

THE LYCEUM

1235: *The First Harlequin*. Dario Fo has identified himself with both the medieval figure of the jester (giullare), and with the character of the Harlequin from commedia dell'arte. He performed a piece dedicated to Arlecchino at the Venice Biennale. His preference goes to the early anarchic Arlecchino before he was tamed in the eighteenth century by Carlo Goldoni. The early figure was a force of nature, dressed on stage in white not in the more familiar lozenge costume.

1236: *The Butterfly Mouse*, an erotic tale from Provençal sources, retold by Fo as one of the *Obscene Fables* (1982)

1237: *Dance as Mime*. Fo directed Stravinsky's *Histoire du Soldat* at La Scala in 1978. While there he there he saw Rudolf Nureyev in rehearsal, and noted that he executed movements which he had first designed on sheets of paper. Fo is no choreographer, but follows the precepts of Jacques Lecoq in mime. This sketch is an application of Nureyev's practice applied to mime.

1239: *Scene from Open Couple* (1983), a play on the dilemma of a couple in a supposedly open relationship. Dario never in fact played the part of the husband, but Franca did take the role of the wife.

1244: *Scene from Toss the Lady Out* (1967), a work set in a circus Big Top, an ironic, grotesque depiction of America in the Sixties, featuring the assassination of an American President, played by Franca Rame. Here she is shown on a trapeze.

1260: Franca Rame in costume for *Toss the Lady Out*

1248: *Come on, Come on, It's All Over*. Depiction of the arrest of Dario Fo in Sassari in 1973 for refusing to allow police in to watch and inspect his play, *Mistero buffo*.

1266: Actors in Costume, Wearing Animal Masks, of commedia dell'arte.

1275: Franca in part of tailor in *All United! All Together! Excuse Me, Isn't That the Boss?* Play subtitled *Workers' Struggles 1911–1922*, performed by La Comune, a company established by Fo and Rame after their break with 'bourgeois theatre' in 1968.

1282: *Dialogue with a Wise Horse*, illustration for *Gulliver's Travels*

1306: *The Palazzina Liberty*, an unoccupied, ex-fruit market in a park in Milan, occupied by Fo and his company in 1974, and the venue for many productions in the Seventies.

1314: *Birth of the Peasant*. Sketch in *Mistero buffo*.

1331: *The Mafia Exists, But It Is Forbidden to Discuss It*.

1332: *The Bribery Game*.

1337: *Story of a Tiger* (2015). Illustration for a monologue piece, written and performed by Fo in 1977 on the basis of a story he heard recited by a teller of tales in a public square in China, which he visited in 1976.

1345: *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, one of Fo's most celebrated and widely performed plays. Described by him as a 'tragic farce,' it investigated the still unsolved death in police custody of the anarchist Pino Pinelli, arrested in connection with the bombing of a bank in Milan in 1969. The outrage was the work of a neo-fascist group and Pinelli was unquestionably innocent, but died in a mysterious fall from the window of the police station, illustrated in this sketch.

1359: *The Subjection of Power*. Fo was intrigued by Ben Jonson's arrest following the production of *Isle of Dogs*, and regarded Jonson as a model of the playwright as dissident.

1976: *Dance on the Stairs*. Illustration for a planned adaptation of *Menaechmi* by Plautus.

DARIO FO

THE UNKNOWN ARTIST

"I have been painting ever since I was a boy," said Dario when interviewed before the opening of an exhibition of his work in Pontedera in 2010. He has stated many times that he had initially wished to be a painter not a writer, or even that he was an amateur actor and a professional artist. It is not easy to accept this self-assessment, nor even to know how seriously it was delivered, but it is a cry for recognition of his work as artist.

"I began before learning how to form numbers. I was quite good, a little phenomenon," he said cheerfully in the autobiographical *My First Seven Years*. He recalls occasions when in his home town of Valtravaglia he was invited to paint the portraits of schoolmates or townspeople, including his teacher, the daughters of the mayor and the mistress of a gangland boss. He never stopped painting over the following decades. Although some work executed when he was young won prizes and was accepted for exhibitions, his first major exhibition, *Teatro nell'occhio (Theatre in the Eye)* was held in Riccione 1984. Since then there have been many others, both in Italy and in the rest of Europe. In 2015, the Italian Ministry for Culture established in Verona a gallery dedicated exclusively to the display of Fo's artwork. This is the first exhibition in the UK.

In the 1940, in post-Liberation Milan, he was fully involved in the debates on realism and neo-realism, and decided at an early stage to use only such elements of, for example, cubism as could be reconciled with figurative art. He was part of that democratic movement which found expression in the magazine *Realismo*, and which sought to ensure that art maintained a dialogue with the tastes of ordinary people and did not appeal only to a small circle of aesthetes. At this time, Fo executed some delightful still lifes and landscapes reminiscent in execution to the work of the Macchiaioli, Italian contemporaries of the French Impressionists. Two seemingly more casual assertions made in a revealing interview in 1984 are of some importance: firstly, that he was "passionate about the Renaissance, not only the Italian Renaissance but also the Spanish Renaissance. I studied the Flemish and French Great Masters;" secondly, that he had "always had a predilection for representational art." It is hardly necessary to add that while much of his art work is autonomous, many of the canvases in the period

from the mid-sixties to the late nineties was done in conjunction with his theatrical activity. If his theatre has been conditioned by his painterly eye, his artwork, and not only that which began life as preparatory work for productions, is dramatic in conception and execution. His figures, apart from some posed portraits, are in constant motion.

