

DARIO FO



A study, now transformed
into a book, shows how
the Italian dramatist
guarantees the perennality
of the political theater

MÁRIO VIANA

Published in February 2003

A lone on stage, the man in dark clothes talks without stopping, gesticulates a lot, and draws in multitudes. At the age of 77, he holds as if hypnotized audiences of up to 8,000 persons at a single performance. Seductive as few, he transforms himself into each spectator's best friend, to whom he tells, with a microphone, a story that seems to have happened yesterday. If someone in the audience coughs, sneezes or lets a mobile phone ring, the man takes advantage of the fact – and, without losing the gist of what he has been saying for a moment, as if were both naturally interconnected. The public laughs, applauds, and is delighted by Italian Daniel Fo, a master in the almost surgical precision of gestures and in the fabulous art of telling stories. Actor, director, dramatist and, since 1977, Nobel Prize for Literature, Dario Fo also became the subject of studies by Neyde Veneziano, a lecturer in Theater at the Communication Arts School of the University of São Paulo (ECA/USP). Published by Editora Códex, the thesis for a doctorate *Dario Fo's Scene – The Exercise of Imagination*, which enjoyed support from FAPESP, is the first study in Portuguese on the Italian artist.

The first achievement of Neyde Veneziano's research is to throw some light on the work of a professional who is little accustomed to theories. A tireless researcher into the origins of popular comedy, Fo rescued for the contemporary stage some elements lost in the Middle Ages – like the buffoons, the story tellers (or raconteurs, as the professor prefers). He mixed these studies up with signs of more popular comedy, those done in the circus, and threw over everything a strong political seasoning – strong enough to mark his work and to link it to the thinking of the left. For some, this politicized posture could be the reason for a certain aging of the dramatist's work: in Italy, a few universities wage veritable battles against Fo and his dra-

maturity of engagement. Others accuse him of being a false revolutionary, as he advocates theses of the left, but does not dispense with the comfortable life, with a Mercedes in the garage, jewelry and other signs of "bourgeois luxury".

In Brazil, this kind of bickering did not catch on, and here he has several defenders. "Dario Fo is one of those artists that give new significance to tradition, in that they put it at a new level, bringing it up to date, but preserving its fundamental constituents," explains Silvana Garcia, supervisory professor in the postgraduate studies program at ECA/USP. "He did this with *commedia dell'arte*, with the medieval comic tradition, with modern mimics, and to all these legacies he added critical political substance, which sends us back to the origins of comedy, Aristophanes." For director Antonio Abujamra, responsible for the first stagings of Dario Fo in Brazil, the Italian author is indispensable. "He is an arsenal of popular theater," he explains. "As an author, Fo realized the lack of space there was for those defeated in History and decided to give them a voice in his work."

Abujamra put his signature to two directions of Fo's texts, both at the beginning of the 80s: *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, starred by Antônio Fagundes and with a full house over seven years; and *An Adult Orgasm Escapes from the Zoo*, a spectacle that served as a springboard for the "essential theater" of actress Denise Stoklos. In both – just as in the whole of the Italian's work – acid humor is a constant. "Dario Fo knows that without humor it is not possible to bear the planet," Abujamra comments. "It is impressive, because he is no great actor, but he is a tremendously good story teller." This quality, Fo learnt in his childhood, listening to the storytellers of Lago Maggiore. It was with him that the dramatist would learn to use dialects, to pay attention to movements in the audience, to use hyperbole and the surreal, and to pass from one per-

sonage to another, even telling a story narrated in the first person.

Perhaps it is there that lies the key to one of the secrets of Fo's permanence. "He researched the history of gestures so deeply that, today, when he is on stage, he transforms the slightest movement into something enormous. He just moves his hand and the entire theater realizes what he is telling," explains Roberto Birindelli, an actor from Rio Grande do Sul. For ten years, Birindelli has been visiting several cities – in Brazil and abroad – presenting the monologue *Il Primo Miracolo*, one of Fo's funniest and most critical texts. In the play, he talks about how Jesus, accompanied by Joseph and Mary, felt out of place when went to play with the children from Egypt. "He talks of racial segregation, of isolation from what is foreign and it is possible to adapt this to any situation," says the actor, who remains alone on stage and represents 21 personages.

