteen I decided to take a nursing course at the Princess Jolanda clinic in Milan. Everything I'm saying tonight is true, I'm not making it up!

I start the course . . . In big hospitals the doctors can't tell the difference between the advanced students and the beginners. There were so many of us. I had been there three days . . . I left a room with a chamber pot that a woman had needed . . . I walked with pride, holding my chamber pot as if it were the national flag! I passed by a doctor, Professor Semenza, who said: "Miss, bring the equipment for inserting a catheter to room 37 right away." He chose me over the others. I felt like I had been "chosen by God." I bowed to him with my chamber pot: "Right away, Professor." I go . . . I say "catheter" . . . I gathered together a vase, a basin, a little rubber tube . . . I go to room 37 . . . the patient was a young Swiss boy, about twenty-years-old, undergoing some kind of surgery that I can't remember. I knock . . . "Come in." I go into the room . . . and I see the Professor holding the Swiss boy's sex organ. I stopped for a moment in embarrassment. And the Professor said imperiously, "Come here! Put down the basin . . . and hold this!" I wanted to die! I didn't dare to say, "Look, Professor, I don't know how to handle this . . ." I obeyed . . . I already told you how obedient I was, and it's always been my downfall! I took this thing between my two fingers . . . I was petrified . . . to hold myself together I looked out towards the distance! It felt in my hand like some kind of sausage . . . I was shaking like a leaf . . . The poor Swiss boy . . . seeing me there . . . eighteen-years-old . . . full figured . . . holding his thing in my two trembling fingers . . . he had

a nervous reaction . . . an erection! I think he never had one like that in his life!

Sure, you can laugh about it, but think of me, a poor girl of eighteen. All I'd ever seen before were the seven dwarves and the turkey. When I felt the sausage . . . how shall I saw . . . come to life . . . — I didn't let go out of obedience . . . but I let out a terrible scream: "Help! It's alive!" The Professor understood everything . . . He said: "Put it down . . . you can go now, miss, you can go." It didn't seem real to me. I tripped on my way out of the room . . . my heart was pounding . . . I was sweating all over! I was just at the doorway . . . "Miss!" — "Mother of God, maybe he's changed his mind!" — "Miss, we'll transfer you to the pediatric ward . . . that way you can get used to them gradually."

Then I grew up . . . I fell in love . . . madly! . . . head over heels! And I made love . . .

Oh, what silence! . . . Do you know that in over three hundred performances every time I say those words, silence descends on the audience?

Ohhh! I'm not the only one here who's ever made love! I made love . . . and I got pregnant . . . (pause) I'm not the only one who's ever done that either! I got pregnant. It's all my mother's fault. If only she had told me . . . not to keep my hands here (indicates her belly button), but here instead (indicates her genitals). I got pregnant. But "how" did I get pregnant? He and I . . . he is Dario, my husband . . . Sometimes I hesitate to mention his name, but then I think: he should be out here getting embarrassed along with me, because he's the one who was mainly responsible.

Because he has a degree in architecture . . . I'm not saying that architects learn in school how a woman gets pregnant . . . but he should have known a little more than me . . . the one with the backside and the rear end in the front!

So the two of us were convinced that I wouldn't get pregnant unless we both reached that moment . . . you all know which moment I mean . . . in the same exact second! That was the only way the egg could be fertilized. If I didn't, and he did . . . even ten times . . . we thought we were safe.

You're probably thinking: "Poor girl! A hundred years ago they didn't know anything!" Who's talking about a hundred years ago. Today, on the threshold of the millennium . . . Do you think young people today are all so well informed?

It's not true! Most girls don't know. Otherwise we wouldn't be finding so many newborns thrown in the trash to die. And there wouldn't be so many girls getting pregnant who have to have abortions! Lots of them just don't know!

A feminist journal conducted a survey of high school students in Milan. The question was: "How does one become pregnant? What methods do you use to avoid pregnancy?" Some of the answers were correct. Some of them were unbelievable. "Yes, you can get pregnant from a kiss. I never kiss anyone!" Think of it! On the threshold of the twenty-first century! Another: "To avoid pregnancy, all you have to do is take a nice vaginal douche. Coca-cola and lemon works best." I'm telling this story because . . . maybe there's a girl in the audience who's convinced that a vaginal douche with Coca-cola will stop her from getting pregnant . . . Nooooo! You make love . . . you take your vaginal douche . . . and in the meantime "they" . . . the perfidious creatures . . . have already arrived at their destination, and are making themselves at home without a worry in the world! Not only that: when the douche arrives . . . they get a hot shower, singing and dancing, as happy as could be (she sings and dances, imitating the sperm doing a flamenco)! "Trrrrrrrr!"

#### MENSTRUATION . . . WHAT A HORRIBLE WORD!!

At this point we're reliving the trajectory of a woman's life span. Today a baby girl is accepted warmly at birth . . . there was a time when they were thrown away . . . she is born, she grows up . . . What is the "turning point" in the life of an adolescent girl? The day she matures, when she becomes a woman.

If the girl is thirteen or fourteen . . . with the help of an older sister or girlfriend . . . she knows something about it. But what happens when girls get their first period without knowing anything? It happened to one of my nieces . . . she was ten when she matured. She came home all red in the face, disheveled, in tears: "I was in a fight. All the girls in my class were fighting with the boys and one of them gave me two kicks in my rear end . . . Look what he did to me! Call the police!" And we said to ourselves, "How silly!" We should have guessed this would happen and prepared her. It took so much time to calm her down, explain everything, and make her understand. So mothers: talk to your daughters, talk without fear, without embarrassment . . . it's a fact of nature.

I learned all about menstrual cycles from my friends . . . Waiting for it to come made me anxious and a little scared. Oh my God, what would it be like?

The day I became a woman was very important for me . . . very emotional, but at the same time it was a disappointment!

I imagined my family would throw a big party . . . God . . . I was coming out of puberty! From that moment on I would be part of the female race . . . a female creator, giver of milk, seductress!

I got a little carried away. I stood there with my arms crossed watching my mother, my sisters, my father . . . the family, and I said: "There's going to be a party, isn't there?" And if you think about it, having a party is the right thing to do when a girl becomes a woman . . . Yessir, because you only become a woman once.

Everyone around me acted as if nothing were happening. No one looked at me. No one gave me the slightest satisfaction and then when lunch came there wasn't even a cake!

Nothing! Nothing at all!

The only thing that happened was that my mother told me: "From this day on, young lady, when you sit down, keep your legs together!"

I'm doing a world-wide survey. There are pages and pages in the Bible that speak of the impurity of a woman during those famous days. We are convinced that during those famous days, we are "making mayonnaise" . . . "the mayonnaise is going bad." (Audience laughs.) Is that what you call it here, too? It's not eggs and ice cream, oil and hot . . . no! You make the mayonnaise . . . you go crazy . . . you menstruate! They even say it about eighty-year olds!

We can't touch flowers during "those days" either. They die! We are geranium assassins! Women, we are a natural force!!!!

#### VIRGINITY

Another problem around which there is a lot of confusion is virginity. It's a nightmare!

In our country virginity is a symbol of purity, an irreplaceable document . . . it's a certificate of guarantee!

From childhood it is inculcated into our brains that virginity is a treasure, a precious thing that is given only to the man who will become your husband, and woe to the one who loses it before her

wedding day! But no one prepares us to confront "that moment," with your spouse or with anyone else you choose. Do you study it in school? Does your mother talk about it? Does your mother talk about it? The family doctor? No, no one says anything. What will it be like? Painful? Painless? Simple? Difficult?

No one tells us that the hymen is a membrane, or how fragile it is. It's not the Berlin Wall! They don't tell us that an encounter with the other sex is an act of love, and that if you are "prepared" for it, everything will unfold in a natural and painless way.

All the virgins who have difficulties in "this moment" owe their difficulties to the culture's pervasive Catholic values. This gives rise to certain neuroses . . . a refutation of the penetration, vaginitis, or total avoidance.

And what's worse, I don't know why, but those who are no longer virgins love to tell virgins all about it . . . about "that moment" . . . incredible stories! Him and his battering ram demolishing your hymen. . . . Ahaaa . . . how frightening!" And then: "Blood, blood. . . ." So that when my moment came I was waiting for fountains of blood . . . "How was I going to clean it off the ceiling?"

Then I discovered it was all a lie. It was a natural act, and if done with love, there was nothing to it.

And so, men . . . she is afraid . . . no one is forcing you . . . TRAC! What's that? The taking of the Bastille? She's agitated? . . . Push it in a little today . . . push a little more tomorrow.

One evening after the show, a twenty-five-year-old woman from Bergamo came into my dressing room and said: "You did well to talk about it that way — it made me laugh — Push it in a little today . . . push a little more tomorrow. Now my friends will stop making fun of me. I was terrified . . . my husband was very understanding . . . I got married on the fifth of December. Push in a little today . . . push a little more tomorrow . . . the eighteenth of May . . . finally. . . ." It took a lot of time, but she experienced no trauma.

Furthermore, you should know that twenty percent of all women don't have hymens, or have ones that are so thin that they can be ripped casually, or have one that could be called complicated, which is to say very elastic.

And here we should have a moment of silence for those twenty percent of all women who for centuries have heard the words on their wedding night: "Whore. Whore!"

#### THE FIRST SEXUAL ENCOUNTER

My relationship with the other sex began as a "service" relationship.

Dear men, now I'm going to reveal to you a secret: we women, during our first sexual encounter, don't feel anything . . . Now I'm sure some of you are whispering to your partners: "No, no, you remember. . . . I felt so much!"

Believe me, it's just like I say: we don't feel a thing! And that's the way it should be.

We don't feel anything because we are young, inexperienced, unaware of our bodies, and we don't have much faith in our partner . . .

So . . . what do we women do at the beginning when we make love and feel nothing? . . . (she pauses) Everyone's silent, eh? Okay, then I'll say it. We fake it!

It's not difficult . . . (she groans) "Ahhhaaa!" They fall for it every time. Men are so sure of their innate splendor, of their sexual potency, that they would never imagine, "You don't enjoy it with me?!"

Why do we fake it?

So that no one discovers that we don't know anything . . . so as not to disappoint . . . to gratify . . . "You're fantastic!"

Men, now that I've put the flea in your ear, I'm going to give you the key for discovering whether your partner, during sex, simulates or really reaches . . . that horrendous term that I can't stand . . . ORGASM! What a word! It could be anything, except for what it really is . . . It could be the name of a killer whale: "Be good little boy, eat up all your spinach or we're going to call (in a terrifying voice) THE ORGASM!"

What is the key for discovering if your partner is really having an orgasm? Pay attention, because when she goes, "Ahaaah!" . . . her pupils . . . TAC! . . . dilate!

Attention, women! From now on . . . you know that he knows! So for those of you who make love without feeling anything . . .

eyes closed and lights out! Let's hope that at the climactic moment he doesn't pull out a flashlight: "Open your eyes!"

And that's not all. When your woman achieves orgasm . . . and is at the height of her pleasure . . . her toes . . . TAC! (With the palm of her hand to the audience, she shows her fingers) . . . tense up! . . . if your partner's toes look like this (she lets her fingers go limp) . . . nothing's happening!

Men . . . I'm sorry to have ruined your next sexual encounter . . . I can see you now . . . there you are . . . working away . . . ready for the big moment . . . sweating all over . . . and as soon as she (moans)

"Abhaaha" . . . you'll be saying (mimes inspecting toes and eyes): "Eyes-toes-eyes-toes . . ."

As I was saying, at first a woman feels nothing . . . then they get to know each other, the relationship evolves . . . things get better . . . and happiness arrives.

We hope.

But if on the other hand sexual compatibility never materializes, then there's all the frustration . . . neuroses . . . and instead of reacting by educating ourselves and trying to find the reason for it . . . we cry and we stuff ourselves with pills. There are the pills that bring you up. "Oh, God, I'm too up!" . . . and there are the ones that bring you down . . . and we end up having a nervous breakdown.

So there are women who go through their entire sexual lives without ever having an orgasm.

It must be awful, and boring besides, to make love for ten, twenty, thirty years . . . always pretending (she moans) "Ahhaaha! Ahhaaha!" With your mind wandering, and tightly so . . . "Ahaa! Peanut butter. I have to remember to buy some peanut butter!"

They don't talk about it to anyone . . . maybe if she has the courage, she'll go to the doctor: "Doctor, I don't feel anything when I make love." The doctor's response ruins her for life. "Madam, you don't feel anything because you are frigid." The poor woman goes home desperate and devastated . . . and shouts at herself, "I'm frigid!!! I'm frigid!!! With two g's . . . because the pain is so strong!"

Okay, there may be a few women in the audience with this problem . . . you should know that frigidity does not exist. It's just

timidity . . . the way you were brought up and educated, a series of ancestral blocks . . . Taboos . . . fears.

How do you overcome them? By finding out about your body, trying autocroticism, having confidence in your partner: "Darling, I don't feel anything, let's try . . . let's look for it together." Remember also that there are sexologists. You can always go to them, can't you? To talk. To find things out! After all, the orgasm is a cultural fact.

In the Kinsey report, forty years ago, it was found that forty-five percent of the women in America faked their orgasms. Forty-five percent. As time goes on this percentage has increased. Now it's up to sixty percent of women who feel nothing. Even here in Italy. Sixty percent!

American sexologists have studied this problem and come to the conclusion that if a woman can successfully fake an orgasm, with a credible acting job, twice a day for at least three years, in the end, miraculously, she'll actually have one. I don't know if that's true, but in America they've now opened gymnasiums with classes like the ones they have for aerobics, where they teach women how to act out their entire sexual act, and in particular their orgasms.

FINNINVEST . . . (an Italian broadcasting corporation) found out about these lessons, had them filmed, and plans to broadcast them on all their stations. I was able to watch one of the episodes at the home of a friend and if I give you a sneak preview, I'm sure it will enrich your imagination and your next bout of lovemaking will be extraordinary. Remember me!

We're in a gymnasium with about thirty women students, young and married, in tights and leotards, stretched out on their little mattresses. In front of them is the orgasm teacher, she has a degree in it. I don't know what tests she had to take, but she's wearing tights and leotards too, and she's in charge. The lights go down. They turn on the sexy background music. And the lesson begins.

Ladies. Relax and stretch out languidly on your mattresses . . . And one and two. Turn over on your right sides . . . and one and two. Imagine your partner also stretched out on his side in front of you. He hugs you. He squeezes you. He kisses you. Respond languidly. Kiss him back and sigh like this . . . mmmmm-

mmmmmmmm . . . as if to say, "mmmmmmmm, what delicious ice cream!"

You have to understand that in a sexual encounter, breathing is very important . . . especially if you don't feel anything. You have to breath sexy. Do it like me. Ahhuhh. Ahhuhhuhh. No, that's a burp. Be careful, dear.

Slowly accelerate your breath: "ahhahhahh." No, not too fast. You'll get dizzy and black out.

Now lie down on your backs. Pull your partner on top of you. Don't pull too hard or you might knock him over. Remember girls. Now we're coming to the most important moment of your sexual encounter. He's on top of you. He's about to possess your body. He's about to penetrate you.

Make him feel at home. "Ahhhhhh." Welcome him with festive sighs. "Ohh.ohh.ohh." As if to say, "Come on in. How ya doin'. Want a cup of coffee?"

One, two. Then continue the sounds you were making before, "Ahaa . . . mmmmm aha aha aha."

But of course you can't keep sighing and groaning like that the whole time. Every once in a while you have to throw in a few words. Like, "Oh no, it's too much." They like that one a lot. "Ahhhhhhhhhh." But it's clear that you can't say, "oh, no it's too much," when you're all tense and blocked up. You have to be loose . . . roll your head back and forth on the pillow. At least eight times. Go. (She demonstrates, turning her head from side to side.) And one and two . . . Take off your earrings . . . and seven and eight. But you can't just do it silently. He'll think you're having an epileptic attack. You have to murmur something tender like, "I'm dying. I'm dying. I'm dying." But not with a tragic expression. Smile when you say it. (She demonstrates the head rolling again with a smile.) "I'm dying. I'm dying. I'm dying." Otherwise you'll scare him.

Back to the basic sighing . . . 'ahhhahhahh.' Then you can invoke your mother. That's always a good one. "Oh, Mamma." But you want to be careful he's not an orphan . . . or you might open some old wounds . . . he'll burst out crying . . . and then it's

goodbye erection. "Oh mamma . . . ahah." Then you move onto the religious epiphany. "Oh God!" Six times in with a rising inflection. "Dio. Dio. Dio. Dio. Oh, Dio!" "Holy virgin!"

Courage. We're coming to the most delicate moment. Lift up your hips. Feet firmly on the ground. Shoulders back. Arms free. Undulate. Don't loose your balance. Count to twelve. One. Two. Three. Not out loud. Stop. Look at him. Eyes open wide. And whisper, "Who are you?" But not too questioningly. Otherwise he might say, "What do you mean, who am I?" and leave.

Courage. Now we're coming to the grand finale. Loosen your arms. Undulate. One . . . Two . . . As many times as you want. Do the back stroke. As long as you can take it. Then finish with a scream. Any kind you want. Desperate. Happy. Suffering. "Ahh . . . abhh . . . abhhhhhh." No that's an ambulance. "Ahhahhhhhhh." Higher. Higher. They love that. Higher. To the max. Then you have to bring it down. Count to two. "Ahh . . . Ahh.ahhh." One, two "ohh." One, two, "Ohhh." One, two "OHHHHHHHHHHH!" Orgasm Achieved.

And now you have to be careful, ladies. The next time you make love, don't burst out laughing when you say, "Oh, Mamma."

Man, what a braggart!

We in modern times are the first people in history to confront the problem of pleasure. When people worked fifteen hours a day, they didn't have much energy to dedicate to sexual relations. After thirteen, fifteen hours of work, they came home dead tired, ate, and went to bed . . . the wife arrives: tran-tran-tran! Then (she burps) "grrrrrr!", they went to sleep. It happens like that today too . . . even though men work much less. Many of my friends complain that their husbands trun-trun-trun, and then "grrrrrrrr!" without even saying: "Thanks, dear . . . Would you like some coffee?"

Today it has become a status symbol for a man to show off his pleasures: the wife, the girlfriend, the three lovers, the boyfriend. You've got to be kidding . . .

And often, in addition to displaying their pleasures, men brag about them. There is an English actor who swears to have copu-

lated three thousand times with three thousand different women, in three years! Figure that out. Three thousand! He's got to be running around nude under a cloak. He doesn't even have time to say, "What's your name?" Nothing! "Thank you — zam-zam! Goodbye!" (She gasps quickly, out of breath.) "Thank you — zam-zam! Goodbye!" What can he get out of doing it like a mechanical rabbit? It's forced labor!

There are always a few women in the audience who, when they hear "three thousand times, eight times . . ." look at their husbands with contempt and whisper, "Impotent!"

Stories like the English actor's are things that men tell each other at bars. . . . "Today from two to five . . . nine times!" And the guy who does it twice a month goes home and bangs his head against the wall! Don't be discouraged men, they're all lies! Nine times? Come on! Maybe when they were eighteen. We women have plenty of sexual problems, but men have their share too. Nine times. . . . But when the two of you are together . . . alone . . . naked . . . in bed . . . it's another story. Then they have temporary emotional impotence . . . premature ejaculation from over-excitation . . . Inability to ejaculate . . . fear of vaginal teeth!

Yes, it's true. I swear! There are boys who anticipate their first sexual encounter in terror: "What if I penetrate her, and she doesn't let me out?"

Let me get back to the women: if you ever find yourself in a situation like I've described, where your partner is temporarily impotent, or ejaculates prematurely, etcetera . . . don't make fun of him and say, "Get out of here you impotent fool!" No! You have to be sensitive when confronting the emotions of love.

Attention girls, your behavior at the beginning of a sexual experience, if it is mocking and derisive, can damage a man, and give him complexes for the rest of his life.

I think that for a young man having his first sexual encounter . . . the erection . . . must be a big problem.

The erection . . . it's not like turning on the lights . . . flick the switch and TAK! . . . it's linked to the moment . . . to what one feels inside . . .

As far as I'm concerned the erection . . . is a living miracle! There's no bone inside a male sex organ! It's a living miracle! Put there by the grace of God!

#### TEMPORARY IMPOTENCE

Temporary impotence exists, but with time, faith, and experience, it can be overcome.

There are some particularly sensitive men . . . fragile, insecure . . . who suffer from this problem continuously.

A young boy came up to me . . . He said: SignoraFrancara — he said it all in one word — "SignoraFrancara, can I talk with you a moment? I saw the show last night . . . I would like to ask your advice . . . you are a mamma." — "I'm also a grandmother, come into my dressing room and we'll talk while I'm putting on my make-up." A little embarrassed, he couldn't find the words. "Be brave, and hurry, because I'm about to go out on stage." He got up his courage: "SignoraFrancara, I have extraordinary erections!" — "I'm happy for you. So what's the problem?" — "It's just that they're at the wrong times! There I am answering questions in Greek class and TRAC! I'm afraid the whole class will notice it. . . . Then when I need it, it's dead!" I gave him Jacopo's book. — My son, who I've already told you has suffered through all kinds of sexual problems, suggests in his book that people having this type of problem try one of the positions of the KamaSutra: "the scissors position." I can't explain to you all the details of this position, because I don't want my mother to turn over in her grave . . . but out of courtesy, I'll mention them briefly. Scissors . . . you all know how scissors are shaped . . . So if two scissors were in love, how do you think they would embrace? (Pause) Can you visualize it? It seems that in this position . . . in close-up . . . even if the man's sex organ finds itself in a moment of . . . how can we say it . . . misery . . . inability to perform its patriotic duty . . . it will eventually succeed . . . with a little bit of help . . . in introducing itself into "the right location." Once it's there, it's trapped! At this point you have to be patient. Give it a little time . . . Talk to it a little: "Howya doin'?" "What did you watch on TV last night?" And then it, being a little cocky, but not completely stupid, after a while will find itself there saying: "Oh, how nice and warm in here . . ." It opens an eye . . . it only has one . . . "Where am I?" . . . and . . . "Ahhaa!" And then . . . More than that I can't say. I'm already sweating!

I believe that the unsustainable inconsistency of the male member is an unsustainable moment for the male.

Look at the way men always want to be in control of things, at any cost. It's bad for them! And we are responsible, we parents, we grandmothers . . . we perpetrate a culture of imbeciles! And we're supposed to be on the left! When a little boy of five or six starts to cry, what do we say to him? "Don't cry. You're not a little woman. You're a little man!" No, that's not right. "Don't cry because you're being a pain in the ass!" not because you're a little man. Ten-years old: "You're a little man. You're a little man." Twelve-years old: "You're a little man . . ." And our sons grow up feeling an obligation to be virile, strong, like steel! Better not cry. All clogged up with lumps in their throats . . . they smoke six cigarettes at once . . . Two in the nose, in their ears . . . but not one tear!

But why can't a man cry? It's beautiful to cry . . . we women cry every five minutes! It's magnificent for a woman to have a boyfriend, a husband, a lover who cries in her arms . . . And it's beautiful to cry together . . . to bathe each other in tears.

Men, starting tonight, cry! You can even burst out in tears immediately. You'll feel relieved.

Because of our "culture of imbeciles," where men are "all of one piece . . . forged from steel," it ends up that men, especially in public, pretend not to suffer from any sexual problems. Everything is held in hiding like a horrible excrescence. I'd like to see a young man at the dinner table eating his spaghetti who says (speaks as if she has her mouth full): "Mamma, I'm suffering from premature ejaculation."

Or have him go out into the town square and shout: "I am a premature ejaculator!"

In my opinion it's a very serious sexual disorder, very common in men, that they keep secret. They don't even talk about it in university manuals of sexology.

Everyone knows that there are frigid women . . . I've already explained that they don't really exist . . . it's just a word that's used to simplify things . . . but did you know that there are also frigid men?

Understand that I'm not talking about impotence. I'm talking about the complete absence of pleasure.

The man has his erections regularly, and his ejaculations, but he doesn't feel anything. He doesn't experience any pleasure.

And you know that to hide this masculine frigidity they have even invented a biological reaction that doesn't exist?

It's called "post-coital sadness." . . . The ancient Romans were already talking about it and it can still be found in manuals of sexology today.

In short, they maintain that it is natural for men to feel sad after having made love.

"Oh God, what have I done?! What bestiality! I repent! What a repugnant act it is to have sex. Mamma, I promise I'll never do it again!"

Who ever heard of such a thing????!!!!

This fact of male frigidity is a serious and tragic problem, and I'm convinced that one of the sources of sexual violence is exactly this "not feeling anything." One of the reasons. It is obvious that a man who experiences genuine pleasure in making love would never have the idea come into his head of taking a woman through violence, raping her. One who can make love, knows that pleasure only grows out of a rapport that is calm and relaxed, built on intimacy and tenderness.

How can this problem be overcome? By speaking with your partner, peacefully . . . without shame . . . having faith in love . . . having confidence . . . and remembering that there are sexual counselors.

#### ABSOLUTE IMPOTENCY

Statistics provide us with data that will stun the men who are present: One man out of three, at least once in his life, has gone "blank." This is the temporary impotence that we've already spoken about at length, but there is another kind of impotence: permanent impotence. And here the statistics tell us that one man out of eight over the age of forty-five becomes impotent. Excluding, of course, everyone here.

There are various forms of impotence: organic impotence, arising from sickness . . . then there is psychological impotence, that which we spoke of earlier . . . then there is the impotence of scamps that comes from overuse . . . playboys, beware!

There are also tragic forms of impotence that rise out of welfare or unemployment: a clerk or laborer, because of insecurity about his work, is no longer able to make love.



There is also the impotence that comes from too much "science." They have everything up here . . . (indicates her forehead). Let me explain: the higher the level of a man's cultural sophistication, the bigger the risk that he will have problems of impotence. I learned of this type of impotence reading the medical pages of "La Repubblica" three years ago in 1996. I want you to pay close attention to that date . . . you'll know why later. . . . So, dear women, if your husband is a Nobel Laureate . . . be content with that, because that's the most he can offer you! (Readers, note that Dario Fo, Franca's husband, won the Nobel Prize in 1997.) Don't laugh! I swear that line has been in the script since 1996!

A while ago, I found myself in Toronto performing this show and when I spoke of the Nobel Prize, I noticed that half the audience turned around to look behind them . . . "What happened?" I asked. There was a Nobel Laureate in the house . . . When I found out I wanted to die! He was trying to disappear into his seat . . . Sitting in the next seat, his wife was laughing like a madwoman!

Why does a man become impotent after the age of forty-five, I asked myself?

The principle male sexual hormone is called Testosterone. Most men have a drop in the production of this hormone between the ages of forty and fifty, and by the age of seventy they produce half of what they did when they were thirty. A shortage of testosterone is called hypo-gonadism and can cause serious disorders like depression, fatigue, osteoporosis, and simple impotence!

And so scientists have invented the "love band aid." This band aid can be attached to the arm, the abdomen, the thigh . . . "I'm breaking out in pimples" . . . to the face . . . what an idea . . . I would say no . . . The body absorbs its testosterone and you have your pretty erection.

Women, if you have this problem in the family, don't rush out tomorrow morning and buy a hundred testosterone band aids! It's a small country. People will talk, and your husband will be too embarrassed to go out of the house! And don't go home and throw down a hundred band-aids on the kitchen table: "Here's your testosterone!" . . . Wait for some holiday . . . his birthday for example . . . or Easter . . . he opens the egg . . . and . . . "Surprise!"

There is also the "love serum," PGE 1, which stimulates the prostate gland. This drug can't be ingested as easily as testosterone. You have to inject it, using a syringe that is about the size of a ball point pen, directly into the cavernous hollow — yes, the sex of your loved one has a cavernous hollow — and it provokes an erection.

And if she asks, "But what are you doing, my love?!" — "I'm writing your name here, dear . . . that way I'll never forget it!"

Pay attention now! I don't want all of you going out and buying these drugs tomorrow. I've only mentioned two of them, but there are others, and . . . 'my friend Franca recommended them' . . . No. No drug should be used without the advice of a doctor. Otherwise they might give the opposite results.

There is a lot to be gained from drugs, but those who can afford it undergo expensive surgical interventions that are tragic and a little grotesque.

What is the nature of these interventions? I enjoy going deeply into things. I've studied the trends over time concerning the various surgical interventions that allow men to achieve a satisfying sexual performance.

In the beginning, in the United States, and then also in Europe, there were the implants, which is a precise term that should not be confused with transplants . . . you can transplant a kidney, a cornea . . . Men had implanted in their sexual organs a prosthesis . . . a stiff one . . . that stayed stiff all the time!

I can imagine these men . . . walking around the city . . . burdened . . . as if they were always carrying an extra suitcase down there! Of course it works well for making love . . . but there are certain situations . . . moments of everyday life . . . a funeral for example . . . "How could he?" Some men end up shouting, "Get it off of me. OFF OFF!"

And then there's skiing. They can't get around the curves any more!

Then, there's another intervention, a soft prosthesis . . . connected to a little tube implanted under your skin here (she indicates her hip) that is linked to a miniature pump . . . a tiny little pump! All you have to do is prepare it two hours before your encounter . . . (she mimes squeezing a pump on her hip) like when you inflate a raft on the beach . . . You can even do it while you're on the phone . . . "hi, honey . . . how's the stock market?" Zam-zam-zam,

and when everything's okay, away you go! Tremendous performance . . . seven hours, eight hours . . . with the poor women who can't stand it anymore! And the minute there's a little sagging: (She mimes squeezing the pump) Zam! Zam! Zam! And the wife: "What's wrong, dear?" — "Nothing, my love . . . just a little cramp."

There is another intervention, also a soft prosthesis linked to a sophisticated apparatus designed to realize the dream of “perfect performance.” I’m going to say right away that it involves a word that I hate: the scrotum! Scrotum . . . what a horrible term. It’s worse than “orgasm.”

Foreskin, for example, now that's a nice word . . . (she pretends to make a phone call). "Hello? Can I please speak to Mr. Foreskin?" Or even gland . . . It's a sweet word . . . it could be the name of a flower . . . "I'd like to offer you this bouquet of glands." But "scrotum" . . . . But we women shouldn't laugh . . . because the terms that define our sexual organs are also pretty horrible: Vulva! Vuuulvaaa! One night a woman in the audience said, "I don't have a vulva. I have a Volvo!" Not to mention the "uterus." What a terrible word! It sounds like something you shout to get attention when you're drowning. (She shouts) "Uteruuuuuuuus!" And what about ovaries? There are some days when you get all dressed up: "How gorgeous I look today!" You go out, all elegant, you see your reflection in a store window, you're looking good . . . and then all of a sudden: "Ah! I have ovaries!" And you're completely demoralized. It's a barnyard term, for chickens . . . "I made an omelet today with thirty ovaries."

But scrotum beats them all! It sounds like the name of a disgusting worm! (She mimes crushing a worm.) "Ahaa! It's a scrotum! Step on it!"

So, what does this sophisticated apparatus consist of? The soft prosthesis is connected to two little buttons inserted under the skin of the scrotum: the one on the left gives you an erection, the one on the right deflates it — any political associations are purely coincidental.

All this happens without the woman noticing anything. The man with the implant doesn't tell anyone, not even his wife . . . otherwise there would be a war of the buttons!

This system is extraordinary . . . the only inconvenience . . . is that when you press the button to lose the erection . . . while it's deflating . . . it whistles: "Piuuu . . ."

In the operating instructions that come with the prosthesis, it advises: "At the conclusion of the act, turn on the radio or television. If this is not possible, sing in a baritone voice or make a noise like a train: "Tootroot!"

Another system uses a silver wire . . . silver is a very malleable material . . . it keeps its shape. The only problem is that these men can't ride airplanes anymore . . . when they pass through a metal detector: drrriiiiiiiinnnnnnnn! . . . They all take trains!

The latest is an ingenious and revolutionary device from the American Medical System. The first tests in Italy have been for volunteers at a clinic in Modena that specializes in these types of problems.

The great innovation of this system is the ability to set off the erection by remote control . . . yes, just like the ones that you use for your TV . . . but there is only one channel.

It's clear that you can't get into bed naked with your remote control device . . . What are you going to do? Give it to your wife: "Turn me on, darling!" So what did they come up with? They miniaturized it . . . and made it into the shape of a . . . suppository! And where do you insert it? Well, I think you get the picture . . . where do you usually insert suppositories. The doctors reassure their patients: "Don't worry, it's ultra-sensitive . . . she arrives, you embrace: "Darling, I love you. . . ." All you need is a little squeeze: "I love you, I love you, I love you!" Three little squeezes and she's shouting: "It's the obelisk of Ramses the fourth!"

Be careful, though. There are three basic rules that must be followed. First: be sure the batteries are charged. Second: don't let it fall into the hands of your enemies. And third: Don't get frightened. Someone walks in: "Put your hands up, this is a hold-up!" TAC! The obelisk explodes! And the remote control ends up in your mouth!

TRUE STORIES OF MY SON: MEN SUFFER TOO

As far as we've been able to establish, men suffer too. I realized this through my son . . . watching him grow up I've been able to observe all the phases of disaster. From the time he was a little boy

Jacopo fell in love with abandon every fifteen minutes . . . and it was almost always unrequited. It wasn't that he was ugly, on the contrary . . . he just had the wrong approach: he was convinced that in order to conquer a girl it was necessary to exhibit desperation, loneliness . . . he must have been watching the wrong movies: "I'm desperate! I'm alone in the world! No one loves me!" He couldn't say, "My mother is dead," because I was well known, otherwise I'm sure he would have tried that too. And the girls, after a while, confronted with this whining desperation, ran away at full speed.

Then one day he came home and said, "Mamma, I'm going to get married!" — "Let's talk about it . . ." I said calmly. He was fifteen-years old . . . and he was head over heels in love with a widow of thirty-four . . . who didn't want him!

The poor boy . . . he had a nervous breakdown! He started losing his hair. It's called "alopecia," a psychosomatic disorder . . . caused by frustration, insecurity, and anxiety. If you see young boys walking around with bald spots, please be kind to them, even if you don't know them: "Hi! Howya doing, buddy! Want a cup of coffee?" Because they are going through a stage of desperation and insecurity. It happens to girls too, but with their long hair you don't notice the bald spots.

