Dario Fo: The Modern Giullare

CHAPTER II

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The Belief in art for art's sake arises whenever the artists and people keenly interested in art are out of harmony with his social environment. (Plekhanov 21)

Dario Fo, along with his oppositional theatre, has always been an inseparable part of radical mass movements in Italy since the 1950s. He never tried to dissociate himself from the disturbing realities and burning issues in the society. Fo never had any tryst with existential crises or psychological dilemmas to keep his artistic self away from the social environment and to crate an individualistic hallucinatory environment. He always readily plunged into political controversies and swam against the current. His individuality has always been determined by his society. His leftist socialist ideology taught him the realistic lesson that art is for people's sake. Therefore he never got alienated from the people.

Dario Fo is a permanent outsider of the establishment, Catholicism and reformist Communism. Through his alternative theatre Fo has been tirelessly targeting the three embodiments of state totalitarianism, religious eclecticism and parliamentary opportunism of revolutionary movements. One can briefly summarize that abuse of political power; religious eclecticism and reformist Communism were the targets of Fovian theatrical battle. A close thematic analysis of Fo's plays undoubtedly reveals these aspects.
The Italian establishment labeled him a “theatre anarchist”, the Catholic heavy weights denounced him a “blasphemous lout” and reformist communists ridiculed him as an exponent of “comic communism”. However, Fo never gave in to these giant walls that stand in the path of political transparency, individual freedom and revolutionary ideals.

The writings of Karl Marx, Mao Tsetung, Antonio Gramsci etc. provided Fo necessary ideological clarity and political orientation. On this early Marxist connection and anti-establishment elements in his theatre Fo openly declares that:

Mine has always been a revolt, a rebellion, against a hypocritical and deceitful order, which dates back to my experience as a student. As Marx says, ‘the ruling ideas in a society are the ideas of the ruling class’, and at that times it [The Christian Democratic Party of Italy] was only the ruling class, which expressed its culture. Therefore my class, the peasantry, was viewed as being a parasite that lived off that culture and aped some of its products.

(Behan, Revolutionary 7)

Later on the Marxist theatre personalities like Bertolt Brecht, Erwin Picastor and Vsevolod Meyerhold, perfected his theatrical insights. Medieval Commedia dell’Arte, the giullare and fabulators bestowed him with delivery methods and above all, his wife-cum-colleague Franca Rame supported and suffered with him all the consequent persecutions.
Dario Fo is an all-round theatrician. He is primarily not only a talented actor, but also a powerful author, an amazing director, stage designer, and a hilarious mime too. For Fo, theatre is not merely a venue or channel for expression of the vicissitudes of existential dilemmas or deeper psychological reverberations. For him theatre is a means and method for registering dissenting political statements. His theatre is definitely a theatre of the oppressed intending to arouse the audience’s consciousness against the prevailing injustices and exploitations. Fo’s theatre absorbs energy from the masses’ survival issues; he modifies them theatrically and gives them back to the people in the shape of a political weapon to fight against the perpetrators of exploitation and injustice. Receiving the coveted Nobel Prize for Literature in 1997, he spoke on his ideological mission:

Our task as intellectuals, as persons who mount the pulpit or stage, and who most importantly, address to young people, our tasks is not just to tech them method, like how to use the arms, how to control breathing, how to use the stomach, the voice, the falsetto, the contra campo. It’s not enough to teach a technique or style; we have to show them what is happening around us. They have to be able to tell their own story. A theatre, a literature that does not speak for its own time has no relevance. (Nobel Lecture)

When Bertolt Brecht dismantled the established, structured narrative stylistics of theatre through his epic theatre, it ultimately
proved to be a revolution in the structure of theatre. However in Fovian theatre, the revolution was in content. Disagreeing with all theoretical holy cows and sacrosanctity of the profession, he fearlessly and directly attacked the abuse of power, de-enlightening attitude of Christianity, hijacking of people's revolution by the parliamentary communists, dehumanizing and exploitative capitalism and so on. By directly referring to the living personalities, contemporary political figures and religious tycoons through his plays, Fo set a unique example of political and moral fortitude. His moral guts and political orientation were instrumental in changing the theatre and polticalscape of Europe, especially of Italy in the 1960s and 1970s. He believed that theatre ultimately had to be a weapon in the hands of the oppressed.

Dario Fo was born on 24 March 1926, at San Giano, in the province of Varese, Northern Italy, which was a hub of art right from the middle ages (Martindale 11). His father was a Railway worker-cum-par time actor and mother had a peasant background. He was brought up amidst the sons of Lombardian glassblowers, fishermen and smugglers to whom the young Fo would listen with intense curiosity for their tales of adventure, hypocrisies of the authority and exploitation by the bosses. Not only did Fo get the elementary lessons on story telling from them but was also politicized by their narratives.

Initially trained to be a professional architect in Milan, Fo's theatrical debut were in the piccoli teatri (small theatre) movements that performed improvised monologues in the 1950s. Right from the
very beginning of public appearances Fo has successfully managed to keep the image of a controversial figure. The scandalised authorities had to cancel the broadcast of his radio political programme *Cocorico* in RAI (Italian National Radio) as he used Biblical tales for political satire.

