

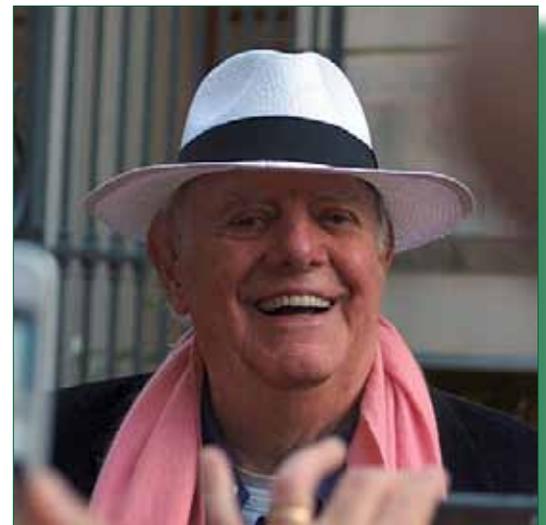
DARIO FO  
(1926-2016)

*This month's essay discusses the life and work of one of the most important dramatists of the 20th century. Dario Fo was an Italian actor–playwright, comedian, singer, theater director, stage designer, composer, painter, and political campaigner for the Italian left-wing. His dramatic work employed comedic methods of the ancient Italian “commedia dell’ arte,” a theatrical style that was popular with the masses. He owned and operated a theater company with his wife and leading actress, Franca Rame, for many years. His works were scathing and satirical, blending laughter and gravity to highlight the abuses and injustices in society. He was determined to present an independent view, which led him to take risks in his work, often bringing upon him the condemnation of the government and the Catholic Church.*

*His international reputation and creative work were acknowledged when he was awarded the 1997 Nobel Prize for Literature in recognition of his important contributions to theater and the broader culture. Part of the citation of the award summarized the importance of his work: “He, if anyone, merits the epithet of ‘jester’ in the true meaning of that word. With a blend of laughter and gravity, he opens our eyes to abuses and injustices in society and also the wider historical perspective in which they can be placed. Fo is an extremely serious satirist with a multifaceted oeuvre.”*

DARIO FO was born on March 24, 1926 in Leggiuno-Sangiano, a town and commune in the province of Varese, Lombardy, near the eastern shore of Lago Maggiore. He was the eldest of three children of Felice and Pina Rota Fo. (His younger brother, Fulvio, later became a theater administrator and his sister, Bianca Fo Garambois, became a writer). His father, Felice was a station master for the Italian state railway, and the family frequently moved when Felice was transferred to new postings. Felice was also an actor in an amateur theater company and, politically, a socialist. His mother, Pina Rota, wrote an acclaimed autobiography, *Il Paese delle Rane (The Country of Frogs)*, about her own peasant family and their lives in Lomellina, in the Po River Valley of Lombardy.

As a child, Dario often visited his maternal grandfather, who was a farmer in Lomellina. During these visits, he accompanied his grandfather as he travelled in a horse-drawn wagon



around the countryside peddling his vegetables. To attract the attention of buyers, his grandfather would often tell amazing stories and insert in them news accounts and anecdotes about local events. His satirical and timely chronicles earned him the nickname *Bristìn* (pepper seed). It was from his grandfather, sitting beside him on the big wagon, that Dario had his first lessons in storytelling, learning the rudiments of narrative rhythm. This would serve him well in his later career when he would do much the same thing onstage.