Jacopo: he had bald spots, teenage acne multiplied a hundred and forty-seven times over . . . tall as hunger . . . and soooooo thin! It was a tragedy! Nobody wanted him. Listen, I'm telling you the truth . . . he's my son . . . I love him . . . but he was reduced to . . . he was just damn ugly! I'm not ashamed to say it: to have a girl he would have had to pay for it!

At a certain point he said, "Mamma, I want to prepare myself for the grand encounter . . . do you think I should read *The Sexual Revolution* by Wilhelm Reich?" — "Yes!" If you say no, it's worse, because he would have read it secretly.

I always tried to talk to my children . . . I tried not to make the same mistakes my mother did . . . even if the subjects were difficult. So I forced myself to say . . . (with a voice that is both sharp and strangled at the same time) "Read it! — (ironically) It came out in a casual voice. "Read it . . . it's a very serious book . . . and if there's anything you don't understand . . . ask your mother . . . (almost suffocating) . . . and your mother will explain everything!"

I don't know why we mothers, when we're uncomfortable in front of our children, speak in a tone of voice that come from outside of our heads.

One day, I was preparing some minestrone soup . . . I have a very good relationship with vegetables. I have an electric slicer, but when I feel like it, I cut them by hand: tac-tac! . . . (mimes quickly cutting celery, carrots, and potatoes). I make enough soup for three months . . . I put it all in the freezer! The innocent child arrives with a book in his hand and asks me straight out: "Mamma, how do women masturbate?" I almost cut off a finger!

Because Dario and I, like everyone else, had explained to our children with delicacy all about the act of sex . . . how babies are born . . . starting with the butterfly . . . but it never occurred to us to talk about masturbation. "Dariooooo! Come here . . . your son needs to talk to you!" Dario arrives . . . a politically active man, progressive . . . and do you know what he said to his son? "That's not the kind of question you ask your parents!"

Then he cut his throat! He made the situation worse: "Ask your girlfriend!" When everyone in the neighborhood knew he couldn't find a girlfriend.

He just couldn't find one, in spite of all the efforts I made to turn him into an Arnold Schwarzenegger type. We mothers, when we're young, live through our afternoons in a nightmare: we take our kids to the swimming pool, we take them to tennis, we take them dancing . . . from the time they're babies . . . to piano lessons . . . and those lazy buns don't want to do any of it! You know what I'm talking about, mamas!

One day I said, "Jacopo, you're too shy. You have to prepare yourself for life. The world is evil . . . talking things out will only get you so far . . ." He was six! So I signed him up for a Judo class! The poor baby didn't want to have anything to do with it. "Be strong, Jacopo, and if some one approaches you with bad intentions . . . taci! One smack and you'll send him flying . . ."

After ten days I had to withdraw him. I went to pick him up and: "Where's my son?" He had run away. — "They all beat me up . . . even the babies!"

Swimming: he didn't apply himself.

Skiing: he broke two legs the first day . . . Nobody breaks both legs at once! It's lucky he didn't have three!

"Go ahead, grow up skinny, without muscles . . . what do I care! It's your problem," I shouted at him in anger.

Fortunately, all bad things aren't for the worse, as they say. When he was called up for military service . . . when the red postcard arrived . . . I don't know why they make them red . . . black would be more appropriate . . . I asked him a month before his physical examination, "How much do you weigh? . . . Okay, for the next month, you don't eat." — "But, mamma, I'm already underweight without trying . . . I can barely stand up." — "I don't care. If you can't stand up, sit down! You're not eating!"

I went with him to the military base at Como, holding him up from behind . . . if I'd have let him go, he'd have fallen down . . . I put him into the hands of the doctors . . . and I left the barracks crying like a fountain.

My God, if I had to go into the military, I'd die. The diagnosis was fantastic: Six feet tall, a hundred pounds. Organic malnutrition. Rejected. Hallelujah! He made a party . . . a huge lunch . . . he ate and threw it all up. He was out of practice, poor thing.

You've understood that during his adolescence, Jacopo was sexually unhappy. Then one day, he came to me — he never asked his father anything anymore! — and he said: "Mamma, I suffer from premature ejaculation!" Because you know, almost all young boys have this problem. Also some adults. I know for certain! "I'm not very good at it."

I didn't know what to tell him to do . . . then . . . the love of a mother kept me up all night and I came up with a solution that I thought would help him: mathematics. "Mathematics, mamma?" — "Yes, mathematics. It's your salvation. The secret to the whole thing is distraction . . . You start to make love and right away detach your brain . . . do complicated calculations: seven over nine divided by five multiplied by twenty-two . . . You'll see. It will work." — "Okay, mamma, I'll try it."

The day of the grand encounter the whole family was behind him: "Courage, Jacopo! You can do it! Come home a winner!" He left. He came back. "How did it go?" — "Seven over nine . . . I finished, mamma!" (Often at this point the audience applauds.) This applause comes from all the premature ejaculators!

Then on his own . . . he's very creative . . . he developed another system: "Mamma I found an extraordinary method: when I

feel myself getting too excited, I use all my strength to contract the muscles at the base of my belly . . . and I can hold it back! Mamma, I can hold it back!"

It gave him cystitis.

On top of that it was the era of feminism . . . and girls got carried away if a man had the bad luck to ejaculate prematurely. They'd get very angry and shout in his ear: "You're a male chauvinist pig!" And they'd slap him. My son's foreskin was always red. He'd go out marching in demonstrations with the communists. (She covers her crotch with her hands and mimes marching to a communist anthem about the triumph of the red flag.) "Avanti popolo . . ."

Then finally he found a girl his own age, more mature than he was, a nice girl . . . who understood almost everything about sex and with tenderness helped him understand that sexual relations were not like the Olympics . . . that it was silly to believe that there would be any prizes for those who came in first place . . . and she saved me.

Once Jacopo overcame this problem, he made up for lost time. His hair grew back, the acne disappeared . . . he became a good looking young man. But around the house he put on airs. You couldn't talk about sex . . . he knew it all . . . as if he were the only one who had it.

One day when he was sixteen . . . we, Dario and I, had to leave on tour . . . a regular part of our strange profession . . . Our children often went with us, but as they grew up it became harder for them to miss school. We had to leave and he was supposed to stay with his grandmother of the rear end and the rear end in the front and his sisters. At that time he was with a young girl who was decidedly virginal . . . I understood that they were fooling around in some way, and I was a little worried: "Jacopo! Come into the bathroom. I have to talk to you!" . . . because whenever I have important family problems I like to resolve them there! I sat down on the WC and Jacopo was on the bidet. "Be careful, Jacopo. Don't do anything silly . . . this girl is definitely a virgin!" And he said: "But, mamma . . . I know very well what I should do!" — "What are you saying? What will you do?" — "I'm only going to do . . ." — he was a little embarrassed, because he trusts me, but there is also respect for his mother — " . . . I'm only going to do . . . the little

key." I didn't know what to say (she mimes adjusting her hair nervously) — "What's that?" — "I learned it from my grown up friends at the university . . . It's when you just put in a little piece of it . . ." — "Are you crazy! What do you mean a little piece? Do you measure it first? Do you tie a little string around it with a bell? Don't you know that the hymen is at the beginning of the female sex organ!" — "No it's not, mamma! The hymen is a little further inside." — "What are you talking about? The hymen is at the beginning of the female sex organ." — "No, it's not, mamma . . . it's at least two centimeters further inside." — "That's enough! You think you know better than I do?" Do you know what he answered? "You don't remember anymore . . ." That made me mad. "Okay, I'm going to call the doctor . . . I want to settle this!" I telephone, but he's not there. His wife answers . . . a woman of my mother's generation . . . Without thinking . . . I was so agitated: "Hello, Jole . . . where's the hymen?" There was silence on the other end of the line. "I've killed her!" I thought to myself. Then a trembling voice asked me, "Do you mean like the river?" — "Excuse me, excuse me . . . I'll call you later."

Then in the evening I spoke to my doctor: "At your age you still want to know where the hymen is? . . . Well, your son is right. It's a little further on the inside."

Now I want to say . . . because there might be some boys here who might want to try out the "little key" . . . Be careful! Stop in time! Remember that your sex organ . . . doesn't have shoulders. Put a bolt on it!

#### THE CLITORIS

You understand that Jacopo's sex life kept getting better . . . one afternoon . . . I was preparing my famous minestrone . . . when Jacopo arrived in a festive mood: "Mamma, mamma, I found the clitoris!"

Do you know that I didn't understand? I didn't understand! It's a term that was not part of the everyday language of my culture. How many people are born and die without ever pronouncing the word "clitoris?" It's not like you sit around at Christmas dinner saying, "And how is your baby's clitoris?"

I didn't understand, so I just said: "Ah, yes? When did you lose it?" He got a little upset, "But mamma, how can you tell me to trust you, and then when I confide in you, you make fun of me?"

— "No! Excuse me, dear . . . I didn't understand!" But when I realized that for him it was an important event . . . because, tell the truth, ladies . . . it is pretty difficult for men to find that clitoris! . . . when I understood . . . I applauded: "Bravo-bravo-bravo!" We had a family celebration . . . Grandmother asked: "What are we celebrating?"

As a confirmation of what I'm telling you, I arrived in Rome and met a young boy at the stage door. He was the son of friends — we always come back to the same cities . . . people get married, they throw confetti, they give birth to their first child . . . they keep coming back every year . . . and you become friends.

This boy, eighteen-years-old, said: "This is my father's cell phone. I'm going to dial my girlfriend's number: now you talk to her . . . tell her it's you, and when she understands that it's really you, tell her: 'You know what you are? A pretty little turd!' And hang up." — "You're out of your mind . . . I can't . . . I don't even know her . . . What did she do to you?" — "What do you mean, what did she do to me? She doesn't collaborate! I can't find her . . . yes, you know . . . that part of her sex organ . . . we are there in bed, naked, making love . . . I'm making a big effort . . . and she, like a serpent, with her mouth drawn in, hisses: 'You can't find it, huh?' I'm not discouraged. I keep on trying and she, cold as ice, rolls her eyes and says: (pause) 'No! . . . (pause) . . . No! . . . (pause). You're getting colder, colder . . .'" Girls, don't be like that. You have to help your lovers!

I advised him to read some books that explain everything about sexuality and the location of the clitoris. "I have one of them with me," he said, and showed it to me. I copied the description of how to track down the clitoris . . . it is very scholarly and a little unnerving. I'll read it to you: "Ideally one should place oneself between the breasts" — they start off a little far away — "then trace a straight line towards the belly button" — I can see him there with a ruler: "Don't laugh or you'll throw me off course" — "from there you continue in the direction of the pubic bone" — "we're getting closer — 'pass through the dark forest' — what a horror! — 'then at the summit of the mound of Venus, begin the descent to the opposite shore' — it reminds me of Tomba skiing the slalom (she demonstrates) — 'from inside the valley, follow the gentle slope of the hill to the canyon: and there it is. The clitoris is there!'"

No wonder men can't find it.

I speak of the clitoris linguistically as both masculine and feminine. In Italian it is grammatically incorrect to speak of the clitoris as a "her," but there were some feminists a few years ago who were tired of calling the clitoris a "him." "It's our thing . . ." Some extremist fanatics proposed changing the gender of all the other body parts as well, so that the nose, eyes, pubic bone, and ass would all be feminine. But then the backlash came, and they gave it up.

The things you need to know are the things that even your gynecologist won't tell you.

#### THE FEMALE SEX ORGAN

At this point I should be projecting a drawing of the female sex organ in cross-section, enlarged at least five-hundred times, in order to be able to continue my lessons, but Dario was adamant: "You can't do that! The female sex organ in cross section is already terrifying in miniature . . . if you enlarge it five-hundred times . . . the men in the audience won't be able to have erections for the next two months! Try something else!" So I will mime for you a female sex organ. You all know what it looks like . . . (she puts her arms up over her head and joins her hands together in the shape of a little boat). Where does one find the famous clitoris, that when stimulated allows a woman to reach a nice orgasm? Here! (She points above her head).

Some men think it's here! (She points to her forehead) We have another erogenous area inside our sex . . . the "fantastic" "G" spot. The "fantastic" I added myself.

All over the world people talk about the "G" spot, but few have found it . . . What is the "G" spot? G . . . G is for Grafenberg . . . a German professor who discovered the existence of the "G" spot . . . In 1944! And nobody ever told us about it!

And where is this "G" spot, that which is actually an internal extension of the clitoris?

This is the female sex (she lifts up her arms as before) . . . Professor Grafenberg says: "On entering . . ." (the public always laughs at this word) — Don't help me! I haven't found another verb — "On entering . . . and descending . . . we find the "G" spot in the first lower third . . ." — which is not clear at all!

Professor Grafenberg eventually helps us by saying: "Imagine the inside of the female sex organ is a clock with the hands pointing

towards the belly button indicating 11:05. That's where the 'G' spot is." I can see it now . . . the next time you have sex . . . your partner will whisper, "Darling . . . it's eleven o'clock . . . can I insert my Cartier . . . so I can find out where your 'G' spot is?"

But remember: whether it's the clitoris or the "G" spot, don't expect him to find it by himself. You know that men can't even find water in the ocean, so you're kidding yourself if you think they're going to find the "G" spot that we ourselves didn't even know we had until 1968.

You have to take the situation into your own hands. Guide their hands to the right place. Don't think that men are going to be able to escape from their dominant neuroses. Their minds are too blocked up. You have to teach them everything!

But please try not to order them around: "Go over here! Go over there!" Do it intuitively, subtly . . . "You're getting warmer . . . warmer . . . you're hot! . . . (sigh of pleasure) Abbaahh . . . Yes, (sigh) Yes!" And clap your hands!

#### MALE EROGENOUS ZONES — THE MALE SEX ORGAN

Once you've explained him everything about you . . . overcoming your shyness and gaining confidence, you should also find out about the erogenous zones of the male sex.

First of all, ladies, we have to admit, the male sex organ is beautiful! Look at how beautiful it is! . . . Well, when it's just lying there . . . in repose . . . all shriveled up . . . it's not all that exciting . . . But my heart goes out to it! I get the urge to pull on it, like the tail of a cat!

But when it rises up . . . in all its force . . . it's beautiful! It's beautiful, but there are men, who in spite of the beauty of their little tail . . . — come on, it's a little tail! . . . the devil has his in the back and man has his in front — are consumed by the drama of size. Men, I assure you that size is of absolutely no importance. What is important is how you use your sex. For example, making a woman laugh is sexually more important than the measurements of your penis. Besides the fact that a man of small proportions can satisfy his partner to the extreme, because he has all that it takes.

At this point I should project a drawing of the male sex organ in cross sections, but for the reasons I've already mentioned I won't do it. Visualize a male sex organ . . . (she draws one in the air). Get the picture? Now, probably no one has ever told you this



before, but he also has a . . . how shall I say it . . . a male clitoris . . . an erogenous zone that is the equivalent of our clitoris . . . and I'm sure you know where it is . . . if you don't know, shoot yourself . . . Anyway . . . it's over here. (Points to the top of the sex organ she drew in the air).

There's another area that many men are not aware of. They don't know that they have one too: the fantastic "G" spot. Listen to that silence! Yes, gentlemen, you have one too! You didn't know about it, did you? The "G" spot — if it hadn't been for a certain Elisabetta Leslie Leonelli, the sociologist and psychologist who discovered it . . . we still wouldn't know about it. How she did it, I don't know. Evidently it is very much loved and much in demand. She even wrote a book about it: "Cuddles and Careses" published by Rizzoli . . . which thanks to this show has sold a shipload of copies, and she never even thanked me . . . she never sent me so much as a lollipop! Nothing! But I'm happy to publicize the book because it's very important and because I love you!

You can find the "G" spot on a man . . . but when I discovered where it was I said to myself: "Mother nature is out of her mind! Why did she put it in a place that is so difficult to get to . . . couldn't she have put it somewhere more convenient and accessible?" It's at the base of the penis . . . at the root of the sex organ . . . inside. Elisabetta Leonelli swears that if you look for this "G" spot, find it, and stimulate it . . . you'll hear him howl like a coyote. Now don't spend all night looking for the "G" spot.

#### THE SONG

Now, for at least five minutes, there will be nothing to laugh at. I'm very serious. We're going to talk together about an important subject . . . no . . . a very important subject: exercises for the pelvic and vaginal muscles of women and the pubic muscles for men. In Scandinavia they teach them in junior high school.

The female sex organ is a miracle of genetic engineering. Inside the female sex are muscles that no one has ever taught us how to use. Some of them we know about. Others are more obscure. And seventy percent of men, when they get to a certain age, have problems with their prostate glands . . . because all your emotions, your stress, your good luck and your tragedies, your sexual relationships . . . is released through there. Doing these exercises can help you

get rid of tension, as well as avoiding prostate disease . . . or if you already have it, maybe help you avoid surgery.

Women. How many girls get married and can't get pregnant? Tears, tragedy . . . they adopt a baby and, then out of the blue . . . after a year or two . . . they get pregnant. How come? They weren't sterile. They were contracted. And these exercises can help.

Even older women can derive benefits from these exercises. I won't go on at length . . . it's a delicate subject and a little embarrassing . . . Why is it important to do these exercises? As we get older we are subject to ailments related to age — I'm not going to list them all — but it's very troubling and some women even have to undergo surgery.

Then, in sexual relationships these exercises are very important. To be precise I should make it clear that vaginal movements are remarkable for their amplitude . . . and we are talking about much more than a few millimeters. In some pornographic shows, they exhibit girls who smoke cigars with their vaginas. They can blow big smoke rings and make little puffs of nicotine clouds. I don't want to encourage you to try these things . . . after all, smoking is bad for you . . . I just wanted to give you a sense of your movement potential.

This usage of pelvic muscles is very interesting because it allows you to make love in different ways, even standing still. That is to say that you don't have to make love the way they do in pornographic movies . . . where they do it like a pneumatic drill with a machine gun tatatatatat (mimes the action clapping her hands). For one thing if you do it like that you diminish the intimacy. Some women ask me: "How do you do these exercises. After you talked about them, I tried, but I couldn't do it!" So now we're going to free ourselves of all our complexes and shyness and try to understand together what these exercises consist of. It's very simple: we have to breath deeply, contract the muscles of our sex organs, relax . . . until they're strengthened. This . . . what should we call it . . . internal caress . . . is very pleasurable during sex, not only for you, but also for your partner. The beauty of this musculature is that it can be exercised anywhere. It's a kind of gymnastics that you can do whenever and wherever you want . . . no one can see . . . You're there washing the dishes . . . you can do it! At the dentist . . . You can exercise all the time at home, no matter what age you are, in any spot you choose . . . in the subway . . . while you're



waiting in line at the post office. (Turning to a woman in the audience) Please, miss, don't start now! Do it tomorrow in peace! Be careful though, women, I have to warn you: if your man is not accustomed to these prehensile caresses, it could frighten him. Remember that ninety percent of the heart attacks that occur during sex are caused by prehensile vaginas. Just kidding.

At this point we should examine the central theme of our little talk: the sexual act itself. I have nothing against love for love's sake: "Very merry, let's make love?" If you want to dress up in studs and whip each other . . . exchange enemas, scarf collections and used underwear . . . make love with eight people hanging from a lamp post . . . or make love throwing yourselves in a heap onto a water slide in groups of three or six or twenty-eight . . . if you like to do it with women in plaster casts . . . go right ahead . . . but know that in my opinion there is nothing more beautiful than love, in all its fullness . . . being in love . . . whether it is homosexual — and this is a subject that calls for a whole evening on its own — or heterosexual, as long as it's love. So knowledge of technique has its importance. Not knowing anything about your own body or your lover's certainly doesn't help you to understand each other. And sometimes men, whether they are sure of themselves or fragile, approach the sexual act with coldness, agitation, and anxiety. They don't make love to enjoy every moment . . . No. Just to arrive at the finish. Relax. Calm down.

What can we do to get calm? We need a little Zen. You might ask yourselves: what does Zen have to do with sex? Lots. As Confucius says: "Sex is the Mastercard of life." What does Zen have to do with sex, you ask? Plenty. Zen, as you all know, is an oriental philosophy. A mental discipline. And you don't have to go to India to find some one to teach it to you . . . you can find as many Indian gurus in your hometown as you can in Calcutta!

Zen teaches us to "liberate" ourselves . . . in a loving embrace . . . get rid of our mundane thoughts . . . it teaches us to concentrate only on what we are doing.

Come on . . . tell the truth . . . how many times have we found ourselves there making love: "I love you. I love you. I love you . . . Oh God, I forgot to set the alarm!"

For us Westerners it's difficult to separate ourselves from our mundane problems, except for people from Naples (insert here Brooklyn, Cuba, South Beach or an appropriate local reference), who demonstrate through the way they talk that they understand everything. They're always saying: "O fuck, I don't want to think about it!"

That's Zen in a nutshell!

Advice to men and women, but especially to men I know that almost all men are very good at the foreplay . . . They'll do anything you want: kiss you, hug you . . . fantasize . . . massage you in the shower . . . be careful, though, not to slip and break a leg . . . But when you come to that moment . . . when you become one person . . . the communion of your bodies . . . it is an elevated moment . . . and this applies to all men, whether they be fragile or strong . . . try to make love following my advice . . . abandon all goals: making a good impression, seducing, finding gratification. Above all relax. The sexual act is not a handwriting test! Don't get all nervous about it . . . it's not a hula hoop contest or a pastry to eat in three bites. Relax. How many times have we looked at our partners and seen their faces all tense and contracted.

If I love you and you love me why do we have to carry around all this tension? Because your mind is vigilant, active, anxious . . . it wants an orgasm . . . it wants it absolutely . . . it wants it explosively . . . it wants it totally! You'll get there in a better state if you calm yourself. Begin by relaxing all your muscles . . . start with your face . . . breathe . . . go down your spine . . . just like that . . . calm down . . . relax all your muscles . . . well, maybe not all of them! Get close, closer, always closer . . . Breathe deeply . . . Try to feel your partner . . . hand in hand . . . listen to the warmth of your bodies . . . centimeter by centimeter . . . the heartbeats . . . smell the perfume in each other's hair . . . hopefully it's clean . . . be in complete contact. Sense each other's pulses. When you're in perfect harmony, you can begin the dance. Yes, it's a dance, like the waltz, but the steps aren't set. It's a kind of synchronized telepathy. You make little up and down movements, sideways and around. Look for the maximum contact with "your" body. Try to establish a common rhythm. It actually becomes a dance . . . your body moves itself . . . possessed by a mysterious rhythm . . . keeping time with liquid movements and shivers that transform the inside of her sex into an amusement park of delirium.

To follow the dance, you have to stop thinking. You have to enter into another state of consciousness. You have to let go of all your anxiety and give yourself over to your emotions without fear.

It's Zen all over again . . . explained a little better. Your orgasm, in the end, will reach biblical proportions. I wish you all the best. And if it turns out like that, send me a postcard: "Dear Franca, you were right!"

Alright. Now we've come to the end of our little chat . . . which I have enjoyed enormously. I accomplished a lot, overcoming my personal tabus, my insecurities . . . I managed to talk about sex on stage, without vulgarity . . . and to convince mothers that it's possible, that you have to talk to your children about sex, delicately, with respect . . . but talk about it . . . I've been able, in part, I hope entertainingly, to remove the morbidity from this subject. During the show I see her getting a little closer to him, hand in hand . . . her head on his shoulder . . . and I think: "Who knows what babies will be born from this show. . . . And the Pope will be content!"

I will end the show with a piece that requires a triple back flip. It is not possible to talk about sex without also confronting the tragic and increasingly serious problem of sexual violence.

The law can help, but the discourse is above all "cultural."

In a society like ours that glorifies the pursuit of power, money, and success at any price, where everyone is conditioned by the presentation of casual sex on television, where violence and pornography are drummed into the heads of young people, there could be no other result.

It is horrifying to live in a world where people take sex vacations to Thailand, Brazil, and India to sexually exploit starving five-year-old little girls. Where "still" a woman is afraid to report being raped because she doesn't feel protected by the law, by society, and sometimes not even by her family. On the contrary, she is often subjected to a second violation on the part of the police, the judges, and the lawyers.

Only a huge social effort to educate our children about respect for one another . . . in the home, in the school, in the street . . . can change people's attitudes.

This piece is entitled "The Rape." It is a testimony that I collected personally from the woman who experienced it.

## THE RAPE

*At the center of the stage is an actress seated on a chair with her arms behind the back of the chair indicating the position she is describing. To act this piece it is necessary for the actress to be dressed in trousers.*

A radio is playing . . . at first I don't notice it . . . only after a while do I realize that someone is singing.

Yes, it's a radio. Light music: sky, stars, hearts, love . . . love . . . There is a knee, just one, pressed against my back, as if the man holding me from behind has the other one on the ground. He holds my hands in his, tightly, twisting them. Especially the left one.

I don't know why, but I find myself thinking that he might be left-handed. I don't understand what's happening to me. I feel the paralysis of someone who's losing her mind, her voice . . . her words. I become aware of things, with an incredible slowness. God, what confusion!

How did I get in this van? Did I lift my legs one after the other, pushed by them from behind or did they carry me? I don't know.

My heart, beating so hard against my ribs that it keeps me from thinking . . . the pain in my left hand is becoming unbearable. Why are they twisting it so tightly? I'm not trying to move. I'm frozen.

Now, the one behind me doesn't have his knee in my back anymore . . . he's sitting down comfortably . . . holding me between his open legs . . . squeezing . . . the way they used to hold children when they wanted to pull their tonsils out. That's the only image that comes to my mind. Why are they squeezing me so hard? I don't move. I don't scream. I have no voice.

The radio is playing, not very loud.

Why music? Why did they turn it down? Maybe it's because I'm not screaming. Besides the one holding me from behind, there are three others. I see them: there's not much light . . . not much space . . . maybe that's why they're keeping me crouched down.

I sense that they are calm. Secure. What are they doing? They're lighting a cigarette.

Smoking? Now? Why are they holding me like this and smoking? Something's going to happen, I can feel it . . . I breathe deeply . . . twice, three times. It doesn't work. I'm still afraid. Now one of

them is coming towards me. One sits down on my right. The other on my left. I see the red of the cigarette. They're breathing heavily.

They're very close.

Yes, something's going to happen. I can feel it. The one behind me tightens all his muscles . . . I feel him surrounding my body. He's not using more strength, he's just tensing his muscles, like he's getting ready to hold me tighter.

The one on his knees moves between my legs, spreading them apart. It is a precise movement that he seems to have planned out with the one holding me from behind, because he suddenly puts his feet on top of mine to stop me from moving.

I have my pants on. Why are they opening my legs with my pants on? I feel worse than if I were naked.

I'm distracted from this sensation by something that I can't make out . . . heat . . . slight at first . . . then it gets stronger . . . finally it becomes unbearable . . . on my left breast.

A burning pain.

The cigarette.

The cigarette . . . burning through my sweater to my skin. That's why they were smoking.

I find myself wondering what a person can do under these circumstances. I don't succeed in doing anything. I don't speak. I don't cry. . . . I feel like I've been projected outside myself, pressed up against a window, forced to watch something horrible.

The one sitting on my right lights the cigarette, takes two puffs and passes it to the one between my legs.

They consume it quickly.

The stench of burning wool seems to disturb all four of them: they slit open my sweater with a blade, lengthways down the front . . . they cut my bra too . . . they slice my skin too, superficially. The medical report says the cut was twenty centimeters long.

The one between my legs takes my breasts in his hands. I feel his coldness on the burns.

Now they open the fly of my pants and all of them do the work of undressing me: leaving one shoe on . . . and a pant leg.

The one behind me is getting excited. I feel him pressing against my back. Now . . . one of them . . . enters inside me.

I feel like throwing up.

I have to stay calm, calm.

I concentrate on the words of the song. My heart is splitting. I don't want to recover from my confusion.

"Move, bitch. Make me come!"

I don't understand any words. I don't know any language. Another cigarette. "Move bitch make me come."

I am stone.

Now . . . it's the second one's turn. His thrusts are more decisive. I feel enormous pain.

"Move bitch make me come!"

The blade that he used to cut my sweater passes a few times across my face. I can't feel if it is cutting me or not.

"Move, bitch. Make me come."

The blood flows from my cheeks to my ears. It's the third one's turn. It's horrible to feel these disgusting beasts finding pleasure inside me.

"I'm dying," I manage to say. "I have a heart condition." They believe me. They don't believe me. They argue. "Let her out." "No." "Yes." One of them is slapped.

They press a cigarette against my neck . . . here . . . hard enough to put it out. At this point I think I finally fainted. I feel them moving me. The one who held me from behind with precise movements. He does the dressing. I am of no use. He whines like a baby that he's the only one who hasn't made love . . . pardon me . . . the only one who hasn't opened his pants. But I sense his hurry, his fear. He doesn't know what to do with my torn sweater, so he sticks two pieces of it in my pants, and the van stops long enough to let me out . . . and it leaves.

I hold the jacket closed with my hand to cover my breasts. It's almost dark. Where am I. In a park.

I feel sick . . . in the sense that I'm going to faint . . . not just from the physical pain all over my body, but from the disgust . . . the humiliation . . . the anger . . . the thousand spits in my brain . . . the sperm I feel dripping out of me. I rest my head against a tree. Even my hair hurts. Yes, they pulled on it to hold my head still.

I pass my hand across my face. It's full of blood. I raise the collar of the jacket and leave. I walk . . . I don't know for how long.

Without realizing it, I find myself in front of the police station. I lean against the wall of a building across the street and stand there

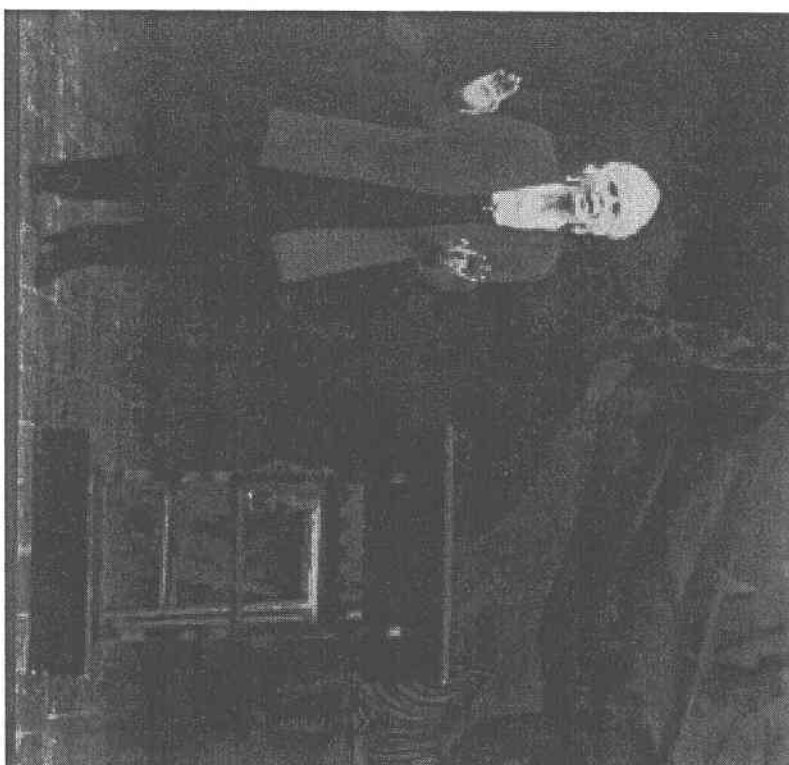
watching the entrance for I don't know how long . . . the people who go in . . . and out . . . the policemen . . .

I think of what I'll go through if I go in there now . . . I hear their questions . . . I see their faces . . . their half-smiles . . . I think . . . and then I think again.

And then I decide . . .

I'm going home . . . I'm going home . . .

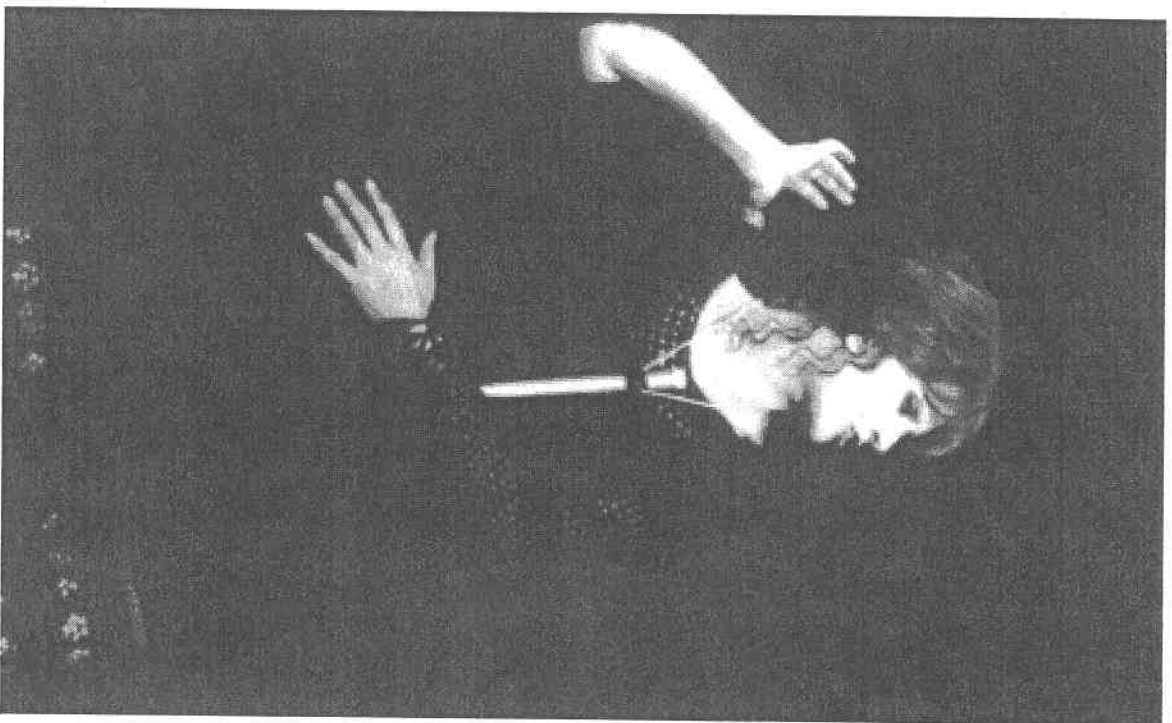
I'll report them tomorrow.



