

Dario Fo and Oral Tradition: Creating a Thematic Context¹

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A historical analysis, especially a critical one, of an actor's techniques is impossible if the actor does not have "poetics." It is by means of "poetics"—in the themes by which it is developed—that the "techniques" acquire depth and meaning and become a "style." Totò² has a poetics that is rich in themes and motifs that weave and dovetail, presenting a whole and complex vision that is always identifiable as being "Totò's." (Fo 1991a:9)³

Dario Fo, recipient of the 1997 Nobel Prize for Literature, presents himself as a champion of popular culture. He does this in part by adapting modes of performance used in oral traditions and in various forms of *teatro minore*⁴ as his medium, and by emphasizing oral and oral-derived performance over the literary text. Fo was born on March 24, 1926, in the town of San Giano in the Lombardy region of northern Italy. After moving several times, his family settled in the town of Porto Valtriglia near Lake

¹ Adapted with permission from *Dario Fo and Popular Performance* (Scuderi 1998).

² Totò (Antonio De Curtis, 1898-1967) began his career on the Neapolitan vaudeville stage and starred in many Italian movies, including Pasolini's *Hawks and Sparrows*. He is one of Fo's greatest influences and the subject of one of his books (1991a).

³ All translations are by the author with permission from Compagnia Teatrale Fo Rame (C.T.F.R.).

⁴ Fo uses the term *teatro minore* to refer to all forms of performance that are considered second-rate or marginal, deriving from or primarily informed by popular traditions. Included in this category are popular farces, variety theater, clown shows, and comedy films of the silent screen. See further Scuderi 2000.

Maggiore. The oral tradition was very much a part of the local culture during his childhood, and he remembers various forms of popular entertainment, such as puppet shows and professional storytellers. But his greatest influence would come from the local storytellers he refers to as *fabulatori*.⁵ These tended to be fishermen, glassblowers, or itinerant vendors who told tales while they worked or as a pastime. His grandfather was himself adept at telling tales and known locally for his pungent wit, for which he was nicknamed Bristin, meaning “pepper seed.” Bristin would use his verbal art as a means of drawing clients to his cart as he sold his wares, and would often take young Dario along with him. The *fabulatori* were Fo’s first and greatest influence, and his earliest performances, back in 1940, were stories and sketches improvised around the tales he had heard from them.

Over time Fo developed his *giullarata*,⁶ a one-man show performed in dialects, which in Italy were historically the predominantly spoken language of the people. It is a type of performance that, due to its basis in the principles of oral art, is closely related to other oral traditions around the world. Ruth Finnegan’s description of African narrative traditions, for example, may be used to describe Fo’s *giullarata* as well (1970:501-2):

Stories are often enacted in the sense that, to a greater or smaller degree, the speech and gestures of their characters are imitated by the narrator, and the action is largely exhibited through dialogue in which the storyteller directly portrays various characters in turn. It is true that such enactment of character is not sustained or complete, that straight narration, as well as dramatic dialogue, is used to communicate the events of the story, and that only one real “actor” could be said to be involved. . . .

Fo has come to be associated with the themes of an interpretive code he has developed, and, as the epic performer whose personality is ever-present in a performance, he embodies them as well. They define his *poetics*. In his studies of oral performance and oral-derived texts, John Miles Foley (1991, 1995) discusses how interpretation remains, to some

⁵ *Fabulatore* (pl. -*i*) derives from the Latin *fabula*, meaning “fable” or “tale.”

⁶ Fo termed his signature solo performance the *giullarata* (pl. -*e*), based on the Italian word *giullare* (pl. -*i*). *Giullare* is a derivative of the Latin *ioculator* (joker, jester), as are the French *jongleur* and the English *juggler*. In the Middle Ages, the *giullari* were itinerant players, mostly of the lower classes, who worked within the oral tradition. They included a wide variety of performers: musicians, dancers, acrobats, tumblers, jugglers, actors, mountebanks, storytellers, and so forth.

degree, open to the individual receiver, while at the same time maintaining a certain degree of homogeneity that is shared by all receivers. It is the tradition itself that provides the homogeneous quality and encodes the performance frame with meaning that goes beyond the literal level.⁷ Words or units of utterance within the frame are invested with special significance that is understood within the tradition: “That is, the traditional phrase or scene or story-pattern has an indexical meaning vis-à-vis the immanent tradition; each integer reaches beyond the confines of the individual performance or oral-derived text to a set of traditional ideas much larger and richer than any single performance or text” (Foley 1995:6).

