Introduction to Dario Fo’s

We Won’t Pay!

Franca Rame

Translated by Lino Pertile


There are many people who seem to think—perhaps because it is easier and more exciting—that our transition (I mean Dario’s and mine) from the traditional theatre to that in which we now work, occurred suddenly, almost overnight, as a consequence of a sort of mystical crisis, as though we had been overcome by the 1968 wave of students’ protest and workers’ struggles. As if one fine morning we woke up saying: ‘That’s enough, let’s wrap ourselves up in the red flag, let’s have our own cultural revolution!’

In fact our true turning point, the point that really mattered, we took at the very beginning of our journey, 22 years ago, when with Paventi, Durano and Lecoq we staged for the first time The Finger in the Eye. Those were the days of Scelba and his ‘subculture’, of Pacelli (the pope) with his civic committees, the days of total censorship. Police superintendents, ministers, bishops and cops understood it immediately: we were ‘a company of communists’ and we were making ‘red propaganda’. Every night there would be an inspector in the auditorium checking our words one by one against the script and the Ministry for Entertainment would obstruct our touring arrangements, while the most reactionary theatre-owners would refuse us their buildings and the bishops would ask the police to tear our [posters?] from the walls of their cities.

The Finger in the Eye was underlined everywhere we went, among the shows ‘advised against’ in the parish bulletins. This hounding of ‘the communist enemy of civilisation and of Holy Mary’ went on for many years with all our shows. However, the workers, the students and the progressive bourgeoisie were supporting us, thereby allowing us to move on and make ourselves known, despite the lack of any prizes.

On more than one occasion we were almost prevented from performing our plays. The opening of He Had Two Guns, a play about the collusion between fascism and the bourgeoisie, and between political power and organised crime, was halted by the extremely severe interference of censorship which literally butchered our script. We decided to take no notice of the cuts and get on with the play. There was a trial of strength between us and the Milan prefecture which threatened us with immediate arrest, but in the end the Ministry, worried about a possible scandal, lifted the cuts. The script of the Archangels was taken away from us because of the many unauthorised jokes we had added to it during the performance. For the same show we collected ‘reports’ to the police superintendent of every single town we visited. I was reported for making a remark against the army in a play about Columbus. While running the same Columbus we were assaulted by fascists outside the Valle Theatre in Rome, just at a moment when, by a strange coincidence, the police had disappeared. Dario was even challenged to a duel by an artillery officer, for having slighted the honour of the Italian army, and, crazy as he is, he even accepted the challenge on condition that the duel should be fought barefoot as a Thai boxing match, of which he boasted being regional champion. The artillery officer was never seen again. However, there weren’t just funny incidents. Though we were operating inside the ‘official’ theatre, we were beset by endless troubles and difficulties. The reactionaries and the conservatives could not swallow the kind of ‘satirical violence’ present in our scripts. Dozens of critics accused us of debasing the stage by introducing politics at every step and they went on proposing the usual, worn out model of ‘art for art’s sake’.

Our theatre was becoming increasingly provocative, leaving no room for purely ‘digestive’ entertainment. The reactionaries were getting furious. On more than one occasion there were brawls among the audience, provoked by the fascists in the stalls. The Chief of Siena police had Dario taken in by two ‘carabinieri’ at the end of a show, because he had offended a foreign head of state ([Lyndon Baines] Johnson). Whatever the criticism of our work, it must be recognised that our theatre was alive—we spoke of ‘facts’ which people needed to hear about. For this reason and for the direct language we used,
Audiences increased at every performance. From 1964 to 1968 our box office takings were always the highest among the major companies in Italy and we were among those who charged the lowest prices. Yet it was just at the end of the 1968 season (a true record in terms of takings) that we arrived at the decision to leave the traditional structures of the official theatre. We had realised that, despite the hostility of a few, obtuse reactionaries, the high bourgeoisie reacted to our ‘spankings’ almost with pleasure. Masochists?