"Sesso?"



“Scisso?”



“Medea”

## RAME, FO AND THE TRAGIC GROTESQUE THE POLITICS OF WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE<sup>1</sup>

Pina Piccolo  
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"Dario è un monumento, ma i monumenti non si reggono in piedi da soli. . . . Hanno il piedistallo, e io sono il piedistallo e sono 45 anni che sto piegata, e ho 'sto monumento sulla schiena, ed ogni tanto mi pesa."

["Dario is a monument, but monuments can't stand by themselves . . . they have a pedestal, and I am that pedestal. It is 45 years that I am bent over, carrying this monument on my back, and once in a while it weighs on me." ]

This description by Franca Rame of her artistic relationship to Dario Fo, made after he was awarded the Nobel prize for literature, has two sides to it: on one hand it sardonically points out her subordinate role in his artistic career while at the same time bitingly claims her structurally necessary input while lamenting the toll it has exacted on her. Keeping in mind this metaphor of "monument" and "pedestal," this article seeks to analyze the representation of women in Dario Fo and Franca Rame's work, exploring how in the last twenty years, the "pedestal" has acquired features and contributed to the monument in ways that not only make it a structural support, but have artistic and political merit in themselves. To Dario Fo's credit, he has acknowledged the autonomous value of Rame's contributions and accepted the prize in the name of both,<sup>2</sup> on an equal level.

This essay is an updated and slightly re-written version of the last part of the final chapter of my doctoral dissertation: "Structures of the Comic and of Politics in the Works of Dario Fo," University of California, Berkeley, 1985. I wish to express my deep appreciation for the support given to this dissertation and my efforts to promote Fo-Rame's work by my much missed, late, thesis director, Prof. Gian Paolo Biasin. The quote is taken from an interview with Franca Rame, excerpted in Piscopo's documentary. All translations are mine, unless otherwise stated.

<sup>2</sup>Dario Fo's acceptance speech at the Nobel Prize award ceremony.



"Il telaio"



In the evolution of Fo's female characters we can track a progression from demystifying storytelling to counterinformation based on the direct experience of the oppressed. But he could not accomplish the latter part of the journey by himself. In order to reach the final phase, Franca Rame was required to enter the field in her capacity of playwright, vindicating the female characters' right to speak through a woman's pen and not only through a female presence on the stage. When comparing Fo's *a solo* production and the later co-authored plays, one can observe some important changes in the features of female characters. This article will attempt to trace this evolution, pointing to elements of continuity with Fo's overall work as well as to elements of innovation introduced by the specific presence of Franca Rame as a female playwright. An analysis will be made of how these changes have shaped both the form and the content in ways that are original and have strengthened the overall satirical power of the plays. These contributions concern particularly what I would call the evolution of the "tragic grotesque," and because of this, the analysis will concentrate to a greater degree on Fo-Rame collaborations written in the late 70s up to the mid 80s.<sup>3</sup>

In Fo's system of representation, women have always been mainly part of the oppressed — those whose story has been told and distorted by official historiography and myth. Because of this, they held particular interest for a playwright dealing with alternative points of view. In his early works, Fo represented women as outspoken, full of initiative, and accomplished practitioners of deceit. Breaking with tradition, however, the latter characteristic was not ascribed to intrinsic wickedness but rather to their historical exclusion from power. In fact, often Fo's women characters used their wits to outmatch the unimaginative and arrogant males who dominated their lives.<sup>4</sup> His early works had many male protagonists be-

longing to a marginalized category, the so-called "balordi," a city dwelling, autonomous, modern day variety of the ancient "servus" combining naïveté and shrewdness in a single character<sup>5</sup> and unleashing these traits in the world at large. In "Gli arcangeli non giocano a flipper" (*Archangels Don't Play Pinball*) this is exactly the case of Il Lungo, whose contradictory mix of savvy and candor pushes him along in his journey through the universes of bureaucracy and politics. Fo's early female characters, by contrast, take their first steps in the sphere of family and personal relations — in the world of the private, rather than of the public. Little by little, in the late sixties they reach, with Enea of *Settimo: ruba un po' meno* (1967), the larger world of societal relations.

Some strong women were present in Fo's very first work *Poor Nana*. For example, Teresina of "Il 999esimo del Mille" defended her autonomy by exercising her wits against a superficial father, a bombastic and unfaithful fiancé and throngs of arrogant, scorned young men who took offense at her spirit of independence (*Poor nana* 29-40). When Fo moved to the farces, he had to confront some of the female stereotypes traditionally built into that genre's plots. Thus jealous couples, love triangles, patriarchal fathers and husband-hungry maidens came to populate Fo's stage, but this time with a Foesque twist. Characteristically, he used the farce's own mechanisms of deceit and discovery<sup>6</sup> to reveal the hypocrisy of sex roles and marital institutions, yet his critique suffered from limitations and ambiguities implicit in the "non gender specific" protagonists. The issue of lack of power is addressed by early female characters in the way they confront their situation and organize their attack or defense plan, yet their mode of reaction is not specific to women. The mold of the male *balordo* still affects their style of action even if their circumstances are different and, for the moment, restricted to the private sphere. Like the male naïve-shrewd characters, their female equivalents exploit the duplicity of language making use of comic structures from the *varietà*, they too set up

<sup>3</sup>This essay will concentrate on segments from: *Tutta casa, letto e chiesa* (Milan: La Comune, 1977), *Coppia aperta* (Milan: La Comune, 1984), and *La madre*, which have also achieved great international recognition.

<sup>4</sup>The traditional Italian theater featured many strong female characters who relied on intelligence in the pursuit of their goals. One of the best known strong "female" characters is Mirandolina, the protagonist of Goldoni's *La locandiera*. However, no matter how strong the implicit condemnation of women's oppression was in works of the traditional theater, even these positive models ended up reconciling themselves to "a woman's place."

<sup>5</sup>An extensive discussion of the significance of naïve/shrewd characters within Fo's structures of the comic is discussed in the first part of my dissertation: "Dario Fo in the Fifties: An Apprenticeship in the Art of Demystification."

<sup>6</sup>An analysis of how Fo's comedies are supported by a mechanism of "deceit and discovery" and how that relates to deep structures of the farce is contained in this author's article "Farce as the Mirror of Bourgeois Politics: Morre accidentale di un anarchico," *Forum Italianum* 20.2 (Fall 1986).



paradoxes usually overlooked by commonsense and unwittingly reveal the absurdity of dominant logical constructions. The widow of *Gli imbianchini non hanno ricordi*, for example, shows an accommodating attitude toward her late-husband's wish to buy a whorehouse for the purpose of studying, first hand, the polygamous customs of oriental societies:

Vedova — Proprio così . . . per fortuna col fatto della nuova legge c'era in giro un'aria di liquidazione a prezzi familiari che non vi dico, e così ho trovato da comprarla anche a rate. L'unico guaio è che quelle sciagurate hanno finito per innamorarsi del mio Giorgio, e allora addio tranquillità domestica . . . c'è voluto proprio che morisse perché tornassero a far giudizio . . . a rimettersi a lavorare come si deve . . . sì, a lavorare come facevano prima, mica posso mantenerle gratis . . . (*Teatro comico* 65)

[That's exactly how it was . . . fortunately with the new law there was such a liquidation sale market that I was able to buy one (a whorehouse) with an installment plan. The only problem was that those wretches ended up falling in love with my Giorgio, and then it was good-bye domestic bliss . . . it took his death for them to go back to their senses . . . to get back to business . . . yes, back to work like before, you don't expect me to provide for them . . .]

The whorehouse bought on monthly installments, at "family budget" prices (thanks to the Legge Merlin that closed the state licensed houses of prostitution); the prostitutes who reverse their role from dispensers of sex to subjects of romantic love; and finally, the widow's ultimatum to them to resume working again combine to form a paradoxical and absurd environment. The exploitation of women is its mainstay yet it is a woman who is an accomplice in this oppression and detachedly recounts the story.

Similarly, in *I tre bravi*, Fo explores the situation of women and satirizes sex roles utilizing a plot that was very popular in nineteenth-century farces. The story consists of the misadventures of three strongmen for hire whose cowardice is tested by the tricks set up by their prospective employer. The traditional deceit-discovery structure was enriched with the addition of a subplot featuring the three daughters locked up in the castle by their strict father. Like Fo's other farces sustained by marginalized types, this one too opens with a chorus of the oppressed:

Siam tre sorelle anemiche, linfatiche ma nubi per via che non sappiamo cos'è l'amor. Siam figlie plurigeniche di un padre univendolo che fa per lucro il bachiculator. Quanti sospiri ci sfuggono dall'esoiago per i singhiozzi abbian la raucedine che prigioniere noi siam dentro questo maniero lungi dal mondo pagano, mon-dano e leggero. (*Teatro comico* 75)

[We are three anemic, lymphatic spinster sisters, who don't know what love is. We are the multiple daughters of a one-time widowed father who raises silkworms for a profit. How many sighs escape from our esophagus, our sobs make us hoarse, as we are imprisoned in this manor house, far away from the pagan, worldly, light world.]

Like the chorus of the streetsweepers in *L'uomo nudo e l'uomo in frac*, this song also targets nineteenth-century Italian operatic language. The appropriate genteel beginnings of "sospiri and singhiozzi" are completed with the most prosaic and unladylike terms of "esoiago" and "raucedine" in a typically Foesque grotesque combination. Even though one of the three sisters plays the role of the naïve/shrewd character, her *modus operandi* is not so different from her male counterparts. She exploits double meanings, awakens dormant metaphors and sets up situations that aid in deconstructing the mechanisms of the farce and society (*Teatro comico* 75-95). Consistently with Fo's farces, in the comedies too, the female character operates in modes similar to the above. At times she is a co-protagonist — as with La Bionda of *Gli arcangeli* — at other times she has the exclusive lead — as Enca, the woman undertaker of *Settimo: ruba un po' meno*.

Meldolesi links the increased importance of female characters in the plays to the switch in setting from countryside and provincial town to the city, the center of the economic boom experienced in Italy in the 60s.<sup>7</sup> There, in the exploratory journeys made by the naïve-shrewd male characters of the complex structures, appears his female counterpart: *la balorda*. Meldolesi writes:

I balordi fanno coppia come in tutte le compagnie, ma qui di più . . . la coppia testimone, nel teatro di Fo, si ravviva di continuo, è la coppia di vita, la coppia di Maria e Gesù, la coppia dei genitori del P.C.I., la maschera è unica sempre. (97)

<sup>7</sup>Claudio Meldolesi, *Su un comico in rivolta: Dario Fo, il bufalo e il bambino* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1978).

[like in all companies, the "balordi" come in couples, but it is even more so in Fo's work . . . the witnessing couple, in Fo's theater, is continuously disguising itself, it is the married couple, the Mary and Jesus pair, the Italian Communist party couple, but the mask (stock character) is always a single one.]

This assessment is valid for Fo's works until 1978. When Franca Rame starts co-authoring the plays, one can see that the mask a of the female *balorda* begins to acquire the specific traits molded by the experience of women — thus breaking the "single mask" nature to which Meldolesi alluded. Whether in the role of protagonist or co-protagonist, the women of Fo's plays, even when they have moved to the City and joined the urban *balorda*, maintain many traits exhibited in the farces: they are still full of initiative, outspoken, architects as well as victims of deceit. However, their ways of operating, even when they step out of the sphere of private relations, are not different from those of their male counterparts.

Like Il Lungo, Enea of *Settimo: ruba un po' meno* is the victim of her colleagues' pranks. Her belief in communications with the dead prompts her co-workers to stage a trick whereby she "hears" from the dead the news that the cemetery has been bought by construction speculators who will install a *cadaverodotto* "corpse-duct." Thanks to this latest feat of modern technology, the corpses will be propelled eighteen miles outside of the city and the old cemetery will make way for a skyscraper. As the absurdities of life characteristically overtake the wildest flights of imagination, it turns out that the prank foreshadowed a real development, thus Enea, as the one "who knows," is hurried by forces beyond her control into the corrupt world of construction magnates and mental institutions. Enea finds herself in many situations that were experienced by her predecessor Il Lungo — just as he was mistaken for a politician by merely wearing the clothes of one, so Enea is mistaken for a prostitute by simply trying on the gaudy attire of a passing streetwalker. The fact that she is a woman merely adds a quantitative benefit for satire, i.e., in her adventures she can also expose the oppressive attitudes of men toward women. Her experience of being a woman does not make any qualitative difference.

At this stage of Fo's career, the situation is no different when his characters move from the realm of the marginalized to that of royalty. Even the strong female characters found in *Isabella* do not address the specific experience of women as women. The queen

reveals some of the idiosyncrasies of sexual roles — she is a dominating woman who must feign submission to her husband for public consumption (Mazzotta I 291–94), yet, her main function in the play is to portray a more enlightened approach to science and technology than Philip I's. She exposes his propaganda against the Arabs and the Jews as obscurantism for the purpose of expropriating their riches and financing wars that would allow him to pay his debts. Isabella's approach is a more rational one, she has a shrewd sense of the financial net in which the feudal class is entrapped and is willing to ally with the emerging mercantile class in order to escape it. As for Giovanna La Pazza, her role is that of a bearer of truth, one that the authorities can tolerate because there is a guarantee that the "sane" will interpret the truths she utters as merely the distorted products of a sick mind. Furthermore, in her class position she is safe from persecution. Giovanna La Pazza undoubtedly served as a model for il Matto of *L'annunzio*, the gender difference was easily overcome by the fact that Giovanna did not act in a way that specifically addressed the condition of women.

By contrast, Franca Rame's later interpretation of a "mad" prostitute in *Tutta casa, letto e chiesa* connected the question of a different logic to that of a different living condition and experience. The different set of contradictions faced by women in power are addressed in later collaborative works such as *Il rutto della Francesca* and *Quasi per caso una donna: Elisabetta* and constitute, in the case of the latter, the fulcrum of the play.<sup>8</sup>

Moving to the women of the militant plays period, the characters can be divided into two main categories. The first group includes the direct testimony of women utilized by Fo in reinterpreted biographical monologues especially used in the *messe da campo*, the second grouping comprises the descendants of the naïve-shrewd characters (female version) now charged with the task of delivering counterinformation. The characters of the first category are an important development as they express Fo's increased reliance on knowledge generated by direct experience and can be

<sup>8</sup>For an extensive analysis of Fo and Rame's treatment of the predicament of women who hold power, the "historical" category of the "Queen" and the "ragion di Stato" and, the modern day contradictions faced by "Le donne manager" see, Alessandra Venezia's doctoral dissertation "Dalla svampita alla rapita. L'evoluzione dei personaggi femminili nel teatro di Dario Fo," University of California, Los Angeles, 1989.

seen as predecessors to Franca Rame's later production. For example, in the *messa da campo* the couple performed in Brescia after the bombings of the neo-fascists, a woman character based on a real woman's experience, Mamma Togni, made her first appearance.<sup>9</sup> She had been a partisan in the *Resistenza*, lost both husband and a son to the fascists, and was known for her determination to continue fighting against them, at a time when the government and some sectors of public opinion were giving them a platform. Mamma Togni's hallmark trait was her courage, embodying a consistent rebellion against a lifetime of exploitation and repression, unnamed by old age (Binni 106–14).

The episode starts with Mamma Togni snatching the microphone from the hands of a speaker for the M.S.I. (Italy's neo-fascist party) who is addressing the people in the square. Among those present were many former partisans. Thus, she addresses them:

Perché se voi avete il fegato e il cuore di semolino bollito . . .  
 pato a voi uomini e donne di Monte Beccaria, io vi dico, che non  
 ci sto a farvi insultare el meo fio che l'hanno ammazzato proprio  
 come se fosse l'altro ieri e mio marito che ne? 23 a bastonate gli  
 stessi fascisti gli hanno fatto vomitare i polmoni. (Binni 109)  
 [Because you might have hearts and guts like soggy semolina . . .  
 I am talking to you men and women of Monte Beccaria, but I am  
 not prepared to stand here and let them insult the memory of my  
 son, whom they killed, as if it was yesterday, and my husband  
 who died in 1923, when these fascists beat him and beat him til  
 he ended up coughing his own lungs up.]<sup>10</sup>

During her subsequent trial, in her cross-examination, she refused to take advantage of the "easy outs" patronizingly set up by the judge. She assured the court that she had not passed by the square just by chance; rather, she had gone there intentionally and against the advice of her "legalitarian minded" comrades. Also, the blow she inflicted to the neo-fascist speaker with the microphone was hardly an accident:

No, no che fortuito, gliel'ho dato proprio giusto di volontà, che  
 ce l'avei dato volentieri anche in testa se viene ancora 'sto maiale  
 di fascista. E il giudice "Ma la prego non si esprima così . . .  
 capisco che lei è sconvolta . . ." (Binni 112)  
 [It wasn't an accident at all! I did it deliberately. I'd have hit him  
 over the head too, if I'd had the chance, and what's more, the  
 next time that pig of a fascist comes, I'll break his head open. "I  
 must ask you not to talk like that . . . I realize that you are rather  
 upset." (*A Woman Alone* 148)]

As the monologue continues she proudly recounts her work as the most experienced nurse of her partisan formation, all the escapes from fascist encirclement and finally the death of her son with her subsequent "adoption" of all other young partisans. This latter gesture is a replay of similar adoptions by politicized mothers portrayed by Gorki and Brecht in their respective novel and play *The Mother* in the context of the fight against the Czar. But in Fo's monologue the stress on using speech patterns and modes typical of old mothers makes the action seem ever more vivid and real.

Another reference point for this Mamma Togni is the Madonna-under-the-cross episode of *Mistero Buffo*. In both cases the invectives address concrete issues of the motherly condition, but in the latter character, the *mater dolorosa* is also herself immersed in a historical process. In Mamma Togni's reconstruction of the trial, the grotesque was used best to express women's refusal to act within models assigned to them by men. This use of "unladylike" language and her "unfeminine" inclination toward violence against the oppressor constitutes a transgression that supports the comic structure of the play. Similarly in *Fedayn*, another *spettacolo d'intervento* (Mazzotta II 336–39), the testimony of an Arab woman who is a liberation fighter reaches the highest point of the grotesque when she describes her marriage ceremony and celebrations requiring that the wife show her submission by letting the husband step on her foot. As to be expected though, the female protagonist, has different plans:

. . . Io mi scansavo abbastanza bene, ma lui ha barato, mi ha dato  
 uno spintone e poi trach una pestata. E allora io, patatrach! Gli  
 ho restituito un pestone a mia volta, che quasi resta senza fiato.  
 Tutti gli invitati sono scoppiati a ridere, ma i parenti suoi no. Non  
 ridevano affatto. "Beh, si vede che non sono spiritosi," ho pensato,  
 io e non ci ho fatto caso. (Mazzotta II 337)

<sup>9</sup>Lanfranco Binni, *Attento te! Il teatro politico di Dario Fo* (Verona: Bertani, 1975).

<sup>10</sup>Translation from: *A Woman Alone and Other Plays* (London: Methuen, 1991) 145–46.

[I managed to keep ducking out of his way, but in the end he gave me a big push, and then, bang, he stamped on my foot. I reacted immediately. I kicked him back. Hard. And all the guests burst out laughing, but not his relatives. They didn't laugh at all. "Well," I thought "I see they have no sense of humor here." And I thought no more of it. (AWA 162)]

In Fo's reinterpretation of her testimony one can see emerging the familiar pattern of the naïve's perception of reality ("Well," I thought "I see they have no sense of humor here"), a trust that the spectators are trained to see contradicted by later developments of the situation. The grotesque element, however, becomes more subdued as the Arab woman recounts a later episode from her life. After becoming a communist fighter, she was entrusted with a mission to eliminate a local chief of police who was responsible for increased repression in her district. She was to use the same technique that Judith used on Olophernes, in the biblical story. The preliminary phases of her planned seduction are not narrated with great reliance on the grotesque: although the paradox is presented of the "male hunter" actually being the "hunted," this role reversal does not cause great hilarity (Mazzotta II 338-39). The only instance of the grotesque connected with carnivalesque reversal is expressed when she describes the last phase of her mission:

Ho preso un cuscino, ho affondato la pistola nell'ovatta, sono andata al letto dove dormiva il capitano e gli ho sparato in testa. Senza neanche tremare, come se gli portassi il caffè "Quanto zucchero?" (Mazzotta II 339)  
[So I took a cushion, struck the gun in the stuffing of the cushion, went over to the bed where the captain was sleeping, and shot him in the head. Without even trembling, as if I were bringing him his morning coffee. (AWA 168)]

The grotesque here is created by putting side by side an activity which is not usual to women — killing — and a traditionally servile female action, the proverbial "making the coffee." Yet when the oppressed herself is the one who consciously sets up the paradoxes, some of the "carefree" comic effects of carnivalesque reversals are lost in favor of a more tragic dimension.

As Fo's work became overtly more political in the 60s and 70s, the female naïve-shrewd characters, like their male counterparts, are also entrusted with the dissemination of counterinformation, espe-

cially in the farces. Greater attention is paid to women's objective place in society which oftentimes puts them in an antagonistic position vis-à-vis economic and political power. For example, housewives as "budget managers" of working class families are the ones who directly feel the consequences of the P.C.I.'s politics of historic compromise, which allowed those in control of the economy to raise prices while not increasing wages. Thus, Antonia, the protagonist of *Non si paga! Non si paga!* finds herself participating in the self reduction movement and hiding it from her husband, a P.C.I. member with great respect for the law. By the end of the play, however, the paradoxical situation that has been created forces him to change his views. In the course of the struggle, he is also forced to recognize his male chauvinism and attempt to correct it.<sup>11</sup> Unlike the Arab woman, especially as portrayed in the last phase, Antonia is not a particularly "conscious" fighter. She still retains a great deal of the candor typical of the traditional naïve-shrewd characters and thus the grotesque situations she unwittingly causes have more of a "carnivalesque" connotation to them. The Antonia of *Tutti uniti* is perhaps the female character that drew the greatest amount of criticism as a portrait of a "politicized" woman. She is the *étourdie* who becomes involved in the activities of the Italian Socialist Party from 1911 to 1922 via her relationship with a socialist, Norberto il Sassofono, the man she falls in love with and later marries (Mazzotta II 29-76). The play is divided in tableaux illustrating major episodes of the class struggle in that period, i.e., the Libyan war, the intervention in World War I, the occupation of factories. As expected of her role, Antonia is the catalytic agent for the release of counterinformation concerning the history of those years, and particularly for the exposure of the class-collaborationist role played by the main currents of the Socialist Party. The controversy centers exactly around her catalytic role: Paolo Puppa<sup>12</sup> asserted in his critique, that there was no character development that could justify her change from naïve police informer to socialist militant, i.e., she made her surroundings change without changing herself. Fo replied to his criticisms that Antonia was not a naturalist character but a "type" — the *étourdie* — and thus she need not

<sup>11</sup> Marina Cappa and Roberto Nepoti, *Dario Fo* (Rome: Grenese, 1982) 106-10.

<sup>12</sup> Paolo Puppa, *Il teatro di Dario Fo: dalla scena alla piazza* (Venice: Marsilio, 1978) as reported in Cappa and Nepoti 96.

follow traditional routes of character development. He did not portray her from a condescending male point of view as the "superficial and vain" chatterbox who is swept by love into the revolutionary movement. Rather her stereotypical "gender" traits were part of the *étourdie's* arsenal that made the situations explode, at the beginning unconsciously and later, through acquired consciousness, by plan (Binni 43).

In the year 1975, the issue of the specific forms of oppression of women came loudly to the fore in that particular segment of the revolutionary movement Fo and Rame most often addressed. In fact, during a convention held in Rimini, after years of internal struggle and rumbling against the male oriented structures and hierarchies still existing in revolutionary organizations, the women of *Lotta continua* took steps to form separate organizations. These newly formed groups would specifically address the problems of women while trying to create forms of struggle and of cooperation that best reflected women's experiences. This development was not to remain an isolated occurrence; in fact, in most organizations of the revolutionary left, the women took up the practice of dual membership (in the traditional mixed organizations and in specifically feminist ones). Fo's and Rame's theater felt the effects of this move, especially at a time when their own plays were increasingly relying on "knowledge" generated by direct experience. Thus Franca Rame began co-authoring some of the plays, especially those in which women's issues were prominent.

In an interview, Franca Rame related her belabored relationship to writing. For many years she relied on and "tormented" Dario Fo to produce female characters that represented in a more accurate manner women's specific experiences. In spite of Fo's attempts, such characters failed to come into being; spurred by frustration and the necessity to forge links with the feminist movement, by 1977 she started to co-author some of the plays.<sup>13</sup> Until the late seventies Franca Rame had been a very important member of the "theater collective," but had not directly written the texts. She was the main actress and she also gave active political direction to the collective. In fact, she was responsible for keeping ties with organizations and was the founder and main force behind *Soccorso*

*Rosso Militante*, an organization set up to aid political prisoners. As far as the creation of the plays themselves, Fo had always emphasized Rame's theatrical acumen, a result of her lifelong experience in the theater, and found her criticisms and suggestions indispensable in the different phases of production.<sup>14</sup>

After her move to co-author the plays one can observe a shift in the female characters. Increasingly they bring on the stage the specificity of women's experience, a more complex approach to the question of power and an increased role of the tragic, resulting in some modifications of the grotesque. These developments coincided also with a new phase in the revolutionary movement: some forces were moving more resolutely towards the formation of an armed political party, others started to re-evaluate former simplistic and utopian analyses. In this latter grouping, also given the pressures of the women's movement, a whole new discourse began to circulate on the "private" and the "political." The ideas of the French "nouveaux philosophes," especially Foucault's contributions on the issues of power and knowledge, also found a receptive audience among this segment, as testified by their impact on the rekindled revolutionary movement among the youth, especially strong in Bologna and in Rome.

In a climate that was full of ferment and openings to non-strictly Marxist class analyses, Franca Rame co-authored her first important work *Tutta casa, letto e chiesa*. This work was preceded by a play titled *Parliamolo di donne* which had encountered serious criticism by the feminist movement because while putting on stage a number of women's situations, it did not address them from a specifically feminist viewpoint.<sup>15</sup> By contrast *Tutta casa, letto e chiesa*, especially in its second edition, was a gallery of women's experiences carried out by *étourdiés*, conscious feminists and tragic characters like Medea and Ulrike Meinhoff. The work portrayed the experiences of women belonging to different classes: from the factory worker of "Il risveglio" to the middle class housewife of "Una donna sola", from the prostitute of "Monologo di una puttana in manicomio" to the peasant mother of "Michele lu Lanzone." Some critics have defined the show as a "Mistero buffo al femminile" but the comparison has only a limited application. Like *Mistero buffo*

<sup>13</sup>Franca Rame, "Da Isabella a Parliamolo di donne: conversazione con Fran-

ca Rame," *Il teatro politico di Dario Fo*, introduction by Jean Chesneaux (Milan: Mazzotta, 1977) 143-44.

<sup>14</sup>Personal interview with Dario Fo, June 23, 1984.

<sup>15</sup>Chiara Valentini, *La storia di Dario Fo* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1977) 173-74.

the play is performed by only one actor with a few props, and it too consists of an alternation of multivoiced monologues bound together by the running commentary of Franca Rame. However unlike Fo's modern day *giullare* who recounts the story in third person, the fact that Franca Rame is a woman storyteller makes a difference. Indeed, it is harder to separate the narrator from the subject that is being narrated, as both partake of the same experience of oppression. The main difference vis-à-vis Fo's previous work can be found in the texture of the grotesque, in the increased importance of the overt tragic element as experienced by the women who are conscious of their specific condition and are fighting to change it.

As observed in the "direct testimony" characters of the militant plays, the grotesque, with its carnivalesque emphasis on role reversals, dominates the parts dealing with the transgressions of traditional women's roles. "Il mondo alla rovescia" challenges the subordinate positions that have been imposed on women. Thus carnivalesque paradoxes govern the experiences of the solitary middle class housewife of *A Woman Alone*. The coexistence of naive and shrewd features that characterized the previous types becomes rather the progression from lack of consciousness to acquisition of consciousness of their oppression in the female characters. This process is in turn linked to their discovery of the deception of male-created myths about women's roles and results, finally, in rebellion against them. The roles intended for the "woman alone" are those of faithful wife, content homemaker surrounded by the comforts of modern technology, nurturing caretaker and dedicated mother. Yet her marriage is loveless — shaped by her husband's supremacy; the gadgets of modern life are alienating and preclude real communication; her "feminine sensitivity" must be directed to the care of an invalid sex maniacal brother-in-law; and even her baby makes only demands without being able to communicate with her. In this totally isolated condition she turns to her neighbor, who is unseen and unheard on the stage, to confide and recount her disillusionment and her frustrating attempts at adaptation or transgression. Finally, as the situations increasingly crowd in on her with the paroxysmal speed of a farce, leaving no room for her existence, she resorts to violence, shooting a peeping tom, disposing of her maniacal brother-in-law and waiting, rifle in hand, for her husband (*Tutta casa* 17-36).

The alternation between conscious and non-conscious in *A Woman Alone* left a great amount of space for a type of grotesqueness similar to that unleashed by the naïve-shrewd characters. With *La Medea* the story is different. She is perhaps the character that has reached the highest degree of consciousness of her status as woman and she is the one least prepared to compromise. Consequently, her mode of the grotesque greatly departs from the traditionally amusing carnivalesque role reversals, even while she points to the injustice and irrationality of gender roles and expectations. *La Medea* is the reinvention of the Greek myth from a woman's point of view. Like many of Fo's villains from *Poor Nano*, Medea has been viewed as a wicked cruel creature, the spiteful assassin of her own children. This multivoiced monologue is delivered in an invented dialect of the Center-South regions of Italy. It starts with a Greek-like chorus of women trying to calm down Medea who has just learned that Jason is about to marry a younger woman. They say:

Accorrei! Accorrei! Aiuta! Medea rinchiusa s'è dentro la sua casa, colli sua due figlioli. Alte grida becera come impazzuta! ... Tutta è stravolta dalla gelusia, che non si capacita che l'omo suo Giasone, con donna più giovane s'abbia ad accasare. Non intende ragione di sua casa sortire (vole) e li figliuoli abbandonare. (*Tutta casa* 101)

[Come over here! Hurry up! Help! Medea has locked herself up in the house with her two kids. She is ranting like someone possessed! She's screaming her head off! She's gone out of her mind ... She's gone mad with jealousy ... she can't believe it ... her old man Jason has gone off with a younger woman. She has got to get out of the house and leave the kids — but she won't face up to it. (*AWA* 61)]

As Medea inveighs against men who use and discard women at will, unmindful of the sacrifices they have made for them, the chorus replies that it is a law of nature:

No è natura, è il naturale: l'omo dura più a lungo a invecchiare ... lui l'omo col tempo stagiona, noi si appassisce. Noi femmine si gonfia ... si avvizzisce ... lui l'omo natura e s'insavisce. Noi potere si perde e lui n'acquiesce. Questa è la legge della munnu. ... (*Tutta casa* 105)

[No, Medea, it's the law of nature. It's natural. Men get older slower than us. They ripen as they get older, we wither ... we

swell up then we fade away . . . they get wiser and more mature. We lose our power and they grow more powerful . . . that's the rule that makes the world go round. (AWA 63)]

The juxtaposition between what happens to men and women in old age is the fruit of a direct experience of the women of the chorus, witnesses the insisting opposition between "lui l'omo" and "noi si. . . ." The "direct experience" vantage point delivers a more tragic vision than that of a distanced witness of paradox. For example, Il Matto's juxtaposition between the impact of old age on the workers and on judges, grotesquely recounted by an "outside" source yielded an "unproblematic" type of hilarity. The injustice could be corrected with the elimination of the present class order. The chorus speaks with a "Greek fatalistic" mode that later will be reproached by "Medea," but the issues they suggest, the evocation of a different body, make the paradox hardly a hilarious or unproblematic one.

In the monologue, the justification of Jason's behavior made by the chorus further inflames Medea:

Desgraziate che altro non siet! Ora m'avvedo bene donne mie, che la migliore penzata che l'omo ha fatto a vantaggio solo è d'averve bene allevate alla soia dottrina . . . voialtre ne ripetete la lezione e ve fate contente, chinate state nun ve ribellate (*Tutta casa* 105)  
[What a bunch of idiots you are! Listen, I understand it all so clearly now. Of all the clever things men have done to get one over us, this is the cleverest. . . . They've got you believing in their law . . . they've brainwashed you . . . you repeat the lesson they teach you like parrots and then you think you are happy . . . you grovel at their feet and yet you won't rebel!] (AWA 63)]

Having taken stock of the insidious nature of false consciousness, Medea will continue in her rebellion. The tragic paradox is that in order to undo her oppression she must sacrifice an important element of her own identity — her children:

Necessità è che 'sti figlioli a mia, abbino a morire, perché tu Giassone e le tue leggi infami, abbiate a schiattare! Amate amiche mie 'sta mano mea, spigni Medea desperata lo ferro nella carne tenerella delli figli fanne sangu, dolce inzuchcherato . . . E no temere quando crideranno "Madre! Pietà! Pietà!" e fora dalla porta tutta la gente faranno crido: "Mostro e cagna scellerata! Madre

for de natura e zozzal!" Ed eo ne dirò chiagnendo: "Mori, mori! pe' fa nascere una donna nuova. Mori! Pe' fa' nascere na donna nova! . . . (*Tutta casa* 110)  
"My little boys have got to die, Jason. They've got to die so that you can be crushed to a pulp — you and all these stinking laws you've invented. My friends give me the weapon . . . poor desperate Medea . . . plunge the knife into your children's soft flesh . . . aah they're bleeding . . . it's like sweet honey . . . Don't shudder when they scream: "Mother . . . have mercy . . . Mother" And a terrible howl will echo round the world: "Monster . . . bitch . . . unnatural, cruel mother . . . she-devil." And through my tears I'll whisper: "Die, die so your blood and bones can give birth to a new woman. Die! You must give birth to a new w-o-m-a-n!" (AWA 66–67)]

The question of power is addressed here in a way that is much more problematical than in previous works. In rebelling against her oppression, Medea, subject to her husband, must betray the trust her children have in her. Whatever little power she has left as mother must be distorted and made unnatural by her drastic act. Yet, there is no other way she can see openly to make possible the birth of a new woman. Interestingly, the re-elaboration of Greek myth from a feminist point of view has been a common practice among feminist writers; the 70s and 80s seeing the works by Christa Wolf's *Cassandra* and Marie Cardinal's a Clytemnestra in *Le Passé Impiété*. The suitability of these myths consists in their stark presentation of the question of power. As most leftist feminists, Rame does not see the end of women's oppression as a mere result of acquisition of power, as defined and structured by generations of males. A new paradigm must be created from within the experience of women. In the case of Medea even gender specific experiences such as motherhood must be challenged and re-established anew if a genuine new order is to be created.