With *Archangels Don't Play Pinball* (1959), the Fo-Rame couple shot into national and international fame. They were invited to produce the popular TV programme *Conzonissima* (1962) but had to leave it unfinished as they refused to accept severe bowdlerization anymore. By now they had become national celebrities. They had amazing success rate in the mainstream bourgeoisie proscenium theatre with their productions like *The Finger in the Eye* (1953) in which they were accused of the communist enemy of civilization with red propaganda. Afterwards they produced *He Had Two Guns* (1960), a play about the collision between fascism and bourgeoisie, and *Columbus* (1963) depicting imperialistic mentalities of totalitarian states.

But soon, coupled with the emotional passivity of their bourgeois audience and their own proletarian concerns, Fo and Rame dissociated themselves from the traditional structures of official theatre. Fo had understood that bourgeoisie wouldn't mind criticism so far as it is raised inside the structure controlled by them. So it was necessary to disengage from that controlled theatrical circle. Their political consciousness made Fo and Rame realize that
...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, form the new impulse that young people were giving in the schools to fight against authoritarianism and social injustice for the creation of a new culture and a new relationship with the exploited class. 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 structure provided by the working class. (Intro. Plays 2 xxii)

After their much considered departure from the mainstream theatre in 1968 they set up a new theatrical company, Nuova Scena (New Scene), and started working in collaboration with the workers Clubs (Case del Popola) affiliated to the Italian Communist Party (PCI). In its publicity brochure Nuova Scena declared its cultural policies as:

Theatre, like all other means of expression, has always belonged to the ruling class, which makes use of it as an instrument of ideological and political pressure. The
structures of theatre architecture and site of the buildings, performance time, ticket prices exclude popular audiences from while that theatre itself, in its choice of script and language, offers exclusively bourgeoisie-styled products, it speaks to the society which supports it. (Behan, Revolutionary 22-23)

The path breaking Mistero Buffo (1969) belongs to this period of engagement with the main stream Communist Party. Soon Fo got fed up with the inflexibility and adjustment policies of the official left, and in 1970 they formed a new theatre collective, La Commune (The Commune) and started identifying with the non-mainstream radical lefts. Even though they said adieu to the Italian Communist Party, Fo and his co-activists, in the words of Arturo Peragalli, maintained that, “theatre only has a use if it is connected on the one hand to the masses and their just demands, and on the other hand to the organized vanguard; in order to become one of the thousand vehicles, one of the thousand weapons in the process of a Socialist revolution” (Behan, Revolutionary 29). Fo’s more radical and politically provoking plays like the Accidental Death of an Anarchist (1970) and Can’t Pay? Won’t Pay! (1973) are the byproducts of his ultimate disengagement with the parliamentary Communists.

Dario Fo never claimed any type of political neutrality nor did he hide from public and spectators his political orientation towards the leftist ideology. This frank admittance of political partiality in
favor of the oppressed turned his theatre more disturbing and provoking. His is a direct theatre in support of the working class and against the oppressors. Fo has definitively unmasked the long established religious falsehoods and delivered credible judgments on the cunningness and complexities of the repressive state apparatuses in the light of the enlightening ideology, Marxism. Because of his un-compromising theatre he was arrested over a dozen times in Italy; made Rame subject to kidnapping, torture and rape; provoked Vatican to label his *Mistero Buffo* "the most blasphemous show in the history of television"; promoted the Italian Communist Party (PCI) call his play *The Worker Knows 3000 words, The Boss Knows 1000* (1969) "crude, banal and sentimental" and forced the United State of America to bar his entry in the country in 1980 and 1984 in the pretext of protecting the country from the communist Fo.

Fo's theatre is an exciting blend of tradition and modernity; seriousness and comedy; and ideology and anarchism. Structurally he is enormously traditional with no avant-garde obsessions with expressionism, surrealism, futurism, impressionism, montage, and so on, except a Jacques Copeaun (1879-194) admiration for *treteau nu* (naked stage). Nevertheless, thematically he is at par with the modern *avant gardes* with his high intellectual moral and political mission of giving went to the feelings of the marginalized and exploited class. His theatrical incitements for political anarchism are firmly rooted in socialist revolutionary ideology. His themes
echo the saying, “Let’s not start with good old things, let’s start with bad new ones.”

There are historical reasons for Fo’s theatre being rude and disrespectful. As a method, largely, Fo imbibles, the performance tradition of the giullare (the jongleurs), the itinerant popular performers of the Middle Ages. The giullare were the medieval jesters who played irreverent, grotesque theatrical pieces at the country carnivals. Their performances were filled with sarcasm, sharp jibes at the landowners and the corrupt clergy. Using vulgar, popular and unpolished language they exposed the corruption and exploitation in the feudal society. They were the modern day counterparts of theatrical anarchists including Dario Fo. This theatre of protest in the pre-capitalist society provided Fo with a fresh tool for mockery and attack.