His range is wide. The critic Rodriguez Amaya imagines the mixture of disbelief and wonder with which some future cataloguer or museum keeper will pull out various cases in the Fo home in Milan to find "at random some of the thousands of sheets of paper and cartoons bristling with polychrome images. There will suddenly come to life blue minotaurs, cloth puppets, fierce monsters, damsels in gilded peplums, groups of lovers under dark colonnades, ironical putti staring out of windows, metaphysical citadels, elaborate codices, ships raising anchor, prancing horses, portraits of the eternal muse." The work displayed in this exhibition represents only a fraction of his output, and consists largely of theatre-related work.

Given this background and his continuing output it might seem paradoxical to suggest that there was something novel about Dario's re-absorption in art, art criticism and art history from the late 1990s. In part, this 'renewal' of interest was a response to his conditions of health after suffering a stroke. His eyesight was poor and reading and writing were difficult, but he remained able to paint, to create figures, to reproduce and re-imagine the works of other artists. He also from this time immersed himself in art history, and produced a critical commentary on the work of many masters of the past. He also used his original artwork to comment, inevitably, on the politics of his own times. In other words, his new dedication to art in the 1990s took the double form of an outburst of personal creative activity and an absorption in the history of art. Fo became an art historian and critic, but very much in his own style, applying to art the same principles that lay behind his concept of "popular theatre." His love of certain Renaissance artists parallels a quest in theatre in the late sixties when he announced his intention to stage *Mistero buffo*, a series of dissident sketches based on medieval work but expressing a popular viewpoint and offered in the most accessible of formats. Fo's habitat is tradition, but his instincts are popularising.



When writing of the artists of the Renaissance, Fo addressed a contemporary audience excluded from the appreciation and enjoyment of art by the forbidding, restrictive jargon employed by scholars and experts. There is something in his viewpoint which brought him close to John Ruskin, although there is no reason to believe he had any familiarity with the English critic. His criticism of art and artists could be described as erudite populism, conveyed in a variety of media. He gave lectures, presented TV shows and produced books on such Old Masters as Raphael, Michelangelo, Caravaggio, Correggio, Giotto, Mantegna and others. He also wrote monographs on Leonardo's *Last Supper* and on the cathedral in Modena, which in many ways provided the ideal vehicle for the expression of Fo's approach to artistic and historical subjects.

The work took the form of a televised lecture-performance on the architecture and history of the cathedral and its relations with the city. Fo invited those who attended the spectacle, which was given in the open air outside the cathedral on an extemporised stage with two giant screens on either side of him, to read the architecture as they would read a book. Since the book was medieval, the language would be as unfamiliar as the *Divine Comedy*, but Fo acted as decoder and populariser, obviously performing in his own style, throwing in jokes about contemporary politics and ironic allusions to the present day. Berlusconi could never be too far away.

The work on Caravaggio, whom Fo first encountered in 1948 at an exhibition in the Palazzo Reale in Milan, where he would later exhibit his own work, was written in part in Edinburgh. As he was preparing this book, he and Franca came to present his autobiography at the Edinburgh Book Festival. They brought with them copious reproductions of Caravaggio, as well as

photocopies of excerpts from various works of criticism or history which they spread over the floor of their hotel room, to the dismay of the solicitous staff. Dario was driven around the city to see the castle, the New Town, Holyroodhouse, the cathedral of St. Giles and the sights of Scotland's capital, but his attention was elsewhere. Accounts of the history of Parliament House were listened to courteously, but would be followed, disconcertingly, not by requests for elaboration but by a monologue on the Knights of St. John of Malta, of Caravaggio's time in Sicily or of the political alignments and class divisions in Rome in the late sixteenth century.

Fo's criticism is invariably non-conformist, dictated by his belief in the popular roots evident even in the works of classic great masters. He is forthright in his expressions of contempt for professional art historians, even those of the acknowledged stature of Roberto Longhi or of the historical authority of Giorgio Vasari. He convicts them of the crime of mystification in having made appreciation difficult for those not part of an inner élite, and thus of having betrayed the intention and vision of the artist.

Fo's narrative is based on the belief that he is releasing Caravaggio, or Giotto, or whoever, from layers of misunderstanding, and presenting "the real Caravaggio or Giotto". The first characteristic of his criticism is enthusiasm, and his driving impulse is to share that enthusiasm. His invitation to his readers or spectators in his discussions of art could be compared to Leporello's advice to Donna Elvira when he is about to show her the list of Don Giovanni's conquests, "*osservate, leggete con me,*" (Observe and read with me). Regrettably none of these books are available in English. But his own work can now be viewed here.