In her introduction to the work, Rame had characterized it as a comic show, one that relied on laughter because for thousands of years women have cried, and crying (in the theater through tragedy and catharsis) immobilizes reason and action. The grotesque and the laughter it generates, she continued, drive into the brain the nails of reason (*Tutta casa* 12–13). This programmatic declaration, echoing Fo's theories, must be taken somewhat critically in relating it to the work itself. In the play, the grotesque dominates, as in Fo's production, but it has acquired new features that link it more



overtly to tragedy. The satire of those in power has given way to the presentation of dilemmas confronting those seeking to rebel and establish new paradigms. Thus the grotesque has acquired a greater articulation and a more problematic direction. This break in the continuity of Fo and Rame's work should be acknowledged as an enrichment, as an experimentation with different modalities, and as such should be presented to the audience, not just as a reiteration of the traditional modes and programs of Fo's theater.

In *Tutta casa letto e chiesa* one can see a continuous reference to the traditional devices of Fo's laughter and critique — the farce, carnivalesque reversals, *varietà*. However, Fo's traditional forms of the grotesque are not always the appropriate instruments to shape the raw materials that are women's experience. In fact new ones are found, chief among which is a new brand of tragic grotesque. Farce and carnivalesque reversals successfully exposed the specific power structures of capitalism, "naïve" characters were able to make the situations explode. When the subject matter of the plays becomes more complex and tortuous, when the full consciousness of the oppressed is required to make breakthroughs in ideological questions, the grotesque itself needs restructuring.

For example, in "To Ulrike grido" (*Tutta casa* 143–50), a piece about the state's "suicide" of Ulrike Meinhoff, one can see a tension between the elements of a new type of grotesque and the persistence of old modes that sometimes constitute a weak spot in the work. In the piece, after defiantly identifying herself mocking the authoritarian style of state bureaucracies, Ulrike continues her monologue to counter, by means of her voice, the sensory deprivation of her cell. She sets up an extremely conscious paradox between the lack of color with which the State is punishing her and the excess of color in which capitalism forces those in the outside to live:

Che grottesco, a me togliete ogni colore e fiori il vostro mondo fradicio e grigio l'avete dipinto a tinte sgargianti, perché nessuno se ne accorga, e costringete a consumare tutto a colori. Avete colorato di rosso sgargiante gli sciocchi al lampone, il cancro non importa, di arancio brillante gli aperitivi . . . come pagliacci impazziti tingete perfino le vostre donne: rosa garanzia sulle guance, azzurro pervinca e violetto sulle palpebre e rosso cinapro sulle labbra. . . . (*Tutta casa* 144–45)

[How grotesque. You deprive me of all color. Yet, outside in that putrid grey world you've created, you are busy repainting every-

thing in the wildest, most garish colors so no one will notice what it's really like. You force people to consume things dyed all the colors of the rainbow: coloured drinks, coloured food. Who cares if the dyes are poisonous carcinogenic? So what? You even paint your own women to look like demented clowns. (AWA 183)]

Then in order to defy the silence of her cell she proceeds to recreate the sounds of the factory, of the street on the outside world, grotesquely ending up thanking her jailors for depriving her of those mechanical, inhuman sounds. This new style of bitter juxtaposition, voiced in a highly subjective manner, is not carried through to the end of piece; in fact it clashes with the tone of the conclusion which still reflects Fo's traditional "didactic" and optimistic tendencies.

Ma non ci potete mai proibire di sghignazzare di tanta vostra imbecillità, imbecillità classica di ogni assassino. Peccato come una montagna è la mia morte . . . Centomila e centomila braccia di donne l'hanno sollevata questa immensa montagna e addosso ve la faranno franare con una terribile risata. (*Tutta casa* 148)

[But you can't forbid us to laugh at your idiocy, the classical idiocy of all assassins. My death is as heavy as a mountain. . . . The arms of a hundred thousand and a hundred thousand men and women have lifted this mountain and will throw it on top of you with a terrible laughter.]

The coexistence of elements of the old with elements of the new continues also in later plays and monologues co-authored by Rame and Fo. In *Coppia aperta*, especially in the segment "Coppia aperta, anzi spalancata" the farce is used to illustrate the various distorted routes man's power over women takes, even when *L'uomo* is a "comrade" invoking the end of the oppressive nuclear family. *La donna* is brought into the web of distortion against her will, but is the one who through it acquires greater consciousness of her position as a woman in society. She embodies a mixture of naïveté and lucidity. As she recounts her story in retrospect from the position of having acquired greater consciousness, her naïveté is different from the original naïve/shrewd characters of previous productions. Describing an outburst of the undirected rage that characterized her initial reactions to her husband's escapades, she says:

Donna — Avevo appena aperto una scatola di pomodori pelati . . . da 5 chili gliel'ho versata in testa . . . e gli ho calcato giù, trachet! il barattolo fino al mento. Pareva Lancillotto pronto per il torneo sponsorizzato dalla Cirio . . . Poi approfittando del suo momento d'imbarazzo gli ho inflato una mano nel tostapane acceso. (*Coppia aperta* 11)

[I had just opened a can of whole tomatoes . . . a 10 pound one . . . and poured it over his head . . . and crammed it down to his chin. He looked like Lancelot ready for a joust sponsored by "Contadina" brand tomatoes. . . . Then, taking advantage of his predicament, I placed one of his hands in the toaster.]

Here the weapons used by *la Donna* seem carefully chosen to underline the change they undergo from instruments of imprisonment into the housewifely mold to weapons of rebellion. The kitchen, woman's domain by force of tradition, has become an impregnable battlefield in which men cannot but lose.

Later, Rame will utilize a traditional grotesque parallel to define *l'uomo's* conception of the open marriage:

Donna — Eh sì, bisogna dire che la coppia aperta ha i suoi vantaggi. Prima regola perché la coppia aperta funzioni deve essere aperta da una parte sola: quella del marito! Perché se è aperta da tutte e due le parti c'è corrente d'aria. (*Coppia aperta* 14)

[Woman: Oh, yes, you must admit that having an open couple arrangement has its advantages. Rule number one: if the open couple is to work well it must be open only on one side; the husband's side! Because if it is open on both sides you create a draught.]

Unlike the parallels expressed by other shrewd/naïve characters, the choice of the comparison is governed by a female/feminist framework.

In the last segment of *Coppia aperta*, "Lo stupro," Rame returns to the tragico-grotesque mode. The monologue is the recounting of a gang rape in a van, as experienced by the victim (29-31). There are no props; the actress must create the environment and the scene only with her words. Her inability to move or scream is counterbalanced by the lucidity with which she chronicles the men's strategically coordinated movements. The lack of voice is compensated by the sound of a radio (switched on to cover her possible screams) that broadcasts romantic pop songs that ironically

highlight her condition. No tearful or emotional language is used to recount the experience, a glacial objectivity replays the different phases of man's most extreme effort to assure the woman's submission. Another collaborative monologue, *La madre*, (Riverside Studio Workshops i-xvii), deals with the dilemma of a "progressive" mother whose son has been arrested and jailed as a new member of the Red Brigades. In contrast with Gorki and Brecht's mothers' joining her son's movement is problematic for the mother in this contemporary version. She must confront the State from a position of social isolation and frustration as the State and the people stigmatize her as the mother of a "terrorist." By the end even the role of mother undergoes a rending reconsideration. At the beginning of the monologue, she makes a plea to the audience to use their imagination, to picture themselves in her position. Her situation is that of a mother who has just learned from the news that her son has been apprehended by the police in a shootout with the Red Brigades members. She then proceeds to trace all the different stages in the raising of her child in order to discover where she, as a "mother," could have gone wrong. Relying on the technique of the grotesque she recalls all the precautions she took while raising her child, to protect him from developing violent tendencies. Taking the latest psychological theories as her Bible, she tells the audience:

Io al mio bambino ho lasciato rompere piatti e bicchieri . . . l'ho tenuto il meno possibile nella — culla . . . l'ho lasciato giocare con la sua caccia quanto ha voluto . . . eppure è diventato un violento. E non si è accontentato di entrare a far parte di qualche banda di teppisti . . . incendiare qualche pullman . . . bastonare qualche passante . . . violentare qualche ragazza, così per sfogo . . . che tanto anche i giudici sono tanto comprensivi . . . no terrorista è diventato. (*La madre* iii)

[I let him smash cups and glasses, just like the pediatrician said, so as to stop him ending up neurotic. I let him play with his poo as long as he liked. But . . . he has turned out violent. He could have settled for joining a gang of hooligans: setting fire to buses, raping a girl or two . . . Just to let off steam. At least judges are understanding about things like that . . . But no: he's a terrorist. A terrorist. (AWA 194)]

While utilizing the framework of speech patterns of the zealous and plaintive mother, Franca Rame directs her polemic against the State

that closes its eyes to fascists and rapists. Her next target are the former comrades who, during the times of repression, recant their beliefs and declare themselves for law and order, forgetting that at one time they were clamoring the loudest against the State (*La madre* iii-v). As though speaking to them, she points out that it was most likely not an ill-digested Lenin that led her son down the road to armed struggle, but the corruption and the unchangeable character of the government and of its economic sponsors. Performing a task of political counterinformation, she continues her narration with the description of the special 'jail for political prisoners, where her son had been brought. There her remaining trust in the fairness of the state is further shaken as she experiences all the repressive measures aimed at the prisoners and their relatives. When she is finally able to see her son, he has obviously undergone severe beatings and perhaps torture (*La madre* xiii).

Her specific experience as a mother emerges most strongly at the end as she recounts a dream. In earlier plays, dreams were dramatic structures favored by Fo to introduce ambiguity and polyvalence in the conclusion; here the nightmare emphasizes the dissolution of the role of mother as wanted by the State. In the dream she is holding her five-year-old son in court; he is on trial, and the judge appeals to her to convince him to talk.<sup>16</sup> If he wants to benefit from the special law for the *pentiti*<sup>16</sup> he must denounce his comrades, even give names he has heard without knowing anything about them. The judge is kind enough to forewarn her that the law works against newcomers like his son; rather it favors old-time hardened terrorists, who in "talking" can give long lists and details. Then in the dream a gust of dusty wind envelops the scene temporarily hiding the child. When she recovers his tortured body (which

<sup>16</sup>After the political kidnapping and killing of former Italian prime Minister Aldo Moro in 1978, the Italian government enacted "temporary emergency laws" curtailing the civil rights of suspects charged with membership in terrorist organizations. These laws set up the construction of special jails for political offenders, allowed political opinion to be used as criminal evidence and granted light sentences or immunity for suspects who "repented" and gave information on others. A relatively small number of intellectuals, artists and democratic magistrates joined in active efforts to bring about the abolition of this "emergency" legislation. Among them were Dario Fo and, especially Franca Rame. To this day, these laws have not been completely repealed.

could also have been that of her young drug-addicted neighbor) she tells the judge:

L'ho preso signor giudice! Ho catturato mio figlio! Ho fatto il mio dovere di cittadina democratica che ha fiducia nelle istituzioni! Oh, mi dispiace . . . L'ho stretto troppo! L'ho strangolato! È morto. (*La madre* xvii)

[Your honour, here's my boy. I caught him, I'm handing him over to you. I have done my duty as a responsible citizen who trusts our democratic institutions. Here you are, sir . . . Oh, I'm sorry, your honour. I have held him too tight. I have strangled him. He's dead. (*AWA* 206)]

As in *Medea*, the role of mother is put in relation to power. In *Medea* the backdrop was the general power of men over women, in *La madre* the power of the State as articulated also in sexual roles, including that of mother. In both cases, the formation of a new woman is handled in a complex manner, one in which resistance to oppression is not sufficient by itself. The political discourse aimed at exposing and demystifying the causes of oppression is blended with a subjective struggle, a process of tortuous consciousness-raising which is both liberating and problematic.

Particularly in *La madre* one feels the vacuum that was left by the crisis in revolutionary theory and organization suffered worldwide in the 80s. This vacuum created a situation where it was possible for once militant activists to continue denouncing the instruments of oppression while being unsure of what path to follow in the struggle to change society radically. Throughout the 80s and the 90s Fo and Rame castigated those who in the period of crisis within the Marxist movement turned away from struggle and denounced their former beliefs; instead they stressed the necessity to continue the struggles against oppression even while easy recipes for liberation were no longer available. Their seemingly pragmatist stance at a time of great ideological crisis in the Marxist movement did not prevent their latter works, even when at times dispersive and unfocused, from addressing the "dark times" in the international situation and in the revolutionary movement. They are, therefore, a contribution, in a political sense, towards grappling with both the problems of ideology and revolutionary practice.

In the co-authored plays the political element has been more thoroughly blended with complex ideological questions, which require the creation of new instruments of representation. Rame's

brand of tragic grotesque is one of them. It can best express a different kind of knowledge, one gained by women's experience, one that exceeds simple reversals. In a sense, Franca Rame's contributions can be said to have enriched the notion of popular and political theater by introducing into them issues and modes of expression specific to the oppressed. In this case, this newly acquired knowledge concerns women — a sector whose needs must be addressed if the theater is to play a vital and militant role. However, this could also mean a first step toward the introduction of other sectors of knowledge that have not yet been touched by strictly Marxist instruments of criticism. Thus, one can hope that as Fo's and Rame's theater continues to maintain its links with the struggles of the oppressed, it will be receptive to and enriched by other experiences and novel modes of expression, as it has proven throughout the 80s and 90s, gaining the respect even of "establishment" institutions such as the Nobel prize committee which gave them the prize in recognition of their continued siding with the oppressed.<sup>17</sup>

If one were to essay a balance sheet of Fo's and Rame's contributions to theater and to Marxist aesthetics one would have to make two seemingly converse statements. On the one hand, they can be said to have brought revolutionary politics into the Italian and international stage; on the other, they can be said to have rediscovered the effectiveness of the specific modes of the theater when dealing with a subject matter mediated by Marxist analysis. Upon closer scrutiny, these two assessments are not mutually exclusive: rather they confirm the validity of the couple's practice of developing concomitant discourses on the theater and on society in their plays. Owing to their ability to address both of these levels, their theater has been successful in re-inventing suppressed theatrical forms of the popular tradition and in giving a theatrical space to the issues of the oppressed.

<sup>17</sup> Statement by the Nobel Prize Committee on awarding the 1997 Nobel Prize for Literature to Dario Fo.

# FEMALE CHRONOTYPES THE CONSTRUCTION OF TIME IN FRANCA RAME'S IL RISVEGLIO AND MATILDE SERAO'S LA VIRTÙ DI CHECCHINA

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In 1489, in his *I libri della famiglia*, Leon Battista Alberti commented:

E perché una faccenda non mi confonda con l'altra, e a quello modo mi truovi averne cominciate parecchie e fornirne niuna, o forse pur in quello modo m'abbata averne fatte solo le peggiori e lasciate adietro le migliori, sapete voi, figliuoli miei, quello che io fo? La mattina, prima, quando io mi levo, così fra me stesso io penso; oggi che arò da fare? Tante cose: annoverotole, pensovi, e a ciascuna assegno il tempo suo: questo stamane, quello oggi, quell'altra stasera. E a quello modo mi vien fatto con ordine ogni faccenda quasi con niuna fatica. (Alberti 214-15)

Already in the Italian Renaissance, Alberti's temporal ethics, his utilitarian conception of time as a manageable resource, gave theoretical form to that feeling of domination over human time which clocktowers had been realizing in a concrete way within urban landscapes since the first part of the fourteenth century. The time of modernity is urban time and it is born in the Renaissance city, a city whose spaces are conceived in order to frame and organize everyday life in a chronological network. Breaking away from the uncertain and episodic time known to medieval society, the fifteenth-century city poses itself as the privileged locus of rational management of space and time. For Leon Battista Alberti, time, like space, is a homogeneous and uniform continuum which can be employed to promote the social mobility and mercantile dynamism typical of his Florentine society.

The distribution of the everyday business ("faccende") is a recurrent theme in Alberti's *I libri della famiglia*. For the virtuous man, time is understood as "la stagione delle faccende"; each period must correspond to a single "faccenda" that is separated from

others by well-marked temporal limits. Otium is banned as the useless waste of a precious commodity:

Adunque io quanto a tempo cerco adoperarlo bene, e studio di non perderne mai nulla [...]. E per non perdere di cosa sì preziosa punto, io pongo in me questa regola: mai mi lascio stare in ozio, fuggo il sonno [...]. sempre faccendo qualche cosa. (Alberti 214-15)

Alberti's narrator lives in his busy present, always ready to seize the right moment ("il tempo giusto"). The Renaissance city offers him the images and devices by which to measure that present and fully valorize its potentialities. In particular, because of their privileged position on public buildings in urban landscapes, in this period clocks become closely linked to the new connotations of productive time. Both Lewis Mumford and D. S. Landes have acknowledged the primary function that mechanical clocks performed in the shaping of the modern period and the historian Jacques Le Goff has demonstrated how the clock made it possible to substitute the sixty minute hour for the "journée," the previous time unit which was used to measure peasant labor during the Middle Ages (Le Goff 26-28). Thanks to clocks, time becomes a social institution, a socially accepted discipline which rules the behavior of citizens:

Strumento laico per eccellenza, l'orologio urbano diviene così uno degli strumenti principali per la razionalizzazione e il controllo delle pratiche che si svolgono nella città. Il tempo misurato dall'orologio è così il tempo del potere, uno strumento di dominio economico, sociale e politico in mano ai mercanti che governano l'attività economica e la vita politica della città. (Paolucci 82)

In a society which considers time as a consumer good subject to diligent administration, the temporal divisions of the clock are magisterial practices which contribute in maintaining and perpetuating the dominant class and gender's representation of time.

Leon Battista Alberti's *I libri della famiglia* has been often cited as the most eloquent expression of the Florentine merchants' calculating morality and its transformation of everyday urban life into a temporal machine. His work had a central role in codifying the most basic images inherent in the "status" of modern time: the vectorized temporal arrow subdivided into measurable distinctions,

the disciplinary practice inseparable from an ethics of maximized activity. Indeed, temporality understood in such a fashion became so engrained in the following centuries that it eventually came to be considered as a universal and a priori category. It took the epistemological break of our post-industrial era to point out the problematic nature of such notions of time. The paradigmatic shift in the basic categories through which human beings construct metropolitan reality has led our era to question such naturalized conceptions of time.

At the turn of last century, Emile Durkheim and his collaborators were the first to emphasize the historically and socially determined nature of temporal experiences and point out the connections between the tempo of modern social life and its category of time. In so doing, Durkheim laid down the foundations for that outburst of sociological studies on human temporal structures which has characterized the second half of the twentieth century. Contemporary research into time tends to interpret the latter as the response that social groups, united in time and/or space, have given to the problems of reproduction (survival of the species, life and death, the body, sex and symbol), rather than focusing exclusively on the problem of production (as did Alberti). In such a context, women's temporal experience has been seen as paradigmatic of the ways of representing and using time which are typical of postmodern societies. By pointing out the conjunction of the sexual and the symbolic, feminist studies have shown that gender plays an important role in the social regulation of time and that temporal experience is a sexually-coded construction. Hence the need for recent sociological studies to revise their methodologies in order to account for a notion of time which is sensitive to female temporal practices and which, more generally, calls into question traditional understandings of modern temporal perception. By revealing the fragmentary and heterogeneous quality of women's time, sociological studies have also brought attention to the strong connections between temporal experiences and the new fluid form of female identity *in fieri*, which characterizes contemporary women.

Credo ad esempio che sia in gran parte merito degli studi sulle donne e sulla loro gestione temporale l'aver individuato e tematizzato il legame tra organizzazione ed esperienza del tempo, da un lato, e costruzione dell'identità e del corso di vita dall'altro. [...] L'aver fatto luce sulla condizione adulta delle donne che

sperimentano la frammentarietà del loro tempo nella misura in cui si trovano nel punto di incontro tra ordini temporali radicalmente diversi per logica, scansioni, continuità e contenuto simbolico, ha aperto la strada alla riflessione sulle interferenze tra la faticosa gestione della complessità temporale quotidiana femminile, da un lato, e il processo di costruzione dell'identità e del ciclo di vita dall'altro lato. (Paolucci 104)

The epistemological revaluation resulting from the introduction of the women's point of view into the sociological analysis of time can also be seen in literary works, many of which depict the relationship of women to the sociosymbolic contract as a sacrificial contract. Mariide Serao and Franca Rame are two obvious examples of women authors who, in two rather different periods, have devoted their writing (and acting, in Rame's case) to the representation of women's social experience. They have excelled in showing how the specificity of women's experience can only appear as non-essential, or even nonexistent, to the totalizing male ideology which their narrative and dramatic situations present. The difference in experience of their women characters is often sacrificed to the demands of a society that does not recognize the relationship between the symbolic and the sexual. As Julia Kristeva has argued:

Sexual difference — which is at once biological, physiological, and relative to reproduction — is translated by and translates a difference in the relationship of subjects to the symbolic contract which is the social contract: a difference, then, in the relationship to power, language, and meaning. (Kristeva 21)

It is also true that, in the translation of the social contract into its symbolic form, questions of representation and narrative structure have a central role. In the cases which I analyze here, a story and a theatrical monologue, time is constructed most explicitly through distinctive narrational attitudes. In the commentary which follows, I will examine the particular chronotypes which characterize Rame's theatre and Serao's novella. Among the questions which need to be asked are the following: how do particular chronotypes contribute to the formation of women's identity? In what ways does the fabrication of these new chronotypes build on, expand, and revise the predominant symbolical order? What are the technologies that enable such chronotypes to be constructed? What is the relation between temporal construction and empowerment?

And finally, how might a reading which brings together these two texts account for a plurality of contrasting chronotypes?

Perhaps the most evident similarity in the texts by Rame and Serao is the dominant role of the clock in the life of their respective female protagonists. Mariide Serao's *La virtù della Checchina* (*Checchina's Virtue*) was first published in four installments in *La Domenica Letteraria* in 1883. It takes place in 1880s Rome, "[la] Roma umbertina, ormai consolidata capitale politica e affaristica dell'Italia liberale" (Iernano 175). With an unprecedented realism, one which demonstrates great knowledge of both the feminine psyche and the women's domestic environment, Serao's novella describes a young woman who attends to her everyday house chores. In many respects, the story is similar to Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. Checchina is also the young and unhappy bride of a doctor (who, on the contrary, moves at ease within the dynamics of his bourgeois life). Toto Primicerio, like Madame Bovary's Charles, could also be described as "accoudé sur son bonheur." Checchina, like Emma Bovary, is fascinated by a young aristocrat who stumbles into her life by chance and breaks its monotonous marital routine. While for Emma, Rodolphe is only the first in a series of lovers who will cause her financial ruin and eventually her suicide, Checchina fails twice to meet the marquis of Aragon in his apartment and she therefore maintains the "virtue" which is indicated by the title of Serao's novella.

The principal cause of this failed adultery is not, however, moral scruples, but simply . . . her lack of a timepiece. (Her husband, the good bourgeois citizen, is also the only one in the household who possesses a watch.) Once Checchina is out of her house, outside of her own routine and outside of her husband's control, she feels so lost that she eventually realizes her inability to live within the new temporal chronotype which an adultery would entail. The novel ends with her silent renunciation: "Allora Checchina abbassò il capo e se ne andò a casa rinunziando" (256).

Far from being a story of romantic, unruly passions which the subject matter could lead one to expect, *La virtù della Checchina* concerns itself much more with meticulous descriptions of house labor and with the managing of a domestic economy. From the first paragraph (where the servant Susanna goes to open the door wearing a greasy and smelly apron and with a rag in her hands), we enter into the life of a bourgeois household, a domain whose day is "operosamente" measured by a series of routines. Checchina and



Susanna, often clothed in their aprons and donning handkerchiefs, are described rubbing wood furniture with oil (214), dusting (238), managing the house finances with the little money that Toto gives them (224) and inspecting the laundry brought by the "lavandaia." In addition, Checchina, by herself, also brushes the shoulders of her husband's coat (215), plans the dinner menu (216-17), makes gnocchi and an accompanying sauce, bakes a cake (217), embroiders kitchen towels (225), mends worn-out gloves (242), inspects the house to check its cleanliness (225) and polishes the marble top of her toilette (238). Susanna, in the meantime, is in charge of shopping and other culinary tasks [skimming off the broth (215), punching holes in the lamb which is to be roasted (232) and cleaning and sorting lentils (240)]; she also buys the coal (218), deals with household goods suppliers (224), scrapes the kitchen table (228), cleans the oil lamps (240) and combs her mistress's hair (224). Each activity is described only briefly, but invariably with a few touches which nevertheless show Serrao's intimate knowledge of this female world.

As the above list indicates, Checchina's and Susanna's day is studiously spent in multiple activities; Alberti would praise them as "virtuous women," who efficaciously employ their time in many "facende," never wasting their hours in otium. Not altogether surprisingly, the incursion of "il bel marchese di Aragona" (249) into Checchina's life also marks one of her first failures in performing her house chores, one of the first glitches of her well-oiled temporal machine:

Si mise a marcare di rosso, con le iniziali A.P. e col numero progressivo, certi strofinacci nuovi, a cui aveva già fatto l'orlo. Lavorò per mezz'ora, come in sogno, cercando di vincere la sonnolenza, applicandosi a contare i fili, mentre le palpebre le battevano.

Lo strofinaccio era caduto per terra, lasciando sul vestito nero la gugliata rossa, come un filo di sangue: a Checchina le mani giacevano in grembo, inerti. (225)

Instead of working, at this moment, Checchina falls prey to daydreaming and later we learn that she has to redo her work (231-32). After dinner, she either sits apathetically, "rompendo le correce vuote delle caldarrose in minuti pezzetti" (231) while Susanna clears the table or she wastes time, reading over and over again the marquis's "billet doux" (249).

Such interruptions in Checchina's productive use of time are the first symptoms of her rebellion to the dominant chronotypes of her domestic regime. It is evident that she is also rebelling against her husband's clock-regulated time and the Church-oriented chronotype as expressed through the character of the servant [in one significant passage written in free indirect discourse, Checchina refers to Toto and Susanna as "i suoi due nemici" (236)]. There is, however, a third chronotype at work in her household, one which intersects and combines with the other two. Many of the household chores performed by the two women follow a different temporal schedule than that which is dictated by mechanical clocks or religious prayers. Even today, domestic work is predominantly oriented to the activities themselves and is not in function of the mechanical divisions of hours. The term used by contemporary sociologists and anthropologists to designate such productive strategy is "task orientation." E. P. Thompson writes that task orientation is a form of temporal organization substantially conditioned by the interaction between different productive situations and their connection with natural rhythms:

Il modo di misurare il tempo descritto come orientamento in base al compito (task orientation) [...] è forse l'orientamento più efficace nelle società contadine [e] continua a giocare un ruolo importante nelle attività domestiche e di villaggio. (Thompson 7)

Although task orientation does not exclude attention to temporality, this is a different form of attention from the one dictated by mechanical clocks. Dusting furniture, scraping a table top, embroidering and laundry are all activities which make up Checchina's day without being fully determined by the succession of hours (as is meal preparation, for example). Task orientation is possible wherever the demands for synchronization are low, as in peasant societies or pre-capitalist economies. But this form of temporality has also characterized women's labor in domestic settings, in both industrial and post-industrial societies, in opposition to the dominant male chronotype ruled by mechanical time.

If industrial society — the society of Matilde Serrao's time — privileged work organized on the basis of timed labor and tended to cancel out a chronotype such as the one of task orientation, post-industrial society, on the other hand, has revalued that discarded cultural formation. The technological transformations which



have contributed to make knowledge into the primary productive force of the post-industrial era, have also greatly reduced the importance of time measurement in labor management. The wealth produced in our post-modern economy thus depends not so much on the quantity of labor (the hours employed in a task), it rather depends on the quality of knowledge which the machines assimilate. The changes in the current status of knowledge have ended up by determining a sense of time closer to the model of task orientation than to the equation between time and money. In this respect, women's family labor, such as Checchina's microactivities within her domestic economy, have become paradigmatic of the temporal experience of our post-modern condition.

Checchina, however, is not conscious of the subversive character of her domestic chronotype nor is she aware that it could be used by her to affirm her difference vis-à-vis her husband's ethics of calculation. On the contrary, her desire for emancipation takes the shape of an imagined interior — a confused projection of a luxurious room, sheltered from the outside by rich curtains, soft cushions and delicate perfumes. She first daydreams:

ella pensava che dovesse essere di bello, di confortante quel nido caldo, ombroso, profumato, dove si affondava nella piuma e non si udivano rumori. Le ronzava nella testa la voce di lui, così soave, così soave, mentre le parlava. (226)

The same image returns during a sleepless night:

ella arrivava sempre all'estremo del suo sogno, a quell'arrivo in quella casa, da lui che l'aspettava . . . e tutto s'inabissava in una confusione di fantasie sognanti le sensazioni della nitidezza ombrosa, della mollezza calda, del silenzio profondo, della carezza voluttuosa delle cose ricche e belle. (237)

In her fantasies, the apartment of the marquis d'Aragona takes on connotations which oppose those carried by her home and her everyday life. The interior decor of the latter is connoted as cold, uncomfortable, cheap and colorless (the long description of her living room sets up this atmosphere from the beginning of the novella). Toto's insistence on pecuniary value and his stinginess make her life miserable; even her most minimal desire for new clothing is systematically turned down on the pretence that she is too coquettish. In response, she dreams of leading a life of excess, one which would

disrupt her husband's petty economy. The only hint of such a life, however, comes to Checchina through her friend Isolina, who has a good deal of experience in extramarital affairs. But Isolina gives a very disappointing picture of her life of adultery. In conversation, she obsessively comments on the price of every single luxurious item which she has bought for her various rendez-vous (Isolina's wasteful spending thus strangely comes to resemble Checchina's husband's economic thriftiness; both are caught in the same economic value system). When describing her visits to her lovers' apartments, Isolina complains how clock regulated even the time of desire and excess is.

Non puoi credere che è di terribile non aver l'orologio, quando s'ha l'amante! Si sbaglia già sempre l'ora. Arrivì, è troppo presto, non vi è: è una morte lenta. Arrivì tardi, è passato un quarto d'ora, per un altro quarto d'ora egli ti porta il broncio, gli uomini si seccano di aspettare. Sei da lui, ogni cinque minuti gli domandi: che ora sarà? Quello si irrita di questa domanda. A casa ritorni sempre in ritardo, con una cera sbalordita che è un miracolo che non ti tradisca. Dio mio, che farei per avere un orologio! (235)

Checchina first listens to her friend and, then, when she is alone, begins crying: "Piangeva, poiché non aveva niuna di queste cose che servono all'amore" (235). Her disappointment is in finding out that even the fulfillment of her desires would have to take part in the same regime of mechanical time from which she desires to escape. Already in her nervous insomnia during the night before her planned rendezvous, we see Checchina frantically rehearsing the itinerary from her place to the Marquis's apartment with mechanical chronometric precision.

Andava sì, doveva andare, poiché aveva detto sì, quella sera, quando egli l'aveva baciata. Infine che ci voleva dal Bufalo sino a via Santi Apostoli? Ci vorranno forse dieci minuti, a piedi. No, più, ce ne vorranno dodici. (236)

Yet, when the day comes and the hour for her romantic tryst approaches, she realizes that she has no way of knowing the exact time: "Infine, non doveva essere molto tardi: egli aveva detto dalle quattro alle sei. Ma non aveva l'orologio. [. . .] Non aveva idea più dell'ora, niente" (244).

Overtaken by such practical obstacles (no watch, no money, no umbrella), Checchina finally renounces becoming an adulterous wife. The Cerberus-like figure of the vulgar doorman whose presence dissuades her from entering the Marquis's building is only the final representation of that male domination which has already disempowered her by denying the specificity of her temporal experience. Within that male-dominated utilitarian morality, the highest compliment a woman can receive is one which hints at her ability in functioning in everyday life with a clock-like precision. The tobaccoist which she meets in the street expresses his admiration for her by saying: "Sempre esatta, sempre brava, la sora Checcha: eh, di queste donne qui ce ne sono poche!" (252).

Unlike the feminists of Franca Rame's generation, Checchina has no language in which to theorize sexual difference and it is therefore next to impossible for her to devise practices of resistance to the dominant chronotype. The time of adultery, as described by Isolina, is simply another temporal construction of male empowerment, equivalent to that used by Toto in ruling his daily routines (meal time, his afternoon siesta, his practice, his visit at the hospital). In the end, Checchina remains virtuous, but her virtue is purely that of temporal economy; in short, she behaves like Alberti's virtuous man, one who knows how to manage precious time. Such virtue, for Checchina, cannot belong to the symbolic, it instead points out the agonizing gap between the symbolic representations of her desires as well as her otherness (*alter-ation*) from the dominant chronotype.

Franca Rame's *Il risveglio* (*Waking up*) was first written and performed in 1977, during the heat of the Italian feminist struggle on major women's issues [e.g. the campaigns to obtain a new bill of rights for families (1975), the parity of labor conditions for both women and men (1977), the right to divorce (1970) and abortion (1978)]. The piece is therefore strongly indebted to the collective history of those years, although in a 1977 interview, Franca Rame also avows her personal involvement with this particular monologue: "di mio forse c'è più di quanto non m'aspettassi."