The sharpness of the giullari tongue and the bitterness of the prevailing social reality are reflected generally in Fo’s plays. The giullari were unprotected by the law and anyone could finish those disturbing creatures with legal immunity (Nobel Lecture). In the Middle Ages the giullari wandered through the streets, cites of carnivals and religious festivals revealing their stories of deceit and exploitation by the feudal masters. Their performances had a political mission of warning people about the oppression. They would entertain and educate the mass with ironic remarks and slapstick performances in sophisticated invented dialect that could be understood by the people of a vast geographical area.
For his method of onstage delivery Dario is heavily indebted to the professional theatrical cycles of the Commedia dell'Arte. According to Stuart Hood, "the lineage of his [Fo's] writing and performance can be traced back to the Commedia dell'Arte of the Renaissance which established the cast of cunning servants, swaggering swordsmen, lecherous old men and star-crossed lovers with their masks and conventional costumes that held the stage for more than two hundred years." (Intro. Plays ix)

Basically the Commedia dell'Arte performances were meant to entertain the court conclaves. They were bourgeois media of entertainment. But Dario Fo reinvented the techniques of slapstick comedy and sophisticated farce to suit his purpose. The elements of acrobatics, quick wit, quick change of character and situations, embedded criticism, and spontaneous onstage improvisation are the Commedia dell'Arte legacies that he applies in his theatre of protest.

Dario Fo's play texts are filled with unpolished popular dialectical expressions. This intentional 'de-civilization' exercise makes Fo's dialogue coarse and razor sharp. This whipping with a vulgar tongue aggravates the fury of the targeted people, i.e. the exploiters and oppressors. Fo's language is entirely zannian. Stuart Hood explains on the linguistic peculiarities of Fo's theatre:

These zanies — peasant clowns from the valley of Po developed a tradition of mime and the convention of *grammelot*: a mixture of dialect words and a language that was no language and yet one audience could latch on and understand and still do. (Intro. Plays ix)
This combination of the giullari style, the Commedia dell'Arte tradition, the zannian slapstick and grammelot transforms Fo's theatre into a popular, rude and disrespectful one. Stuart Hood elaborates that Fo's theatrical mission is therefore one with a trajectory that takes him away from the formal scholarly dramas of the Renaissance courts just as it does from the bourgeois plays of the nineteenth century and the well-made plays of our own time. The art of comic acting, of working with masks, of mime and grammelot developed in order to create a modern popular theatre (xi).

Before elaborating the other thematic and methodological features of Fo's theatre, a brief description of the stylistic and thematic features of the Commedia dell'Arte theatre variety, on which Fo heavily indebted is necessary.

The Commedia dell'Arte

The Commedia dell'Arte, ("Comedy of Art" or "Comedy of the Profession") denotes a species of largely unwritten or improvised, professional drama that originated in Italy in the fourteenth century and flourished throughout Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Thanks to its local origin it is also known as the "Italian Comedy". This Renaissance theatrical nomenclature implies a peculiar manner of performance rather than the thematic content of the performance text. The first documented history of the Commedia dell'Arte began in 1545, in Padua, Italy with the signing of a professional contract binding on a group of men to travel about playing commedia for money (Borwn John, Oxford Illustrated 118). It
was the Commedia dell'Arte theatrical entertainment that introduced the professional actors into Europe.

The phrase “Commedia dell'Arte” doesn't suggest a single monolithic theatre variety. It is more or less an umbrella phrase that includes almost all the popular performance traditions of the Middle Ages. According M.A. Katritzky, an expert in medieval theatrical forms of Europe, the 16th century mountebank performances as well as the comici stage shows distantly fall within the sphere of the Commedia dell'Arte. Mountebanks, also known as “Charlatans” or “quack sellers” were commercial traveling showmen associated with the sale of quack medicines and other products. They had to impress the crowd invariably at carnivals and city squares to ensure a handsome business of selling their wares. For this, in the form of platform advertisement, they had to show their histrionic accomplishments to pull the crowd. In this way the medieval mountebank entertainments were an alternative form of recreations too. Katritzky elaborates:

Mountebanks and comici did not simply overlap through a superficial coincidence in their choice of costumes and stock characters. It is evident, that, in at least some cases, depiction of these costumes and types is their conjunction with the mountebanks was because they would stage full-length plays of the Commedia dell'Arte type. The Commedia dell'Arte was not the only point of contact in a cultural continuum in which the low farces, acrobatics, clowning and lazzis of the mountebanks
overlapped with the wide range of theatrical performance offered by the Commedia dell'Arte. (105)

So the Commedia dell'Arte is a fluid concept, which involved a wide variety of theatrical manifestations in the Renaissance Europe. Another bone of contention among theatrical historians is the “class” question of the Commedia dell'Arte. The Commedia dell'Arte performances were often described as a lower class alternative to private theatre of courts and academics (Brown John, *Oxford Illustrated* 126). Most of the traditional historians of theatre hold the view that the Medieval theatrical from was an alternative popular culture against the elite culture. It is rightly understood that the commedia performance was basically a popular entertainment phenomena during carnivals and religious festivities. However recent researches in the field reveals that the genre cannot be simply connected to “low culture” opposed to “high culture”, but a combination of both literary and verbally transmitted materials. “Not only did the dell'Arte actors sing in the emerging early opera of the late 16th century, but they often performed fully scripted pastorals and tragedies as well as show cased their work before aristocratic audience at court as well as for plebian audience in piazza” (Erith 539-40).

Even though spontaneous onstage improvisation was the most important characteristics of the commedia dell'Arte; these gripping performance were never a result of moment’s inspiration. On the contrary, the themes and subjects were carefully chosen,
the characters meticulously pre-determined and the situations in each scene were scrupulously defined. The main plot or general outline of each performance was called "Scenario" or "Canvas" which was finished to the maximum extant still leaving ample scope for each actor to heighten, vary and embellish at their ingenuity. The commedia dell'Arte performances, which basically were physical exhibitions of the artist's talents often called forth acrobatic feats, which could be attained by a thorough actor training.