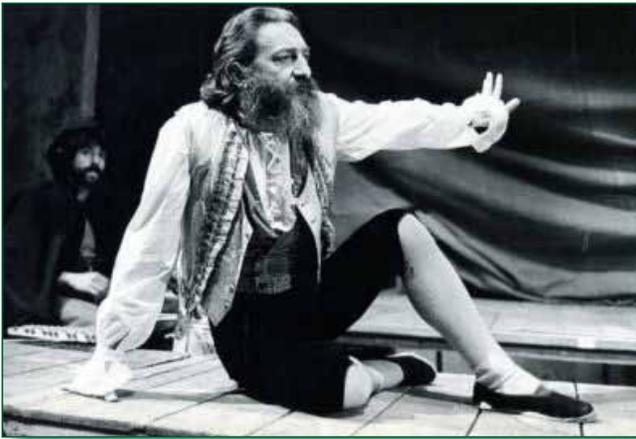
Dario spent his childhood moving from one town to another, as his father's postings were changed at the whim of the railway company. But even though the geography remained in a flux, the cultural setting was always the same. As he grew older, he became schooled in the local narrative tradition. He was fond of sitting in taverns or piazzas that were frequented by master glassblowers and fishermen. He would listen intently as they exchanged spicy and long political news and tall tales that were often steeped in pungent political satire. They provided the second lesson in the development of his storytelling skills. (He described this influence in his Nobel speech: "They were the old storytellers, the master glassblowers who taught me and other children the craftsmanship, the art, of spinning fantastic yarns. We would listen to them, bursting with laughter—laughter that would stick in our throats as the tragic allusion that surmounted each sarcasm would dawn on us.")

In 1940, Fo moved to Milan to study at the Brera Academy. However, World War II intervened. He joined the Fascist army of Mussolini's Repubblica Sociale Italiana. Years later, Fo argued that he had joined the army to avoid arousing suspicion since his family was active in the anti-Fascist Resistance. Fo helped his father smuggle escaped British soldiers as well as refugees, some of whom were Jewish scientists, into Switzerland, by disguising them as Lombard peasants. His mother served the Resistance by nursing the wounded.

As the end of the war approached, Fo joined an anti-aircraft division of the navy, expecting to be immediately discharged because of a shortage of munitions. He was mistaken and was instead dispatched to a camp in Monza. He soon deserted with the aid of false documents and wandered for a while before joining a parachute squadron. He then deserted this group as well, and spent the remainder of the War in hiding while unsuccessfully searching for the Resistance movement.

After the war, Fo returned to the Brera Academy, also taking up architectural studies at the Politecnico di Milano. He began a thesis on Roman architecture, but became disillusioned by the cheap impersonal work expected of architects after the war, so he left his studies before his final exams. Soon after, he suffered a nervous breakdown, and his doctor told him to spend time doing things that brought him joy. He started to paint and became involved in the *piccoli teatri* (small theaters) movement where he began to present improvised monologues.

One such monologue was about Cain and Abel, a satire in which Cain, *poer nano* (poor little thing), is a miserable fool and anything but evil. It's just that every time *poer nano* tries to mimic the splendid, blond, and blue-eyed Abel, he gets into trouble. After suffering one disaster after another, he finally goes crazy and kills the splendid Abel. Franco Parenti (the Italian actor, director, and writer) was so impressed with his monologue that he enthusiastically invited Fo to join his theater company.



In 1950, Fo asked to work with Parenti (*left*) on a variety show performed by radio actors, beginning a collaboration that would last until 1954. He delighted audiences with stories of his upbringing, which impressed Parenti who described his presentations as “absolutely original, with an extraordinary humor, wit and personification. When the show was over, we’d go for walks round the lake and he’d tell me more stories. In this way, we originated a project in which we would work together on a new type of revue, one which didn’t copy reality, but which involved people and took a stand.”

In 1951, Fo met Franca Rame, the daughter of a theatrical family, when they were working in a production of the revue *Sette Giorni a Milano* (*Seven days in Milan*). (After a slow start, they became engaged and were married on July 24, 1954). Also in 1951, he was invited to perform a radio play *Cocorico* on RAI Italian national radio. He made 18 satirical monologues in which he varied biblical tales to make them political satire. Scandalized authorities canceled the show.

In 1953, he wrote and directed a satirical play *Il Dito nell’ Occhio* (*The Finger in the Eye*). After initial success, both the government and Catholic Church authorities censored his work and, although the public liked the show, Parenti’s theater company had trouble finding theaters in which to perform it. Fo continued to work in the Piccolo Teatro in Milan, but his satires suffered more censorship, although they remained popular.