*Il risveglio* is the monologue of a woman worker who wakes up late because her alarm did not go off. She then has to get ready for work at the plant, as well as wake up her baby and get him ready to go to nursery school. The protagonist does everything in a chaotic frenzy; things are misplaced, objects are lost, the baby receives the wrong care, and, throughout the play, she gives her audience a

minute-by-minute commentary on both her present and recent past (for instance, misplacing her apartment key and arguing with her husband the previous night). Moreover, throughout all this frenetic activity, that same husband continues to sleep in the back of the stage.

In short, Rame's monologue could be read as a grotesque parody of Alberti's passage from *I libri della famiglia*, which I quoted at the beginning of this essay. Like Alberti, Rame's protagonist is involved in many "faccende" at the same time. In sociological terms, we could say that her temporal experience, like that of many contemporary women, is highly fragmented, stratified and heterogeneous; one single period of her day is constituted by the overlapping and interlacing of different, and often conflicting, time allocations (Paolucci 102). While Alberti, at the outset of his morning, had time to reflect on the course of his day's events and to plan their course, the alarm clock ejects Rame's protagonist from her nightmare into the *hic et nunc* of her everyday activities. In real time, for a half hour, the audience watches this woman attending to the routine she performs every morning from six thirty to seven. It is evident that she is unable to find time for reflection within the thick materiality of her everyday experience. In her actions, we can see no sense of a project (which would involve a vectorial temporality directed towards the future, as the place assigned to the realization of goals); instead, she devotes her exclusive attention to the present, as if she were engulfed in what Italo Calvino calls "il mare dell'oggettività" (*Una pietra sopra*).

Nonetheless, one purpose of the protagonist's ongoing commentary is to impose a rational, chronological order of linear narration onto her disordered "faccende" and thus to make them appear as if they were a planned chain of events. The failure of her attempt to impose such an order is precisely what Rame's play performs. Whereas Alberti concludes, with evident self-satisfaction, "E a quello modo mi vien fatto con ordine ogni faccenda con niuna fatica" (215), Rame's narrator proves herself unable to master her many activities. Unlike Checchina who seemed to fit the image of the perfect housewife, the protagonist of *Il risveglio* projects the image of a rather disorganized, scatterbrained mother and housewife, one who, for instance, forgets her baby in the closet:

vado all'armadio e prendo la vaschetta per fare il bagno, la chiave sempre fra i denti . . . metto la vaschetta qui, cerco il bambino . . .

non c'è più il bambino! Ho perso il bambino! Dove ho messo il bambino? Nel frigorifero . . . nella lavastoviglie . . . nell'armadio! Avevo messo il bambino nell'armadio! (29-30)

From her own words, we also learn that she put the detergent box in the fridge instead of the milk bottle, that she sprinkled parmesan cheese instead of talcum powder on her baby after bathing it, and that she mistook a can of spray paint for her deodorant.

Already in 1934, Lewis Mumford wrote:

Dal momento della sveglia il ritmo del giorno è scandito dall'orologio. Senza riguardo per la stanchezza o la fatica, nonostante qualche riluttanza o apatia, la casa si sveglia all'ora stabilita [. . .] Non appena le dimensioni dell'organizzazione industriale crescono, la puntualità e la regolamentarietà del regime meccanico tendono ad accrescerla: il tempo dell'orologio arriva a regolare automaticamente l'entrata e l'uscita del lavoratore. (Mumford 269-70; Paolucci 38)

The conflict brilliantly depicted by Franca Rame is thus one between clock's mechanical time (the chronotype which rules the measurement of productive time in plants, factories, offices, kindergartens, popular housing, etc.) and the more flexible hours of family time and care duties. Rame's parody reaches Rabellesian proportions when the woman comments:

O mamma, l'ha fatta! Cagone di un cagone . . . Quante volte ti devo dire che tu la cacca devi farla all'asilo. Alle sette e due minuti devi farla, così ti cambia la suorina! (31)

In this first part of the play, it is evident that the strong acceleration of social tempos in our postmodern era has affected both women and men. Both sexes have experienced the inhuman aspects of capitalistic industrialization which have developed Alberti's modern chronotype to its most extreme consequences. The protagonist says:

il papà . . . lasciamolo dormire per una mezz'oretta ancora, beato lui! Che poi deve scattare alla Sandokan: aaaaaaaahhahh! [. . .] correre a prendere il tram, il treno, poi in fabbrica, e via a far ginnastica come una scimmia ammaestrata, alla catena di montaggio. (28)

The ruling of the factory's mechanical time has become so powerful that it has also invaded her hours of sleep; at the opening of the play, she is having a nightmare punctuated by the accelerated tempo of her factory work on the assembly line.

Even if the husband sleeping in the backstage is probably having a similar nightmare, it is evident that the woman, as housewife and mother, manages a much more complex web of time allocations than he does. The description of her morning routine shows, on one hand, the difficult commensurability of the different chronotypes which are experienced by women who live the "double-presence condition" (women who are simultaneously engaged both in the paid labor force outside their home and in unpaid domestic work), but also shows, on the other, their potential for flexibility and resistance in responding to rigidly structured social temporalities. In the first part of *Il risveglio*, the woman's resistance is very weak and takes place mainly in the heteroglossia which inhabits her monologue. It is as if many contradictory voices speak simultaneously through her mouth; one voice reinstates the dominant symbolic order, while the following one questions it. The result is a highly effective ironic mode. In this way she deconstructs the persuasive techniques of mass media publicity: "Camaj, sapone delle stelle. Camaj, sapone . . . (S'interrompe) L'acqua, non c'è più acqua! Maledizione! [. . .] Con che cosa mi sciacquo adesso? Accidentaccio . . . come brucia il Camaj, nell'occhio . . . questo la pubblicità non lo dice" (28). Later on, she ridicules one of the commonplaces of domestic economy: "in compenso ci ho messo il detersivo al limone per la lavastoviglie [nel frigorifero] . . . E' giusto: il limone si mette sempre nel frigorifero, altrimenti va male!" (29).

The drama's presentation of a distraught woman as spectacle is further reinforced in the second part of the play, when the actress realizes that she has lost her house key. She then begins a minute-by-minute play back of her routine activities of the previous evening, while commenting them aloud. Hence the dilated temporal effect experienced by the audience, who is made to participate simultaneously, from here to the end of the play, in two different staged times: evening and morning. At the level of style, the monologue thus presents conflicting narrating voices and a metatheatrical performance (a play within the play); such devices contribute to enhance the plural and heterogeneous character of the chronotypes experienced by the protagonist. While the extradi-

egetic narrator in Matilde Serao's *La virtù della Checchina* was typical of an earlier era in her ability to depict Checchina's rebellion with an ironic smile, the immediacy of the first-person monologue requires Franca Rame to adopt more refined techniques of distanciation from her character. The complexity of postmodern temporal experience has led many literary critics and fictional writers to question the adequacy of linear narrative as a device for the organization of time and the representation of the everyday life; like Franca Rame, they privilege instead heteroglossic and heterogeneous forms of narration.

Toward the end of the drama, the protagonist's discombobulated monologue becomes more and more reflexive as she launches herself into a tirade against the sacrificial role played by women in both productive contexts, work in the factory and work within the family. At one point, she says, addressing her sleeping husband: "La famiglia, la sacra famiglia . . . l'hanno inventata apposta perché tutti quelli come te, sgallati dalla nevrosi dei ritmi bestiali di lavoro, ritrovino in noi, mogli tuttofare, il materasso su cui sfogarsi" (31). In a dramatic crescendo of accusations against her husband, she vents her frustrations about the many impositions the social contract locks women into. After a heated exchange, her husband finally gives in and they reconcile in bed. The optimistic ending of this part of the play can, however, be read or performed as a wishful or ironic flight from reality. At this point, in fact, the apartment key is found in her husband's pocket as if to show that men, even in this moment of crisis, don't easily relinquish their position of empowerment. The seventies may have brought women to their "risveglio" and to practices of "autocoscienza," yet Franca Rame's protagonist, with her usual ironic linguistic twist, still questions the validity of such achievements:

— C'è la dialettica no? C'è la dialettica, per Dio — e mi spingeva verso il (*si siede sul letto*) 'dialettico' [. . .] insomma, si è fatto la . . . cosiddetta 'AUTOCRITICA.' Ma così bene, così bene . . . che io piangevo . . . E più si autocriticava e più io piangevo. (32)

The end of the monologue adds a final twist, an ironic comment that represents the lasting hold that mechanical time has on the protagonist. Looking at her weekly bus pass, the woman sees that it has been punched six times; only then does she realize that it must in fact be Sunday and that she doesn't have to go to work:

Ma che giorno è oggi? (*guarda il calendario appeso alla parete* . . .) Domenica! (*Gridando*) Domenica! (*Al bambino*) E tu non mi dici niente? [. . .] A letto, bambino, a letto! Dormire! [. . .] Voglio fare un sogno dove c'è un mondo che tutti i giorni è domenica [. . .] E se mi sogno un'altra volta di lavorare, mi strozzo da sola! (33)

For Matilde Serao's Checchina, the desire to escape takes the form of fantasizing about a luxurious room untouched by her husband's clock and his ethics of calculation. The protagonist of *Il risveglio*, on the other hand, dreams of an "eternal Sunday," a death-like sleep where the clock has no power to rule. Almost one hundred years separate the temporal experiences of the two characters, although women in the post-industrial era might well have gained an awareness of the gender structure implicit in social chronotypes, their everyday life has nevertheless been so thoroughly saturated by the multiple times within which they operate that even their dreams are threatened. The fantasy of *Il risveglio*'s protagonist — the suppression of the calendar divisions in favor of one undifferentiated temporal continuum — is ominously similar to the absolute white silence of the high security cell which contains the protagonist of Rame's monologue *Io, Ulrike, grido*. Ulrike's cry, "il tempo, che mi avete cancellato, dipingendolo di bianco" (248), depicts an eternity which echoes, in nightmare fashion, the white sheet in which the protagonist of *Il risveglio* wraps herself in her desire for an "eternal Sunday."

In contrast to the realistic situation of sexual politics presented throughout *Il risveglio*, its final song introduces a Communist utopia in which speed, that *modus vivendi* of our postmodern era, has given way to a relaxed and harmonious combination of different chronotypes. In such a utopia, women are no longer isolated social actors at the center of a congested pluridimensional network of temporal functions; instead their experiences are shared by men both in market and family labor. It is significant that the factory's regime of mechanical time is here replaced by the more flexible tempo of an invented figure which combines female and family counterchronotypes: "i tempi li dava una mia zia, / si andava comodi, si andava piano" (34). The conflict between time-budgeting (work organized quantitatively on the basis of timed labor) and task orientation (work measured qualitatively on the basis of the activity to be performed) is resolved in the favor of the latter.

It remains to be asked how Rame's monologue and its final song can be interpreted today, more than twenty years after its first performance, in an era where feminist studies have continued to explore the functioning of the sociosymbolic contract and where new information technologies have caused further revolutions in the modern spatial-temporal dimension. The time of today's information-based world — potentially infinite, simultaneous, stratified — is irreducible to clock metrics and to the temporal arrow (Paolucci 21). If such technological developments have meant a certain desynchronization of work times, increased flexibility and more permeable borders between work and life, our postmodern task-oriented chronotypes nevertheless continue to intersect, more often than not, with temporal models oriented around a clock. The temporal experience of women such as *Il risveglio* protagonist, their flexibility at juggling with incommensurable temporal orders in their everyday life, has thus become emblematic of the postmodern temporal paradigm experienced by both sexes. Gabriella Paolucci writes:

La stessa *contemporaneità* — che si trasforma spesso in un vero e proprio *ingorgo* — è divenuta caratteristica tipica di gran parte della vita quotidiana di tutti, ma in particolare delle donne che hanno impegni di lavoro e di "cura". Le richieste poste loro dalla molteplicità degli ambiti in cui si esplica il lavoro di *cuma*, insieme alle esigenze di organizzazione e distribuzione temporale proprie del lavoro del mercato, portano le donne ad acquistare capacità specifiche nella gestione delle eterogenee e stratificate durate quotidiane. (103)

In the prologue to *Tutta casa, letto e chiesa*, Franca Rame defined the protagonist of *Il risveglio* as a "personaggio 'portante' della nostra società" (8). Today such a characterization must seem even more apt, in an era where it has become evident that the dialectics of women's "double presence" at work and at home have made them more accustomed to managing the complex web of time allocations typical of our fragmented temporal condition. According to Paolucci, women of the post-industrial era, thanks to their ability at moving at ease within the plurality of conflicting chronotypes, are best situated for the necessary task of replacing the obsolete arrow image of modern mechanical time with the post-modern image of the puzzle:

Il tempo femminile è tipicamente postmoderno: flessibile, frammentato, differenziato ed eterogeneo, è il tempo di un soggetto che deve padroneggiare modalità di regolazione temporale estremamente differenziate e spesso contrastanti. Quale soggetto della società postindustriale, se non la donna, compone e scompone continuamente il *puzzle* del tempo quotidiano per venire incontro alle molteplici aspettative sociali? (14)

Although Franca Rame's protagonist is evidently a woman who is constantly faced in her everyday life with just such time management decisions, it nonetheless seems incongruous to depict her hysteric activities and her outburst of frustration through the self-control, determination and playful attitude of a puzzlemaker. What is lost in the image of the puzzlemaker is the sacrificial dimension of women's sociosymbolical contract. No matter how ingenious women may have become in developing temporal tactics and how obsolete communication technologies may have made clock-regulated time, women's actual know-how remains founded on an a priori disempowerment. Only when, and if, chronotypes constructed as puzzles are reconceived as privileged strategies rather than as defensive tactics, will it become possible to dislodge the present world, where male-dominated chronotypes are still dominant. And as long as subjects are engaged in a production of knowledge which disregards the history of gender difference, subsequent changes in the postmodern configuration of social time may well continue to favor the male symbolic and to assign women the management of the "frattempo" while what society constructs as "il tempo" (time itself) remains the property of men. It is difficult to imagine a conversation in which one would explain to Rame's protagonist the epistemological privileges of her social positioning. Having the big picture before them, philosophers and sociologists tend to emphasize the subversive effect played by disadvantaged categories of social actants and to idealize the liberating potentiality which fragmentation of the present may allow. Among its many other qualities, the real-life monologue of Franca Rame's *Il risveglio* has the merit of waking us up to the human cost which all revolutions, social and epistemological as well as political, demand from the disempowered.

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## FRANCA RAME GIULLARESSA

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giullare jester; buffoon;  
minstrel: il — del Re, the King's jester.

*Il nuovo dizionario Hazon Garzanti* (1995)

**G** *inllessa*, a word so seldom used that it does not appear in dictionaries, is the feminine form of *giullare*. In Tito Saffoi's study on medieval jesters, *I Giullari in Italia*, most of the female jesters mentioned were part of a husband-wife team, or of a family of strolling players and took a supporting role, such as that of providing musical accompaniment. Very few women jesters were recorded as solo artists in their own right (Saffoi 42). In modern times Franca Rame deserves to be called a *giullaressa*, in part for playing many secondary roles, both on stage and behind the scenes, but principally for the one-woman plays in which she acted and which she co-wrote with Dario Fo. Her life achievement has earned her this title. Rame made her debut on stage at the age of eight days<sup>1</sup> in her mother's arms and performed for over twenty years in the family theatrical company.<sup>2</sup> She became a statlet in the Variety shows of the Fifties, played many supporting roles in Dario Fo's farces and early plays and matured in the late Sixties into Tairov's "universal artist" (Geron 207-08): first actress, singer, clown, acrobat, and, later, co-writer and writer of her own material.

For our purposes, there is no need to clarify what exactly a medieval *giullare* was and did (Saffoi 11-19; Straniero 18-32). There have been debates over the most appropriate English equivalent but the translation adopted here will be 'jester.' What is important is to realise what being a modern *giullare*-jester meant to Dario Fo, and how Franca Rame then developed this role at a later

<sup>1</sup>Fo, and Rame, *Theatre Workshops at Riverside Studios, London* 69 and Rame, *Parliamo di donne* 115: the daughter of Genovetta di Brabante.

<sup>2</sup>The Rame company was one of Italy's last families of touring actors.



stage. This figure is mentioned for the first time in the 1959 play *Archangels Don't Play Pinball*

Lanky — "... do you know who the *giullari* (jesters) were?"

Blonde — "... the jesters were those who made the people at court laugh...."

Lanky — "Right... with the only difference that since the royal family no longer exists I make my drinking mates laugh."<sup>3</sup>

The nature of the role of the *giullare* was made clearer in *Misero Buffo* (1968):

in Medieval times, the jester was part of the people... he came from the people and took their rage giving it back to them mediated by the grotesque, by "reason," so that the people would become aware of their condition. (Fo, *Commedia* 5: 12)

The role jesters played was put into clearer context in an interview where Fo stated that "for the people, the theatre has always been the principle means of expression, of communication, but also of provocation and agitation. The theatre was the people's spoken and dramatized newspaper" (Valentini 124).<sup>4</sup> Fo exhumed this figure in "an attempt to restore to the... jester the up-to-date significance he once enjoyed as spokesman for a pristine popular culture" (Pertile 177). He succeeded to such an extent that nowadays the word *giullare* is a synonym for Dario Fo, as can be seen from headlines referring to him, culled at random from the press:

"A *Giullare* against Frankenstein" (*La Repubblica* 19 feb. 1998: 16)

"Fo, the *Giullare* bows and the king gives him the Nobel prize" (*Il Messaggero* 11 dic. 1997: front page)

It is possible to trace the couple's contact with popular culture and even, with reservation, to the *giullari* back to their earliest days in theatre. Franca Rame was part of the Rame family touring theatre company — the descendants of the *commedia dell'arte* tradition —

<sup>3</sup>Dario Fo, *Commedie* 1: 26 (all translations from Italian are by the author).

<sup>4</sup>See also Fo, *Manuale minimo dell'attore* 113, 120–21.

and it was there she learnt the acting trade; in her own words "it was my Academy of Dramatic Arts" (Fo and Rame 69). Her exposure to popular theatre and its techniques was total. "I was born on the stage, so to have a sense of cuts from scene to scene, to guess the right rhythm of a scene or the need to shorten a piece, comes as naturally to me as eating and drinking" (Fo, *Il teatro politico di Dario Fo* 142). Dario Fo studied architecture at the Brera academy and during his free time his sister Bianca recalls him "reinventing history, telling stories of 'poor' Cain, Sampson and Delilah" (Fo Garambois 11). The paradoxical role reversal of historical characters involved in these monologues, giving voice and dignity to the "loser" toppled the conventional hero from his pedestal. The hero became more human, his flaws exposed and his charm destroyed. Fo believed the demolition of myths, of god-given truths, to be at the core of the *giullare's* mission, and a means for the people to acquire awareness of their subordinate condition. This role reversal became a trait in all his future works. This ability to tell stories, to "reinvent" history from the point of view of the underdog was not innate but was part of popular culture of the Lombard region where the author was born. Story-telling played a major part in the social life of the Italian people before the advent of television, especially in the Lake Maggiore region. He often recalled how the *fabulatori*, or story-tellers, like the ancient *giullari*, would speak to the people in their own dialect about their own reality, raising their level of consciousness. Some were to be found in Fo's own family. As his mother recalls

when my father told stories of his family he did so in a storyteller's voice: solemn, while making a jester's comments... My father seized any occasion to tell stories, real and invented... that scared us then made us laugh our heads off in liberation. (Rota Fo 9–10)

She also gives an idea of how important this activity in the social and cultural life of the community was: "the stable was everything for us peasants, in those times, especially for women: it was a church, because we prayed there, it was a theatre, because storytellers would sing and narrate for hours" (Rota Fo 23). The tale of a king and his jester would feature among the eccentric stories her father would tell his grandchildren (Rota Fo 96–99).



This early background helped Fo to write his first, unperformed, play *A Master Drives a Servant Mad*, *Then the Servant Drives the Master Mad* (1944), and his early, now lost farce *But the Tresa Drives Us* (1949), but it was in the Fifties that the couple, both individually and jointly, were able to capitalize on their earlier experience. In 1951 Fo devised his one-man radio series *Poor Nano*, while Rame took part in "*Sette giorni a Milano* — a summer variety show with the Nava sisters in which she played the 'soubrettona' part, a role halfway between a soubrette and the ... 'girls' in bikini" (Cappa and Nepoti 22). It was during this show that she met her future husband. The following year Rame worked in the review *I fantisti*, with Billi e Riva, while Fo worked with Giustino Durano in *Cocoricò*. In 1953 Franca Rame joined Dario Fo and Franco Parenti in *A Finger in the Eye*, which was termed *la rivista "rossa"* (Bosio 79; the "red" review) on account of its political satire. This was followed the next year by *Madhouse for the same*. This exposure during what were to be the twilight years of Variety in Italy won Franca Rame some notoriety but did not add noticeably to her skills. In many ways it reduced her status from actress to stage ornament, as she herself was aware: "I had become famous as the Italian Rita Hayworth but without having done anything. Everyone thought that I was just a 'dumb' blonde" (Rame 117). On the contrary, in this period Dario Fo gained valuable, first-hand experience in writing and performing for the stage and in the genre which was to become his own. Variety shows were viewed as a form of 'lesser' theatre, a direct descendant of *commedia dell'arte*, retaining many of the characteristics of all popular performance. It was during these years that the actor acquired and refined many stage techniques: the "aside," or *a parte*, the speech delivered straight to the audience (ante-prologues, prologues, framing devices) (Scuderi 19-47), improvisation and multi-character monologues. As Franco Parenti, who acted as Fo's mentor in these years, stated

actors . . . should be enrolled for an obligatory military service in reviews. If it is true that in reviews and variety shows the script is practically non-existent and that the actor has little or nothing to say, on the other hand rhythm, gestural expressiveness, and mimicry are important. These are irreplaceable ingredients in theatre. Besides, in the reviews you pay cash: either you amuse the public or you are dead. (Ronfani 160)

After their marriage in 1954, the couple spent the years between 1955-58 in Rome. Franca Rame appeared as a 'sex goddess' in Cinecittà film productions. Dario Fo wrote cinema scripts and appeared in films, none of which found favor with the critics (Ronfani 138). The 1956 film *The Screwball* (*Lo svitato*), directed by Carlo Lizzani, belongs to this 'Roman holiday,' and although it was unfavorably criticised at the time has lately been reassessed by the critics, who now consider it to have been too 'modern' at its first release. The script was the author's first attempt to produce a plot lengthier and more intricate than the short sketches written for his reviews, but what emerged was an assembly of gags tied together by the main theme rather than one coherent theme. The main characters mirrored previous roles played by Fo and Rame. The protagonist, the 'screwball' of the title, was the fool who disclosed the reality of news-making in the press world; the female character was the eye-catching, blonde sex-bomb. Although this period seemed fruitless for the couple, it was to have an enormous impact in their future work. Cinema calls for greater coherence in plot, greater narrative momentum and rapid changes of set changes and these characteristics would reappear in Fo's subsequent works.

Franca Rame was the first to return to theater, in 1958, with farces by Feydeau and Labiche. The same year, with *Thieves, Dummies and Naked Women*, the couple inaugurated a stage relationship which has lasted until the present day. The program comprised four one-act farces, broadly in the style of the French Absurd theatre then in vogue. It was not fully appreciated at the time that this programme also represented the dramatist's first challenge to traditional farce and was a direct attempt to "re-evaluate the minor genres, which were the object of scornful dismissal by the high priests of the grand tradition" (Farrell 261). The same year Fo wrote *Comica Finale*, again comprising four one-act farces, this time based on the outline plots, or *canovacci*, for actors and puppets belonging to the Rame family. One of the farces was given the title *La Marcolfa*, originally a *commedia dell'arte* character, where Rame played a peasant woman rich in popular wisdom, well endowed with a store of proverbs but seemingly indecisive and feckless. The author was engaged in a process of rediscovery and reinvention of traditional material and characters. It was from here that the major elements of Fo's theatre take their origin: the mixture of elements of popular and erudite theatre, gags from the eighteenth-century strolling players, *lazzi* from *commedia dell'arte*, songs and music

from the reviews, clowneries, the grotesque, Brechtian antinaturalism, mime and puppetry (Valentini 58–60). These elements were to enrich Dario Fo's social theater<sup>5</sup> and counterbalanced the frequently inadequately drawn characters. The centrality of plot in Fo meant that character development was always of lesser importance. The male roles were primary while the female roles were invariably secondary, with few lines of dialogue but requiring various degrees of nudity. In the Fifties, neither Fo nor Rame challenged the "decorative" position of women in society on stage or in real life. The actress is remembered by an Italian critic who saw her one evening arrive "draped to the ground in a long fur coat, just like a famous American movie star, platinum blonde hair, shining with beauty, gorgeous" (Valentini 74–75).

The rediscovery of the popular tradition also played a part in the establishment of the Fo-Rame company in 1959, set-up on the same basis as the Rame family and many comparable companies (Fo, *Manuale minimo dell'attore* 29). It was to be a small family-run company with the members taking on many different roles: Fo was the author, first actor, director and stage designer, Franca Rame the female lead and administrator, while Pia and Enrico Rame helped out in various backstage roles. The company made their debut at the Teatro Odeon in Milan with the play *Archangels Don't Play Pinball* (1959), the playwright's first full-length play and the first of seven plays<sup>6</sup> that marked the couple's "bourgeois" period (1959–1968). This comedy was a milestone in Fo's works as it represented the moment when he began to merge his knowledge of popular theater with his own idiosyncratic, stylistic innovations to create coherently plotted, powerfully imagined plays. A major change which set the tone for Fo's future work came about in the way the characters were developed. In *Archangels Don't Play Pinball*, the two protagonists had, for the first time, a life of their own rather than being products of a situation. The male character, Lanky, was a fool or jester who lived on his wits (Puppa 37) while

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Fo's social commitment was present throughout his work, but his political commitment was to show up in his work a decade later, 1968.

These were, in chronological order: *Archangels Don't Play Pinball* (1959), *He Had Two Pistols with White and Black Eyes* (1960), *Isabella, Three Sailing Ships and a Con Man* (1963), *Seventh Commandment: Thou Shalt Steal a Bit Less* (1964), *Always Blame It on the Devil* (1965), *The Lady Is to Be Discarded* (1967).

his companion Blonde, was both a part-time prostitute and the "straight-character" indispensable for comedy routines. Lanky, presents himself as a "guillare" (Fo, *Commedie* I: 26) and represents a synthesis of the preceding absurdist roles of the farces and the cinematographic experience of *The Srenpball*: he is the fool, the dummy, the naive/zany character who with his linear and ingenious logic, often taken to surreal extremes, becomes the opponent of the system and unveils its wickedness. In Fo's own words "he is an allegory for the people" (Fo, *Commedie* 5: 13). This role is "the archetype of the naive/smart character, the fool to whom everything is permitted provided that he remains within given boundaries" (Cappa and Nepoti 47). The fool was to gain an even higher profile in Fo's work on account of his ability to evade censorship and undermine common logic while enunciating inconvenient truths.

The fool is a very difficult character to perform because of the everpresent risk of ruining his disruptive force by exaggeration. The performance of this role by Franca Rame, in the 1963 play *Isabella, Three Sailing Ships and a Con Man*, marked an important stage in her acting career. For perhaps the first time since she left the family company, Rame performed a character who was more than merely decorative and who required all the popular theatre skills acquired in her earlier years. As the author tried "to make the great leap forward, to go from unrestrained comedy and uncontrollable laughter to historical and political satire" (Valentini 85), the actress had to play two important secondary roles, both of whom were required to convey the social and political message of the play. In the first act, Rame played Queen Isabella and through the metaphor of fifteenth-century history denounced Christian Democrat censorship and American imperialism. In the second act, through the madness of Giovanna la Pazza (Joan the madwoman), she revealed scandals and injustices uncannily similar to those prevalent under the Francoist regime. Even though both roles were important in the development of the plot, they did not steal the lime-light from Fo-Columbus who remained the pivot of the play.

Lino Pertile has pointed out that Rame's "stage persona in Fo's theatre parallels the evolution of that theater" (169), so it was natural to find the actress gaining full prominence as a "giullaressa" when she played the role of the *fausse étourdie*, Enea in *Seventh Commandment: Thou Shalt Steal a Bit Less* (1964), one of Fo's most deftly devised comedies. His social satire and her performance

as the seemingly naïve character cast a critical, scoffing light on some of Italy's more *piquant* political scandals. Enea is a naïve female cemetery attendant who has inherited job and alcoholism from her father. She is subject to practical jokes from her fellow workers who make her believe that the cemetery where she works is being demolished by building speculators<sup>7</sup>, and later managed to convince her that she should pursue a vocation as a prostitute. She inhabits the world of the politically 'dead', or at best unaware, while the 'real world' of protest and demonstration could be glimpsed, awkwardly, from a barely reachable cemetery window. The mimicry of Enea and her fellow workers had the Italian public witness, for the first time on stage, a police attack on striking workers and the response of the regime, which Enea makes her own: she is a supporter of the police action. This gullible character then encounters a 'coffin maniac' who asks to rent a coffin, but she discovers that the director of the cemetery is in fact planning to sell the grounds to speculators. She once again sides with capitalist logic, taking it to its extreme. The 'coffin maniac' asks her to disguise herself as a nun to enter a convent/mental asylum where he keeps compromising documents needed to blackmail the authorities. During these transformations Enea acquires a political awareness that makes her want to expose political corruption to the police. The situation gives way to a maelstrom of succeeding incidents that sees real and fake madmen uncover various scandals and corruption. "Symbolically [the asylum] is a political and satirical image of official society, and from the point of view of popular mythology it is the world of the mad, the universe of demons, where constitutional order is turned upside down in an anarchic, carnivalesque universe" (Holm 25). In the end the police decide to brainwash all the people involved so as to avoid a scandal "that would blow up the nation" (Fo, *Commedia* 2: 200), but leave untouched Enea who departs defending her newly acquired political awareness. In this play dedicated to her by Fo, Franca Rame for the first time played a strongly satirical lead character and took on the *giullare* challenge of amusing while bringing the audience to think about contemporary events. For the critic Vegliani, Enea was "a complete

female character no longer reduced to an amusing but pouting supporting role" (Vegliani).

The *bourgeois* period was, on the whole, a time of discovery and evolution for the playwright: the sketches and stories began to develop into three-act plays which, as they grew in coherency, adopted the standard cinematic two-act format. The mix of theatrical genres, of film-making experiences and literary research settled into the very personal comic style that is Fo's unique hall-mark. His social satire gradually developed into political satire, as is evident in the last play of this period *The Lady Is to Be Discarded* (1967). This was also a time of great success both in Italy and abroad; in the 1964-65 season Fo became the most performed living playwright in Europe (Cappa and Nepoti 45), but this did not seem to satisfy the couple who, after their experiences with the Nuovo Canzoniere Italiano group, had moved closer to left wing politics and fringe theatre.<sup>8</sup> This group of 'revolutionary militants', as they liked to call themselves, actively and scientifically researched popular traditional music, with the purpose of involving and restoring this culture to the people rather than keeping the data for academic circles. Fo was contacted in order to aid the group stage the material researched in an appealing, theatrically dynamic style. The result was the show *Ci ragiono e canto* (1965).<sup>9</sup> This experience deepened the couple's conviction, gained during the short-lived appearance on television in 1962, that the new medium had an unexpected power to bring to a greater public issues and ideas which were not altogether welcome to the establishment. By the mid-Sixties the Fos had come to understand that playing their ingenious characters, the *giullari*, in bourgeois theatres was not likely to bring about any real social or political change. These proletarian characters, devised with the aim of undermining all the *cliches* and raising political awareness, lost most of their innovative impact on middle-class stages. As Fo explained in a 1974 interview with *Libération*:

<sup>8</sup>Franca Rame joined the PCI (Italian Communist Party) in 1967 and held a major role in the decisional process that would lead the couple away from the ETI theatre circuit.

<sup>9</sup>The Nuovo Canzoniere Italiano had a very scientific approach to research and wanted to keep to the original texts while Fo's outlook was very much performance oriented. This led to an end in the collaboration, but Fo went on to make two further editions of the show adding many songs he had written himself — *Ci ragiono e canto* n. 2 in 1969 and n. 3 in 1973. (See Valentini 99-100.)

<sup>7</sup>Though many critics appreciated the farce, the strong political satire was dismissed as ineffective. Fo took his revenge when a few years later a case of speculation on the Milanese cemetery was uncovered (Valentini 91).

the bourgeois accepted even our most violent criticism of them as long as we criticised them inside their own structure, in the same way as the king's court jester was allowed to say the most incisive things to the king, as long as he said them at court, to the courtiers who laughed, applauded and said "My, how democratic the king is." This was a way for the bourgeois to show itself how sympathetic and democratic it was... (Mitchell, *Dario Fo: People's Court Jester* 53)

A change was needed and the couple followed other left-wing playwrights and performers in the move away from the bourgeois theatre circuit towards the establishment of cooperatives which would perform in alternative or non-conventional venues, before an audience not accustomed to attending theater.<sup>10</sup> It was 1968, a moment when a revolutionary process was thought possible and intellectuals were called on to take a guiding role in uncovering and reaffirming popular culture. Fo tried to achieve this Gramscian goal in the first works of his "political theater," written for the cooperative Nuova Scena. In order to reach a mass-audience, the couple performed separately, and realised their ambitions in full with *Mistero Buffo* (1969), designated a *giullarata popolare*, or a popular jester performance. The sub-title alone makes clear a search for historical roots that was even more evident in the content of the piece and the techniques employed. The *giullarata* consisted of a series of short one-person pieces based on adapted medieval jester texts, with the addition of some similar pieces invented by the author, bound together by explanatory, introductory or framing devices. The performance called for neither costumes nor stage settings, as the actors were dressed in black and the stage left bare. Most of the time, the stage had no more dignified function than that of providing extra seating space. The performer played all the characters involved in the pieces in a non-naturalistic, detached style, and keyed in and out of the narration in an attempt to break the 'fourth wall' convention. The language was deliberately kept accessible and the mixture of dialects used during the pieces was in itself a political statement. This work was perfectly constructed so as to meet its political and didactic objectives. Fo compounded the experience of the previous 'fools' into his *giullare* performance, and has never

subsequently been able to separate himself from what has become his *alter ego*.

