

Franca Rame

I Am Ready

Interview by Stefania Taviano

Anomalo bicefalo, the new comedy by and starring Franca Rame and Dario Fo started touring recently and is sold out. Franca is not feeling very well, but this does not prevent her from writing, working on the show, rehearsing with Dario and even being interviewed over the phone. When I call her, Franca is typing at the computer, she is updating the text. Every night the show is recorded and the following day Franca introduces improvisations from the previous night. She asks me to call back in ten minutes. Then we start: "I am ready". Her voice reveals her tiredness and fatigue, but the tone is generous and available as Franca always is. It is the tone of voice of a woman for whom struggle is a *raison d'être*. Struggle intended as a political struggle, a class struggle, a social struggle, a struggle for the weakest. It is a fight for women's rights, a fight for political prisoners and a fight without compromise. It is a fight at a national and international level, both public and private, as a woman, writer, actress and wife of the Nobel Prize winner Dario Fo. I enthusiastically start with my first question.

This issue of The Open Page focuses on struggle. Can you talk about your experience of class struggle through theatre and about the role that your and Dario's theatre has had in Italian society, for example, in the years of Morte Accidentale (Accidental Death) when you performed in stadiums and factories? Can you tell us what struggle through political theatre means?

For a period of time, we performed political theatre (at least what the censors allowed us to do) in middle-class venues. We could call it digestive theatre, not because it was light theatre, but because it allowed the bourgeois to think, "Yes, they are Communists, but they make us laugh," digesting their own fears. In the 1970s we decided to be at the service of the class that we felt we belonged to, the working class.

Those were tough years: factories closing down, occupied factories, redundancies. We decided to support those

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Franca Rame in *La signora è da buttare*, 1968

people raising funds through our performances to keep the factories occupied. The workers organised the performances, they sold the tickets, their wives and daughters ran the bars. Not only that, the performances were an opportunity to inform the audience about what was happening and to sell what the workers produced, asking the audience to offer anything they could to help them: food, blankets, money. In some cases, thanks to people's support (sometimes we performed in sports halls to more than 10,000 people) the workers won the litigation against their bosses (now they are called multinationals).

I can tell you an amazing story about a glass factory with 1,000 workers. The owner wanted to shut it down and the workers occupied the factory. We went to see them; they were desperate. We decided to try and sell their products. "You can't," a trade unionist said. One worker said: "I want to start my own business, I have 10,000 glasses, they are yours!" We were scheduled to perform the following day at the sports hall

in Bologna to an audience of about 10,000 people and we suggested taking the 10,000 glasses there. They looked at us thinking that we were mad. "Don't worry, we will take care of everything". We hired a truck and loaded the boxes. Can you imagine 10,000 glasses? They were never ending. A store would not sell them in a year. Ten workers came with us. We got to Bologna, people started coming at seven. At eight we told the audience about these workers' drama. What could we do to support their cause? We could sell their products: glasses. Then a worker explained their situation. To cut a long story short, at the first interval we had sold all 10,000 glasses. Some people bought six, others could only afford one. In the end we were all holding a glass. It was wonderful!

I heard that the Piccolo Teatro in Milan tried to censor your new comedy, Anomalo bicefalo. Your work has been censored several times, from the years of Canzonissima until the refusal of a visa to enter the USA in the 1980s. Can you talk about this recent experience of

censorship in contemporary Italy?

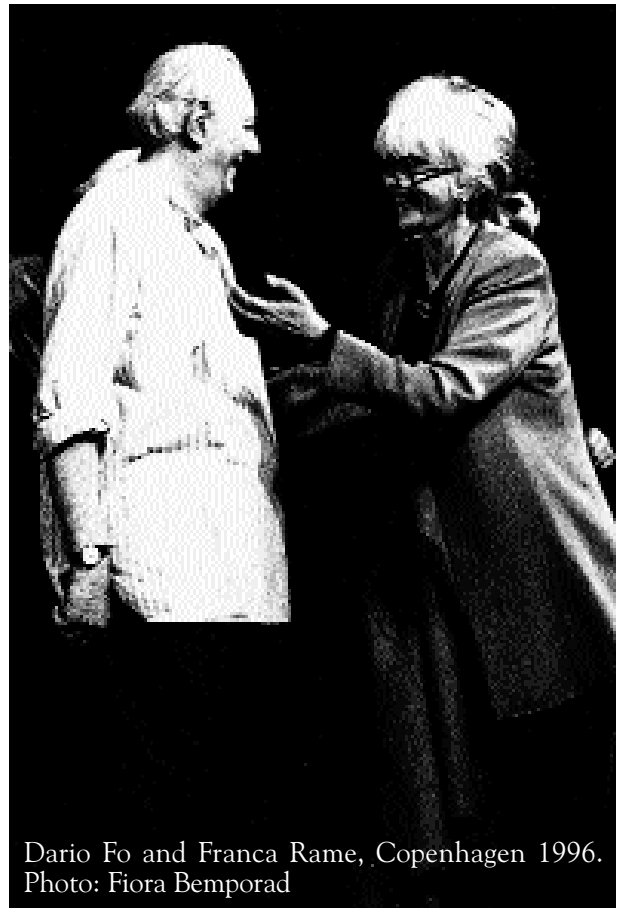
In 1962 when we took part in *Canzonissima* they censored everything. It was constantly in the media and Italy was divided between those who supported us and those who wanted us dead.