In 1955 Fo and Rame worked in movie production in Rome. Fo became a screenwriter and worked on many productions, including those of the young Italian film producer, Dino De Laurentiis. Fo and Rame’s only child, a son Jacopo, was born on March 31, 1955. Rame worked in Teatro Stabile of Bolzano. In 1956, Fo and Rame worked together in the Carlo Lizzani’s film *Lo Svitato* (*The Screwball*). Other movies followed that continued Fo’s biting wit and humor.



In 1959, Fo and Rame returned to Milan and founded the Compagnia Dario Fo-Franca Rame (Dario Fo-Franca Rame Theater Company). Fo wrote scripts, acted, directed, and designed costumes and stage paraphernalia. Rame took care of the administrative jobs. The company debuted in Piccolo Teatro and began a series of six full-length plays that were performed each season. The theater company also

began annual tours of their plays around Italy, bringing its satirical and comedic presentations to the masses outside Milan.

One of the Company's early plays, *Gli Arcangeli non Giocano al Flipper* (*Archangels Don't Play Pinball*), brought Fo and Rame national and, later, international recognition. It would be the first Fo play to be performed outside Italy—in Yugoslavia, Poland, the Netherlands, Sweden and Spain. Other successes followed.

In 1962, Fo wrote and directed a variety show, *Canzonissima*, for RAI Television. Fo, unafraid of raising controversy, used the show to give Italians a glimpse of a type of television resembling the origins of theater, far removed from the “junk TV” shows being produced by RAI. *Canzonissima* featured satirical songs and sketches depicting the lives of the working classes. However, many sketches were frequently censored by the network. One sketch featured a fat aunt who came to visit her nephew at his workplace (a canned-meat factory) only to fall into a machine and come out as mincemeat, which the nephew retained in a cupboard at home and often displayed to friends. The sketch led to complaints from canned meat producers and “industrialists in general”—though none from aunts, Fo later observed. Another episode about a journalist who was killed by the Mafia annoyed politicians and Fo and Rame received death threats and were placed under police protection. Nonetheless, *Canzonissima* proved popular, attracting millions of viewers, and Rame maintained that taxi drivers in Italian cities would often complain they had no riders during the broadcasts since everyone was watching the show.

*Canzonissima*'s eighth episode—which referenced the dangerous conditions faced by workers on building sites—led to a dispute with the program's producers, and prompted Fo and Rame to walk out on November 29, 1962. RAI maintained it would not broadcast the sketch since it risked further inflaming the anger of building workers' unions about the working conditions on construction sites. National uproar ensued over this censorship, with headlines in the daily newspapers and questions raised in the Italian parliament. The Italian Actors' Union even told its members to refuse to become Fo and Rame's replacements. RAI eventually sued Fo and Rame for breach of contract, and destroyed all the *Canzonissima* recordings. The dispute led to the effective banning of Fo and Rame from Italian television for the next 14 years.

Controversy seemed to be constant in the theater work of the two artists. In 1962, Fo's play *Isabella, Tre Caravelle e un Cacciaballe* (*Isabella, Three Sailing Ships and a Con Man*), was considered "an attempt to demystify and debunk the traditional history-book image" of Christopher Columbus. Fo said: "I wanted to attack those Italian intellectuals who, with the center-left and the Socialist Party in the government, had discovered power and its advantages and leapt on it like rats on a piece of cheese. I wanted to dismantle a character who had been embalmed as a hero in school history books, whereas he is in fact an intellectual who tries to keep afloat within the mechanisms of power, play games with the King and be cunning with power figures, only to end up reduced to a wretch." Fo received threatening letters, was assaulted in Rome with

Rame by Fascist groups who also threw rubbish at them. On this occasion, it was the Italian Communist Party which provided security for Fo and Rame. One of the performances was even disrupted by a bomb scare.