Joseph Farrell

The exhibition is part of *Dancing with Colours, Whipping with Words*, a one-off festival of international political performance and art.

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SCOTTISH STORYTELLING CENTRE

Much, but by no means all, of Dario Fo's artwork was done in association with the production of his plays, either as working illustrations, as sketches for scenery, as actual backcloths or as canvases for use on stage. At other times, he painted scenes to help clarify his own thinking. All works in this venue are related to specific theatre works.

Introductory:

1229: *Franca Rame and Dario Fo in the parts of Queen Isabella of Spain and Christopher Columbus*, a 'comment', in Fo's words, on the crucial scene in which the two discuss his hopes for securing backing for his voyages. This canvas is related to the 1963 play, *Isabella, Three Caravels and a Chancer*. Columbus, the 'chancer' in question, features several times in Fo's theatre.

Religious Themes:

Although himself an atheist and a trenchant critic of institutional religion, offended by its pomp, display and alliance with the powers that be, Dario Fo has always taken a respectful interest in religious questions, regarding religious observances and beliefs as expressions of popular culture. He has been drawn to religious legends and popular manifestations of the creed. Certain historical figures, most notably St Francis of Assisi, the subject of a one-man play first performed in 1997 and often revived, have been objects of admiration. So too is the present Pope, and sometimes the two Francises seem almost to merge.

455: *St Francis Talks to the Pigs*, a scene from the play *Francis The Holy Jester*. *Giullare*, the Italian equivalent of 'jester', is a description Fo has applied to himself.

Fo's main collection of one-man pieces with popular or religious-popular themes was *Mistero buffo*, first performed in 1969, and subsequently expanded with the addition of scenes drawn from different cultures and countries. The following canvases illustrate some such scenes.

1249: *An illustration of the Legend of the Blind Man and the Cripple*. The blind man provides the legs and the crippled the eyes for the couple, but when both are cured by Christ, the blind man is delighted but the cripple outraged, since this means he will have to enter the exploitative world of labour.

1256: *The Resurrection of Lazarus*, also a scene of *Mistero buffo*.

1261: *The Madman under the Cross*, a crucifixion scene depicting the futile efforts of a madman to help Christ down from the cross while He is still alive. Christ refuses, saying that his sacrifice is not complete, leading the madman to conclude that it is Christ, not him, who is insane.

1292: *Adam and Eve*, an illustration from a series of stories entitled *The Peasants' Bible*.

1316: *Jesus Meets Pope Boniface VIII*. While carrying his cross, Jesus meets the Pope in all his finery. He denounces the Pope as a hypocrite who has betrayed the gospel teaching, and kicks him on the backside. The scene is part of *Mistero buffo*.

ITALIAN CULTURAL INSTITUTE

Dario studied art, not theatre, as a young man and produced his first paintings in the 1940s. In 2015, he wrote, "My dream, as is well known, was to complete my course (in art) at the Accademia di Brera (Milan) and to be successful as a painter, but it did not turn out that way. On the contrary, as actor and author, everything went more than well. It was there that I met Franca, who taught me much of what I know about the art of acting. And in these years spectators have discovered that I also know how to paint." (*Mistero buffo a colori*, Skira) Many of the works displayed in the Italian Cultural Institute come from this volume, and are related to his plays and performances.

1351: *Dario and Franca Rame in costume for Mistero buffo*

1377: *Self Portrait*. "When I was seventeen or eighteen, I painted my first self-portrait, a whole body depiction of myself from head to toe. This work has been lost. More than seventy years later, employing fading designs from that time, I have attempted to reconstruct it. Here it is!"

1272: *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, a one-act piece performed in 1977 together with *Story of a Tiger*, but first given as a radio piece at the outset of Fo's career.

1296: *The "Pregnant" Women*. A scene from *Can't Pay? Won't Pay*, where two women, in a protest against rising prices, indulge in an act of "proletarian expropriation" from supermarkets to feed their families. They conceal the goods they have pilfered in such a way as to make them look pregnant.

1320: *A group of singers*. This work was done in conjunction with the show *I Think and Sing about It*, a musical work, a collection of songs, some newly written by Fo but most from tradition, all part of Fo's ideas of popular culture.

2060: *The Widow Exchanges the Body of her Husband*.

2181: *Mortification of the Satrap*, from performance piece on *Arabian Nights' Tales*.

1277: *Debate at the End of Performance*. In the days of Fo-Rame's most militant theatre in late sixties and seventies all performances included a "third act," a debate with the audience. This painting was done much later, in 2015.

1353: *A Lesson by a Master on Performance Techniques*.

1355: *The Grammelot of the English Lawyer*. The grammelot was a linguistic device devised by the players of commedia dell'arte when performing for an audience which did not understand Italian. They babbled sounds which had no meaning but appeared to be authentic expressions in French or whatever language the audience spoke, so that a meaning was conveyed by sound backed up by gestures. Fo has revived this technique for modern audiences. This sketch depicts an English lawyer who managed to have his aristocratic client acquitted of a charge of rape by piling the blame on the peasant victim.

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