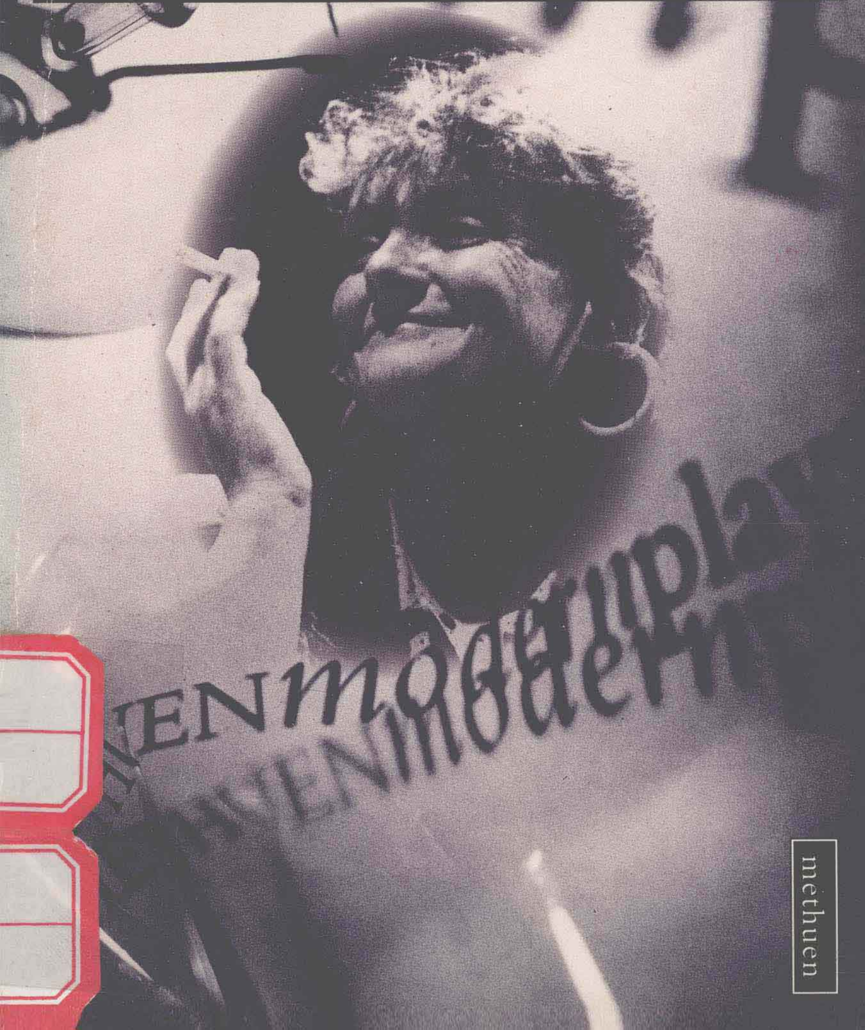
FRANCA RAME and DARIO FO

A WOMAN ALONE & OTHER PLAYS



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FRANCA RAME
and
DARIO FO

A Woman Alone & Other Plays

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and GILLIAN HANNA

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INTRODUCTION
The Theatre of Dario Fo and Franca Rame

The son of a railway worker, Dario Fo was born in 1926 near the Lago Maggiore in Northern Italy. He grew up in a village community that included glass-blowers and smugglers, where there was a strong tradition of popular narrative – much of it humourously subversive of authority – fed by travelling story-tellers and puppeteers. Gifted artistically, he studied architecture at Milan at the art-school attached to the Brera Gallery; but the theatre drew him strongly – first as a set-designer and then as a performer. His career began in revue which was the spectacular escapist entertainment of post-war Italy with girls and comics (some very brilliant like Totò, whom Fo greatly admired) and glamorous *chanteuses*. It was a genre favoured by politicians of the ruling Christian Democrat party; girls' legs were preferable to the social preoccupations of contemporary Italian cinema. In revue Fo began to make his mark as an extraordinarily original comic and mime. On radio he built a reputation with his monologues as a Poer Nano – the poor simpleton who, in telling Bible stories, for example, gets things wrong, preferring Cain to the insufferable prig, Abel. In 1954 he married Franca Rame, a striking and talented actress, who came from a family of travelling players and had made her first stage appearance when she was eight days old. Together they embarked on a highly successful series of productions.