*La Signora è da Buttare* (*Throw the Lady Out*) was the final play Fo put on in the mainstream Italian theater. It was first performed in 1967, and it contained satirical references to the Vietnam War, Lee Harvey Oswald and the assassination of John F. Kennedy. The U.S. government saw it as disrespectful to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, and Fo was denied a US visa for years afterward under the McCarran-Walter Act.

Inspired by the civil unrest in France in 1968, Fo and Rame founded the *Associazione Nuova Scena* (The New Scene Association) theater collective. Since it was created to operate outside the official state structure, they asked the Italian Communist Party for support and for access to community centers and workers' clubs. The traveling theater group toured throughout Italy. In Milan, it turned an abandoned factory into a theater *Il Capannone di Via Colletta* (The Shed on the Via Colletta). The collective had links to the Italian Communist Party, but Fo also openly criticized the Party's methods and policies in his plays. Soon the communist press disliked him as much as the Catholics, and many performances were canceled. Fo had never been a member of the Party, but the conflict caused Rame to resign her membership in it.

In 1969, Fo presented for the first time, *Mistero Buffo* (*Comic Mystery*). The actual translation of *Mistero Buffo* means "grotesque spectacle" which, in its name alone, is a satire of the Catholic Church which used the term *mistero* to describe sacred spectacles. The play was a

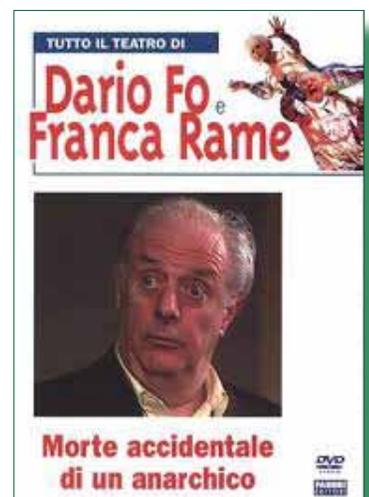
one-person performance that presented a series of medieval texts depicting specific Catholic traditions. It could be considered the formative moment of what Italians used to call *teatro di narrazione* (storytelling theater), a kind of theater in which there are no characters playing dramatic roles, similar to popular storytelling. Fo began writing the series in 1963, developing each story in the series so that it would smoothly connect one part to the next. The play was very popular and had 5000 performances—some even in large sports arenas holding thousands of people. *Mistero Buffo* was the play that more than any other established Fo's fame worldwide, even influencing many young actors and authors.

In 1970, Fo and Rame began their third theater group, *Collettivo Teatrale "La Commune"* (Collective Theater "The Commune"). It produced plays based on improvisation about contemporary issues and brought them up to date with numerous revisions (from 1971 to 1985, the group donated part of its income to support strikes of Italian labor organizations).

One of the first plays this group did was Fo's *Morte Accidentale di un Anarchico* (*Accidental Death of an Anarchist*), which opened in December, 1970. It was his most internationally recognized play, described by Fo as "a grotesque farce about a tragic farce." In the play, Fo criticized abuse on the part of the forces of law and order. He had written it after right-wing extremists and the Italian Secret Service carried out a "terrorist" attack on the Banca Nazionale dell'Agricoltura (The National Bank of Agriculture) in Piazza Fontana in Milan in 1969. The play dealt with the case of an Italian railroad worker who was either thrown or fell from the upper story of a Milan police station while being questioned on suspicion of terrorism.

In 1973, the company moved to Rossini Cinema in Milan. When Fo criticized police in one of his plays, police raids and censorship increased. On March 8, five Fascists, reportedly commissioned by high ranking officials of Milan's branch of the Carabinieri, the Italian federal police, abducted Rame for her political activism, held her at gunpoint, and dumped her in a van. They raped her, beat her, burnt her with cigarettes, slashed her with razor blades, and left her in a park. The company continued to tour around Lombardy and Veneto during that year, with Rame joining the tour with new anti-Fascist monologues after a recovery of two months. In spite of this violent reaction against them, the couple kept on producing more provocative plays that continued to upset governmental and Church authorities.