Extensive Humour was the lingering tone of the whole performance. The individuality of the actors was dependent on their brilliance to bring in prompt repartees, constant surprises and shocking physical agility in each show. The highly sensitive and trivial nature of the performance assured flowing of tears and ringing of laughter intermittently. Perfect professionalism was required for the success of the performance that would ensure the actors their daily bred.

As said earlier, rather than to the psychological intricacies, the Commedia dell'Arte emphasized on the visual feature of their performance with marvelous acrobatics and traditional pieces of lazzi. The lazzi were both verbal and gesture eccentricities that could be inserted in between, or flexibly transplanted to another occasion, to ensure regular frequency laughter. The word is a linguistic transform of the Italian lazzo which means a joke or witticism. Lazzi is a dynamic term used to express
...situations, dialogues, gags, rhyme, rigmaroles which they [actors] could call up at a moment notice to give the impression of on-stage improvisation. This repertoire had been prepared and assimilated through the experience of an infinite number of performances, of different shows, of situations worked out directly on the audience, but the central fact was that the majority was the result of study and careful preparation. Every actor or actress learned by heart dozens of tirades on variety of topics corresponding to the parts he or she might have to play... for a women in love, expressing contempt, jealously, spite, desire or despair, and each of them easily adopted upside down and stuck into the middle of a dialogue. (Fo, Tricks 8-9)

The lazzì were primarily injected in the vein of performance to heighten the comic aspects. Some of the Lazzi would seem grotesque, over stretched and vulgar. There were lazzì of tremendous farting, accidental pissing, fondling and wooing the maid, ringing yawns, mock-fight so on and so forth. The protagonists of these performances used to be zanies who would utter all unpleasant truths in public. According to Antonio Scuderi, zanni is an allegory of all oppressed and disenfranchised people" (55). It was this zannian role for Fo gives to most of his leading characters.

There is one more reason for the Commedia dell'Arte being a physical comedy. Half masks were mandatory for each character, except for female roles. Consequently there was little scope for facial
expressions of emotions. This resulted in the Commedia dell’Arte actors wearing half-masks used their bodies, gestures and attitude to render emotions, facial expressions were limited to the mouth, which was left uncovered. Even if it allowed the actors to make horrible faces, the half-masks inevitably reduced the display of facial expressions (Aliverti 132). Aggressive efforts to express emotions through the cunning manipulation of the physical movements and gestures were the compensation for the curtailment of facial expressions sought after by the actors.

The Commedia dell’Arte was basically a street performance, occasionally in courts too, that later profoundly influenced the French Pantomime and the English Harlequinade. The performers wandered throughout Europe on their makeshift stages adapting local topical issues and using a common dialect that could be followed by the people of a large geographical area. Conventionally each character of the Commedia dell’Arte was distinctively demarcated with separate designs of masks and costumes. Each character represented a type. In their mental make-up, the characters of the Elizabethan comedy of Humour resemble the Commedia dell’ Art Characters.

Although there were numerous character types to represent a peculiar individual trait, there are about ten clearly distinguished, often-performed Commedia dell’Arte character types (Brown John, Oxford Illustrated 125-40). A brief description of these characters is attempted here.
The most popular of all *Commedia* characters was Pantalone or Pantaloon, the venomous villain figure who represents the darker side of male consciousness, a secret hero of the unenlightened male ego in the audience. Though old, he is a pure man of action with an undiminished physical virility implied by an always-erect phallus under his stockings. Being illiterate merchant from Vienna, he attained nobility with the power of his wallet. He is full of temper, fond of food and pretty women, but a butt of all jokes due to his inherent stupidity. He believes that everything can be sold or brought; but only to be ultimately deceived and deserted by his adventurous daughter and prodigal son. He is suggestive of winter with his lean frame and black dress with a woolen red skullcap and a pointed beard. He libidinously flirts with La Ruffiana (the whore), plots with La Captaine (The Captain), to whom he wishes to give his daughter in marriage, against Harlequin, who can be his zany (servant) and the beloved of Innamorata (Pantaloon's daughter). Pantalone is a parent and godfather whose wicked plans assure his ultimate downfall. Pantalone represents exploitation and evils in the society.

The real protagonist figure in the Commedia dell'Arte cast is Harlequin. Basically a zany, servant, this character is known by different names such as Arlechino, Arlequin, Tuffaldino, Polpettino, Frittellino. His is a dynamic and often bewildering personality oscillating from utter foolishness to sophisticated intelligence. He is the representative of the subservient, exploited commoner with his patched but colorful costumes with a conspicuous large red blemish...
on his forehead suggesting his sufferings. He has a witty tongue to foil
the plotting of his masters and a greedy mouth suggesting his
insatiable hunger for food. He personifies an ever-hungry peasant. He
has an anarchist kind of behaviour and tremendous physical agility
that enables him to walk, run, jump, and summersault constantly on
the stage. He just has a master over him, but no law above him. He is
a hippie like figure with no money and hatred towards the exploiters.
The Maniac in the Accidental Death of An Anarchist is an embodiment
of this Harlequin spirit of causing bewilderment to retrieve the truths
swept under the carpet. On the mentality and eccentricities of this
commedia figure Fo, in an interview, elaborated:

Harlequin is really a wild animal without any sense of
honour. One could say that Harlequin totally rejects this
society but not because he has one in mind. He is
simply, totally anti-social. He refuses to compromise in
of basic human psychological needs -- eating, shitting,
pissing, and making love. He goes ahead blithely
destroying everything: honour, logic, common sense,
good taste. (Mitchel 190)

Harlequin is an inveterate schemer always pitted against
Pantalone. A clownish appearance wearing a savage looking gray
mask and bearing two sticks lied together, which produced a huge
noise on impact. This wielding of the parted sticks gave birth to the
expression “slapstick.” Though enjoys the affection of Innamorata, his
lone interest is in Columbina, the maidservant.
The Captain (*Il Capitano*) is a middle aged Spanish speaking, bragging, boasting and a swashbuckling officer. A self-claiming veteran sailor is the Captain, who claims to have defeated the whole army of the Turks after an individual face-to-face dual with the Sultan. He always makes tall claims on his soldierly adventures but he would be the first to slip away at the mentioning of a possible hazard. He is always “dressed to kill” with a feathered cap, high boots, and jackets and with a sword in his belt. He loves to bully people inferior to him, but a coward inside. He often attempts to make advances towards lone maids only to be thoroughly thrashed by her Harlequin lover later on. Being boastful, he always carries bombastic names like Horribililoribilibifax, Ralf Doister Roister, and Captain Metamora etc. He is looking forward to marry Innamorata, only after he father promises a handsome dowry.

Another common Commedia dell’Arte character, Il Dottore (The Doctor), is a reincarnation of academic pomposity and intellectual vacuum. He may appear in different roles of authority like lawyer, philosopher, astrologer etc. He is an absent minded fraud or quack shouting Latin at inappropriate occasions revealing his enormous pretension. Also called as Dottore Balazone (Doctor of lies), he is arrogant and ignorant. He talks and talks teasing the current exaggerated beliefs in science and humanity. He claims to have educated in a university. This obese, who loves bottle and beauty cracks jokes about the opposite sex, only after confirming that none of them are around. He wears short trousers; a black felt cap and a
long beaked mask. He is always depicted carrying books to announce his authority being a member of every academy. He is a schemester colleague of Pantalone who has only contempt for the doctor.

The miserly crooked Pantalone is always blessed with his adventurous, innocent but not ignorant daughter Innamorata. She is all for love, lust and romance. This maiden always well advised by her cunning maid Columbina, who in her turn makes sure that Harlequin is not seen often by her mistress. Innamorata is known under different names such as Flavio, Leandro, Valerio, Isabella or Ardelia. Young and beautiful but smart enough to keep away from the ill-advises of La Ruffiana, a middle aged spinster with a shady past. Though no masks were worn by the female characters of the Commedia dell’Arte, their apparels undoubtedly proclaimed their class status.

With his philosophically balanced out-look on the success and failures in life, for Pulcinella there is no tension or despair. His dreamy, and his externally melancholic attitudes make him a representative of Neapolitan culture. His wining ideology and strategy is this neither positive nor negative approach to life. This indifferent attitude invites him numerous problems only to get out of them all in the end, as simply as how he got involved in them. Reciting poetry and quoting philosophy, he roams around his friends in simple, pure white clothes and a sugar loaf hat. He is a hunch back with a crooked nose and straggly hair and unsuccessfully chases women.
Giandino represents the peasantry in the Commedia dell'Arte characters. He is an honest peasant with strong inclination for wine, gastronomy and beautiful girls, but strictly faithful to his lover Giacometta. He has a happy, humorous way and wears a brown jacket with red boarders and a tricon hat.

Even though the Commedia dell'Arte is largely an improvisational theatre with a preconceived scenario, all most all performances would rotate around some intricate, silly exaggerated affairs of day-to-day life. Russel James Brown economically and amply summarizes the basics of the Commedia dell'Arte plots as:

The plots in which the character meet were built of condensed and recombined structures from the repertoire developed in regular comedy, stories of crossed love, mistaken identity, disguises of sex and status, the run away wives and children, adventurous rescues, madness, apparent death, reunion of separated families, clowning, ingenious tricks, ridicule of jealous husbands and lustful old men, mocking of masters by servants, witty extortion, gulling and unlimited opportunities for mayhem, erotic play and coarseness.... *(Oxford Illustrated 131)*

With their double takes, slapstick references, quick changes, typical tirades and dialogues, verbal and gesture lazzi and comic entrances and exists the actors could make the performance entirely live and humorous throughout. Amidst all these apparent chaos they would ensure the natural unfolding of a story, its complications and
denouement in fixed duration and in a single place. They move to the next venue with another freely manipulated plot and eccentricities.

In spite of all the trivialities and non-seriousness, the Commedia dell'Arte performances were overtly and consistently subversive and anti-establishmentarian. Their crude oversimplification of societal issues comprehensively raised uncomfortable questions and delivered apt and confronting answers. Their popular slapstick is an equally powerful counter narration to the erudite comedy that often minced its words in social criticism. As many of the Commedia Performances were ridiculously comic and provocative, the establishment often attempted to chase them off the provisional boundaries.

Looking from a linguistics point of view, the dialogues of the commedia were enormously rich, metaphorically superior with piled up diction in a grandiloquent and flowing style. Spoken in a generally comprehensible dialogue, the commedia language was sharp and emotional at the same time. It was filled with frequent repetitions and declamations that may look odd. But in their performance context these repetitions and other physical and linguistic nuances were absolutely necessary.