In the fifties the right-wing clerical Christian Democrat government had imposed a tight censorship on film, theatre and broadcasting. Fo took advantage of a slght relaxation in censorship to mount an 'anti-revue', *Il dito nell'occhio* (One in the Eye). His aim was clear – to attack those myths in Italian life which, as he said, 'Fascism had imposed and Christian Democracy had preserved.' *Il dito nell'occhio* was 'one in the eye' for official versions of history. Presented at the Piccolo Teatro in Milan it was an immense success to which the participation of the great French mime, Jacques Lecoq, from whom Fo learned much, was an important contribution. *Il dito* *nell'occhio* was the first in a series of pieces which drew on French farce, on the traditional sketches of the Rame family, and on the traditions of the circus. This mixture of spectacle, mime and social comment was highly successful but made the authorities nervous; the police were frequently present at performances, following the scripts with pocket torches to ensure that there were no departures from the officially approved text. Fo grew in stature and virtuosity as actor and comic, exploiting his extraordinary range of gesture, movement and facial expression, his variety of voices and accents, and his skill as a story-teller. It was the misfortune of Italian cinema that it was unable to exploit his talents. There were difficulties in finding suitable scripts and, on set, his vitality and spontaneity were denied the space and freedom that the theatre provided. But what Fo did take away from film was an understanding of how montage gave pace to narrative.

In 1959 the Dario Fo–Franca Rame company was invited to open a season at the Odeon Theatre in Milan. The piece they chose was *Gli arcangeli non giocano a flipper* (Archangels Don't Play Pinball), written, directed and designed by Fo. It was unusual in that it dealt critically with certain ludicrous aspects of Italian society. The middle-class audience were astonished by its rhythms and technique and delighted by Fo in the leading role – that of a wise simpleton, who looks back to Poer Nano and forward to a series of similar clowns in later work. Fo and Rame were now securely established both as actors and as personalities in the public eye. Their success in conventional theatre was confirmed by a series of pieces which exploited a mixture of comedy, music and farcical plots in which Fo would, for instance, double as an absent-minded priest and a bandit. The social references were there – Fo and Rame were now both close to the Communist Party and acutely aware of the political tensions in society – and the public readily picked them up. In a period which saw widespread industrial unrest culminating in the general strike of 1960 their material caused the authorities in Milan to threaten to ban performances.

Italian television had been for many years a fief of the Christian Democrats. Programme control was strict: a young woman given to wearing tight sweaters who looked like

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winning a popular quiz show had to be eliminated on moral grounds. But when in 1962 the centre-left of the Christian Democrats became dominant there was some relaxation of censorship. It was in these circumstances that the Fo–Rame team was invited to appear on the most popular TV show, *Canzonissima*, which, as its name suggests, featured heart-throb singers along with variety acts. Into this show the Fo's proceeded to inject their own variety of subversive humour – such as a sketch in which a worker whose aunt has fallen into a mincing-machine, which cannot be stopped for that would interrupt production, piously takes her home as tinned meat. The reaction of the political authorities and of the right-wing press was to call for censorship, duly imposed by the obedient functionaries of Italian television – all of them political appointees. There was a tussle of wills at the end of which the Fo's walked out of the show. The scandal was immense. There were parliamentary questions; threats of law-suits on both sides. Fo had public opinion solidly behind him. He had, he said, tried to look behind the facade of the 'economic miracle', to question the view that 'we were all one big family now' and to show how exploitation had increased and scandals flourished. By subverting *Canzonissima* from within he had established himself with a huge popular audience.