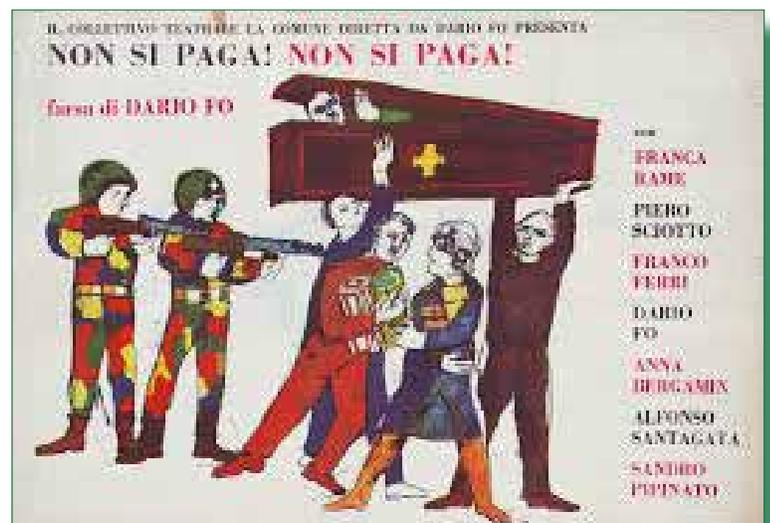
In September, 1973, after the suicide of Salvador Allende in Chile, Fo produced *Guerra di Popolo in Cile* (*The People's War in Chile*), a play about a rebellion against the Chilean military government under Auguste Pinochet. It toured the country attracting great interest



especially because of a part at the end that unnerved audiences, who thought a coup had been declared across Italy. According to accounts, a member of the audience panicked during a performance in Turin and ate ten pages of what he thought might be compromising names, while in Merano a student broke the glass in an attempt to flee through a window. Finally, in November, 1973, the police arrested Fo in Sassari at a performance of the play when he tried to prevent police from stopping its performance. This led to a nationwide uproar when it was learned that under Italian law, the police could not enter the theater during the performance. The outcry served only to boost attendances at future performances.

The 1974 play, *Non Si Paga! Non Si Paga!* (*We Won't Pay! We Won't Pay!*), was a farce documenting the *autoriduzione* (self-reduction) movement which had developed during the severe economic crisis Italy was experiencing, and in which people would take what they wished from markets, only paying what they could afford. This play was regarded as Fo's best-known play after *Morte Accidentale di un Anarchico* (*Accidental Death of an Anarchist*).

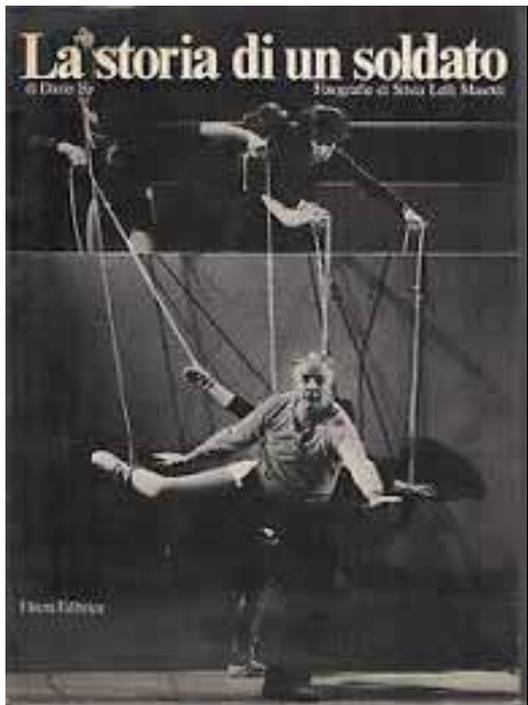
In 1976, following general elections, a new RAI-2 director, Massimo Fichera, invited Fo to do a new program, *Il Teatro di Dario* (*Dario's Theater*) for a total television time of 21 hours. However, when *Mistero Buffo*'s



second revised version was presented on the program in 1977, the Vatican described it as “the most blasphemous show in the history of television.” The Italian right also denounced it and Fo's time on RAI-2 was limited only to his original contract.