As it developed, this work also called for the participation of Franca Rame in the more dramatic pieces, the texts of the Passion of Christ. These performances shattered centuries of iconographic and evangelical tradition by portraying in a very human way Jesus, the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalen and the other characters normally performed in a religious setting during Catholic festivities. Both the comic and the dramatic pieces were introduced and performed in a popular style, but they were placed in reverse order compared to what was usual in a popular theatre, where the comic pieces would have followed the more dramatic scenes in order to lift the audience's spirits. Probably the couple's intention was to send the public home to brood on the political message, but the contrast between the two groups of sketches was such that the importance of Rame's pieces was diminished. This contrast, together with the Rame's "starlet" public image, which would not dissolve for many years, could explain why the actress did not yet fully emerge in her own right as a *giullaressa*. It was an opportunity *manqué*.

The break with official commercial or bourgeois theatre had an effect in the female characters which was immediately evident. Franca Rame recalled how:

before we left the official theatrical circuit [in 1968] my characters, the female characters written by Dario, had a tendency to be decorative, supporting roles but they spoke and reasoned.... Then, from 1968... we broke away from these schemes.... all the characters have moved away from the decorative style.... (Fo, *Il teatro politico di Dario Fo* 142)

In a theater centered on politics there was little space for the sexy female presence so dear to the bourgeois theatre. The actress shed this 'role' with incredible ease turning to more difficult parts which, for the first time, included those of older women such as the mother of Michele Lu Lanzaone in *The Worker Knows 300 Words*, the Boss Knows 1,000 — *That's Why He's the Boss* and the Mother in *Chain Me Up and I'll Still Smash Everything* (both 1969). In a complete reversal of roles that owed not a little to Dario Fo's inspiration, Franca Rame concealed the facile sex appeal that had been part of her stage persona and gave fuller play to her undoubted acting abilities. This change was deep and immediate, and her po-

<sup>10</sup>Jean Louis Barrault in France, Giorgio Strehler and the less famous Luciano Leonesi in Italy.

litical commitment on stage was shadowed by the organization of *Soccorso Rosso* (Red Aid), an association established by her to offer assistance to the many political prisoners and their families during Italy's troubled 'years of lead.' Moreover, it was in this politically turbulent period that Rame took a more active part in Fo's theater in many ways: as co-author rather than critic, as joint director (Fo, *Il teatro politico di Dario Fo* 142, 148–50), and on and off stage, as political militant with responsibility for the political content of their plays.

At this time of "contestation," the couple's satire was aimed at all political and social structures and addressed all parties without distinction. This inevitably caused tensions with the PCI (the Italian Communist Party) and brought about, in 1970, further change. The couple left Nuova Scena and, together with those of their colleagues who had grown disillusioned with the PCI and its ally the ARCI cultural circuit, created the company La Comune. This meant that Fo and Rame had to organize a new way of bringing theater to the masses but this move also gave them greater freedom of speech. From the earliest stages of his playwrighting career, Fo had included in his theater elements of every-day life, of daily news and political events so as to make it relevant to the present. Now his subjects were taken from the headlines of that day's newspapers. The best known work in this period is undoubtedly *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* (1970) where the author became the people's living newspaper, providing continually updated counter-information to his audience on the investigations concerning the Piazza Fontana massacre.<sup>11</sup> Fo's *tour de force* as the Madman in this play was equalled a year later by Rame's in *United We Stand! All Together Now! Hang On, Isn't That the Boss? Here Rame*, in the lead role of the dressmaker Antonia, played a working-class woman experiencing a process of political education during the workers' struggles of 1911–22. Antonia comes into contact with political

circles through her lover, later her husband, Norberto. At first it is love that drives her to learn more, while in the end her political convictions lead her to revenge her husband's death and to keep fighting for what have become her ideals. The protagonist role won Rame favourable notices from most critics, who finally recognized her as one of the most talented epic actresses of her generation.

Running parallel to this political/didactical/informative theater, the couple engaged in less glamorous community work aimed at reintroducing popular culture and history to the people. The couple called these performances *messe da campo*<sup>12</sup> — an improvised theatre based on particular local events such as episodes from the Resistance or contemporary strikes. It was during this political period that the couple consolidated their stage skills, and displayed considerable personal courage in their continual battle with a system that stifled the people and popular culture, and had not hesitated in promoting a "strategia della tensione" or strategy of tension.<sup>13</sup> The company had also to face the difficulties of adapting the little stage material left at their disposal after the last company split,<sup>14</sup> of finding theatrical spaces and of escaping police harassment. On a more personal note Fo had to face many legal charges, culminating in his arrest in Sassari (9/3/1973). On this occasion, Franca Rame led a mass protest and improvised a happening-performance on the roof of a Fiat 500 outside the prison for many hours and eventually obtained Fo's release. Franca was now the street-performer, the *giullaressa*. She was also kidnapped and raped the same year by a gang of Fascists,<sup>15</sup> an experience that led her to

<sup>12</sup>Literally "field masses."

<sup>13</sup>The 1968 political elections saw a definite swerve towards left-wing politics in Italy, but these forces were not cohesive. The 20 year old Christian Democrat regime sought to move the political axis back towards the right wing by destabilizing the country (through continuous threats of anticipated elections and *coups d'état*, police provocation, the organization of Fascist action squads and acts of terrorism that aimed at taking the political struggle from the political sphere onto the streets thus making it an issue of public order). This has since been called "strategia della tensione." (See De Palo and Giannuli.)

<sup>14</sup>In 1973 La Comune split, but both parts kept the name even though Fo and Rame were deprived of all theatrical equipment. A year later they occupied the Palazzina Liberty in Milan which for ten years was to be their main theatre.

<sup>15</sup>In 1998 there was a scandal because the rape was said to have been carried out by a group of neo-Nazis with the support of the Carabinieri (state

<sup>11</sup>On the 12th of December 1969 a bomb exploded in mid-afternoon in a Milanese bank, killing many people. The police immediately decided that left-wing, extra-parliamentary groups were responsible and arrested an anarchist, Pino Pinelli. In the course of interrogations, he was said to have committed suicide by jumping from an open window. Police statements were, from the very beginning, contradictory but official investigations were quickly closed. Only a public outcry, due in large measure to Fo's play, caused the case to be reopened and neo-Fascist elements to be implicated. For a detailed account of the facts see De Palo and Giannuli.

write her first very own one-act play *The rape* (performed only years later) and put together the video *Basta con i fascisti!*

The company was at the service of the "movement" as a whole, not of any single faction. La Comune refused to endorse any particular extra-parliamentary label and dedicated itself instead to promoting popular culture and history. Political life had so absorbed the couple that they considered themselves 'revolutionary militants' and sacrificed all their time to either performance or research and debate (Valentini 134-35). But while Fo still perceived himself as a playwright and performer, Rame felt that the responsibilities of the administration of the company, the Red Aid activities and her family responsibilities had become unsustainable, so much so that Rame convened the company and announced that she was leaving the stage (Rame 116). A few days later Fo presented her with a 'television' play on the condition of women, *Let's talk about women*, which, together with some of his older works, was to be shown on national television in the Fo's TV *rentrée* in 1977.<sup>16</sup>

It had been Franca Rame's idea to write a play on women's condition but the TV play was not satisfactory; rather than a parade of women on stage she wanted a more feminine/feminist<sup>17</sup> way of representing women and their condition. Both Fo and Rame went to work on the last play transforming it into the one-woman *giullinata*, *Female Parts* (1978).<sup>18</sup> All the monologues represent various types of female oppression by representing situations facing a

police); a crime for which Franca Rame has received a private letter of apology from the Italian Head of State, Oscar Luigi Scalfaro. On a more general note the Fos have suffered many false accusations and many acts of oppression. (See Bellu 9.)

<sup>16</sup>After the left-wing parties won the local elections in 1975 and the general election in 1976 the political climate in RAI had changed. There had been a 'division' of the broadcasting channels between parties and the second broadcasting channel was run by the Socialists. It was thus possible for the Fos to return to the screen after fourteen years of absence.

<sup>17</sup>Rame has never denied her admiration for feminists in general but was never involved in the feminist movement because of her theater and *Soccorso Rosso* activities. The women's movement in Italy had by the late 70s reached mass mobilisation, communication channels had opened on television, radio shows and newspapers like *il manifesto* and *la Repubblica* and feminist journals were circulating. *Donna womanfemine*, *Memoria* and a feminist literary journal *l'Orsaminore* were also available.

<sup>18</sup>This is the first work in which Rame appeared as co-writer, while her work as co-director has never been credited.

woman in ordinary life — work, housework, ageing, rejection, sexual harassment — and others that are pertinent mainly to the female gender — motherhood, lack of sex education, abortion,<sup>19</sup> rape.<sup>20</sup> As in Fo's *Mistero Buffo* the pieces may convey the political message through historical metaphor, for instance with *Medea*, but these are a minority. Most of the monologues deal with contemporary issues. For many years Rame has performed the working mother in *Waking Up*, the housewife in *A Woman on her Own*, the female partner dealing with abortion in *The Same Old Story* the terrorist's mother being strip-searched in *The Mother*,<sup>21</sup> the German women terrorists Meinhof and Moeller in *I Unlike and Tomorrow's News*. The pieces were added or removed according to the needs and politics of the moment and the prologues placed each performance in cultural and political context. This *giullinata* acquired a universality and effectiveness parallel to Dario Fo's own work, and made Franca Rame a jester in her own right. All these factors contributed to the play's success and to draw female — and male — audiences from all social classes. In view of this, Rame returned to perform in the bourgeois theater since, in her own words

I realised that in turning our back on the so-called bourgeois theatre, we were [rejecting] a portion of spectators who would never have come to a stadium or under a tent, but still has the right to be entertained, to laugh, and at the same time to see certain problems dealt with. (Mitchell, *Dario Fo: People's Court Jester* 83)

<sup>19</sup>In 1973 Mario Sossi (an Italian magistrate later kidnapped by the Red Brigades) carried out an inquiry on Franca Rame's political activities suspecting her of involvement in illegal abortion. The inquiry yielded nothing incriminating and preceded the mass mobilisation for an abortion law that occurred between 1974 and 1978. In those years two impressive demonstrations uniting most women's movements were held in Rome (3rd April 1976 and 10th June 1977) following opposition from the Democrazia Cristiana and the Movimento Sociale Italiano to the passing of the abortion bill. (See Tiso 18-20, 46-51, 65-68, 136-39).

<sup>20</sup>In Italy rape had been considered a "moral" crime until 1996, when by law it became a crime against the person and, the most serious cases, can incur the penalties laid down for kidnapping.

<sup>21</sup>Rame's performance of *La madre* in London, 1983, served to bolster a campaign against similar practices in Armagh Jail in Northern Ireland (Hirst 110-11).



The focus on a particular type of female character not previously seen on stage, together with Rame's *bravura* epic acting, established an immediate rapport and drew a "more intense emotional response from . . . [the] audience, requiring it to enter more completely into the situation so that it may be more disturbed, more inclined to respond and change [things]" (Hirst 149). It also gave the piece greater didactic strength. The grotesque and the anti-cathartic finales confirmed Franca Rame as being "the exponent of his [Fo's] theater's power to drive straight to the heart of an issue and make the audience through anger will to change what is outmoded and corrupt" (Hirst 110-11).

As times changed, political militancy dwindled: the Italian feminist movement was reabsorbed into the large parties of the left, major feminist battles had been won by 1983. The Fos turned from political theater to a social theater that denounced such social incongruities as women's subordinate condition in the family, for instance in *The Open Couple* (1983), as kidnappings in *Abducting Diana* (1986), drugs and the Vatican's stance on contraception and homosexuality in *The Pope and the Witch* (1989). In 1996 the actress returned to the stage with another one-woman *giullarata* *Sex? Yes, my pleasure* promoting sex education in Italian state schools.<sup>22</sup> The lack of sex education in the schools is seen as one of the root causes of ignorance in sexual matters, of tolerance of violent behaviour, of gender discrimination, of role stereotyping, of the lack of a female presence in literature, history and evolutionary theory. Once again Franca Rame is a *giullaressa* promoting change through the use of monologues contextualized by daily updates. As political discussion is reported in the daily press, the contents of the play change and adapt, highlighting the evolution, or indeed regression, of debates.

Franca Rame has progressed enormously from the 'dumb blonde' characters of the Reviews of the 50s to the female archetypes of the 90s. Her acting abilities and stage persona caused Fo's theatre to change in the 60s when the political message was then carried out by the female characters, reaching a complete "role regression, of debates.

<sup>22</sup>There has been much debate on this topic since the 70s but, mainly due to Catholic opposition, a bill has never been passed. Jacopo Fo, the couple's son, has been involved in the same campaign and, since 1996, has toured *Zen and the Art of Screaming*. The tenor of this piece is more didactic rather than artistic.

versal" (Fo, *Fabulazzo* 67-68) in the 70s. This progress brought the playwright to say, in 1977, that "the ideological key to the representation of female characters is highly conventional. While a great conflict . . . has existed in the history of theater regarding male characters, the female characters are still seen in a racist way" (Fo, *Il teatro politico di Dario Fo*). Thanks to Fo and Rame this is no longer true. They have demolished the myth that women can only perform in a particular type of comic situation, they have transformed the physicality of women (in, for instance, the 1967 *The Lady Is to Be Discarded*, the 1969 *Michelle Lu Lanzone* and the 1997 *The Devil in Drag*) and have changed the role of women on the stage. Comedy is no longer "unbecoming" (Allegri 154) for women. Through the use of the grotesque and the obscene, the couple's female characters have re-discovered a long-forgotten comic approach, that of the *giullaressa* (Fo, *Manuale minimo dell'attore* 298). This differs from its male counterparts, the *giullari*, mainly through the overt eroticism in the comic part freed both from religious guilt and the heavily erotic innuendos of modern theater but maintaining the ingenuousness and naturalness of the peasant world. Franca Rame has revived and given renewed political potency to a character from theatrical history, has conquered a space for herself in modern theater,<sup>23</sup> has promoted Italian culture world-wide and has participated in many campaigns for the political and social betterment of women. Her persona will always be associated with Dario Fo, as it was in the award of the 1997 Nobel prize, so has she not won the right to be identified as a *giullaressa* as well?

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<sup>23</sup>Especially outside of Italy where she is regarded as an independent artist, while at home she is always associated with Fo.



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## IMPROVISATION AND FRAMING IN THE FO-RAME COLLABORATION

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When Dario Fo was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature he took the opportunity, as he has on innumerable occasions, to acknowledge his debt to his wife and collaborator, Franca Rame, declaring that the award was hers as well. The team of Fo and Rame offers great insight into the complementary dynamics and exchanges that constitute a successful partnership in the performing arts. As Walter Valeri points out,

Both of them have profited immensely from each other's theatrical abilities and their synergetic collaboration is unparalleled in twentieth-century European theater. It may even be argued that their collaboration has no equal historically in all of European theater, for even the great Andreini family of the sixteenth century, with the stellar presence of Isabella, lacked a collaboration that produced an equivalently vast corpus. (In press)

Dario Fo's performance career has always been driven by a Gramscian quest to give dignity back to popular culture, which explains why he created his theater primarily by drawing from popular forms of performance. Franca and the Rame family, with all of their background and experience in theater, provided Fo with invaluable resources for the vein of popular performance that he was intent on making his own. "I even wrote some one-acts that were based somewhat on the farces of the Rame family, which Franca brought along. . . . She brought me nearly a chest full of *scenari*, some of them quite beautiful, which have been very useful to me" (Fo 1990:95). And on many occasions Fo has explained how he depends on Franca Rame's opinions and comments, based on her keen theatrical instincts. By the same token, without the influence of Fo and his strong desire to explore popular forms, Rame's career would undoubtedly have gone the way of conventional stage acting. He also encouraged her to perform monologues with feminist messages. She explains that when he wrote the first

draft of *All Bed, Board, and Church* for her (which later developed into a coauthored work), it gave her a new sense of direction and of self-confidence: "For years I was told that I was dumb and beautiful. . . . Everyone thought of me as a blond bombshell" (1992:116-17).

Various aspects of the Fo-Rame collaboration are explored in this volume. The present study will focus on two key techniques of their theater that link it to popular performance: improvisation and framing. The first has to do with the Italian tradition of *recitare a soggetto* or "performing on a theme" that culminated with the *commedia dell'arte*. As will be demonstrated, although this is one of the most important elements of Fo's solo performance art, were it not for Rame and her theatrical background, he more than likely would not have been able to explore, develop, and refine it to such an extraordinary level.

An important lesson that scholars of performance can learn from Fo is that the legacy of the *commedia dell'arte* is not to be found solely in the literary tradition, where playwrights and directors consciously borrow or adapt what they believe to be elements of *commedia*. To a great (perhaps greater) extent "the tradition was transmitted via an oral process — as one generation passed on to the next what it learned from the previous one — in various forms of popular theater" (Scuderi in press). The Rame family, who can trace its roots as itinerant performers back to the seventeenth century, is a prime example. They were originally puppeteers, who continued the tradition *dell'arte*, that is, they were involved in all aspects of their craft and they improvised their performances on plots or *scenari*. It was during the 1920s that the Rame family made the transition from puppet theater to *teatro di persona*, bringing to the new medium all of their previous performance experience. The fact that the Rames were able to make such a transition is evidence of how many popular forms are governed by similar principles and mechanisms and share similar approaches to and techniques of performance. In the history of Italian theater, a parallel example is found in Giovanni Grasso (1873-1930). Grasso grew up in a family of Catanese puppeteers and went on to become one of the most prominent actors and *capocomici* (theater company leaders) of Sicilian veristic theater, bringing to the new medium the techniques he had learned as a puppeteer, such as performing *a soggetto*. (For more on Grasso see Barbina 1983.)

Franca Rame was born into a theatrical family and literally grew up in the theater. The art of performing and all aspects of the theatrical profession were passed on to her by means of a popular, oral tradition. She began performing at a very young age and learned her trade, not by formal study, but by experience and assimilation, by emulating her elders. She was at home in the theatrical setting amongst the members of her immediate and extended family. "Much of our domestic life, talking with family members about domestic things, took place right in the theater. Being on stage meant being with my family" (Rame 1993). Franca Rame then is truly a *figlia d'arte*, which translates to "daughter of the métier."

The Rame family typically performed a repertoire of about six plays at a given time. Sometimes they would exhaust their repertoire and needed to come up with new material, for example, if they felt it profitable to extend their stay in a given location. In these situations, they would exercise their skills in improvisation. It was this type of performance, more than any other, that linked the Rames to the tradition of the *commedia dell'arte*. Here is how Franca Rame explained it to me in an interview:

This is what would happen: We would finish our repertoire, we had nothing left to perform, so my uncle would read a novel. Then we would come together and he would tell us the story. . . . The essential facts were written on a chart, for example: "Father meets up with daughter." "Acts coldly towards her." "Remembers the death of her mother." . . . in other words the key events of the actions that we were to play were indicated. These charts were called *scatole* [lists]. They were placed in the wings, and each actor would take a look before going on. (1993)

Compare Franca's childhood experience of performing *a soggetto* with the process used by the *comici dell'arte*, as explained by Allardyce Nicoll. In this example, he is focusing specifically on the "argomento," which provided the background to the plot.

Next, the director reads aloud a very short "Argomento," a brief outline of the chief past events leading up to the beginning of the play. The actors are aware that this Argument demands their close attention, since assuredly from time to time in the course of the comedy they will have to refer to previous events described therein. They are also aware that the Argument will be made

available to them for later consultation, no doubt tacked to the wall of the wings. (1963:124)

A further comparison can be made (particularly in the succinct wording) between the examples of the key moments of the scenario as recalled by Rame and examples from actual *commedia* scenarios, such as this excerpt from Flaminio Scala, entitled *Isabella's Fortune*: "Pantalone enters and learns from the two brothers that Grattano, their old father, is in love with Franceschina and that he is making no effort to find them wives as he should" (1996:23).

Dario Fo profited immensely from the Rame's experience.

Dario Fo remembers being invited along to a family meal on one occasion when he was being introduced to the family. He coaxed the family into playing variations on the boy-meets-girl theme, such as she is in love but refuses to say so, he is in love but is tongue tied, the two meet but are conscious of being watched. The family went into the roles, the appropriate lines came out, seemingly fresh and spontaneous but ready for use when the opportunity arose on stage. (Farrell in press)

Such experiences were instrumental in helping Fo to understand or decode the principles behind the technique, which for centuries illuded most scholars of the *commedia*. There had been a long-standing debate as to whether the players *dell'arte* were actually *improvising* from thin air, or were simply repeating verbatim memorized lines and gags. Fo essentially came to the conclusion that the mechanisms behind this type of improvisation primarily entailed a contextualization of preconceived elements, what some scholars of oral performance might call *formulas*. In fact, Fo's explanation of the mechanisms governing this type of improvisation is akin to that functioning in many oral performance traditions, as explained by scholars of popular performance. An actor could employ a particular formula at an appropriate moment and adapt it to the given context with such expertise and timing so as to give the impression of pure improvisation (Fo 1987:9). (For a discussion on Fo's improvisation see Scuderi 1998:51-77.) Thus, for example, the notes written on the Rame's *scalette* — "Father meets up with daughter," "Acts coldly towards her," "Remembers the death of her mother" — were, in a sense, formulas that the actors contextualized in the act of performance. The actual utterances were, for the

most part, open to endless variations. The end result is best expressed by one of the originators of the oral formula theory, Albert Lord, when he explains that in performances based on "composition by theme" (1987), the preconceived ideas are "presented in 'more or less the same words,' while expressing the same essential ideas. The text is not really fixed, yet because the essential ideas have remained constant, it is 'more or less fixed'" (1981:453).

The insight Fo gained from the Rames allowed him to develop his famous *giullarata*, his solo performance, which often entails improvising or formulating the exact utterances at the moment of performance (a fact made evident by comparing the many variations that may exist between different performances of the same *giullarata*). And this is exactly what Fo demonstrated to the Swedish Academy and all those present at the Nobel award ceremony. Fo's acceptance speech, *Contra Jugglatores Obloquentes*, consisted of drawings, i.e. iconographic formulas, which he contextualized in his delivery. Fo had brought this use of the iconographic scenario to a very sophisticated level earlier in 1991-92 with his *giullarata*, *Johan Padan a la descoberta de le Americhe*. Fo conceived of the original text for *Johan Padan* as a series of drawings and paintings that depict the key moments of the narrative. He put these images together sequentially in a book that served as a plot outline (his "canovaccio") which he kept on a lectern during performance (Scuderi 1998:57).

Thus Franca Rame was instrumental in allowing Dario Fo to understand and adapt the technique of improvisation, providing him the opportunity to rightfully assert that he is in fact continuing in the tradition of the *commedia dell'arte*. In turn, Fo's keen insight into the principles and techniques of popular performance has helped Franca Rame in developing her own theatrical signature. A technique that Fo and Rame initially developed together is the prologue, what Fo calls the *discorsetto* (little discourse). The prologue was developed during the period in the late sixties and seventies when Fo and Rame were playing outside the conventional theater circuit.

Since we started twenty-three years ago with our popular theater — theater for the masses, proletarian theater — that's when Franca and I began coming out [before the performance] all the time. . . . There was work going on before the shows: We were getting signatures, getting the names of comrades who had been

arrested, making announcements, distributing pamphlets, and so by the time the show started no one said "Let the show begin!" There was no curtain. (Fo 1993)

The prologue evolved into an extended introduction to the performance. Through it the performer(s) can provide the audience with information and background to the show. (Cf. the prologue to *Sex?* in this volume.) As Fo often performs in special languages coordinated with mime, the prologue provides vital information that allows the audience to follow the narrative. Both Fo and Rame make great use of this (via an interpreter or superitles) in order to communicate to non-Italian speaking audiences and to assist them with the narrative.

At this point it would be useful to introduce the concept of *performance frame*. Richard Bauman explains that Gregory Bateson "first developed systematically the notion of frame as a defined interpretive context providing guidelines for discriminating between orders of message . . ." (1984:9-10). Bauman then goes on to specify that the performance frame

is marked as available for the enhancement of experience, through the present enjoyment of the intrinsic qualities of the art of expression itself. Performance thus calls forth special attention to and heightened awareness of the act of expression and gives license to the audience to regard the act of expression and the performer with special intensity. (1984:11)

In Fo and Rame's theater, the prologue serves two functions. First, it creates a gradual transition from non-performance to performance frame. More than Rame, Fo has made greater use of this and actually precedes the prologue with an *anteprologue*, whereby the performer is present on stage and interacts with the audience as the house fills. This is a technique borrowed, once again, from popular performers, specifically from Italian vaudeville masters, such as Totò (Antonio De Curtis 1898-1967) and Ettore Petrolini (1886-1936). The result of gradually keying in the performance by means of these introductory techniques is to establish a flexible performance frame. This allows the performer to key in and out of performance at will in order to make metatheatrical commentary, while avoiding the sense of "breaking character," which is part of Fo and Rame's own brand of epic theater.

The prologue has a second important function. It allows the player the opportunity to suggest to the audience how they should interpret the performance frame, for "a frame is metacommunicative. Any message, which either explicitly or implicitly defines a frame, *ipso facto*, gives the receiver instructions or aids in his attempts to understand the messages included within the frame" (Bateson 1972:188). (For a discussion on Fo's interpretive frame see Scuderi 1998:19-47.) For both Fo and Rame, this has provided an essential method for underscoring the social and political messages they mean to convey. Specifically for Franca Rame, the prologue allows her to underscore and to highlight the principal feminist themes of her monologues. Her ideas on matters such as the exploitation of women in the labor force, the sexuality of women, and motherhood have been instrumental in her development as an important figure in European feminism. (See Wood in press.)

Dario Fo set out to develop a theater steeped in popular tradition; Franca Rame was a child of that tradition. Their long collaboration has provided a rich legacy for the theater world: a sizable corpus of work as well as a distinctive approach to performance. Improvisation and framing, treated above, are but two performance techniques that have become signature features of the theater of Fo and Rame.

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# FROM THE LADY IS TO BE DISPOSED OF TO AN OPEN COUPLE: FRANCA RAME AND DARIO FO'S THEATER PARTNERSHIP

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## Introduction

THE variety of comments generated by the Swedish Academy's decision to make Dario Fo the recipient of the 1997 Nobel Prize for Literature inspired me to come back to my Franca Rame scholarship, and my first article about her collaboration with Fo (1984). In 1984, I was an international graduate student from Italy who came to the US to study the presence of women in the textual production of modern drama. My horizon was just a bit wider than that of the teaching-oriented, gender-indifferent institutions where I had studied. My models of successful literary women were based on those that were part of a famous couple. They included Mary Shelley, Elizabeth Browning, Lillian Hellman, and Simone de Beauvoir. It was a model that, with its specific cultural variables, was prominent also where I came from, as attested by the female writers whose careers were launched by Alberto Moravia, including Elsa Morante and Dacia Maraini. I remember wondering who was going to be my "Dario" as I struggled with the material for my first article.

At the time, in American academic culture, the theoretical debate in the area of modern drama revolved around the status of individual performances and/or productions with respect to the dramatic text they actualized. It presumed a theater in which areas of competence were clearly defined, with writers writing, directors directing, and actors acting, in a system characterized by well-defined boundaries between areas of competence. It also presumed a theatrical culture in which dramatic texts were fully developed before the beginning of production. These principles accurately described the American theater culture that claimed the legacy of high European culture, but they certainly contrasted with those of the theater culture with which I was familiar. In the mid-century,

the community-based theater culture of Italian stand-up comedy and *varietà* was still alive enough to have called the attention of major Italian filmmakers.<sup>1</sup> It was characterized by loose boundaries between the areas of competence of directors, writers, and actors, with these three roles often conflated into one. Its performative spaces were street corners, restaurants, cafés, and community halls. They were sites of partly improvised textual production that happened *coram populo*, namely in a face-to-face commerce with the public in attendance. Its main feature was a participatory type of performativity, whose texts, when available, were testimonials of the collective experience therein implied. As a European child, I had the normative cultural awareness that, as Baudrillard would probably put it, existing and acting are coextensive (1994). And, as a participant in a subproletarian theater culture, I was not a stranger to the fact that, in more than one sense, performance is life. However, as a feminist-to-be, I was looking for a way to validate as culture the specificity of certain experiences that were part of women's lives.

As W.B. Worthen has recently noted, at the time the American debate was polarized between those who wanted to expand the field of theater and performance studies beyond its traditional boundaries, and those who insisted that performances discreetly serve literary drama (1998). The latter postulated that the dramatic text was the discipline's primary object of study, while the former challenged this assumption (Eliam 1980). Outside the academic walls, the performance art movement was developing, with its strong feminist impulse. Women like Laurie Anderson, Meredith Monk, Carolee Schneemann, Suzanne Lacy, and Judy Chicago were creating their own performative culture, opening up spaces for dramatizing women's lives (Roth 1983). The more traditional women who inhabited a man's shadow were considered traitors to the cause, with the admixture of envy and contempt that surrounded them. In feminist academic circles, the discussion was

<sup>1</sup>In their two landmarks of Neorealist cinema, *Bicycle Thief* and *Rome, Open City*, both de Sica and Rossellini represent this theater culture as a vital, if sometimes politically questionable, part of Italian life. They describe it as a community-based form of entertainment that sustains the natural talents of people who do not have a formal education, but are willing to try their luck in small artistic ventures rather than fully embrace middle-class values. Some of its ingredients are musical folklore, compassionate humor, and mildly risqué cabaret shows.

mired in the dichotomy theater vs. performance art (Case 1988). As a newcomer to the field of women's studies, I shared an investment in expanding the field with other feminist scholars of the time, but I was persuaded that women in supportive roles put more than their fair share of creative intelligence in the work done with their male companions. I felt it would be best to inscribe this energy in the feminist camp. Hence, I was not sure that a performance-studies approach would best apply to the work of Rame. Moreover, I was aware of the lesson of *commedia dell'arte*, a theater culture whose widely spread influence enabled the production of classics such as those by Shakespeare and Molière, but left no literary legacy of its own. My main preoccupation was not focusing on the subversive value of performative moments, but rather validating the texts born out of these moments as part of a cultural legacy to be passed on to future generations. Given the situation, I decided to focus on Rame's achievements as an artist independent of Fo, rather than on her input on what they did together.

As I see it now, their practice of theater subverts the dichotomy in which the American theoretical debate was mired because it uses performance as the site of literary production. Indeed, in their populist, subproletarian theater spaces, roughly outlined tropes are acted out, thus allowing the emotional energy of the public in attendance to animate a performer's creative intelligence and energize his or her desire to expand areas of the piece into more articulate, expressive drafts. The repartee developed in production is sometimes taped, and then transcribed, with further editing. These *post-factum* play scripts are then printed and often translated, which makes them accessible for production to theater companies world wide. Thus the very energy created by the simultaneous presence of audiences and performers in the theater space becomes literary.

As performance studies gradually ate away at the space for theater studies, in the late 1980s and early 1990s there eventually was no position from which to argue that historically, theater has functioned as a site of literary production. As the Oscar-winning film *Shakespeare in Love* has reminded us, this happened even in the times of the Bard, who did not have a script when what was to be *Romeo and Juliet* went into its first production. For Fo and Rame, who claim a lineage from the early-modern popular tradition of the *commedia dell'arte*, this still currently happens. Recently, thoughtful academic arguments propose new, productive alliances between performance and theater studies (Diamond; Taussig; Worthen).



These changes have prepared the space for my current argument, that Rame and Fo's theater is the performativity of their own collaborative literary production. Whether she works alone or with her husband, Rame's contribution is most effective in subverting the dichotomy theater vs. performance art. Indeed, busting academic dichotomies is the thrust of Rame and Fo's artistic production. They insist that literature is not the product of an isolated, masculine mind inspired by a feminine muse, but rather the result of the collaborative effort to bring a community's creative intelligence to life within the shared space of theater production (Fo 1977, 73–84). The dramatic text is then used to gather the creative energy thus inspired, based on an actor's memory, and/or taped record, of his or her performative elaborations (Rame 1975, v–xv).

Neither does this kind of theater practice suppress the erotic, creative, and intellectual energies generated within the performative space, nor does it sublimate these energies in aesthetic consumption. As they remain within the space of theater production, these energies enhance the sense of communal intimacy resulting from the experience of participating in the shows. When I first approached Fo and Rame, I, like the objects of my study, was imprisoned in a cultural model based on monogamy and monosexuality, a late-romantic ideal that celebrated the dual harmony of opposites given by heterosexuality. Then and now I was persuaded that Rame was an important artist who certainly gave more than she received in the exchange with Dario. As with the rest of us, her creative output was the result of a more or less fairly balanced system of intersubjective exchange of erotic, creative, and intellectual energies, in which Dario featured prominently for most of her life. The feminist rhetoric of which my voice was part was still captured in the myth of modernity, and its univocal, phallic subject. It emphasized women's aspirations to unified subjectivity rather than our search for alternative models based on interdependence and mutuality. All I could do in my article was emphasize what Rame had done on her own and how underrated she was in the partnership with her husband.

A few years later I learned that Dario and Franca had parted. Indeed, I was told that in a popular Italian TV show Franca declared that she was through with Dario, which surprised only those who still doubted her independent strength and talents. To me, her declaration seemed almost an inevitable result of her desire to really find her own centeredness, which was inspired by the popularity of

her feminist militant theater of the 1970s (Anderlini 1991, 23–24). Today, as I come back to this topic and part of my creative/scholarly life, I do know how to imagine different intersubjective models enabling narrative, artistic, and intellectual production. I no longer believe that male sexual energy is the enabling force of a woman's creative intelligence and production, nor do I believe that a woman's creative energy has no place outside a man's shadow. And, thanks to several decades of women's studies, I know many women who have created a reputation for themselves independently of men's support. My new intersubjective models are based on communities rather than couples, communities such as the ones that gather around environmentalist, feminist, bisexual, and holistic discursive practices. Therefore, I can take an integrated approach to the collaboration between Fo and Rame, one that, by emphasizing what keeps them together rather than what drives them apart, can do more justice to what Rame puts in their joint works.