During this period Fo had become interested in material set in or drawn from the Middle Ages. He had begun 'to look at the present with the instruments of history and culture in order to judge it better'. He invited the public to use these instruments by writing an ambiguous piece, *Isabella, tre caravelle e un cacciaballe* (Isabella, Three Caravels and a Wild-Goose Chaser), in which Columbus – that schoolbook hero – is portrayed as the upwards striving intellectual who loses out in the game of high politics. It was a period when Brecht's *Galileo* was playing with great success in Milan and the theatre was a subject of intense debate in the intellectual and political ferment leading up to the unrest of 1968. For Fo the most important result was probably his collaboration with a group of left-wing musicians who had become interested in the political potential of popular songs. Their work appealed to him because he was himself 'interested above all in a past attached to the roots of the people . . . and the concept of "the new in the traditional".' They put together a show, built round popular and radical songs, to which Fo contributed his theories on the importance of gesture and the rhythms in the performances of folksong; it marked an important step in his development.

In 1967 he put on his last production for the bourgeois theatre, *La signora non è da buttare* (The Lady's Not For Discarding), in which a circus was made the vehicle for an attack on the United States and capitalist society in general. It again attracted the attention of the authorities. Fo was called to police headquarters in Milan and threatened with arrest for 'offensive lines', not included in the approved version, attacking a head of state – Lyndon Johnson. By now it was becoming 'more and more difficult to act in a theatre where everything down to the subdivision of the seating . . . mirrored the class divisions. The choice for an intellectual', Fo concluded, 'was to leave his gilded ghetto and put himself at the disposal of the movement.'

The company with which the Fo's confronted this task was the cooperative Nuova Scena – an attempt to dispense with the traditional roles in a stage company and to make decision-making collective. It was, Fo said in retrospect, a utopian project in which individual talents and capabilities were sacrificed to egalitarian principles. But whatever the internal difficulties there was no doubt as to the success the company enjoyed with a new public which it sought out in the working-class estates, in cooperatives and trade union halls, in factories and workers' clubs. It was a public which knew nothing of the theatre but which found the political attitudes the company presented close to its experience of life. Each performance was followed by a discussion.

Nuova Scena did not last long – it was torn apart by political arguments, by arguments over the relationship of art to society and politics, and by questions of organisation. There were also difficulties with the Communist Party, which often controlled the premises used and whose officials began to react negatively to satirical attacks on their bureaucracy, the inflexibility of the Party line, the intolerance of real discussion. Before the split came, the company had put on a *Grande pantomima con bandiere e pupazzi medi e piccoli* (Grand Pantomime with

Flags and Little and Medium Puppets), in which Fo used a huge puppet, drawn from the Sicilian tradition, to represent the state and its continual fight with the 'dragon' of the working class. But the most important production was Fo's one-man show *Mistero Buffo*, which was to become one of his enduring triumphs in Italy and abroad. In it he drew on the counter-culture of the Middle Ages, on apocryphal gospel stories, on legend and tales, presenting episodes in which he played all the roles and used a language in part invented, in part archaic, in part drawn from the dialects of Northern Italy. It has been described as 'an imaginary Esperanto of the poor and the disinherited'. In performing the scenes of which *Mistero Buffo* is composed – such as the resurrection of Lazarus, the marriage at Cana, Pope Boniface's encounter with Jesus on the Via Dolorosa and others – Fo drew on two main traditions: that of the *giullare* (inadequately translated into English as 'jester'), the travelling comic, singer, mime, who in the Middle Ages was the carrier of a subversive culture; and that of the great clowns of the Commedia dell'Arte with their use of masks, of dialect and of *grammelot*, that extraordinary onomatopoeic rendering of a language – French, say – invented by the 15th-century comedians in which there are accurate sounds and intonations but few real words, all adding up (with the aid of highly expressive mime) to intelligible discourse.