As Geoff Beale rightly noted, there are two primary functions in the language of Commedia dell'Arte: firstly, as a source of narrative, and secondly as a source of humour (174-77). The narrative plot is simplistic in response to the performance in outdoor locations, often on the street with its distracting background noise. An
overcomplicated plot cannot hold a transient audience. The simpler the plot, the easier would be the translation of messages. Generally actions are not reported but dramatized. To elicit humour from language they made use of repetition of words with their rhythm, occasional double intenders, important sounding gibberish etc. Since the comedy is often backed by physical action, or is derived from situation in trying to find example of language as source of humor the actors had to come to the conclusion that taking a single line out of the context of its physical emotional and character delivery generally reduces it unfunny and stilted.

Even though it was a Renaissance theoretical method, the Commedia dell'Arte techniques encouraged many masters of 20th century experimental theatres also. As it seemed the ideal antidote to the theatre of emotion and naturalistic play, Sevolod Meyerhold's the Moscow Art Theatre made extensive us of the commedia dell'Arte physical acting techniques in the post revolutionary Russia in the late 1910s. Similarly the French theatre company, Campaign des Copians, founded by Jaques Copean in 1924 devoted considerable effort to adapt the Commedia dell'Arte acting methods. With Saint Denis' Campagne des Quinze, a new form of Commedia dell'Arte reached the English-speaking world in 1929. The Russian dramatist Stanislavskay's 'Method of Physical Action' that focused on the presentation of physical action as the key to emotional portrayal is undoubtedly influenced by the Commedia dell’Arte (Anderson 167-69).
A more direct and all pervasive influence and experimentation of the Commedia theatrical tradition is found in the Italian master Dario Fo. He acknowledged that this Renaissance performance tradition was his single largest source of inspiration and admiration.

The commedia dell'Arte performers enjoyed great popularity throughout Italy in their time. The popular Commedia dell'Arte performers of the middle ages were Giovan Paolo Fabbri, Francesco and Isabella Andreini, Maphio Zanini Flamino Scala, Silvio Fiorillo and so on.

These non-institutional traditions emboldened Fo to “emulate the jesters of Middle Ages in scourging authority and upholding the dignity of the downtrodden” (*Nobel Press Release*). In emphasizing idealism, humanity and stimulating satire. Dario Fo’s plays scan be compared to that of Bernard Shaw’s problem plays. However Fovian theatre stands apart in its intelligent mix of the seriousness with the trivial, evoking laughter and anger simultaneously. His surprising blend of religious Gospels with contemporary issues, in *Mystero Buffo*, is a finest example these methodological features. He rightly understood the fatal potentialities of humour than any other 20th century playwrights. Gathering inspirations from circus acrobatics and carnival clowns, he uses slapstick comedy, puns, ridicule and parody to explore deep into the political hypocrisies of the authorities and religious dogmatism of Catholicism. His sharp, irreverent theatrical satires knew no holy cows. Fo personified in totto Walter Valeri’s words: “When an actor-playwright serves as a spokes person
for social change, it becomes a necessity to temporarily transcend the state of subordination and question the dominant powers. Then theatre becomes a historical phenomenon and an expression of social development” (Scuderi 27). He rigorously and persistently challenged all centres of power with his grotesque farces. Acknowledging this feat of Fo the Nobel Committee commented that, “Fo’s strength is in the creation of texts that simultaneously amuse, engage and provide prospective.” (Nobel Press Release)

For employment of laughter as a tool Fo has his own reasons. He said, “When the theatre is comic grotesque, its above all then that you have to defend it because the theatre that makes people laugh is the theatre of human reasons.” (Nobel Banquet Speech)

In his classic work on drama, The Political Theatre, the German agitprop theatre theorist Erwin Picastor (1893-1966) said that “the important things is always the aim: the best performance is the best propaganda” (168). Dario Fo had a crystal clear aim and he achieved this aim of propagating the tales of corruption, suppression and injustice, through his best propagandist performances. His uncompromising radical left wing ideology gave him a breadth to his vision of political theatre that is popular, agitational and instructive. His commitment to popular theatre is an extension of his political beliefs and engagements. This can be said vice versa too.

Fo's exploration into the medieval popular performance practices has cultural dimensions too. With the emergence of mass media communication in the modern capitalistic society the popular
culture and performance traditions are pushed to the periphery by the dominant class. It was this lost cultural link Fo is striving to recapture and reactivate. In this sense his giullare is a representative of the people symbolizing an alternative culture alongside the officially recognized culture. According to Stuart Hood Fo is working on the Gramscian principle that one should know where one has come from before establishing the way forward (Intro. *Plays 1 3*). Though his agitprop theater is not only challenges the political and religious status quo but also is trying to recapture the lost threads of peoples' theatre. Fo identifies himself with the medieval giullare. Thus his theatre becomes peoples' theatre. To recapture people's theatrical tradition Dario Fo has distilled history books, diaries, letters, memories, medieval sketches and turned them into a "cinematic montage of physical action." (Jenkins, *1492 and All 12*)

Fo's plays are surprisingly receptive and suitable for adaptation to the local issues and concerns. Though Fo dealt with the Italian political and social issues, the basic themes are always the oppression of the working class. This feature of adaptability made him an international hero of the theatre world. Though his dissident plays he provided the word with some broad frameworks wherein local issues and concerns of the proletariat can be inserted and performed. In this sense Fovian plays have universality in their appeal and audience acceptance. The Nobel press release has lauded Fo's plays by mentioning that they are always open for creative additions and dislocations, continually encouraging the actors to improvise, which
means that the audience is activated in a remarkable way. His is an oeuvre of impressive artistic vitality and range (*Nobel Press Release*). On stage improvisations assured Fo a more active audience interaction and provided him the valuable feedback.