No, without realising it, we were helping their digestion. Our ‘whipping’ boosted their blood circulation, like some good birching after a refreshing sauna. In other words we had become the minstrels of a fat and intelligent bourgeoisie. This bourgeoisie did not mind our criticism, no matter how pitiless it had become through our use of satire and grotesque technique, but only so long as the exposure of their ‘vices’ occurred exclusively within the structures they controlled.

An example of this rationale was offered by our participation in a TV programme, Canzonissima. A few months earlier we had done a show, Who’s Seen Him?, for the second TV channel which had only recently become operative and was still the privilege of the well-to-do. On that occasion we had been allowed to do a socio-political satire of rather unusual violence—at least by TV standards. Everything went well, without great hitches. Indeed the reviews were totally favourable and we were ‘warmly’ applauded by the ‘selected’ audience. However, when we tried to say the same sort of things before an audience of over 20 million people and in the most popular programme of the year (which Canzonissima, certainly was), the heavens fell. The same newspapers that had applauded our earlier show now unleashed a lynching campaign. ‘It is infamous,’ they would say, ‘to feed such wickedness, worthy of the basest political propaganda, to an audience as uneducated and easily swayed as the great mass of TV viewers.’ Consequently the TV governors, urged by civic committees and by the most backward centres of authority, imposed cuts and vetoes of unimaginable severity. Our scripts were being massacred. It was a return to Scelba’s censorship. We were forced to abandon the programme and faced four law suits. For 18 years now we haven’t set foot in the TV studios. Thirteen years of ‘banishment’ and 200 million lire in damages, plus 26 million to pay. Authority does not forgive those who do not respect the rules of its game.

It’s the usual story. The great kings, the potentates who understand such things, have always paid fools to recite before a public of highly-educated courtiers, their rigmaroles of satirical humours and even of irreverent allusions to their masters’ power and injustices. The courtiers could exclaim in amazement: ‘What a democratic king! He has the moral strength to laugh at himself!’ But we well know that, if the fools had been impudent enough to leave the court and sing the same satires in the town squares, before the peasants, the workers and the exploited, the king and his sycophants would pay them back in a different currency. You are allowed to mock authority, but if you do it from the outside, it will burn you. This is what we had understood. In order to feel at one with our Political commitment, it was no longer enough to consider ourselves as democratic, left-wing artists full of sympathy for the working class and, in general, for the exploited. Sympathy was no longer sufficient. The lesson came to us directly from the extraordinary struggles of the working people, from the new impulse that Young people against authoritarianism and social were giving in the schools to the fight a i injustice and for the creation of a new culture and a new relationship with the exploited classes. No longer could we act as intellectuals, sitting comfortably within and above our own privileges, deigning in our goodness to deal with the predicament of the exploited. We had to place ourselves entirely at the service of the exploited, become their minstrels. Which meant going to work within the structures provided by the working class. That is why we immediately thought of the workers’ clubs.

The workers’ social clubs (case del popolo) in Italy represent a peculiar and very widespread phenomenon. They were set up by workers and peasants at the turn of the century, when the first socialist cells began to appear. The fronts of these first buildings used to bear the following inscription: ‘if you want to give to the poor, give five coppers, two for bread and three for culture’, and culture does not only mean being able to read and write, but also to express one’s own creativity on the basis of one’s own world-view.

However, by working in these places, we realised that the original need to study and produce culture together, which inspired workers and peasants to build their own clubs, had been completely dissipated. The clubs had be come nothing more than shops, selling more or less alcoholic drinks, or dance halls or billiard rooms. I’m not saying that drinking, dancing and playing cards or billiards is unimportant. The trouble is that nothing more went on there. There were almost no discussions. Some documentary films or little shows were put on, but only as a recreational activity. The working class parties had failed to
follow up the needs for creative expression that had been manifested so powerfully among workers and peasants. This failure was based on their persuasion that it is useless to stimulate the development of a proletarian culture, since this does not and cannot exist. 'Only one culture exists'—is what those 'who know' say—and it is above all classes. Culture is one, as one is the moon or the sun that shine equally for all those who want and can take advantage of them.'