When Nuova Scena split in 1970 it came hard on the heels of mounting polemics in the Communist press. Looking back, Franca Rame has admitted that she and Dario Fo were perhaps sectarian and sometimes mistaken but that they had had to break with the Communist cultural organisations if they wished to progress. The result was La Comune, a theatre company with its headquarters in Milan. The Fo's were now politically linked to the new Left, which found the Communist Party too authoritarian, too locked in the mythology of the Resistance, too inflexible and increasingly conservative. In *Morte accidentale di un'anarchico* (Accidental Death of an Anarchist) Fo produced a piece in which his skill at writing farce and his gifts as a clown were put brilliantly at the service of his politics, playing on the tension between the real death of a prisoner and the farcical inventions advanced by the authorities to explain it.

It is estimated that in four years the piece was seen by a million people, many of whom took part in fierce debates after the performance. Fo had succeeded in his aim of making of the theatre 'a great machine which makes people laugh at dramatic things . . . In the laughter there remains a sediment of anger.' So no easy catharsis. There followed a period in which Fo was deeply engaged politically – both through his writings and through his involvement with Franca Rame, who was the main mover of the project – in Red Aid, which collected funds and comforts for Italian political prisoners detained in harsh conditions. His writing dealt with the Palestinian struggle, with Chile, with the methods of the Italian police. In the spring of 1973 Franca Rame was kidnapped from her home in Milan by a Fascist gang, gravely assaulted and left bleeding in the street. Fo himself later that year was arrested and held in prison in Sardinia for refusing to allow police to be present at rehearsals. Demonstrations and protests ensured his release. Dario Fo had, as his lawyer said, for years no longer been only an actor but a political figure whom the state powers would use any weapon to silence.

His political flair was evident in the farce *Non si paga, non si paga* (Can't Pay? Won't Pay!) dating from 1974, which deals with the question of civil disobedience. Significantly, the main upholder of law and order is a Communist shop steward, who disapproves of his wife's gesture of rebellion against the rising cost of living – a raid on a supermarket. It was a piece tried out on and altered at the suggestion of popular audiences – a practice Fo has often used. It was the same spirit that inspired his *Storia di una tigre* (Story of a Tiger), an allegorical monologue dating from 1980 – after a trip to China, and based on a Chinese folktale – the moral of which is that, if you have 'tiger' in you, you must never delegate responsibility to others, never expect others to solve your own problems, and above all avoid that unthinking party loyalty which is the enemy of reason and of revolution. In 1981, following on the kidnapping of Aldo Moro came *Clacson, trombette e pernacchi* (Trumpets and Raspberries). In it Fo doubled as Agnelli, the boss of FIAT, and a FIAT shop steward, whose identities become farcically confused. The play mocks the police and their readiness to see terrorists everywhere and the political cynicism which led to Moro's being abandoned to his fate by his fellow-politicians.

It was the last of Fo's major political works in a period when the great political upsurges in Western Europe have died away and consumerism has apparently triumphed. Yet even when he turned to a play about Elizabeth and Essex, *Almost by Chance a Woman: Elizabeth* with a splendid transvestite part for himself as a bawd, it was possible to read in his portrayal of the machinations of Cecil, Elizabeth's spymaster, a reference to the part played by secret services in Italian politics in the Seventies – and, it might be added, in other Western states. In the meantime he has produced for a theatrical festival in Venice a charming Harlequinade, which is an exercise in the techniques of the Commedia dell'Arte, the tradition from which he has drawn much of his inspiration. His latest play, *The Pope and the Witch*, is once more political not merely in its anti-clericalism – his return to Italian television at the end of the Eighties deeply upset the Catholic hierarchy – but in that it deals with the social problem of drugs and the debate as to whether the solution is to be found in police action or in more enlightened policies which address the needs of the addicts and the social conditions that lead to addiction. It is a piece which has found a strong resonance with Italian audiences.

Meanwhile Franca Rame, who has progressively established herself as a political figure and a powerful feminist voice, has produced performances of a number of one-woman plays in collaboration with her husband – monologues usually which are a direct political intervention in a society where the role of women is notably restricted by the Church, the state and male traditions. Like her husband she finds political intervention difficult in a period which she defines as being one of indifference, of cynicism, of alienation – one in which the grand social causes have been replaced by other issues, green issues, issues affecting deprived children, children with congenital defects, issues like those of drugs and AIDS which are indeed political and of almost universal application.