Not working within a living tradition, Dario Fo has devised his own means for defining his frame and providing a code that aims beyond the primary meaning of a given performance. Besides using an extended prologue and metanarrational commentary to define the frame, he has succeeded in creating a code of meaning peculiar to his theater. He has accomplished this by repeating certain themes in his workshops, interviews, and writings, and in his prologues and in his plays. For many members of the audience, the presentation of a given theme automatically carries with it references to the same and/or related themes that run throughout Fo’s theatrical code.

Many of these themes fall into his Gramscian-derived view of popular versus official culture. One overriding theme is that the dominant class has managed to appropriate what it wanted from popular culture, stripped it of its dignity and validity, and presented it back to the people as substandard and inferior.⁸ As part of this process, the dominant class has retold history, presenting it in such a way as to suit its own sense of purpose. Fo’s theater works towards rectifying this bastardization of history and denigration of popular culture by presenting history from a subaltern point of view and by putting back what official culture conveniently left out. His mission is to restore the dignity of the downtrodden masses with his own interpretation of history: “The duty of every intellectual is to reconstruct popular culture, which has been stolen and falsified, and give it back to the people” (Fo 1992a:76). Many themes that turn up in his plays—the abuse of power, the myth of the superiority of official culture, the subversive power of humor, official sobriety versus folk laughter, official religion versus popular

⁷ For more on Dario Fo’s performance frame, see Scuderi 1996a and 1998.

⁸ This theme is expounded in the prologue and performance of the medieval poem “Rosa fresca aulentissima,” which Fo often used as the first sketch of *Mistero buffo*.

religion, the inhumanity of human beings towards each other—are charged with Fo's sociopolitical outlook and may be all subsumed under a greater Marxist-Gramscian rubric.⁹ These themes encode a Fo performance with meaning. By repeating a circumscribed set of themes in various contexts over the years, they have come to constitute an interpretive system. Like the "units of utterances that constitute the idiom" in traditional oral narrative, those elements in a Fo performance that refer to his code of themes "are charged with associative values particular to the event taking place" (Foley 1995:8).

Fo creates an interpretive code that informs his performances through the associative value of the code's various elements. In his own theory of performance, this code of "themes and motifs that weave and dovetail" constitutes his *poetics*, which defines and identifies him as a performer. For the present study, whereas *themes* name the messages or meanings of a narrative, *motifs* should be understood as the narrative elements that contribute to the plot or content. This definition of motif in folklore includes the quality of transferability across cultures and across genres (Ben-Amos 1980). Our concern is that a motif may be transferred by Fo across texts and performances. For example, in his prologues Fo often drags powerful figures down to his level of popular entertainer by insinuating that they are fellow performers. He has done this on numerous occasions in reference to former President Reagan, an erstwhile movie star. In his introduction to "The American Technocrat" in *Mistero buffo* (1977a), he suggests that former President Ford's unfortunate public trips and stumbles are in reality intentional gags and refers to Ford as a fellow clown. And in the prologue to "The Pope and the Witch," he does the same with reference to Pope John Paul II: "We theater folk should be more generous towards each other" (1992b:i). The import of each such instance is enhanced by its associative value, that is, by its appearance in other contexts, and by its role in comprising a theme that in turn serves to define Fo's *poetics*. The humorous value is heightened by repetition as well, much like the signature jokes or shtick of famous comedians and comic actors. In order to illustrate the point, we will trace several themes and motifs from various sketches of his first *giullarata*, *Mistero buffo* (initially performed in 1969), which were later used in the development of one of his last *giullarate*, *Johan Padan* (initially performed in 1991). *Johan Padan Discovers America* is a *giullarata* about the adventures of a northern Italian antihero, first in Europe during the

⁹ See Scuderi 1996b and 1998.