Naturally we soon found ourselves fighting against this unity of classes theory. In the arguments that followed we often quoted the example of the Chinese revolution, where the Party had shown a very different faith in the creativity of the masses and in their ability and willingness to build a different language and a different philosophy of human relationships and social life. Above all we pointed to the great, truly revolutionary determination of the Chinese leaders to urge the intellectuals towards active political participation beyond any personal artistic interest. The intellectuals were asked to commit themselves totally to class struggle, with the aim of studying the culture of peasants and workers and learning about their needs in order to transform them together into artistic expression. These ideas drove the Party bureaucrats furious. They would cling to the usual cliché that 'we must move on gradually, starting from the lowest levels, avoiding any flight forward'. They also evinced a certain mistrust of the workers' intelligence and ability not only to express but also to invent a particular cultural world of their own. In fact the workers' clubs' audiences not only listened but actively participated in our debates and our work.

Now, as I read the proofs of those early plays, I remember our first show at the Sant'Egidio club in the suburbs of Cesena. We had decided to go there for our main rehearsals four or five days before the opening. We were assembling the scaffolding for the stage with the help of the lads in the organisation (ARCI) and a few workers and students. However, the club members went on playing cards at the other end of the hall, looking at us now and again, but with diffidence. Clearly for them we were a group of intellectuals, mildly affected perhaps by the populist bug, stopping over for a few days to refresh our spirit among the proletariat and then away again to where we had come from. What took them by surprise was actually seeing us working, working with our own hands, lifting boxes, carrying steel tubes, fixing nuts and bolts, setting up the stage lights. What? Actors, both male and female, slogging away? Incredible!

In the meantime a rather serious problem had arisen: voices reverberated too much in the hall. We wouldn't perform in those conditions. We had to first arrange some cables underneath the ceiling and to hang a few acoustic panels. We decided to use egg-boxes, the kind made of cardboard. But it was necessary first to tie them together with string, a job which I took on myself together with two other women comrades. We started stringing the boxes together with the help of some upholstering needles, but it wasn't at all easy.

After swearing for a couple of hours trying to get the needles through the cardboard, we noticed that the comrades from the club had interrupted their games and were looking at us, following our work with interest but in complete silence. After a while an old comrade muttered, as though talking to himself: 'One would want a much longer needle for that job.' Then, silence again for a few more minutes. Then someone else said: 'I could easily make one with a bicycle spoke.' "Go!" they all said. In a moment the comrades were back with ten very long needles. Then everybody started to help us to get the string through the boxes and hang them, climbing on step-ladders, like jugglers, cracking jokes, laughing as though it were a big game. A few hours later there were so many people in the hall that we could hardly move. Even the most stubborn billiard players had come to help us and some women too, who had just come to get their husbands back home.

The ice was broken and their diffidence entirely overcome. We had won their sympathy by showing that we too could work and sweat. In the late afternoon, after work, they would come to help us and when we started rehearsing, they would sit at the opposite end of the hall looking at us very quietly. The old men would silence the young ones, who burst out laughing at our jokes: 'You mustn't disturb', they would say. Then little by little they all loosened up. At the end of our rehearsals we would ask for their views, whether they had any criticism to make. At first they wouldn't unbutton, saying that they knew nothing about theatre, but later they became less shy and began to make critical remarks and give us some advice too, which in variably was as unassuming as it was pertinent and to the point. When we finally got to the opening night, the show didn't just belong to 'The New Stage': it was our show in the sense that it belonged to all of us in that hall, who had built it together. Later on, when we moved to other clubs in the vicinity, those comrades followed us and introduced the show to the local comrades. They went out hanging posters and were always the first to speak in the debates. They supported us, we were their team.

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In that first year we performed in more than 80 workers’ clubs, indoor bowling alleys, occupied factories, suburban cinemas and even in some theatres. We performed before 200,000 and more spectators, of whom 70 per cent had never before seen a play. The debates that followed our shows were always lively, going on till very late at night. Everyone spoke—women, boys, grown-ups and old people. They all talked about their experiences—the Resistance and their struggles—and they told us what we could put on the stage in future: their history.