As Fo's theatre was deliberately purposeful, the audience is the nucleus of this theatre. Before the start of his performance Fo, usually would establish a rapport with them. Fo was of the opinion that theatre is a means of communication. If it is unable to put across the ideas, to the audience, it is an utter failure. Fo's theatrical performances were like a lecture to demonstrations to discussion events. He never left any stone unturned to communicate the ideas maximum to the audience. To ensure that he would attempt to numerous repetitions, oversimplifications, detailed explanations and so on. All these were done to help the audience in absorbing the socio-political content of his interactive theatre. He believed that, "the refusal to assist the audience to follow you is at heart an attitude of pure snobbishness practiced by imbeciles, it conceals an insuperable inability – an ability to communicate." (*Tricks* 135-6)

Fo never maintained any artistic aloofness from his audience. He always stressed on the need to educate the audience so as to help them understand and appreciate new and disturbing ideas and he used to embolden them to take part in the debate and concrete political action outside the theatre. The transparent "fourth wall" is identified by Fo as the main obstacle in the relation between audience and the play. The darkened auditoria and the separation between the
stage and stalls push the audience into passivity and make them exposed only to the emotional content of the play. Fo had his essential lessons from the Commedia dell'Arte players and the 17th century theatre genius Popquelin Moliere (1622-73), who had the proscenium pushed forward. However, critics like Sogliuzzo opine that the stagecraft of Fo's plays stem from a popular pre-commedia tradition for the following reasons.

Because of its extensive use of mimicry, masks and puppets, Fo's theatre is mistakenly characterized as stemming primarily from the commedia. But commedia satirized social stereotypes, whereas Fo's political satire comedy originated in the period between eleventh and twelfth centuries, the post-feudal stage when the Italian peninsula saw a burst of political freedom: jesters roamed the land with a repertoire of gags skills celebrating the end of feudalism, and ridiculing the remaining feudal overlords and the Church. (Farrell, *Harlequins* 79)

Fo's witty speeches, spontaneous improvisations, amazingly flexible physical activities had always kept this audience on the edge of their seats. To ensure better audience participation it was mandatory for to use the language of the people. As a political agenda, he always stressed using colloquial expressions in his theatre. The giullari and zannian tradition urged the dramatist to use a life like language in his theatre of protest. Linguistic sophistication in theatre was seen as an instrument of alienating people, especially the working
class from theatre. More over the popular language, idiomatic expressions abundant with may vulgar connotations and rough intonations were always an inseparable part of the commoner's life.

The intensity of this language lies not in sophistications, but in the stylistic modulations in accordance with situations. The medieval giullari wandered through different provinces, necessitating a working knowledge of the all the dialects. To communicate with these diverse linguistic communities they attempted at grammelot, an onomatopoeic flow of speech, consisting meaningless words but conveys the sense. For theatre communication Dario Fo reinvented and adopted the grammelot, as he believed that proper communication is important to elicit the desired goals. He never deviated from using abusive, vulgar vocabulary if it is necessary for accurate communication. On the linguistic features of Fo's the tricks of the trade Stuart Hood opinions that:

His special gift is the ability to communicate recondite matters with the elements of zany fantasy and wit. The vocabulary he employs is colloquial, relaxed slangy and anything but dictionary bond. His idioms are enriched and embellished by an inventive humour, which though a delight to the listener is the despair of the academicians, established jargon seems to inadequate or colourless. In the course of one sentence he can more dexterously from technical theatre jargon into the slang of the moment, before launching into some purely personal flight of fancy or into plain gibberish. (Intro. Plays 1 2)
Dario Fo’s reorientation towards the Medieval theatrical tradition and popular language has a definite cultural politics. He is trying to review the forgotten marginalized popular culture and language. Even though the language is crude vulgar and common, it didn’t prevent him from conveying a deep message -- the need to question and act against the anti-people establishment. His language is addressed to the proletariat not to the “cultured”.

Reviewing David L. Hirst’s *Dario Fo and Franca Rame* (1990), Giovanni d’Angelo jumped to quick conclusion that “Dario Fo and Franca Rame is absolutely of no use to honest students of Italian literature” (*Dario* 450-51). He accused Fo as one of the theatrical figures most pampered and rewarded by an intellectual and political class subservient to Communism. Giovanni was irritated to the historical and religious, scurrility of Fo, who according to him acted against the concept of eternity, the spirit and God by waging an unreasonable rather than an irrational war thereby debunking the message of Christ, history and literature by turning them upside down. Giovanni’s uncritical evaluation of Fo’s literacy merit was rebounded with the conferring of the prestigious Nobel Prize for literature on Fo.