In 1978, Fo made the third version of *Mistero Buffo*. He also rewrote and directed *La Storia di un Soldato* (*Story of a Soldier*), based on Igor Stravinsky's opera. It was a success. Later he adapted operas from Rossini.

We don't have the space to discuss all of his work during the 1980s and the following years. Suffice it to say that these years saw more of the same pattern. Fo continued writing and producing vicious satirical comedies attacking the traditional foundations of Italian society, especially showing their defects, irrationalities, and self-serving uses of power. The plays faced scathing opposition and criticism—sometimes even violence—from these institutions.



Fo forced Italians to judge the effects of the power these institutions maintained over their lives.

On July 17, 1995, Fo suffered a stroke and lost most of his eyesight; Rame subsequently took his place in productions for a short period of time. Fo was back in action on the stage within a year.

#### THE NOBEL PRIZE IN LITERATURE AND AFTER

On October 9, 1997 came the announcement from Sweden that Fo had been awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, becoming both the first Italian to be selected for the award since Eugenio Montale in 1975, and the first Italian playwright to be chosen since Luigi Pirandello in 1934. The Nobel Prize came as a

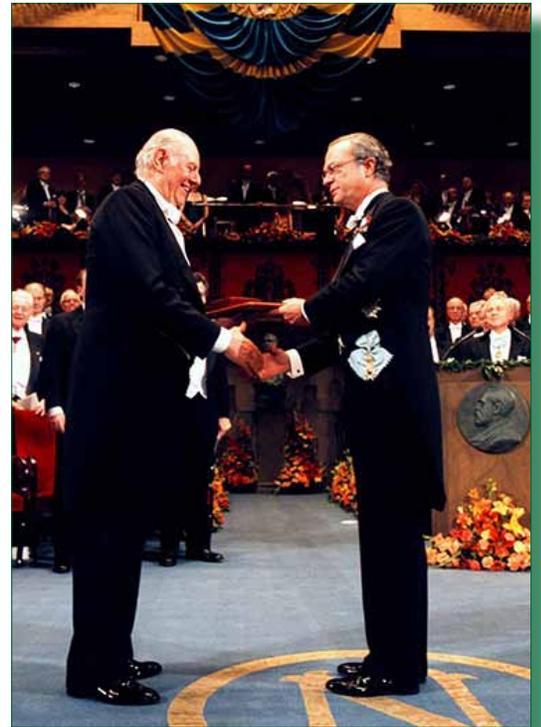
surprise to Fo and his supporters; in their view his eclectic, unorthodox art and his reputation as an onstage jester seemed far removed from the more conventional works of other literature laureates. The Swedish Academy thought differently. In its citation, it praised him as a writer “who emulates the jesters of the Middle Ages in scourging authority and upholding the dignity of the downtrodden.” Fo, driving along the Rome-Milan motorway at the time of the announcement, was alerted to the news when a car came up alongside his with an enormous placard in the window exclaiming “Dario, you’ve won the Nobel prize!”

The announcement came as a shock to Italians and non-Italians alike. Umberto Eco expressed delight that the award had been given to someone who “does not belong to the traditional academic world.” However, the Italian literary critic Carlo Bo was mystified: “I must be too old to understand. What does this mean? That everything changes, even literature has changed.” The Roman Catholic Church had been a frequent target of Fo’s satire, and the Vatican newspaper *L’Osservatore Romano* said it was flabbergasted by his selection. “Giving the prize to someone who is also the author of questionable works is beyond all imagination,” the paper said. The poet Mario Luzi slammed the phone down on a call from a reporter: “I’ll say only this. I’ve just about had it up to here!”

Reaction from the English-speaking world was also particularly fierce, with representatives from many English-speaking countries regarding Fo’s work as unfashionable and outdated, belonging to the 1970s and 1980s. American playwright Tony Kushner, however, expressed his approval, writing: “[Fo] has dedicated his genius to making everything he touches debatable.