Inquisitions, then on Columbus's fourth voyage, and finally in America with indigenous peoples.¹⁰

The Tyrannical Father and the Loving Son

The overriding theme of Fo's theater concerns the domination of official power over subaltern cultures. Subsumed under this greater rubric, and imbued with Gramscian overtones, are a myriad of themes and motifs that Fo strings together during the course of a performance or the development of a text. These themes and motifs carry with them added meaning from the contexts of the other performances and texts in which they appear. The primary theme, "official power versus popular culture," encompasses two very strong supporting themes that concern the figures of God the Father and Jesus Christ. The paternal God serves simultaneously as a device for justifying the authority of those in power and as an instrument to terrorize the downtrodden. Fo has consistently questioned the validity of the paternal God-figure of the First Testament. This work would suggest that the Church, as part of the ruling power structure, presents Him as a fickle and authoritative tyrant, distant from the sympathy of ordinary people. God the Father has served both as a symbol of and as a tool for an official culture that has historically used "cosmic terror" (Bakhtin 1984:335) and the fear of divine retribution as a means of oppression, while justifying its power and privileges as being divinely ordained. Fo discusses this issue in the prologue to "The Massacre of the Innocents" (1977b:28):

And why so much hatred on the part of the people towards God the Father? . . . Because the Father is representative of what those in power have taught the people. It is He who made divisions, dispensing lands, power, and privileges to a certain group of people, and trouble, desperation, submission, humiliation, mortification to the other part of the population.

While attempting to subvert the Church and its official dogma, Fo concurrently champions the cause of popular religion. His interpretation of popular religion is not only based on a historical aversion to the authoritative patriarchal God, but also asserts an affinity on the part of the folk with Jesus Christ: "That is why God the Father is so hated, because he represents those in power. It is He who bestows crowns and privileges; while Jesus Christ is

¹⁰ The protagonist's name is not pronounced like the German *Johann*, but rather /zo'an/, in Lombard dialect.

loved, for it is He who comes to earth to try and give back spring and above all dignity” (1977b:28-29). This Father/Son dichotomy and its social implications is at play in many of the elements that comprise Fo’s overall thematic-motivic code and his *poetics*.

The Disgusted Soldier and the Warrior Angel

There is a motif in “The Massacre of the Innocents” that we might label as “the disgusted soldier.” The sketch begins with two of Herod’s soldiers carrying out his bloody decree to slaughter all male children under the age of two. One of the soldiers has a change of heart, becomes disgusted with his actions, and refuses to continue the heinous mission. He tries to explain to his colleague that it is not a matter of cowardice, attempting to draw a distinction between justifiable acts committed during war and senseless bloodshed. In this case, the motif in the published text is well developed and closely corresponds to its forms in various performances (1977b:32, ellipses in the original):

FIRST SOLDIER	Wait, I think I’m going to puke.
SECOND SOLDIER	What do you expect? You eat like a cow: onions, salted goat and then... Come on, there’s an inn on the corner, I’ll buy you a drink.
FIRST SOLDIER	It has nothing to do with eating! It’s this slaughter, this carnage of children, it turns my stomach.
SECOND SOLDIER	If you knew you were so delicate, you shouldn’t have gotten into this profession.
FIRST SOLDIER	I became a soldier to kill men. Enemies.
SECOND SOLDIER	And perhaps to bang some women while you were at it, eh?
FIRST SOLDIER	Well that’s understood, but enemy women.
SECOND SOLDIER	And slaughter their livestock.
FIRST SOLDIER	The enemies’ livestock.

SECOND SOLDIER

Burn their houses, kill the elderly, the chickens, the children . . . I know, I know, “enemy children.”

FIRST SOLDIER

Yes, even children. But in war! In war it's not a dishonor . . .

The same motif appears in the first act of *Johan Padan*. The native people rebel over the continuous abduction and enslavement of their fellow tribesmen. When they try to stand up for their rights, the protagonist, Johan, witnesses their slaughter at the hands of the Europeans (*JP-V*)¹¹:

. . . out from the ships came the cannon and began firing against these warriors. Pow! Boom! People screaming, torn apart, guts hanging out, heads blown off. We were a bunch of imbeciles! Oh, let's be clear on this, I'm no sissy, I'm not weak of heart. At eighteen I was with the Lanzichenecchi [mercenary troops] between Brescia and Bergamo. I had the heart of a lion and I slaughtered men, but men who wanted to slaughter me. But these people were naked, always smiling, immaculate, the children laughing. And we'd catch them, throw them in the air, cut them in two, disembowel women. Scoundrels! I wanted to puke!

This scene, present in all the versions of *Johan Padan* used in this study, makes use of the “disgusted soldier” motif to define the horrors of military crimes and to establish the viciousness of the Europeans towards the indigenous people. Johan, as the disgusted soldier, while not protesting too strongly, retains some semblance of humanity and thus the sympathy of the audience.