This approach has the remarkable advantage of situating Rame's work as a performance artist within the wider horizon of the humanities, an area in which collaborative efforts deserve much wider acknowledgments. Indeed, responses to Fo's being declared a winner of the Nobel Prize have been very jarring, but the outrage of the scandalized and the excitement of the admirers point to the same direction: the absurdity of exclusively awarding the prize to a man who claims he could not have deserved it without the contributions of his collaborator and wife of 45 years, namely actress, activist, editor, co-writer, archivist, and *filie d'art* Franca Rame. As a way to assess the discursive gap in our cultural understanding of what it takes, in the humanities, to generate lifetime projects worthy of consideration for major awards, this paper will survey these reactions. It will then focus on three main areas of Rame's contributions to the life of the company she and her husband founded in 1959, and on the interdependence of its two main performers and writers. The paper will close with a current perspective on Rame's educational work on consensual, pleasurable, and nonviolent forms of sexual and erotic expression in our time.

*Enthusiasm or Scandal? Acknowledging Interdependence and Collaboration in the Arts and Humanities*

The award of the Nobel Prize to Fo has generated an interesting mixture of enthusiasm, indifference, and scandal, with very little



attention to Rame's specific contributions from any position. Among the enthusiasts are those who have an investment in seeing a transcultural sense of humor rewarded. One is playwright Tony Kushner, who could scarcely believe that the sentence "Dario Fo won the Nobel Prize" was the actual beginning of his article for *The Nation*, and not a line from an absurdist farce by Fo (1997). He was of course overjoyed that a playwright was rewarded. Likewise, Comparative Literature scholar Armando Gnisci was excited that the jury took into account Fo's global rather than national reputation (Gnisci). Finally, a tongue-in-cheek accolade came from Italian stand-up comedian Stefano Benni, who gave Fo a "pretend prize," for the "terrible trial" of keeping his cool while becoming a Nobel laureate (Benni 1–2). Benni's alternative award kindly included Rame.

The Italian literary establishment reacted with a mixture of condescension and sanctimony and hardly even mentioned Rame. The major complaint was that a literary prize had been given to an actor, which ignored the real scandal that the prize had not been jointly assigned to the performing couple. Predictably, the dean of Italian literary critics, Carlo Bo, lamented the collapse of traditional values. He positioned Italian-literature Nobel laureates in a downward spiral, from the pure poet Eugenio Montale (in 1963), to the contaminated "actor" Dario Fo, a profession that stuffy Italian literati feel entitled to be condescending about (Trotta). Of course, Bo forgot to mention that in 1934 Pirandello, another Italian playwright and sometime director, was also awarded the Prize.

A moderately conservative commentator was especially advised of Italy's current efforts to establish a reputation as a respectable, well-organized, and modern country, and wary of the persistence of negative Italian cultural stereotypes. He remarked that the decision to reward an Italian comic actor officially certifies that "Italy is a country of clowns," with its only valuable contributions to world culture being jesters and banter (Veneziani). Ironically, a similar kind of male-centered comedic style based on the body's physical energy is what earned Benigni his recent success as first foreign Oscar-winning best actor. The Pope, preoccupied with his own performances as religious leader, has often failed to appreciate Fo's P.R. for the Scriptures, which, in the playwright's mildly blasphemous parodies of Medieval genres, are reinterpreted as the secular wisdom of the working classes. This time he reconfirmed his bias, by ranting against the Academy that "giving the prize to someone

who is also the author of questionable works is beyond all imagination ("Dario Fo: A Cross between Bertolt Brecht and Lenny Bruce").

And finally, Fo, the only one logically entitled to being scandalized, declared himself "flabbergasted" as he learned about the award on the freeway, when a nearby driver approached him with a sign ("Nobel a Dario Fo: 'sono esterrefatto'"). When he showed up before the King of Sweden to accept the Prize, Fo proclaimed that he was receiving it also on behalf of Rame (ANSA). He thus pointed to the absence of acknowledged team work in the humanities, and became the first male humanist to share, at least symbolically, his Prize with a major female collaborator.<sup>2</sup>

The American mainstream press gave basic information on Fo's theater and politics, and mentioned the generic input of his wife.<sup>3</sup> But in general, on this side of the Atlantic the award met with a certain degree of indifference, or perhaps slow-motion reaction, in both theater and Italian studies communities. For example, ATHE, the professional association for theater in higher education, did not have a Fo panel in which to host my paper on Rame. The MLA accepted the proposed Fo special panel, which was scheduled at the tail end of the conference, when participants are more preoccupied with packing than with scrutinizing the decisions of the Swedish Academy. The plenary-session type of room the panel was assigned might indicate that planners presumed a more cosmopolitan public than MLA-ans turned out to be. Italian American communities manifested a much lower degree of excitement for Fo's Nobel Prize than they did for the success of Benigni's film in the Hollywood awards. This might suggest that, regardless of how important its influence might be on other cultural and/or artistic discourses, the idea of a people's theater really belongs to the past.

<sup>2</sup>A visit to the Nobel Prize Website shows the disparity in acknowledgment of team work between the sciences and the humanities. Between 1957 and 1997, at least 22 Nobel Prizes for Physics were jointly awarded to two or more members of a team. As early as 1903 and 1911, a famous couple was awarded the Prize, Pierre and Marie Curie. To this day, however, no Nobel Prizes have been awarded to literary teams or couples. <http://nobelprizes.com>

<sup>3</sup>I refer in particular to the following sources: "Dario Fo: A Cross Between Bertolt Brecht and Lenny Bruce", "Nobel Watch 1997. Prize Goes to 'Subversive' Playwright", and "Italian Wins Nobel," by Jim Heintz.

More to the point, the wide range of responses to the award measures the ideological rift between today's literary and theater/performance culture, a rift that has grown wider on account of the gradual impoverishment of higher education in the humanities, and concurrent rise of media power. This gap calls for more interdisciplinary work in literature, theater, cultural, and women's studies. In my early interview with Rame, I focused on a woman's ownership of her work when in a team with a famous husband (1991).<sup>4</sup> In a more recent work, I focus on the creative endeavors of women with middle-class status in a modern, industrially developed society, who are apt to creating systems of sustained interdependence with other subjects, and thus are ultimately more resilient and adaptable than their male counterparts (1998, 52–69). One such subject is Franca Rame, whose resilience and adaptability to circumstances have produced a highly successful female-centered theater practice over a period of four decades and changing historical circumstances.

These qualities are legible even by simply assessing her contributions as an actress. In the company's "political pieces" in the 1960s she played dramatic and/or allegorical female characters which reminded the public of women's situations by using tropes from popular culture such as the Virgin at the Cross, and the mother of Italian partisans. In the militant 1970s, she played the performance-style feminist monologues of *Female Parts*, which presented a collection of issues debated in the women's movement of the time (Fo and Rame). In the recessive 1980s Rame starred as the protagonist in *An Open Couple*, the company's comic drama about the crisis of monogamy and monosexuality (Fo and Rame). And finally, in the sex-phobic 1990s, Rame came up with *Sexo? Grazie, tanto per gradire* (Dario Fo, Franca Rame and Jacopo Fo). This monologue, whose title roughly means "sex? Thanks, just a taste," is organized as an educational parable about the healthy practice of consensual, nonviolent erotic pleasures and sexualities.

#### *The Partnership: Keeping a Poised Exchange of Energies*

The first area of collaboration between the two artists is what Dario calls Franca's "dowry." It is the knowledge about a people's

theater and culture that Franca brought to the company as a young actress (Allegri 95). When she married Dario in 1954, Franca was a *filie d'art* and expert actress. She had a special bridal gift of experiences, tropes, and know-how rooted in the tradition of popular art she inherited from the itinerant company of her ancestors. The group went back to the days of the *commedia dell'arte* and eventually disbanded as a result of the rise of cinema and television entertainment. Franca fell short of being literally "born on the stage," as her mother, a female lead in the company, resumed her role eight days after she gave birth to her child, and, as a way of baby-sitting her, kept her in her arms throughout the show. As she moved out of her family, Franca became an accomplished actress who successfully played in the urbane, light comedies of the time. When she met Dario, she was quite glamorous in the Feydeau burlesque *Don't Walk Around all Naked*. But most importantly she had been an integral part of a holistic system of theater production based on collaborative improvisations in which everyone's role was acknowledged, and on a gutsy, sanguine sense of humor designed to entertain peasants and blue-collar workers in the least elegant sections of town. She was not prepared to allow state censorship or commercial demands to take away the freedom and creative intelligence she had acquired (Anderlini 1991, 25–27).

In the first years of their marriage, Franca encouraged Dario to found an independent theater company with her. Her motivation was her desire to do something more spiritually and intellectually satisfying than being the beauty onstage in the commercial theaters of the time (Anderlini 1991, 26–28). She partly obtained what she wanted. In the first ten years in a company with its own bourgeois comedies and satires, she usually got parts that were written expressly for her. This valorized her talents and personality, and gave her a chance to play a wide range of emotions. It was mischief mixed with irony in the female leads of *commedie brillanti* like *Archangels Don't Play Pinball* (1959), *She Had Two Guns, with Black and White Eyes* (1960), and *He Who Steals a Foot is Lucky in Love* (1961). It was earthy humor for *Ia Marcolfa*, and tragic compassion for "Mamma Togni" in *People's War in Chile* (1971).<sup>5</sup> At this early stage of the company's development, Rame had a role in the creation of the company's texts, since she participated in the

<sup>4</sup>Other interviews on related subjects are those with playwrights Dacia Maraini, Natalia Ginzburg, and Ntozake Shange.

<sup>5</sup>The texts of these plays were published as plays by Dario Fo. See *Le commedie di Dario Fo*, vols 1, 6, 7.

process of revising scripts in response to audience reactions, as they were put into their initial production stage. Yet, up to this time, she might have seen this role as one limited to that of the female lead who slightly modifies her part to suit her personality.

Later, the company abandoned the bourgeois theater of the time to become the harbinger of a new political consciousness apt to analyze the politics of the 1968 revolution and its aftermath. Thanks to its position in the Atlantic Alliance, Italy was getting access to the privileged status of a "first-world" country whose high technology and infrastructure would eventually attract lower-status immigrants from "third-world" countries. Italians resented the cultural influence of American capitalism but were afraid that a political move towards socialism could cause a return of fascism. The political farces of this period analyzed various aspects of these specific historical circumstances. Their focus on ideological issues positioned female characters in the background. Often they did not have a human dimension of their own, but were either symbols or allegories. For example, the female journalist in *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* (1970) was a "straight man" figure that allowed the comic lead to get the laughs. In *The Lady is to Be Disposed of* (1967), the agonizing old woman who stands for the obsolete political ideology of the Christian Democratic Party is a symbolic figure that allegorizes a political situation (Fo 1988). In other cases, the female lead was part of a group of naturalistic female characters who rebel against injustice, such as the homemaker in *Can't Pay Won't Pay* (1974), who fights inflation by participating in the organized shoplifting called *spesa proletaria*.

The political plays were organized as farces with a lot of stage business and a male comic lead impersonated by Fo. At this time, Fo started to tap into the tradition of stand-up comedy, and especially its Italian models like Totò and Petrolini (Fo 1991, p. 24, 88, and 150). Comic routines were organized based on a two-man system made of a *comico*, the comic leader who gets the audience to laugh, and a *spalla*, the "straight man" who feeds the comic leader the cue that leads up to the punchline. Fo did not have a male *spalla*, and the tradition of Italian misogyny constructed women as people to be laughed at. Hence, many of the pieces in this period got organized as comic farces in which Fo plays the *comico* and Rame the *spalla*. His character is the center of comic energy, hers a mere vehicle of it. A good example is the well-known *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* (1970), a satire of the collusion between

Italian police and fascists in failing to properly assess responsibilities for a major terrorist massacre, the *Strage di Piazza Fontana*, in 1969.

In the play, the police are accused of arresting two innocent anarchists, one of whom is then conveniently killed in a pretend suicide to avoid further investigations. The anarchist alluded to in the title is Pinelli, who died a death similar to the one therein described. His companion, Valpreda spent about ten years in prison, awaiting for his trial in a system that lacks provisions for bail. Eventually, the slow-paced judicial machine found two fascist paramilitary terrorists to be the culprits. Rame's character is a journalist who investigates the "suicide" at the police headquarters. Fo's character is a "madman" successfully disguised as police chief. He plays devil's advocate, and, confronted by the journalist, he readily admits to the connivance between police operations and state ideological apparatus. He even satirizes the global political system which relies on it, including the Cold War Order and American capitalism. The trope casts Fo's character as the comic leader, Rame's as the *spalla*. Thus, when the journalist and the madman discuss the relationship between free speech and consumer capitalism, Rame brings up the unresolved murders of many leaders in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. This feeds Fo the grisly punchline, that "free speech" amounts to "burps free of charge" when it comes in combination with American capitalism (Vol. 7, 72). The line goes over very well with Italian left-wing viewers that relish spoofs of American culture. Rame's role is essential in the comic routine, but it is not recognized and uses a narrow range of her talents.

In another play of the period, *La signora è da buttare* (1969), misogyny is connoted in the very title, *The Lady is to Be Disposed of*. The play is about the Cold-War Italian political party that functioned as the major ally of Washington, the *Democrazia Cristiana*. It is symbolized by a *vecchia signora*, an old lady, who is dying and is about to be preyed upon by its rapacious ally, a vulture made in the guise of the American eagle. The play's political satire pivots on the symbolic construction of the party that sold out to American neocolonial power as feminine cowardice. The party that represents socialist ideals and national autonomy is constructed as masculine courage. The allegory is fully supported by the grammatical gender of their names and acronyms: *la D.C.*, or *la Democrazia Cristiana* takes a feminine article, *il P.C.I.*, or *il Partito Comunista Italiano*,

takes a masculine article. The mannequin representing the political party under accusation lies in her deathbed for most of the show. She moans breathing her last whenever another character looks inside the curtains that surround her (Vol. 7, 85–180). Puffed up with pillows and other costume stuffing, Rame plays a rather silly and laughable “fat woman,” who feeds cues to Fo’s punchlines.

When I interviewed her in 1984, Rame claimed to be known as the “tyrant” of the company, because she would insist that a play be modified until she felt it was just quite right (Anelini 1984, 34). I would not be surprised to learn that she acquired this fame during this intermediate period in the company’s development. In these rather overwrought ideological pieces, she probably acted as a censor who told her husband that something was redundant, or as a doctor who found out what was wrong with a theatrical situation that did not yet work out. Her situation was similar to that of many women in the culture of the Italian left, who shared a political ideology with their male partners, but were starved for their own centeredness and a sense of belonging.

The subsequent shift in the company’s orientation enabled Rame to step out of Fo’s shadow, and get a more accurate sense of her talent. The 1970s were intense years of activism for the women’s movement. Women already had equal opportunity in education and access to professional careers, but needed equality in family law and reproductive options to actualize them. The women’s movement successfully established fair divorce and abortion laws. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that Rame felt the need for a show of her own. Rame had personal and political battles to fight, both as a partner in the company and as Fo’s wife. Naturally, she wanted roles of a different kind, yet she did not have confidence in herself as a writer. The situation determined a major change in the direction of the company’s development.

In some ways playing together was limiting to both artists, for the available interactions were contained within the minimum common denominator of their shared talents. Since Rame tends to be succinct and dramatic, while Fo tends to be wordy and funny, this common ground was actually very narrow. This new phase in their collaborative partnership was inaugurated when Rame gave Fo his “assignments.” She wanted to stage some feminist monologues, and gave him the tropes for them: a homemaker locked up in her house by a jealous husband, an exploited female factory worker and mother, a rebellious female child who turns into a sexual commod-

ity for her male partners, and so on. These performance pieces focus on central issues in the Italian and European feminist debate of the time, such as women’s sexuality, birth control and abortion, the double shift and the double moral standard, and shared parenting. The texts went through various printings because they changed and developed as they were acted. In this case, Fo was not even present and female spectators formed the majority of the public. Hence, Rame not only came out of the masculine shadow, but she even used the reputation she and Fo had established together to get that creative energy to flow into a woman-centered show. Eventually, the monologues were arranged in a sequence called *Tutta casa letto e chiesa*, which also included the more tragic monologues *Medea* and *I, Ulrike*, *Cry*, on infanticide and terrorism, respectively (Rame and Fo). With the *comico/spalla* routine behind, Franca finally had the stage to herself and could use all of her talents. She later came to see these shows as her first affirmation as an actress. But even though she did not yet see herself as a co-author, in these “assignments,” Rame was the one who gave the trope to Fo and developed his first drafts. At this time, therefore, her editorial, writerly, and authorial efforts became totally intertwined with Fo’s, and with their shared commitment to transform the space of performance into a site of collaborative, improvised literary production.

In the meanwhile Fo was also creating his own theatrical performances with his character of the poet *giullare* which started in *Mistero buffo* and then evolved into several other pieces (1977). He learned that he could make people laugh without the *spalla*, and he actually developed a more elegant performative style, which relied on mime rather than props. His performer/character even created his own language, a mixture of old and new Northern Italian dialects called *Grammelot* (Fo 1991, 42–65, 74–80).<sup>6</sup> During this period the two partners experienced personal problems and eventually, always by Rame’s initiative, drifted apart. Rame did not claim ownership of the one-woman-show texts she elaborated based on

<sup>6</sup>Fo explains the nature of Grammelot in the first chapter of his actor’s manual, *Tricks of the Trade*, 1991. There he claims that this lingua franca was used by the Italian *dell’Arte* comedians when they became exiles due to the Counterreformation. As they went on to act in foreign countries, they had to invent a universal language based on onomatopoeia and mime, so that audiences could understand their shows. Fo’s Grammelot is a recuperation of this early modern language, in accordance with his parodies of medieval genres and general effort to revisit premodern times.

her husband's first drafts. Nonetheless the authorship was collaborative, and, when he had them published Fo acknowledged this by having Rame's name appear on the jacket next to his. Rame continued to use the technique of developing and organizing texts in performance, based on improvisations inspired by specific audiences and/or circumstances. Therefore, even though materially she did not write, she actually composed important parts of the texts as a result of these exchanges of creative energy with the predominantly female public that went to *Tutta casa*.

As late as the mid-1980s, Rame would still not see herself as a writer, and I remember that when I interviewed her on this topic she was rather embarrassed. She looked like a young bride afraid to upset her husband. Yet it was precisely this personal tension which inspired an excellent character for Franca, the female lead in *Coppia aperta*, a satire about machismo in open marriages which denotes a more reflective time in Italian *femminismo* (Fo and Rame 3-34). At this time, the possibility of becoming "like men," of imitating their culture, was being evaluated in Italian feminist discourse. It was eventually turned down in favor of what Luce Irigaray called "assuming the feminine role deliberately" (Irigaray 76). This act of choosing the feminine from a feminist viewpoint valorized women's interdependent and collaborative traditions and cultural practices. This feminine feminism sustains female centrality and uses it as a basis to examine the positive aspects of women's culture. Accordingly, in *An Open Couple*, Fo does not appear and Rame gets to play opposite another actor. She is an ex-homemaker who now lives on her own and has liberated herself through independence and activism. Her character is the central source of comic energy, causing the audience to laugh at her husband, at his sexual bravados, and at her farcical descriptions of the men with whom she had semi-serious romances. The husband character is the *spalla* who feeds comic energy to her centrality.

For example, in the first part of the play the two ex-spouses present to the public the events that lead to their separation. Rame explains that as a result of the sexual liberation movement in the 1970s, her husband declared heterosexual monogamy to be a patriarchal, oppressive institution, and started to behave modestly as she had been raised to, had strong emotional feelings for younger men, but was too shy to act on them. Since the open-couple system had been agreed upon by both parties, he gave to a listening Franca

the details of all his affairs. Birth-control systems were new in the culture and somewhat intimidating to some of his young female lovers. Faced with one of his partner's resistance to them, he became so arrogant as to ask Franca to take her to a gynecologist to fit her with an Intra Uterine Device, commonly called IUD. As the two performers evoke the scene, the husband patiently explains to Franca that she is such a dependable person that he thinks "with [her] [his younger lover would] go for sure" (83) ("con te ci viene di sicuro" 15).<sup>7</sup> This allows Franca to further elaborate on the imagined doctor's office scene, in which she would candidly say: "Doctor, could you please fit my husband's girlfriend with an IUD," and hope that the physician would understand the open couple's queer sense of humor (83) ("Dottore, metta la spirale alla fidanzata di mio marito" 15). The crescendo leads up to the punchline, which floors the husband's machismo as Franca explodes: "I'm going to fit you with a coil, in your foreskin! So when you pee you look like a sprinkler" (83) ("La infilo a te la spirale nel prepuzio! Così fai la pipì a grandola! 16).

She then proceeds in the same vein, explaining how her husband eventually became a sexual maniac always in pursuit of some female prey. She claims he was infected with an alleged virus, the "horricoccus" (84) ("l'arrazzococco," 16), as a result of which he became fixated with collecting, not "mushrooms," but "mushrooms." Embarrassed, she proceeds to specify that these collectibles are commonly called "mouses . . . pussies" (84) ("funghette . . . passierine . . . topole," 16). Then she mentions the kinds of visions his activities gave her, as she fantasized of all these used and abandoned sexual objects as fellow women:

"I swear, it is now an obsession with me . . . I see them everywhere . . . instead of the soap bar . . . Oh, a little pussy, good morning! I put on a shoe . . . Oh goodness, what's there? A mouse!!! No, a pussy! I see these pussies spread all over the place . . . used and abandoned . . . eyeing sadly from ashtrays full of cigarette butts . . . How do I keep them alive! I water them. The

<sup>7</sup>Quotations from the original refer to the play *Una coppia aperta, quasi spulpanata* published in Vol. 9 of Fo's *Commedie* (1991). The translated quotations are from my adaptation of the play, parts of which have been published in *VIA*, for a special issue on Italian American theater (1998, 78-95). *Coppia aperta* was first translated by Stuart Hood for *Theater* 27. (1984): 19-31.

special, invigorating liquid, is provided by the sperm bank, of which my husband is a honorary member." (84)

["Giuro, ormai per me è diventata un'ossessione . . . me le vedo dappertutto . . . al posto della saponetta nel bagno . . . oh . . . una topina . . . buongiorno! Mi infilo una scarpa . . . oddio che c'è? Un topoi! No, una topa! Me le vedo 'ste topine sparse per la casa . . . usate e poi abbandonate . . . che occhieggiano tristemente dai portaceneti pieni di cicche . . . Come le tengo vive? Le annaffio. Il liquido apposito, vivificante, me lo passa la banca del seme, di cui mio marito è socio onorario." (16-17)]

Having thus ridiculed her husband's machismo, she proceeds to confess her fantasy of female genital symbols, which displays, in a quasi homoerotic manner, Rame's sense of female solidarity against the culture of Italian machismo exemplified by her husband's behavior.

The story continues as Rame, now an independent, sophisticated, and cultured woman, has taken a younger male lover, who represents the new generation educated by the women's movement. She casually discusses her new lover with her visiting ex-husband. He sounds rather fresh, smart, and desirable and Franca asks him to please leave before he arrives. The husband believes she is afraid the lover will not live up to her description—that he won't really look like competition to him. She tactfully explains that, on the contrary, she is ashamed to have her lover see the kind of macho guy she used to go out with. The husband, who is drinking some sparkling water to look dignified, cannot swallow properly and begins to hiccup. As he spits the water up, she goes for the punchline: "There's no need to sprinkle in my house. I don't do the ironing any more!" ("Non mi inumidire la casa. Non stiro più." 25). Eventually, she rejects the sexual advances of her ex-, who is now turned on by her again since another likes her. The play concludes with the husband pretending to commit suicide as the lover arrives.

In positioning Rame as the center of the play's comic energy, this production inaugurated a phase in her development dominated by the search for a non-institutionalized female-centered performative space. *An Open Couple* was followed by a number of short plays on women's sexual expression. In the romantic farce *Rientro a casa* (coming home) it is a search for genuine emotion and spontaneous, compassionate sexual and erotic expression (Fo and Rame 1984, 23-28). The comic monologues *The Freak Mama* and *A*

*Woman Alone* focus on married women who discover sexual pleasure with younger male lovers. In this phase Rame's work was parallel to Dario's and to the work that the two did together sometimes with the input and/or participation of their son Jacopo.

Rame has continued to develop the theme of sexuality in her recent production *Sesso? Grazie, tanto per gratulare* ("sex? Thanks, just a taste," also translated as *Sex: Don't Mind if I do*). The text is coauthored by Franca and Dario with their son Jacopo, author of the book from which the play is taken *Io zen e l'arte di scopare*. The play is organized as a mock course in sexuality in which a wiser woman, Franca imparts the rudiments of a positive sexual education to younger women and men. Her "love lessons" are designed to facilitate the enjoyment of consensual and nonviolent erotic pleasures that benefit the spirit and create peace and harmony in the social environment. They include chapters on male genitals, menstruation, virginity, male impotence, and the clitoris. The course is introduced by a parody of Adam and Eve's first sexual intercourse in the Garden of Eden, and ends with a lesson of advice to male and female sexual players. The sequence is based on the findings of the Hire Reports, which emphasized women's autonomous eros and the independence of clitoral orgasm. In their approach to these delicate anatomical and personal matters, these lessons are a good example of a positive feminist compromise in the debate over the three related issues of pornography, free speech, and violence. They demonstrate that even in an age characterized by rampant fears of sexual contamination, free speech can be used to educate people to the enjoyment of healthy, nonviolent, and highly erotic sexuality. They also suggest productive ways of spending the energy currently consumed in divisive academic arguments within the feminist debate in America. These lessons of love are very simple, non-offensive, and funny. Even though they focus on two-gender couples, any sexual player can learn something useful from them. As harbingers of a new positive movement that values embodiment, eroticism, and sexuality, they anticipate the kind of education that makes these areas of human experience healing and enjoyable for everyone.

The third role Rame plays in the Fo-Rame company is that of activist and archivist. Like a good manager, she draws raw materials for the company's theater practice from current issues and cultural dynamics. As she gives these materials back to the public by making the company's texts and records available to interested parties, she



directs the dissemination of knowledge about the company's work, or, as Derrida would put it, she shapes this knowledge by controlling its repertoire (1998). As a scholar in Italian studies, I have often been pleasantly surprised by the effectiveness with which the company provided materials for my work, especially considering the general disorganization in the country. When I interviewed her, Rame claimed that she was the archivist in the company (Anderlini 1991, 28). She provided scripts and clippings free of charge, and invited me to get back in touch with her for further materials. Her agents have sent me scripts and clippings free of charge up to this time. Since Fo and Rame's plays are widely staged in many languages by companies around the world, Franca's role as archivist is especially important. As an archivist, Franca seems especially invested in having their texts survive their time. Unlike the *commedia dell'arte* type of scenarios used by her parents, she clearly wants these plays to have a life of their own, and acquire, when all is said and done, a well-deserved literary status.

### Conclusion

Often accompanied by unsustainable technological developments, performativity is a pervasive feature in post-modern, media-oriented cultures. This situation produces an even stronger need for participatory educational spaces in the humanities designed to generate positive communication and harmony. In today's media-dominated society, literary culture feels defensive due to the erosion of its status. Even though theater culture has been associated with license, promiscuity, and scandal, by its own tradition, physical organization, and structure, it is in a key position to mediate the educational conflict between media and conventional narratives.

The intriguing work produced by the theater partnership of Franca Rame and Dario Fo facilitates such mediation. In their four decades as a collaborative performing couple, Rame and Fo have provided successful models of educational spaces for the entertainment of the masses where the public's creative intelligence and participation are rewarded. With their range of modes, themes, and styles, they have created a holistic system of literary and theatrical production that successfully challenges constructed bipolarisms such as the one between theater and literary cultures. In short, they have demonstrated that even in today's performative, or, as Gianni

Vattimo would put it, "transparent" society, theater, and, as a consequence, drama, is a collaborative art (Vattimo 1–20).

In a modern feminist perspective it was important to focus on Rame's work independent of Dario. But postmodern discursive spaces suggest a focus on the collaboration between the two performers. Their teamwork is the very reason Fo's work merited the Nobel Prize, and therefore points to the necessity of a literary culture more aware of performative art forms that are by necessity collaborative. Rame and Fo's creative process involves managers, administrators, stagehands and actors within the company, as well as viewers of the initial productions whose responses help to reorganize, develop, and polish the rough drafts of the company's new plays. The energies contributed by each player in the partnership are integrated into a larger force which is carried forth into the end result. This happens even as postmodern literary culture still relies on a system of copyrights based on individual ownership and property values.

Naturally, some will argue that these collaborations happen in all literary genres. Yet the performing arts have the power to amplify them, thus begging the question of how they can be acknowledged and critically examined. Many collaborators are more or less replaceable, but the contribution of Franca Rame is one that Fo, by his own admission, could not do without (ANSA).<sup>8</sup> The three areas of Rame's contributions to her partnership with Fo facilitated the development of the company and the growth of its international reputation in a major way. Her contributions in the areas of acting, writing, and archiving demonstrate that Fo had good reasons to express his desire that she too be rewarded.

I believe that for both Rame and Fo their partnership is a space of growth through contrast whose stages of development are con-

<sup>8</sup>The Italian bulletin from ANSA describes Fo's behavior at the Awards Ceremony in great detail. He thanked the Academy for the award, and claimed to accept it for both him and Franca. Then he proceeded to introduce his absent wife by way of showing a picture of her. As he explained, "We have played all over the world in occupied factories, prisons, and churches, even consecrated ones. We have suffered threats, insults, trials, and violence, especially Franca. Yet we have endured, she has most of all." "Abbiamo recitato in tutto il mondo, nelle fabbriche occupate, nelle prigioni, nelle chiese, perfino quelle consacrate. Abbiamo subito anche minacce, insulti, processi e violenza, in particolare Franca. Ma abbiamo resistito. Soprattutto lei ha resistito" (ANSA 5; my translation).



nected like Vico's historical cycles (Vico 397–418). As in the philosophy of history that governs their theater, the past is a mirror of the present that helps us understand where we are in the new cycle. Cultural and spiritual forces run their course and then return in a different guise. It is by interpreting these processes that human beings understand our mutual interdependence and sense of irony. So it was by transforming their partnership according to changing cultural circumstances that Rame and Fo kept it productive and vital.

Rame's initial focus on the sex/gender system of production and reproduction, and on women's position in modern culture, has recently evolved in wider concerns with eroticism, violence, and healing energies in postmodern, global societies. Fo's initial interest for ethical responsibilities and ideological conflicts within male working-class culture in modern consumer society has evolved into a quest for the epistemological sources of a premodern culture, to be found in popular medieval genres. Even in the period during which they had their own separate shows, both Rame and Fo contributed to each other's work in spite of their separate personal lives. As they became more independent, they opened up their complementary talents and perfected their styles. His is marked by long-winded narratives whose emotional tones include the grotesque, satire, banter, license, and blasphemy. Hers is tersely dramatic, with high emotional moments interspersed with sarcasm. Eventually they got back together on a different basis, probably realizing that their partnership was equally empowering to both artists.

Over the years the company's texts benefited from the holistic approach to theater production made possible by Rame and Fo's partnership, even as their stages of development are marked by varying balances of female and male energy. They have brought their brand of community-based performance to a variety of public spaces, including conventional theaters, television, videos, factories, stadiums, cultural circles, and piazzas. They have also made their works available for production in translation to other performers world-wide. The absurdity of having Fo be the sole recipient of the Prize demonstrates the need for more acknowledgment of collaborative efforts in the humanities. As Rame's case demonstrates, it is mostly women who lose when these partnerships go unrecognized. Hence, the need for more interdisciplinary work in theater, literature, cultural, and women's studies.

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# FRANCA RAME'S NOSE, OR WHAT IF THEY HAD NEVER MET?

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How profoundly, Pascal famously wondered in his *Pensées*, would the course of history have been altered had Cleopatra's nose been a little longer? What if Mark Antony had been less enraptured of the beauty of the Egyptian queen and had pursued with greater vigor and determination the Civil War against Julius Caesar? This sort of question enrages stern historians. Facts alone matter, they intone, speculation on what 'might have been' is for duffers and dilettantes, history cannot be fashioned from a series of 'what ifs.' And of course they are right, but dilettantes outnumber professionals and the temptation for those who are not historians by profession to indulge in party games of 'whatiffery' is overwhelming. What if George Washington had been defeated by the forces of King George III? What if the Russian winter had been less severe when the Napoleonic troops were invading? What if Lenin had been delayed at the Finland station?

This game might be more permissible and rewarding in the minor matters of life than in the great episodes of world history. What if Dante Alighieri had never set eyes on Bice Portinari? What if Christopher Marlowe had not been murdered in a tavern in London? What if Julius II had released Michelangelo from his contract to complete the papal tomb? What if Gauguin had remained in Paris? The list is endless, but one question is particularly intriguing for our purposes. In Pascalian terms, what if Franca Rame's nose had been longer? What if Dario Fo and Franca Rame had never met, or if, having met, had disliked each other? Just supposing Dario had not been enraptured of Franca or she of him, what would have become of them?

It could have happened. There is no shortage of photographs of Franca as a young *ingénue* actress, all plunging necklines and pouting lips, lounging seductively before the camera or the cameraman. The 1992 work, *Parlano di donne*, containing late plays on the condition of women and contemporary social problems, also

carries pictures of Franca when making her debut on the Milanese stage. One shows her in a pose of languid sensuality, back to the stage curtains, profile perfectly positioned for the lens; another photograph from 1953, when she was appearing in a review, *I femministi*, depicts her encased in jewelry, huge ribbon arching over perfectly coiffured hair, shoulders bare, cleavage prominent, dress long and flowing. Franca was already the darling of camera operatives, who were not yet called *paparazzi*, and appeared frequently on the cover of magazines of the period. She was constantly surrounded by suitors, while at that stage Dario Fo was an unknown, not without genius, who had recently abandoned architecture studies and was making very tentative steps on the stage. When the two appeared together in a show, *Seven days in Milan* (1951), it was clear to fellow actors that young Dario was captivated by the glittering star who was Franca but, not surprisingly, was afraid to make the first move. She relishes telling how it was she who took the initiative, seized hold of the awkward, gangly youth, pressed him against the wall, held him in an embrace and kissed him with, she says, some warmth and intensity.