[It] is brave and perhaps even reckless because it subjects Literature, and prizes, and Newspapers of Record, to the Fo effect.”

When he accepted the award, Fo was grateful, telling the Swedish Academy, “Yours is an act of courage that borders on provocation.” Since throughout his long career, he had encouraged directors in Italy and around the world to tailor performances of his plays to local issues, he said in his Nobel lecture: “A theater, a literature, an artistic expression that does not speak for its own time has no relevance.” In true Fo-fashion, the lecture was presented in the form of a specially-written dramatic piece, called *Contra Jogulatores Obloquentes (Against Jesters of Irreverent Speech)*, alongside some paintings. This later was described as “undoubtedly the most flamboyantly theatrical and comical acceptance speech ever seen at the Swedish Academy.”



In 2004, Marcello Dell’ Utri, a senator in the Forza Italia (the party headed by Silvio Berlusconi), on trial at the time for money laundering, sued Fo over references to him in his latest play. Fo was disgusted: “I have been doing satire for 40 years. It is paradox. It is grotesque.” The play, titled *The Two-Headed Anomaly* and first performed in 2003, also poked fun at the shortness of then prime minister Silvio Berlusconi, had him strapped to a chair and given electric shock treatment and portrayed Vladimir Putin being shot dead by Chechen rebels while visiting Berlusconi’s luxury villa in Sicily. The title refers to the subsequent transplanting of Putin’s brain into Berlusconi’s head, and the play was performed amid debate over Berlusconi’s business and political interests and media censorship, with RAI having barred Italian satirists Sabina Guzzanti and Paolo Rossi from its television channels. Fo spoke of receiving threats from politicians if he performed it, which he completely ignored.

In 2005, Fo revealed plans to run for Mayor of Milan, the most economically important city in Italy, the following year. He said it was part of his ongoing fight to rid Milan of Berlusconi’s political colleague Gabriele Albertini, the incumbent mayor. Ostracised by Italian television (both state,—RAI having shunted his latest show off to a graveyard slot—and commercial,—3/4 owned by Fo’s long-time adversary Berlusconi), Fo instead elected to campaign on stage, always his preferred platform. Under the slogan “I am not a moderate,” he opposed the center-right administration’s plans to demolish parts of Milan’s city center and vowed to chase out those “money-grabbing bastards who have run this city for decades.” He won 23.4% of the vote in the primary election of the center-left party, The Union, in January, 2006. He was ultimately unsuccessful, finishing second to Milan’s former police chief Bruno Ferrante.

In 2007, he was ranked seventh, tied with Stephen Hawking, in *The Telegraph's* list of 100 greatest living geniuses.

On October 13, 2016 Dario Fo died at the age of 90 due to a serious respiratory illness that had hospitalized him for 12 days at the Luigi Sacco Hospital in Milan. He was preceded in death by his wife of 59 years, Franca Rame, who died in 2013. They both are survived by their son Jacopo (born in 1955), who is a writer, actor, and director.

*Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from: Award.com website; Badge, Peter. Nobel Faces: A Gallery of Nobel Prize Winners. New York: Wiley-VCH Co., 2007, p. 148-49; Bohlen, Celestine. "Italy's Barbed Political Jester, Dario Fo, Wins Nobel Prize." The New York Times, October 10, 1997. From New York Times.com website; The Famous People.com website; New World Encyclopedia.org website; Kandell, Jonathan. "Dario Fo, Whose Plays Won Praise, Scorn and a Nobel, Dies at 90." Obituary in The New York Times. October 13, 2016, From New York Times.com website; Nobel Prize.org website; and Wikipedia.*

**Dario Fo - "La Resurrezione di Lazzaro" - Mistero Buffo 1991**

**From the shows recorded at the Teatro Lirico di Milano**

**(Video, 15 minutes, in Italian):**

**<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gKdKu8h-NXg>**