We drew new themes and plots from those debates, and we found above all a new, direct language without rhetoric or sophistication. For this reason we were accused of populism, but populists are those who parachute down to the people from high above, not those who are up to their necks inside the world of the people and who do their utmost to learn about the struggles of everyday men and women. And by living with the people we have also been able to verify for ourselves the great truth expressed by Brecht when he said: 'The people can say deep and complex things with great simplicity; the populists who descend from above to write for the people say with great simplicity hollow and banal things.'

However, the debates, the polemics and especially the shows that resulted from them, began to annoy the clubs’ managers, not to mention those of ARCI, the organisation within which we all were operating. We held on for a while, but in the end were forced to give up. The tension was causing real rows and all sorts of outbursts against us, in oral and written form—in polemical articles in the Unita and the Party’s cultural journals. Sometimes we reacted without much dialectical sense, in a confused and fanciful manner. We had very little experience of political subtleties nor did we know how to be restrained and accommodating. Nevertheless today, if we look back objectively, while recognising how sectarian we sometimes were and admitting our mistakes, we must say that we could do nothing else. Had we stayed within those structures, we wouldn’t have made a single step forward, we would have been ensnared by a thousand compromises.

The separation with ARCI didn’t come easily. There was a further division within us too. More than half the company chose to continue working within the ARCI structures and kept calling themselves ‘The New Stage’. We called our group ‘The Commune’. We had come through a great crisis, but it had been a crisis towards growth and clarity. Basically there had always been a conflict in the company between two fundamentally different ways of looking at our roles as actors. What were we, militants at the complete service of the working class or, more simply, left-wing artists? The dilemma kept emerging. The latter point of view meant accepting more or less correct compromises, veering towards opportunism, renouncing any vigour not only in respect of our own criteria, but also of our collective and individual behaviour both inside and outside the activity of the group. Moreover, there was among ourselves a sort of self-defeating democratism that was the first cause of arguments, conflicts and division. Dario and I, while trying to avoid acting as managers, made the opposite mistake. We didn’t provide any direction at all for the group. What is worse, we allowed some ambitious individuals who were after power, to organise political factions to the point of endangering our autonomy. Therefore, two years ago, at the time of the last break-up, Dario and I found ourselves with only four other comrades, completely alone and bereft of everything—the lorry, the vans, the electrical equipment, including our personal stage equipment—we had put together during 20 years’ work and which, on leaving the official theatre, we brought to the company.

Whether those comrades were correct in bringing about the split, can perhaps best be judged from the fact that in less than one year their productions have achieved only indescribable failures. They have been cutting each other’s throats, they have broken up again, wasted money, sold or abandoned all the equipment. And now they have broken up for good, they don’t exist any more. This disaster does not give us any pleasure at all. It only makes us very sad, as we realise how many comrades, with the ability and the quality of good actors, how many who could have continued working for our common aim, can have been so easily undone by the deleterious ideology which time and again emerges like a tumour inside every company: individualism, the struggle for personal power and all the evils that go with it. But we learned one thing, that this mistake can be fought and overcome only if we tie ourselves even more closely to the working class and their struggles, if we let the workers direct our activity and put ourselves entirely at their disposal and service with the utmost confidence. It is because of this principle, that the mood inside our group has entirely changed: there is no more tension, no more personal arguing.

Well, despite all the problems, rows, conflicts and splits, the positive thing is the result of these seven years’ work—the millions of people who have seen our plays, our intervention with purpose-written scripts in occupied factories and cities where political trials were being held (as was the case with The Accidental Death of an Anarchist, performed in Milan during the Calabresi-Lotta Continua trial; or with
Bang Bang, Who’s There? Police!, performed in Rome for the Valfuda trial; or our interventions on behalf of Giovanni Marius in Salerus and Vallo della Lucania, in Pescara during the trial of fifty prisoners who had rebelled in the city’s jail in Mestre to help the Marghera workers; and many other shows in other cities, when the total takings went to support the striking workers of Padua, Bergarus, Asli, Varese, Tusit and for a long period, Milan; or the sale of 10,000 glasses from an occupied Milanese factory carried out at the Palazzetto dello Sport of Bologna, which was an incredible event, every comrade, every spectator carrying a glass in his hands.)