Another motif from *Mistero buffo* may be labeled “the warrior angel.” Marisa Pizza reports on Fo’s prologue in a recorded performance of the sketch, “The Passion of Mary at the Cross.” After telling how the Devil will be punished by having his tail cut off by the angel Gabriel, Fo digresses into a discussion on the mythical violence of archangels, “always going around armed,” reminding us of Adam and Eve’s expulsion from paradise (Pizza 1996:233). This iconic motif is a strong statement in support of the thematic

¹¹ Citations from and references to the various versions of *Johan Padan a la descoperta de le Americhe* will be indicated as follows: *JP-I* (iconography), the published facsimile of the original iconography painted by Fo (Fo 1992c); *JP-T* (text), the published text of the play in dialect with an Italian translation (Fo 1992d); *JP-A* (audio), the recording on audio cassettes of a performance in Pordenone on December 12, 1991 (Fo 1991b); and *JP-V* (video), the recording on video cassette of a performance in Milan on April 24, 1992 (Fo 1992e).

association of official religion and official power.¹² In the second act of *Johan Padan*, when Johan tries to teach Christianity to the Indians, Fo introduces the same motif, dovetailing it with the violence previously established by “the disgusted soldier.” After trying in vain to convey why Adam and Eve felt shame for their nakedness (since the Indians themselves wore few or no clothes), he describes their expulsion from the garden (*JPT*:87-88):

And how angry they were when I told them how the angel of God descended with a flaming sword to chase Adam and Eve out of terrestrial paradise.

They yelled: “For sure that angel was one of those Spanish bastards!”

Then they asked me: “What was this terrestrial paradise like?”

“Well, it was a sweet and beautiful place, much like this.”

“Therefore the god didn’t kick us out, since we’re still here!”

“I guess they were right!”



¹² An angel armed with an enormous saber guards the manger in the send-up of the nativity scene in “The First Miracle of the Christ Child,” from *The Story of the Tiger* (Fo 1980:86).

The symbol of the paternal God as a terrorizing force, associated with the abuses of official power, was already present in the “Massacre of the Innocents,” as the grieving mother screams: “‘Terrible, pitiless God!’ I yelled. ‘This killing is your doing! It was you who wanted this sacrifice in order to allow your son to descend. One thousand children butchered for the sake of one of yours. A river of blood for one little cup’” (1977b:36). The weaving of motifs becomes intricate, for later in the religion lesson in *Johan Padan* the Indians express their anger toward God, admonishing Him in a similar way: “‘Oh cruel and evil God!’ they yelled, ‘When your son called to you, ‘Father help me!', why did you pretend not to hear and stayed there playing the guitar with the angels? You left him to die like a dog!’ And so crying, they threw stones into the sky at Him!” (*JP-T*:91)

Thus the motif of “the disgusted soldier” comes to *Johan Padan* already heavily charged by this former context. Fo uses it to establish the cruelty of the Europeans in the New World, and this information in turn works to inform the motif of “the warrior angel” when he is presented in the religion lessons. When the image of the archangel is introduced in *Johan Padan* it is given new meaning by its association, in historical context, with the violence and cruelty of the conquerors, creating a powerfully ironic icon that embodies the abuses of both official power and official religion.¹³

Feminine Beauty

In support of the general theme that “sex is human” or “sex is not evil” (in opposition to official religious morals), Fo takes delight in describing feminine beauty in his performances. In “The Birth of the *Giullare*,” the *jongleur*-narrator tells of his former life as a poor farmer. In the description of his wife in the written text, we find a motivic formula to be contextualized and developed in performance: “She’s sweet my wife, white skin with two round breasts. She has a gentle gait, like a young girl when she walks” (1977b:72). In performance this brief sketch becomes an elaborate description of feminine beauty, which includes firm breasts “that would come together like bells when she ran” (1977a). It also includes a stately manner of walking with perfect posture (among Fo’s favorite routines), which in performance is accompanied by his extraordinary mime.

¹³ The original text for *Johan Padan* was a series of drawings and paintings (*JP-I*), an example being the image of the expulsion included in this essay. In performance, Fo kept the iconographic text on a lectern and would occasionally refer to it as a mnemonic device.