Fo was never against the liberatory teachings of Jesus Christ. He identified Christ with the suffering, oppressed masses. All his uncompromising criticism was against the elitist nature of Christianity. Similarly he never debunked history. Instead he was trying to raise a historical consciousness among the mass by trying to
recapture the muffled, marginalized popular literature and performance traditions. Fo’s arrogance and renunciation of all forms of oppression has to be understood in the contemporary scenario of religious persecutions and economic exploitations prevailing in the society. Fo’s unrelenting proletarian concerns prompted people like Giovanni call him “a long time pawn of intellectual Communism.” (World Lit. 313)

Dario Fo is more of a performer than an author. But this cannot be a criterion for refusing him his deserving place in world of literature. Just like his performances. Fo’s written plays are equally captivating. His literacy works signifies the struggle between the weak and the powerful. His legitimate literacy credential is upheld by the Swedish Academy and supported by critics like Ron Jenkins:

The Swedish academy’s decision to honour a master of literature is a historic tribute to the theatre, which is still viewed by many as literature bastard child; it is also first time that the Nobel for the literary art has been awarded to an actor. This courageous and controversial choice indirectly expands the modern definition of literature to include the power of the spoken word. Fo is a physical comedian. His language is inseparable from the vocal rhythmic and muscular gestures that emerge from his lips. His syntax is impregnated with pratfalls, violence and sensuality, his phrasing ripples with the breath of an audience response.” (The Nobel Jester 22-23)
A thematic analysis of Dario Fo's plays reveals his wide range and major political convictions. Nevertheless, for convenience sake, his thematic concerns can be broadly categorized into religious hypocrisy, exploitative capitalism, imperialism, reformist reactionary Communism, totalitarianism of the establishment, fraudulence of mass media and the suppression of female identity by the patriarchy.

For Dario Fo, the self-proclaimed atheist, religion in general and institutionalized Christianity in particular, is not a liberatory agent. He always poked fun at the inconvenient interventions of religion in individual's, private lives. He viewed that religion, just like feudalism and modern capitalism, is an instrument of control. By offering liberation after death, religions are not only protecting the exploiters but also prolongs the sufferings of the poor on the earth. In collaboration with the exploiters, it extinguishes the spirit of revolt in the oppressed by intimidating them about the perennial contamination of the soul.

He attacks religion in plays like Mistero Buffo (1969), The Pope and the Witch (1989), The Seventh Commandment: Thou Shall Steal a Bit Less (1964), The Emperor's Bible and the Peasant's Bible (1996), and Obscene Fables (1981). He never forgot to give frequent digs at the Pope. Pope for him was a symbol of religious hypocrisy and pompousness.

Real politic is another frequent theme in Dario Fo. The most celebrated of all Fo's plays; The Accidental Death of an Anarchist is a political manifesto cautioning people against the totalitarian
tendencies of the establishment. Instead of becoming a protective body, the establishment is accused here purposefully creating tension and put people under terror only to maintain the political status quo. Knock, Knock! Who’s There? Police! (1972) is also an example of mobilization theatre against the state sponsored massacre.

Fo’s ever-throbbing heart for the liberation of the working class dragged him to revolutionary communist ideals. Being a staunch admirer of the Chinese Revolutionary Mao Tsetung, Fo could not digest the compromising policies of the parliamentary Communists. Neither did he acknowledge the totalitarian regime of the Communists also. The worker knows 300 words. The Boss Knows 1000 - That’s Why He’s the Boss (1969), Chain Me Up and I’ll Still Smash Everything (1969), United We Stand. All Together Now! Oops, Isn’t That the Boss? (1971), and Letter from China (1989) are some of Fovian plays critical of the hijacking of socialist revolutionary ideology by the opportunist parliamentary Communists.

Fo’s comedies were big machines to make people laugh even if one should sense an underlying gut feeling -- a working class derision of the rich and powerful. For this ridiculing he made full use of the potentiality of farce as a delivery method in his theatre. Farce was a powerful weapon in the theatrical repertoire of Dario Fo. In delivering the content of his plays to the common man he adopted farce as a method. He said that:

For me farces were a very important exercise in understanding how to write a theatrical text. I learned
how to take apart and reassemble the mechanisms of comedy, how to write directly for the stage without any literary diversion. And I also understood how old and useless things there were in so many theatrical texts, in the theatre of words. (Behan, *Revolutionary* 11)

Through his theatrical interventions Dario Fo rightly comments that, just like the feudal setup, capitalism is also inhuman and exploitative. Inflation, the dehumanizing working conditions in the factories, low payments, frequent lock-outs and the non-readiness of the political establishment to intervene in labour issues are the topical issues raised by Dario Fo in *Can’t Pay? Won’t Pay!* (1974) and *Trumpets and Raspberries* (1981) etc.

Fo was not only satirical of the establishment alone. With the same vigour and gravity he lashes at the manipulative tendencies in journalism and mass media. Fo held the view that public opinion is manufactured and most often manipulated by the media in the service of the political establishment. His collaborative work *Fit to be Tied* (1954) and *Grand Pantomime with Flags and Small and Middle-sized Puppets* (1971) are examples of Fovian critique of the mass media. The 1991 productions, *Peoples’ War in Chile* (1973), and *Joan Padan Discovers the America* unveil the imperialistic tendencies of the West, especially America. Dario Fo’s collaborative work with Franco Rame brought out *Women Alone and Other Plays* (1977), which comprises plays that depict the problems, that women face in our society.