The fact that Dario, despite so many internal and external worries (trials, assaults, arrests, attempts on his life), managed to write and produce something like three scripts every year (not to mention all the emergency sketches), seems amazing even to me, though I have personally lived through all these ordeals.

At this point I should say something about Dario’s craft as a writer, or, I should say, as a maker of scripts for the stage. Why a maker rather than writer? Because, when he writes, Dario needs to think out and build a stage or, preferably, a sequence of scenic spaces and planes on which the dramatic action can take place. It is also a question of theatrical construction rather than simple writing because his theatre is not based on characters, but on situations. The characters become masks, i.e., emblematic pretexts at the service of a situation. The stage moves on by virtue of an action, just as the actor moves by virtue of his gestures and his words. Even the stage props therefore become part of an action. This demands great open-mindedness at the level of stage management. Therefore Dario can allow himself to bring on to the stage puppets and marionettes, masks and mannikins, actors with natural or painted faces. And all this he joins together from the inside with the songs, the jokes, the coarse shouting, the use of noisy instruments, the pauses, the exasperated rhythm—though never overdone, because his style is rigorous even when everything seems haphazard and accidental. Only superficial people can in fact think that Dario’s theatre is ‘handmade’. On the contrary, it is all reasoned out in advance, written, rehearsed, rewritten and rehearsed again and always in a practical relationship to and with the audience. It must be remembered that Dario studied as an architect and that, besides being an actor and a writer, he is also a choreographer. He always sees the stage (and he insists on this) as ‘plan, elevation, foreshortening and perspective’. Personally, coming from a family of actors, I’ve seen, since I was a child, all kinds of shows being prepared and written, but I have always been struck by Dario’s method. He has a constant inventiveness and is always lively and young, never banal and obvious. His scripts are always technically perfect, never boring or tiresome. What amazes me most of all is that when he writes, he always keeps the structure of his text entirely open, he doesn’t build in advance a complete framework. He invents dialogue based on a paradoxical or a real situation and goes on from there by virtue of some kind of natural, geometric logic, inventing conflicts that find their solutions in one gag after another in correspondence with a parallel political theme, a political theme which must be clear and didactic. You are moved and you laugh, but above all you are made to think, realise and develop your understanding of everyday events that had before escaped your attention.

This is what I think of Dario Fo as playwright. Many others have talked about Dario as writer-director-actor. I can add something about Dario’s behaviour as an actor on the stage. He is always alert, ready to catch the mood of an audience with inimitable timing. For the comrades who work with him he is a comrade up until the end of every show. He regrets his success when it compromises that of other actors and he does his utmost to make sure that each one achieves adequate personal satisfaction. If a comrade misses a burst of laughter, he goes on working at it and isn’t satisfied until the colleague gets it back.

About Dario the man and partner I am reluctant to say anything, except that his honesty and his inner beauty can be seen better on his face as he grows older. He is getting more gentle, nice and calm, humble, generous and patient. I don’t know anybody with so much patience, especially with those who pester him, and god knows how many of them we have met in these years. Moreover, he is generous and stubborn. Nothing depresses him, I’ve never heard him say ‘let’s give up’. Even the hardest ordeals, such as my kidnapping by the fascists, or the 1972 split, he has overcome by reasoning with his usual strength, confident that he would make it, trusting the support and the respect of the comrades who have followed us by the thousands. What would you say? Do you think that I am quite ‘crazy’ about Dario? That I admire him a lot? Too much? Well, I say that yes, I admire him, but even more, I respect him. I was so lucky to meet him! If I hadn’t already done it, I’d marry him now.