This is clearly a Fo method for presenting a spectacle. Although as a director, he knows very well how to use the resources offered by technology, when he goes to the stage Fo prefers a total cleanliness of elements. Except that, to arrive at this simplicity, he works – and he works a lot. "There isn't any inspirational muse, that comes at night and whispers verses in the dramatist's ear," explains Neyde Veneziano. "It is all technique, a lot of technique, a lot of research." The dramatist receives help from researchers, digests what he reads and assembles a text, which will serve only as a guide for the spectacle. In the process of rehearsals, gestures and voices keep being given life and receive additions at each presentation. "At no moment does Fo reassemble a spectacle the same way he did ten, 15 years ago. He changes it, adapts it, brings it up to date and perpetuates it."

To gestures, Dario Fo adds the refined use of the voice. Born in a country where each city seems to have an accent of its own, Fo realized that a good storyteller captures the voice of each personage in the midst of the people. "Few actors today understand that voice is body, that speaking has a poetic function, and that it only realizes itself with



Roberto Birindelli in Fo's play *Il Primo Miracolo*: alone on stage, he interprets 21 personages

the use of a concrete element, which is sound," says Professor Sarah Lopes, who responds for the chair of Vocal Expression at the Scenic Arts Department of the Arts Institute at Campinas State University (Unicamp). "Dario Fo does this brilliantly. He is a master of the technique of anecdotes, and for that reason he knows how to adapt each spectacle to the region in which it is being presented. Fo is like a musician who masters his instrument and is capable of playing to any rhythm."

The capacity for prospecting the essence of popular comedy and discovering elements of the medieval in the

THE PROJECT

Dario Fo's Scene – The Exercise of Imagination

MODALITY

Postdoctoral grant

SUPERVISION

EUGENIA CASINI ROPA – Dipartimento di Musica e Spettacolo from the University of Bologna (Italy)

GRANT HOLDER

NEYDE VENEZIANO – Communications and Arts School at USP



REPRODUCTION

proof of this is that his plays continue to be staged, and under geographical and historical conditions in all senses very distant from the original ones of this production.

“Those who think that resistance theater is out of fashion do not understand anything about Dario Fo,” Neyde warns. “His political theater is not aggressive, it’s provocative, which is something quite different.” For her, Fo the political man, as the years went by, came to arrive at the sensitive man. “He provokes, but he gives people a hug. It is as if it were a humanistic political theater,” she says. A confessed admirer of the Italian, author, actor and director Hugo Possolo, of the Parlapatões group, thinks that Fo’s political engagement is not something that limits his dramaturgy. “As he relies basically on popular culture, always telling stories from the point of view of the underdog, the work takes on a left-wing slant – but what really remains is its popular root presented with a tremendous poetic power,” says Possolo.

Ariano Suassuna - According to Neyde Veneziano and Sarah Lopes, the Parlapatões are the group in Brazil that does a job that is closest to the dramaturgy that Dario Fo produces in Italy – in literature, the work of Ariano Suassuna is what gets closest to the union of the popular and the erudite. “In the case of the theater, the difference lies very much on account of the technique, which Fo masters like nobody else,” claims Sarah. Something else that may be credited in favor of the Italian is Fo’s class, which avoids vulgarity at all costs. Possolo disagrees. “Just because he has won a Nobel prize, that doesn’t mean that he ought to be read like a sacrosanct author,” he claims. “There is a strong scatological side to his works, as in some stories of *Mister Buffo*, for example.” An artist with an impressive capacity for taking advantage of the moment of the audience and mixing it up with the story he is playing, Possolo – who seeks inspiration in the circus – does not hesitate to classify Dario Fo as a clown. “Just like another Italian, Léo Bassi, Fo reinstates the clown as a demolisher of ruling morals, capable of making profound criticisms while he makes people laugh. And that is something that never becomes outdated.” ●

laughter of today has been, obviously, stimulated by the political slant of Dario Fo and Franca Rame, his wife, who also acts. The theater that they started doing in the 70s won a strong political coloring, with presentations in factories, trade unions, schools, bowling pitches and wherever else it was possible to put on spectacle. The organization of the company – which was connected to an arm of the Italian Communist Party – was communitarian – on the posters, the names of Franca and Dario did not head up the cast, but modestly in alphabetical order. Even so, at no time would Fo give up his conception of po-

popular theater. “He wasn’t concerned with doing party political theater, but just political theater,” is Sarah Lopes’s analysis. “Dario Fo knows how to stand up for an ideology without losing at any moment artistic quality.”

“All theater with a political intent takes its sap from the historical moment, but it earns universality by employing allegorical and metaphorical constructions,” explains Silvana Garcia. “This theater accepts being updated, because it is willing to be an instrument that interprets reality, and is not a mere portrayal of that historical reality in particular.” In the case of Dario Fo, the