To find a parallel to the role of Franca Rame and Dario Fo in the Italian theatre we have to go back to the second half of the 16th century when one of the most famous companies of the

Commedia dell'Arte was led by a husband and wife: Isabella and Francesco Andreini.

Franca Rame and Dario Fo came to the theatre by different routes. She comes from a family of travelling players and made her first appearance on stage as a babe-in-arms; Dario Fo came to the theatre through stage-design. Both had highly successful careers in conventional, bourgeois theatre which they abandoned in the Sixties to find new, popular audiences in unorthodox settings: circus tents, parking lots, piazzas. Their kind of theatre was a political intervention which reflected the radical movements on the Left in Italy in the Sixties and Seventies. The sharp, satirical nature of their work brought them into difficulties with the State, and with the Italian Communist Party, which was too inflexible to cope with the new forces in politics – young people, women and workers rebelling against the old industrial and political structures. They were inevitably attacked – in Franca Rame's case physically – by the neo-Fascists.

Their dramatic strategy was to use laughter as a weapon directed against conformism, against the duplicity of the government which deliberately created an atmosphere of tension; they were on the side of the oppressed – in particular of women. Like others who were politically active in those days they have had to rethink their strategies and targets. Their latest pieces – *The Pope and the Witch* and *Hush, We're Falling Head over Heels* – deal with the problems of drugs and AIDS. But their kind of theatre still draws on the great comic traditions of the Commedia dell'Arte, which they have kept alive and developed to deal with the social problems of today.

STUART HOOD
January 1991

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INTRODUCTION
Performing in the Mirror

'The function of our theatre is to try to provoke self-awareness in the audience, a consciousness of what's going on around them, and to provide, in a sense, a mirror of society,' said Franca Rame in an interview on BBC's *Woman's Hour*.* At a time of so-called 'post-feminism', these plays are a bracing antidote to the wishful thinking that would consign the struggles of the last twenty years to the safe obscurity of history. As Rame says, 'I draw on problems that women have within the family, problems that women have at work, in the factories, in the office, and, of course, problems that they have within society at large.' That these problems have not been resolved is what gives her work its continuing painful resonance. Rame continues, 'The most important thing, the crucial thing that I would wish to see, that I would demand, is respect for women everywhere: at home, in the street, in the family and in bed. (*She laughs*) Very important.'

Here is what makes Rame's voice so special and unexpected. She is passionate in pursuit of change in society's attitudes to women. For her, it is not only a question of equal rights or equal pay at work. She also, critically, recognises the essential human flashpoint: emotional and sexual relationships between men and women, the enchantment and traps of heterosexual love. In the play *Coming Home* the wife's most bitter complaint against her husband is that he doesn't satisfy her sexually. Rame constantly challenges us to acknowledge that for women to achieve true equality the world has to be remade, in bed as much as at work.

None of the issues she tackles in these plays is new. After more than twenty years of the 'second wave' of feminism, her audience will be familiar with the themes. But they are issues that do not go away, and many are not amenable to legislative solutions. As long as men continue to abandon their middle-aged wives for 'younger flesh, younger skin', as long as women live in fear of rape, as long as women have to do two jobs – one inside, one outside the home – as long as women are forbidden to explore and enjoy their sexuality in a society that labels them as whores, so long will Rame's women continue to sing out loudly, so long will her audience recognise their voices.

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* Franca Rame, Interview with Jill Burridge, *Woman's Hour*, BBC Radio 4, January 1991.

The essential problem for both translator and performer is the question of finding this voice. When Franca Rame performs the plays in Italy she is already well known in her own right. Her audience is aware of her history as a political being as well as an actress. She appears on the stage bringing with her the ghost of three decades of political activity, and everyone in the audience, be it in a theatre or sports stadium or factory is familiar with that. So whichever character she is playing, her audience recognises her within all her characters. This is not to imply a lack of technical skill, to say that the actress somehow does not get inside the character she is playing. Quite the reverse, her virtuosity enables her to move seamlessly between herself and her characters. It enables her to speak to the audience through her characters. But her history means that she can also speak directly to the audience with authority and without the mediating force of those characters. When she performs these plays, she starts the evening as herself. She challenges the audience head on saying, in so many words: look, you know who I am, I want you to think about the shitty way women get treated in this world and this is how I am going to make you deal with it.