(The image of balancing the glass while walking comes up in each of the examples of the motif's variations that follow.) Here is one instance (1977a):

. . . she walked like a queen. You could place a small glass filled with water on her behind as she walked by, not a drop would be spilt!

There are various descriptions of feminine beauty in *Johan Padan*. In the published text, when Johan encounters a new tribe of indigenous people who have come to pay a visit to his host tribe, he comments on the women: "Their women were beautiful, I had never seen any so beautiful" (*JP-T*:33). Once again, this statement in the text stands as a formula that Fo contextualizes in performance with elaborately sensual descriptions, accompanied by gestural language conveying the stately walk:

. . . what magnificent girls! Big, with long black hair to their knees. What breasts! Their breasts would laugh! Buttocks like balconies, such that if you were to place a glass of water on their buttocks as they walked, not a drop would they spill! (*JP-A*)

. . . with girls, the most beautiful women I had ever seen in the world! With long flowing hair down to their knees, breasts that would emerge, magnificent buttocks, such that if you placed a glass of water on their buttocks, they could walk without spilling a drop! (*JP-V*)

The "sex is not evil" theme, supported by its motifs and informed by the general thematic-motivic code, occurs often in *Johan Padan* as the adventurer makes love to his girlfriend back in Venice and to the uninhibited native girls, even two at a time (*JP-T*:36). Each time this theme is introduced in performance, it is supported by elements of the "feminine beauty" motif. It is finally introduced with powerful subversive impact, once again, when Johan tries to explain Christianity to the Indians. He is forced to placate them by presenting Mary Magdalene as Jesus' lover, thus presenting Christ in a human light (*JP-V*):

How happy they were to hear how He would raise the dead, embrace children. . . . The only thing they didn't like was this going around praying with the twelve apostles, all men. They were a little suspicious, so I added Mary Magdalene: "He had a lover named Magdalene." They loved this image of a beautiful woman covered only by her long hair. [He mimes Magdalene flashing her breasts from under her hair.]

"They must have always been in their hammock making love!"

“No. The Gospel doesn’t mention it.”

“Then what were they doing in the hammock, catching a breeze? They were making love! How can a woman like Magdalene not make love with Jesus, and he, the son of God, not make love to her? He did make love, by God! Like a god!”

[Audience applauds]

“Then why doesn’t the Gospel say so?”

“They must have torn out the pages!”

The motif of “feminine beauty,” associated with lovemaking and presented in a positive light, is used various times throughout *Johan Padan*. By the time Fo gets to Mary Magdalene, it seems natural that she also be depicted in this mode. The motif helps to present her as an extraordinary woman, worthy to be the lover of the son of God. This, in turn, serves to underscore the human aspect of Jesus. The two themes, “sex is not evil” and “Christ was human,” dovetail and support the positive popular connotations associated with Fo’s Jesus, the complementary converse of the authoritative and distant God. As would be expected in Fo’s schema, the Native Americans, as subalterns and victims of the European conquerors, readily accept Jesus while reacting to God the father with suspicion and aversion.

Coming from a standpoint deeply rooted in Gramscian thought, Fo believes that “all art, even the most aristocratic, always derives from an art that was born of the folk” (1993). Although at times he may have carried this point of view to extremes, his perspective on popular performance is essential for an understanding of his theatrical art. The thematic-motivic code explored in this study is but one aspect of Fo’s theater that is akin to popular performance forms. As indicated above, his *giullarata* also represents an adaptation of formulaic-based performance, in which he contextualizes preconceived ideas without memorizing a text.¹⁴ This was demonstrated at his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, “Contra Jogulatores Obloquentes” (“Against Jongleurs of Irreverent Speech”). In the formal and official context of the Nobel Prize, specifically awarded for “literature,” Fo made a strong statement about the important role popular culture has played in his theater through his rejection of a written text and the homage he paid to the oral tradition. Instead of a formal, written text of his speech, he passed out a series of cartoon-like drawings that amounted to a mnemonic device, signaling a series of formulas based on preconceived ideas to be

¹⁴ See Scuderi 1996a and 1998.

contextualized—that is, actualized as a performance. With the validation of the Nobel Prize for Literature, along with his worldwide popularity and influence in performance circles, Fo has succeeded in a very real way in raising the status of the oral tradition to the level of literary prestige, and has helped in redefining the concept of “literature” to comprehend oral tradition and performance.

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