That much is history, or destiny, and from then their private and public biographies are intertwined. Franca Rame became the lead actress, the administrator, the dramaturg, the scribe, the favored critic and eventually co-author of plays written by Dario Fo, but it is at this point that unhistorical speculation can take over. What if Franca had been more coy that day, and Dario had remained immobilized by shyness? Serena Anderlini, in one of the shrewdest pieces devoted to Franca herself, noted and regretted "an imbalance in reviewing the criticism of their theater."

A major problem in writing about Franca Rame is drawing a line between what belongs to her and what belongs to her husband. It is at the same time a practical and an ideological problem, as the relationship between these two people is a complex one that affects their personal and creative life entirely. (Anderlini)

That dogmatic 'entirely' is fully justified, but our imaginary 'what if' exercise allows us to draw the line Anderlini was seeking. There are no limits. One could speculate on the impact on Dario, who loses interest in his works once they are performed, leaving the task of collecting, collating and publishing them to his wife. Without her presence, his theater might never have attained its worldwide

popularity, and it might even be that Fo would have become a splendid eccentric known and loved in a limited circuit in Italy, but not beyond it. But let us concentrate on Franca Rame. She has often chafed against the restrictions imposed on women, and complained specifically of the complexities and inconveniences of life with Dario. More than once she has gone on record as saying that if she had her life to live again, she would seek some form of relationship with Dario, but not marriage. Whimsically, she once wrote of the toils of living with a monument such as Dario Fo, and of having to live bent-double, in the pose of the pediment. She complains of having lost her personality, and is known to keep a large file marked — Humiliations. When, for instance, the American authorities during the Reagan administration refused her and Dario a visa to visit the USA, one of the reasons the American consul in Milan gave for this decision was that Dario had been involved with *Soccorso Rosso* (Red Aid), a body which existed to offer assistance to convicted terrorists and their families. The consul's knowledge of the organization was accurate, but Dario had little to do with it; the initiative was entirely Franca's. She was enraged at being robbed of the credit, or contumely, for founding the organization.

It is better to leave the personal and even, as far as is feasible, political dimension aside, and restrict our 'what if' to Franca's stage career. What if she had made her way in theater on her own, as she could have done? She was a *figlia d'arte* (born to the stage) in a way Dario never was. The Rame family had a pedigree as a company of strolling players stretching back several centuries, and later when touring with the co-operatives she and Dario founded in the aftermath of their break with commercial theater in 1968, she was more readily recognized in many communities in Lombardy than Dario. So what if, instead of restricting her appearances to comedies and farces written by Fo, she had been a jobbing actor of a more conventional kind? Franca has undoubtedly shown her mettle in comic roles which have varied in type as Fo's theater and style of writing has developed — from the secondary, sexy, largely ornamental parts in the early one-act farces, such parts as that of the madam in a brothel in *Housepainters Have No Memory*, of wife and mistress in *The Virtuous Burglar*, of zany business-woman in *Bodies in the Past and Women in the Nude* (all 1958), to the fuller comic creations of the so-called 'bourgeois period,' such as Queen Isabella in *Isabella*, *Three Carrels and a Con-Man* (1963), or the grave-digger Enca in *Seventh: Steal a Little Less* (1964), culminating

in the committed, rounded, one-woman roles of the feminist plays of the seventies.

While Dario's style of acting has been fully dissected in hagiographic or critical terms, Franca's performing talents have never been subjected to comparable examination. In many ways, her skills stand in contrast to his. On-stage, Dario Fo does not submerge himself into a part. There is about his acting a carnivalesque excess, an unbounded joy in prankishness, a willingness to revel in histrionics practiced by a Puck who is very pleased with the effects he sees himself produce as he peeps out momentarily from behind a rude mask. Fo is marked by exuberance, he seems to totter endlessly on the very brink of an excess inseparable from his own innately, superabundant talent, only to rein himself back with a restraint acquired by observation and reflection. Dario is always recognizably himself, a characteristic justified in the name of an 'epic' style which is not Brechtian but popular. For him, one of the essential characteristics of the popular tradition in theater lies in the ability of the performer to present a character and not identify with it, to move in and out of part, to let an audience remember he is himself even while he is impersonating another. He has never had any sympathy with the Stanislavskian quest for the inner essence of a character, but he has had doubts too about Brecht's theories on 'third person' acting, which he believed put intolerable strains on an actor's mind and imagination. "It is a bit hard to explain," he said in an interview with the French magazine, *Cahiers du Cinéma*, when questioned about his relationship with Brechtian theory

above all for the actors, to be "inside without being inside," or to "be a mirror" . . . the poor actor is liable to go mad, or to look for another job. While to get a real understanding of epic theater, all you have to do is look at the people. ("Culture populaire et travail militant")

Rather than look at 'the people,' Fo both as writer and actor has looked at various styles of popular theater, first at the Rame family company, and subsequently at music hall, vaudeville, farce, stand-up comedy and clown shows. He was impressed by the freedom performers afforded themselves, at their ability to don and remove masks in their efforts to facilitate communication with a popular audience which did not demand (middle-class) suspension of disbelief. In a music hall sketch, an actor could turn to the stalls,

make some joke about the situation his character found himself in, then turn away to re-assume his role.

Fo explained these techniques fully in his handbook on acting, *Tricks of the Trade*, based on a workshop for drama students in a theater in Rome, and made the most obvious use of them in his monologues, *Mistero buffo* or *Johan Paduan*. To ask Fo to conceal himself in a character is akin to stuffing a fat genie into a tiny bottle in a Christmas pantomime; arms and legs will protrude. He has displayed the same relaxed approach to character in other plays where he was not the solo performer, indulging in the virtuosity which is part of his personality — and which puts that personality on display — even when playing the anarchist in *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* (1970), the supposedly stuffy trade-unionist in *Can't pay! Won't pay* (1974) or the grotesque Man-Woman at the court of Queen Elizabeth in *Elizabeth, A Woman Almost by Chance* (1984). Fo is always Fo, and perhaps the theories which saw him adopt the styles and approaches of the medieval *giullare* (jester) were no more than a rationalization of his recognition that he was at his best when he was himself and when he was constrained by no need to encase himself in a fictional persona.

On the other hand, Franca Rame is, once the word is stripped of the pejorative, condescending connotations it has acquired in English usage, a character actor. She has that ability to embody a character which is the essence of classical acting. A product of Italy's native popular tradition of touring theater she may be, but she also displays the gifts of the classical stage. She sinks herself into characters, she dresses herself in the attributes of the people she plays, she eschews self-revelation and, excepting the first person prologues which precede performances, she never plays herself. Dario Fo has never managed to establish a long-term company of performers who would remain with him throughout the vicissitudes and twists and turns of his career, nor has he appeared on-stage with actors of the highest caliber. Whatever his relations with Vittorio Gassman, Carmelo Bene or any of the other actors of international repute whom Italy has produced in recent decades, they have never performed together. When Giorgio Albertazzi was invited to perform with Franca in a Fo script, *The Devil in Drag* (1997), it was because Fo himself was still recovering from an illness and felt unable to appear. The one performer of excellence with whom he has appeared is Franca Rame, but her own commitment to a theater which was 'theirs' and not 'his' alone has meant that she has

deprived herself of the opportunity, taken for granted by the actors in every country, of testing herself in a variety of parts, with a multiplicity of partners, in a range of tones. She is like a soprano who has sung only Puccini roles, and who leaves admirers wondering how she would have coped with the great coloratura parts of opera, or with arias composed by Wagner, Verdi or Benjamin Britten.

It is at this stage that the 'what if' freedom we have permitted ourselves comes into play. What if Franca Rame had built up a repertoire of parts from Ibsen, Shakespeare, Goldoni, Lope de Vega, or even Arthur Miller, Harold Pinter, Sean O'Casey and Anouilh? The great classical actresses of the last century, Eleonora Duse or Sarah Bernhardt, drew acclaim for performances as, for instance, Lady Macbeth, the tragic heroines of Racine and Alfieri, the melodramatic female figures from French *boulevard* theater, Nora in *The Doll's House* or Santuzza from *Cavalleria rusticana*. Vanessa Redgrave, the most obvious parallel among contemporary actresses if only because of a shared allegiance to a broadly Marxist ideology, was able to play Rosalind in *As You Like It* or the mysterious Ellida in *The Lady from the Sea* without there being any clash between political commitment and theatrical employment. Jane Fonda in her most militant, anti-Vietnam war period, appeared in films. Franca Rame permitted herself none of this. From the *Canzonissima* fiasco in 1962 until the advent of the 'national solidarity' governments in the mid-seventies, television was closed to her, as to Dario. After the failure of the film, *Lo svitato* (The Screwball) in 1956, she and Dario resolved to have nothing more to do with cinema. Live theater alone would be the medium to which they would dedicate themselves, and in a repertoire entirely of their own making. No other actors in any country in the modern world have attained the fame, or made the impact Fo and Rame have, while working purely on the stage. This choice has become so much part of the landscape in which the two worked that it has become easy for critics to forget that it was a choice, and that it involved a cost.

Franca's commitment to one style of theater — political theater, popular theater, comic theater — was unflinching, and inside that framework she has, gradually, assumed a mask as precise as that worn by the actors of *commedia dell'arte*, or by those inheritors of that tradition who were her family. If Dario can be identified as a modern Harlequin, Franca could with equal justice be termed an updated Marcolfa, the stock-character from *commedia dell'arte* who was in many ways the female equivalent of Harlequin. Franca her-

self discussed the character in the section of the Sixth Day of *Tricks of the Trade* written by her. She points to the curiosity that while in *commedia dell'arte* female parts were normally played by men, the actresses who did appear on stage, 'so as to be recognized as real women, and not men in disguise,' refused to wear masks. Marcolfa, she adds, was such a part, normally performed by unmasked women. Franca points out that she herself had played Marcolfa in *Hellequin, Harlekin, Arlecchino* (1984), a theater work prepared by Dario as an inquiry into the roots of *commedia dell'arte* and, specifically, into the Harlequin figure. She also played a Marcolfa at the beginning of her career with Dario in a one-act farce, entitled simply *La Marcolfa*, which was one of the four constituent pieces of the *Comica finale* program (1958). The work itself was a reworking by Dario of material which was part of the heritage of the Rame company. Franca has become something of a Marcolfa, but has left indications of what she might have been had she taken a different path. What if she had had played a more classical repertoire?

Of course the female characters played by Franca in Dario's drama deepened, widened and changed enormously over the years, but they remained within the comic framework. Franca has blossomed in that role, because her talents as a comic actress are considerable. She has the easy command of timing, pace, rhythm which are indispensable to comedy, but has an additional, and rarer, ability to sidle unobtrusively into absurd situations, to act with angelic insouciance in a fictional world which is, in the eyes of any audience, upside down and in a state of chaos. Her calmness suggests that the characters are acting in accordance with a logic of their own, while blithely unaware that their conduct is absurd, but it is this very calmness that makes the final explosion all the more effective. As actor, Franca combines an inner energy with an outer normality, she can appear spontaneous, she can perform with a certain *grazia* or *disinvoltura* which lose their linguistic force as they are done into English as grace or nonchalance. She has the knack of appearing natural, but behind that 'naturalness' there are years of effort and of the acquisition of skills by application and observation; perhaps these talents are even incorporated into her own being by dint of inhabiting a living tradition of theater. This offhand, seemingly unstudied 'naturalness' is a gift shared with the highest of comic talents. Buster Keaton or the Neapolitan actor, Totò,<sup>1</sup> had it

<sup>1</sup>For a discussion of the career of Totò, see Fo, *Totò*.

in abundance; it differentiates them from more banal actors in comedy who, as the pace quickens or the tension of the absurd situation heightens, rely on tried-and-tested effects, grow more strident, indicating by voice and gesture their consciousness of the inhumanly ludicrous plight or their character. It is at just these moments that Franca on stage grows measured, more controlled, more apparently unaware of the utterly preposterous nature of her predicament.

Nowhere did she display this quality more effectively than in the quick-fire, 1961 comedy, *He Who Steals a Foot Is Lucky in Love*. The play is a reworking of the Apollo-Daphne myth, reinterpreted with zany freedom by Fo to make it a satire on industrial-political corruption. The immensely complex plot defies summary, but involves the theft by a taxi driver, called Apollo, of a foot from a classical statue, which is then reburied in land under construction, leaving the contractor liable to denunciation for building on an ancient site, and hence an easy target for bribery. The contractor's wife, named Daphne, meets the taxi driver as she is returning from an assignation with her lover, persuades him to tell her husband that she has been involved in an accident, but when the husband arrives home, he casually assumes that his wife is having an affair with Apollo, and takes it as his duty to act with *sang-froid*. The woman suffers a variety of mishaps, causing a doctor who arrives on the scene to pronounce her in need of a blood transplant. The taxi-driver happens to be a blood donor, and so knows that he shares the same blood group with Daphne, with whom he is by now in love, and by whom he feigns to believe he is pregnant. The doctor announces that the two require to be linked up immediately to facilitate the flow of blood and preserve Daphne's life, and the plot has a myriad other turns before ending with the taxi-driver making off with a laurel plant which, as in the ancient myth, he takes as Daphne transformed. The plot rests on the unending momentum which is the hallmark of Dario Fo's theater, but its very closeness to being an unordered farrago requires, paradoxically, a subtlety of balanced performance skills which, although overlooked by contemporary critics, Franca Rame brought to the part. They slammed the play as lacking in inspiration, and for being little more than a showcase for Dario's own brand of exuberant performance skills. They missed the tranquillity which surrounded Franca as she whirled along from absurdity to absurdity, or the self-possession which prevented her from indulging in sublimated, supposedly

ironic winks to the audience or from causing the whole structure to cascade into inconsequential incoherence. Franca was the focus of the play, but her style of imposing herself was quite the reverse of Dario's. She was in the play, while he was simultaneously in and out of part.

Whatever the talents of the performer, there are limits to the range of comedy. Comedy, unless we seriously consider Chekhov a comic writer, cannot have the emotional depth of drama which delves into human predicaments and clashes. This assertion is not tantamount to suggesting that tragedy is 'better' than comedy, nor does it run counter to Dario's repeated demand for a rethinking of the hierarchy established by the Greeks, which puts tragedy at the top, comedy somewhere lower and farce off the scale entirely. It does pose in a different form the 'what if we have taken as our starting point, and restates the question of what kind of actor Franca Rame could have been in a parallel universe.

There are indications throughout her career of Franca's propensity for a different style of drama, particularly when the rise of feminism in Italy began to be reflected in the output of Dario and Franca, and when Franca began to make a stronger contribution to the writing. The energy, drive, force and, regrettably, violence behind the militant, extra-parliamentary political movements of the sixties and early seventies were spent by 1975, when the country entered a period known in Italy as '*reflusso*,' literally 'ebb tide,' and turned to the cultivation of more personal interests. Feminism in Italy at that time drew force from its position as both the last product of Sixties political radicalism and the first product of the new individualistic mood. Franca herself noted that it would have been simply unthinkable for them to ignore a question of such fundamental importance to the lives of their audiences as new-wave feminism. As she said in a 'conversation' published in 1977, the condition of women was a topic which had become a torment to the two of them, precisely because it was so difficult to find a theatrical means of dealing with it. "On the other hand," she added, "for a theater like ours, which both pushes events forward and is pushed by them, to miss the link with the questions raised by women would be extremely serious. Problems concerning women are today too important." It is worth pointing out that Franca went on to distinguish herself from other feminists and to make her own, guarded, criticisms of the feminist movement as it then was. "These girls, these women have done some extraordinary things even if



there have been, as in every movement, negative, mistaken phases" (Rame 143-44).

Although Franca became a feminist icon in many countries, she always preferred to speak of her plays not as feminist theater but as works which put women's problems and perspectives on-stage. Her work drew severe criticism from more militant colleagues, who were puzzled by a paradoxical mixture of elements some of which were acceptably radical while others were conventionally viewed as reactionary. The omnipresence of the mother figure in her plays, from the monologues featuring the Madonna which were part of *Mistero buffo* to one-woman plays which made up *Female Parts* (1977), caused surprise. More familiar feminist subjects, such as mother-daughter relationships, woman-woman solidarity or even the need for female independence did not feature in a theater which it now becomes possible to speak of as hers. Similarly, although in a sense which differs the use of the term by the political Right, her monologues and plays of this period uphold family values. Of no piece was this more true than of *Open Couple* (1983), a play which occupies an idiosyncratic position in the Fo-Rame canon. The script was entirely Dario's and is written with all the grotesque, satirical force of which he is master. It features a Sixties couple dedicated to the fashionable sexual liberation beliefs of that time, which dismissed jealousy as a petty bourgeois vice and left both parties in a marriage free to pursue extra-conjugal relationships at will. The man avails himself of this freedom to the distress of the wife, who then turns the tables on him by forming a liaison with a famous physicist who doubles as a rock star. Faced with his wife's sexual openness, the husband finds himself unable to cope and is driven to threats of suicide.

Franca performed the work at the Edinburgh Festival in 1986, and on that occasion I was able to do an interview with the two. Dario revealed that the play was autobiographical in inspiration, and that for that reason he had declined to appear in it: he had no wish to establish too overt a connection with the husband of the fiction. The impulse behind the play, he said, had been Franca's unhappiness at Dario's Casanova activities, and indeed the following year, 1987, while appearing in the Raffaella Carrà show on Italian television, Franca astounded Italy by announcing that her marriage to Dario was over. (In fact they were reunited shortly afterwards, and have remained together.) This play was a jocular attempt by Dario to restore calm to their relationship, and as such

was never intended for the stage. It was their Swedish translators, Carlo and Anna Barsotti, who saw its possibilities, and had it premiered in Stockholm.

Thereafter Franca performed it herself, with Giorgio Bivanti in the male role. The interpretation of the piece caused controversy. Some critics saw the play as a protest against the sexual repression of women, as a declaration of female sexual autonomy and an assertion of the right of women to behave as freely, and as badly, as men. This was not Franca's interpretation, nor her motivation for appearing in it. Of course it was a protest against the oppression of women, but for her the play was as moralistic as any tract produced by a dryasdust cleric. The title — for her, but perhaps not for Dario — was ironic, since she believed there could be no such thing as an open couple. As she said:

The ideology of the open couple appeared in the Sixties, and suggested that two people could be free to have affairs without this undermining the relationship. In fact this is simply impossible, because there are feelings involved, feelings of love and one of the two always suffers. Some people may adapt, but women — and men — find it hard to cope.

Normally it is the woman who comes off worse, although that is not the main point of this play. I am not sure it is any easier for young people, because I have had many conversations with people while touring this play and I know the problems they are facing. For couples of my age, it is much worse, for men do not look for mother figures and go off with women in their eighties. They go with young girls and for the wives it can be traumatic.

I know there has been much talk of how access to pill will change attitudes, but in my view people who live in this way must abandon emotions. They can have mutual sympathy, warmth, fellow feelings, but not love. ("Interview")

*Open Couple* is, for Franca, a defense of love, of conjugal fidelity, of the observance of marriage vows. Its feminist slant comes from the upholding of woman's — a wife's — right to the respect and companionship which are part and parcel of a traditional exclusive sexual union. If that is viewed in certain circles as fusty Toryism, so be it. Franca Rame is a more complex being than those who condemn her to life on a plinth would allow. Her feminism, if that is the appropriate term, is idiosyncratic, individualistic and resolutely non-ideological. The personal is not political. She and Dario

deal with politics continually in their theater, but focus on the personal when discussing dilemmas facing women. Franca looks at women in society in such works as *Open Couple*, but the society in question is the micro-society of women and men in their private, or family, circles.

What is also of interest in this context is the question of authorship. From the time of *Tutta casa, letto e chiesa* (1977), translated into English as *Female Parts*, Dario and Franca adopted the custom of jointly signing their works. Nepoti and Cappa, authors of the most detailed compendium of the couple's works, have followed this convention for *Open Couple*, but this is clearly a mistake. *Open Couple* is Dario's work, while the overall question of the authorship of the 'female' scripts is complex. With a few exceptions, Dario remained the sole writer, and Franca performed the role she had always done of critic, refiner, dramaturg, judge and arbiter of what was theatrically acceptable. It was also she who had always undertaken the thankless task of preparing from the multitude of revisions introduced during rehearsal the version which would be finally delivered for publication. The one disadvantage of the new system of joint signature was that it implied a downplaying of her contribution in previous times, when plays were signed by Dario alone. The most probable truth is that all the works produced by the couple began as Dario's, but ended as Franca's.

In spite of that, after 1977, there was an enhanced input by Franca, and in consequence a very real change of tone, noted by several critics, both in the writing and the performance style. "It is not a comedy, nor a drama, much less a farce," noted S. Borelli, writing of *Female Parts* in *L'Unità*, (11 December, 1977). Nepoti and Cappa focused on Franca's acting, suggesting that it "veers between the approach of farce and that of tragedy" (122). Franco Quadri, a critic who had followed the career of Fo and Rame with sympathetic interest over many years, called attention to the presence of the tragic element in Franca's performance of the supposedly popular version of the *Medea* myth, but went on to make a wider point. "It (the performance style) is also the autobiographical self-redemption (*riscatto*) of the actress from the imposition of a mask which has been extremely fortunate, but one-dimensional (*felicitissima ma a senso unico*)."<sup>2</sup> The paradox used by Quadri is intriguing, and his comments acute. The mask he attributes to Franca

resembles what we have called the Marcolfa mask. What if Franca had been able to wear various masks during her career?

In the mid-eighties, particularly during the brief separation from Dario, Franca was on the lookout for a different style of play. She asked her agents and translators to assist in the search, and considered the hard-edged, brutal but comic exposition of working class life in 1930s Scotland, *Men Should Weep*, by a woman author, Ena Lamont Stewart. The moment passed, but even in the plays written by her and Dario at this time, the zany knockabout, the wild farce, the grotesque satire are less strongly in evidence, while a more genuinely poignant protest against the spiritual and cultural aridity of her own times is allowed to emerge. The tone is evident in the 'feminist' monologues, comic and hilarious though they still are. There is a new undercurrent of emotional commitment to the depiction of the solitary housewife in *A Woman Alone*, engaged in a conversation with an unseen neighbor across the street, armed with a rifle to ward off peeping toms, closed in a house with a brother-in-law who is confined to a wheelchair but not above occasional harassment. The comedy could not be blacker, and Franca's playing reflected this. She threw herself body and soul into the part, although this, to the consternation of British feminists, involved appearing in a transparent negligée. This was for her merely an instance of the kind of dress a woman alone might have donned, but her performance at the Riverside theater in London was actually picketed by some women, who regarded Franca's attire as a reduction of women to sex-objects. Franca dismissed the protest as based on puritanism, not feminism.

Her acting in these plays still showed her indebtedness to the comic tradition, but it is impossible not to be struck by the number of critics who found themselves describing her performances in terms of the tragic. There was a depth and seriousness which had not been apparent, or had been denied expression, previously. Perhaps the monologue *The Rape*, was a case apart, perhaps even a case without precedent. The work was based on her own fearsome experience of kidnap and rape in 1973 by a group of neo-fascists acting, as was established by the 1998 report by the magistrate Guido Salvini, with the collaboration of the police. The responses of Dario and Franca, in purely theatrical terms, to the experience she had suffered are illuminating. Dario turned to satire. He composed and performed a savagely funny, satirical piece entitled *The English Lawyer*, inspired by a medieval English law which gave an

<sup>2</sup>Review published in *Panorama*, 17 Jan. 1977, now in Quadri 222.

aistocrat *droit de seigneur* over any girl on his estates. Using his favored technique of *grammelot*, the play dramatized the response of a court of law to a girl who, having been violated, had the audacity to raise an action against her assailant. The play has the bitter humor Dario employs in his major political work, including the distancing devices which are inherent in satire, however deeply felt. Dario allowed his mask to slip only in his prologue when he inveighed, with polemical sarcasm, against man's inhumanity to woman, even sardonically suggesting, but not too seriously, the reintroduction of capital punishment for sexual crime.

In contrast, Franca's monologue, *The Rape*, written without reference to Dario and without any intervention by him, is as mercilessly stark as Munch's *The Scream*. The speaker is a woman who has been assaulted in circumstances similar to those endured by Franca herself. The victim piles detail on detail, recalling being stripped, stabbed, burned with cigarettes, slapped, kicked and finally raped by a group of men, one after the other. There is no artifice as she talks in a voice which freezes listeners of terror, humiliation, pain and of the discordant fragments of sound and speech which lodged in her memory. This is not performance as therapy or expiation, but performance founded on pain and wretchedness, executed out of heroic conviction of the need to help other women in comparable circumstances. It is as inappropriate to consider this from a narrowly theatrical perspective as to attempt to judge Primo Levi's memories of Auschwitz as literature, but it is right to point out that Franca chose tragedy and Dario the grotesque. This is not to suggest that Dario was in some way guilty of male insensitivity, or that one approach is superior to the other, but merely to underline a divergence of instinct.

Perhaps the same discussion of technique could be more tastefully undertaken with reference to *Medea*, another monologue delivered, but not written, by Franca. Dario claimed to have seen this *Medea* being sung and performed by peasants around Pistoia, and was impressed by one aspect: "The counterpoint was provided by a group of women (an anti-chorus) who in their complete subjection to men provoke grotesquely, violently ironic situations, sneeringly sent up by Medea" (Fo, *Tricks of the Trade* 108). *Medea* for Dario was no longer the classical tragedy of Euripidean vision, but a risqué satire in the popular tradition, where the response of Medea to being abandoned by Jason was rendered grotesque, even grotesquely funny. Franca did not play it in that style. In her hands,

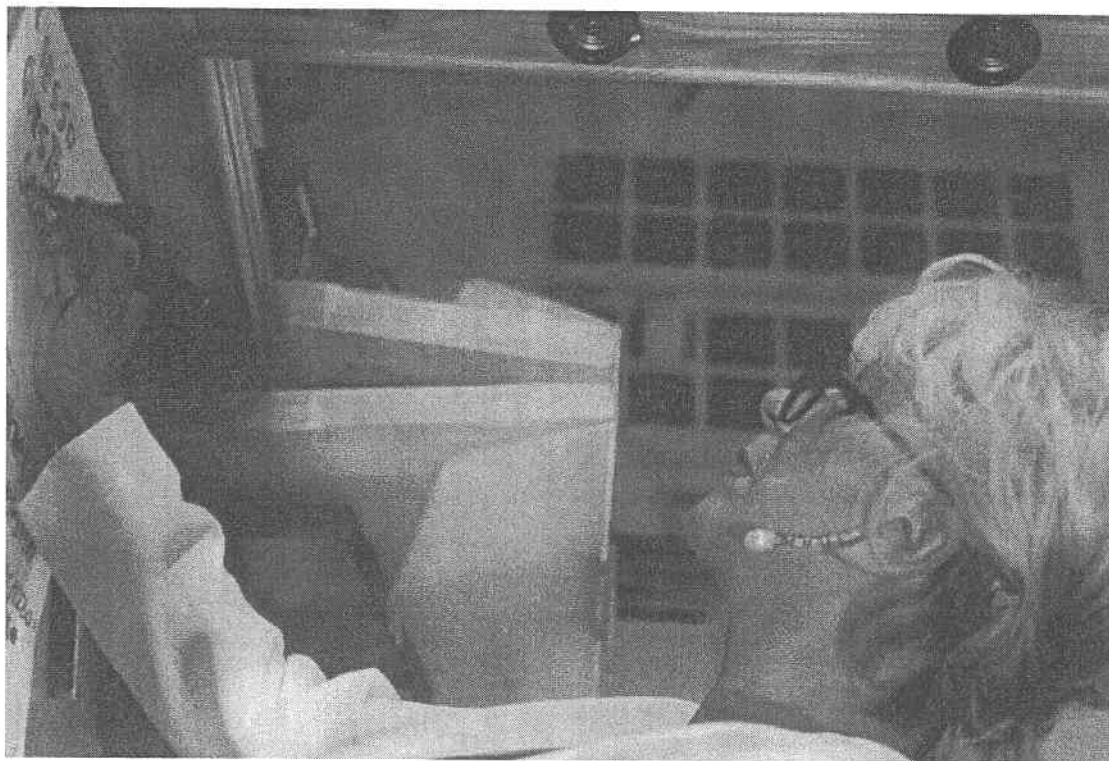
tragedy was restored, the tragedy of the woman deserted, the woman hurt beyond her comprehension and beyond her sense of what is just in the dealings of one human being with another. The stillness of performance and of spirit made the final explosion all the more devastating in its impact, but the appeal was to raw emotion, not based on any response aroused by satire.

So then, what if? What if Franca Rame had pursued her own career on the stage? She could have developed into one of Italy's leading classical actresses, dabbling in comedy when the occasion offered itself but showing a mastery of other theatrical languages. There would have been a loss, and that loss might have been borne substantially by Dario Fo. Franca too would have lost immeasurably in other ways, so there is every reason to be grateful that she took the initiative in the wings of the theater, that day in Milan, in the 1950s.

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Franca Rame in her dressing room before "Sesso?"



Franca Rame, in her dressing room before "Sesso?"

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LUCIANA D'ARCAANGELI, from Rome, is a graduate of the University of London. Since 1998, she has been a graduate teaching assistant in the Italian Department of the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow. She specializes in the study of contemporary Italian theater, and is currently researching the development of female characters in the theater of Fo and Rame.

JOSEPH FARRELL is a senior lecturer in Italian Studies at the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow. He has translated plays by Dario Fo, Eduardo De Filippo, Carlo Goldoni, and Alessandro Baricco. He is the author of a book on Leonardo Sciascia and has edited an anthology of writings on the mafia and a volume of essays on Carlo Goldoni. He broadcasts regularly for the BBC's arts programs.

DARIO FO is often considered the rightful heir of Aristophanes and Molière. He has led the field in political satire in Europe for over forty years. Since 1954, Fo has been married to Franca Rame, his chief collaborator and co-star. His best known plays include *Misero Buffo*, *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, *We Won't Pay! We Won't Pay!*, and *Orgasmo Adulto Escapes from the Zoo*, written in collaboration with Franca Rame. During the 1970s and 80s, under the McClaren Act, Fo and his theatrical company were refused a visa to enter the United States. It was not until Robert Brustein and the American Repertory Theatre invited him to perform in 1986 that he was finally granted entry. In 1997, Fo was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature for "emulating the jesters of the Middle Ages in scourging authority and upholding the dignity of the downtrodden."

JACOPO FO, the only child of Dario Fo and Franca Rame, has collaborated on many of their productions as set designer and mask maker. During the 1980s, he founded the Libera Università di Alcatraz, an alternative cultural, ecological, and agricultural center. Jacopo Fo is also an acclaimed cartoonist and has published over 20 books of editorial humor, among them: *La vera storia del Mondo*, *Diventare Dio in 10 mosse*, *Il diavolo ha i piedi per terra*, *La grande truffa delle Piramidi*, and *Come fare il comunismo senza farsi male*.

RON JENKINS began his research on Dario Fo in Italy in 1985 with the support of a Sheldon Fellowship from Harvard University and was recently awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, which will enable him to spend much of the next year translating, directing, and writing about the works of Dario Fo and Franca Rame. The author of *Subversive Laughter and Acrobats of the Soul*, he has written on theater for the *Village Voice*, *American Theatre*, *The Drama Review*, and *The New York Times*. This fall, he joins the faculty of Wesleyan University as professor, chair, and artistic director of the college's theater department.

PINA PICCOLO is a technical translator, poet, political activist, and professor of Italian at the University of California, Berkeley Extension.

sion. In 1985, she wrote her dissertation on the work of Dario Fo and Franca Rame at the University of California, Berkeley. She has also written articles on Gianni Celati, and translated the play *Veronica Franco* by Dacia Maraini and four one-act plays by Dino Buzzati for Veronique Guillaud's theater production, entitled *Free Fall*. She was also active in promoting "Fofest," a 1998 San Francisco festival that celebrated the work of Dario Fo and Franca Rame.

FRANCA RAME was born in 1929 in Parabiago, a little village near Milan, to a family of puppeteers who had been practicing their art for several generations. The advent of cinema, shortly before Rame's birth, forced the family to pursue live theater and gave her the opportunity to start a prolific acting career at the age of eight. She married Dario Fo in 1954 and has since collaborated with him as stage performer, writer, and editor for dozens of plays and monologues. Although her name is most frequently connected with Dario Fo, Franca Rame is accomplished in her own right as an actress, dramatist, and lecturer of international prestige. She is co-author of many dramatic works, among them: *All Home, Bed and Church* (1977), *The Open Couple* (1983), *Female Parts* (1986), *A Woman Alone and Other Plays* (1989), *Seventh Commandment: Steal a Little Less 2* (1992), and *Sex? Thanks, Don't Mind if I Do!* (1995).

ANTONIO SCUDERI is assistant professor of Italian at Truman State University in Missouri. He is the author of various articles and books on the Sicilian dialect, literature of Nino Martoglio, and on the theater of Dario Fo, including *Dario Fo and Popular Performance* (Legas, 1998). He has also co-edited the forthcoming book *Dario Fo: Stage, Text, and Tradition* with Joseph Farrell (Southern Illinois UP).

WALTER VALERI has been a visiting artist at American Repertory Theatre's Institute for Advanced Theatre Training at Harvard University since 1997. He served as director of the Press and the International Office for the Fo-Rame theatre company from 1980 to 1996. In 1990, he founded the experimental theatre, Teatro Greco, in Milan and served as its artistic director and dramaturg until 1995. He is a regular contributor to Italy's leading theatrical monthly *Sipario* and national newspaper, *il manifesto*. Valeri is also a playwright, translator, and poet whose works have been published and performed on many occasions.



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