Rame is quoted as having said that she would like these plays to become part of an actress's repertoire. They are indeed, performed over and over again. But for any other performer and for the translator there are problems to be overcome. It has always seemed to me to be of vital importance to find the voice of each character, because it is almost impossible for any other actress to have the same direct (unspoken) line of communication to the audience that Rame does in the course of a performance. When that essential link is absent some other way has to be found of confronting the audience face to face with the urgency of what Rame, the writer, is saying.

The first question to be addressed always has to be: how can this be translated so that it can be *performed* effectively? Or, at its most basic, what works? Theatre is a collaborative art, and translations of plays, unlike other literary works, have to take *three* participants into account: author, performer and audience.

'What works?' has to be asked of these plays in the context of what Rame sets out to accomplish both politically and theatrically. They are passionate, angry, moving, and, in some cases, hilarious demands for a reappraisal of women's role in society. It is the job of the translator and the performer to move the audience through anger or tears or laughter to *rethink* the issues that Rame is throwing in their face.

This point is particularly tricky when dealing with the comic plays, and leads to a crucial issue: whether to leave the character in an Italian context or to move her to a place which the audience is likely to recognise more immediately, and where there is a greater chance of them laughing *with* the character rather than *at* her. The response Rame is looking for is not 'O look at this woman, isn't she funny?', but 'O God, that's hysterical, I've been there, I've done that . . .' The humour is the shared humour of what is common to all women. Additionally, it is a problem for the performer. If the character remains in her Italian surroundings, how is one to perform that? In English with an Italian accent? Not a good idea, given the unfortunate English tendency to find any foreigner funny just by dint of being foreign. Estelle Parsons, who is closely associated with Rame's work in America, leaves the plays in their original context and performs them as Italian-American women. This may be a solution in the United States where there is a large community of Italian descent which plays a vocal and visible role in mainstream American life, but would not be particularly helpful to performers in the British Isles (except, perhaps in Scotland, where there is also a lively Italian community). There is a danger, too, that by leaving the women in an Italian context they become generalised, their 'Italianness' having the effect of masking the differences between them – differences of age, class, temperament and attitude. As a performer my instinct has led me, in translating the plays, to look for the distance between the characters. I have tried to place them in such a way that each one's individual voice can be heard. The aim is to retain Franca Rame's savage bite, her precise wit and her passion, without depending on the actual presence of Rame herself.

Any actress who performs these plays quickly experiences the power of the relationship that is created between herself and the audience. This is indeed precisely why they are entering the repertoire of many actresses, as Rame had hoped. The plays demand that the performer redefine the relationship with the audience: the breaking down of the traditional fourth wall so that each character can speak *directly* to the audience.

Most of the plays require the performer to treat the audience as a trusted friend, a confidante. The context in which the plays function is often a domestic one and the performer has to establish the feeling of a woman leaning over the garden fence chatting to a neighbour. This is most obvious in *A Woman Alone*, where the character is actually talking to the audience-as-neighbour, but even in those plays which have a less domestic situation (*The Rape* and *Medea* for example) the performer has to buttonhole the audience by taking the characters out of the epic and into the intimate. In the end, Rame brings us back to the old adage of the Women's Movement: the personal is the political. Each member of the audience leaves the theatre knowing that the performer has been speaking to them individually.

My thanks are due to Sharon Miller, who directed the three pieces which made up *A Common Woman* (*Bless Me Father For I Have Sinned*, *The Rape*, *Coming Home*), and whose continued comments and suggestions have been an invaluable help. Thanks, too, to Diane Gelon for her expert skills in the preparation of the text.

GILLIAN HANNA
February 1991

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