This time the board of Piccolo Teatro wanted to read the text. One of them said to the press: "No more politics, no more politicians." Even other theatre managers wanted to see the text, but we refused to let them read it. Since there is no censorship in Italy now, how could they impose a precautionary censorship? So after the interviews, the articles in the press, the board stopped asking. The play has not been censored in any way. We should thank the board of the Piccolo for all the free publicity they have given us. It is sold out everywhere. It is exactly the same thing that happened at the time of *Canzonissima* when the Vatican condemned *Mistero Buffo* (Comic Mysteries).

There is another aspect of your daily battle, the social aspect, which is perhaps less known, but which is dear to you. You have said more than once that if you could choose you would have committed yourself to helping the underprivileged, rather than being an actress.

I was born into a theatre family, originating from families of actors and puppeteers, dating back to the 17th century, which means that I have Commedia dell'arte in my DNA.

I started performing when I was eight days old. My mother, playing the leading role in Brabante's *Genoveffa*, was holding me in her arms, I was her new-born baby. I didn't say much that night. I have always performed since then, every day of my life, but this is not the job I chose and love, even though it is hard to understand. I would have done anything in my life, apart from this job. My



Dario Fo and Franca Rame, Copenhagen 1996.
Photo: Fiora Bemporad

vocation is social, I mean I am interested in social issues, I could have done something else. I could have been a trade unionist, perhaps I could have been the President of Italy, I would have been happy to do that, but not to be an actress. When I realised that I was not very interested in this job, I was already an adult.

Why did I continue? Because through my work I can talk to many people every day and I can deal with political issues, I can fight for the causes I believe in, like an occupied factory, a house for a homeless person, a job for an immigrant family, a bed in a hospital for someone who is HIV positive.

Eva, for example, is a Brazilian woman whom you helped a lot.

Yes, one evening we were watching the television programme *Sciuscìa* and I was touched

by the story of Eva Dos Anjos, an illegal immigrant from Brazil, who lost two of her children in a fire in the restaurant where she worked illegally. She told her story, a terrible story, without a tear. She was calm, she spoke with dignity. She was desperate. She was holding the photos of her two beautiful children in her lap, her children who are gone now. The following day I managed to get in touch with her. I met her, I loved her. I wish everyone could meet a woman like her: a desperate life from childhood to the present, helped only by her son, who started selling underwear with her when he was six. Eva is beautiful. How many women would have done something else in her place? She does not know what the future holds for her, although things are changing and I hope they will get better. Through the fund-raising "Justice for Eva and Wagner Dos Anjos" many people helped us. Eva has a residency permit now, she has a flat, and they have refunded her the funeral expenses.

I remember when I met Eva and her friend Eleonora, I remember Eva and her son in the bedroom I had offered them to stay in. Wagner put his mattress on the floor and was happy. "Why on the floor? There is another bed underneath, you just need to pull it out," I said. "Thanks, but Wagner prefers it this way." I was not happy, the next day Wagner slept in our bedroom (I sleep in a smaller room when Dario is away). They stayed with us for eight months. I remember sad nights, when you could breathe her sorrow as a mother. Eva was watching television, but she was somewhere else with her thoughts. I kept silent, trying to disappear on the sofa. Then she stood up, she went to her room. I thought: "Where is she going, what can I do?" A bit worried, I went looking for her. Silence: perhaps she was sleeping. I gently opened the door, I was always afraid she might harm herself. She was sitting on her bed, holding the photographs of her chil-

dren, like the first time I saw her on television. I gave her a kiss and left.

You have always fought as a woman, as the wife of Dario Fo, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1997. You have written plays about the role of women in society and about couples. Could you talk about this aspect, about your feminist commitment, if I can call it like this?

I am usually seen as Fo's wife, full stop. I used to think that this was offensive, because it revealed a lack of respect. The same happened in the USA. We were denied a visa because of Red Aid, an organisation to support prisoners' families which I created. But in the USA Dario is responsible for Red Aid and I am just his lady. Dario has always been considered the artist, but next to his creativity there was and there is my creativity, smaller perhaps, less evident, but as important as his for our common work. Dario reads his texts to me, and we discuss, rethink, rewrite them together, or write them together as in the case of *Female Parts*. The title of *Female Parts* is a play on words (theatrical parts and body parts) and the protagonist is a woman telling women's stories emphasising the social, cultural, political and human problems of women today.

My approach is feminist in political terms, not as a sterile fight against men, it is about a common journey that needs to be taken with men, perhaps while kicking them, but holding hands. We both need to grow. A lot of mistakes have been made, we have often adopted male models without changing them, but those were early years that were destroyed by terrorism and by the socio-economic situation. But we have made some progress: we obtained divorce and legal abortion. The right to work should always be defended because women are those who suffer most from unemployment. And you

cannot be independent if you don't have a job and financial autonomy. Social structures, as they are based on material needs, prevent equality between men and women. Men are not necessarily negative as human beings. How many times do women behave badly? Given my age, and because of my experience and the hundreds of stories that I have heard, I can tell that woman's worst enemy is, precisely, woman. We need to learn to behave like sisters. We argue that we are united when fighting, when demonstrating, but in private we only think about ourselves and when we have a relationship with a married man, we ignore the consequences and justify our actions in the name of love. "But I love him!" Who cares about his wife, his children?

I would like to ask you a last question about what seems a more personal struggle, which you have turned into the struggle of all women, the struggle against rape. Your monologue I think is the most powerful weapon against this scourge which continues to affect women from all over the world. Can you tell us about this extreme type of struggle as a woman?

Stupro (Rape) is a monologue against rape and it means a lot to me. For two years I didn't tell anyone that I had been raped. I told everybody, including my husband, that I had been beaten. This kind of violence is a trauma that you carry with you all your life. Those responsible were not found for many years, despite Angelo Izzo's confession at the trial for the Bologna terrorist bombs in 1987. It was not until 1998 that it was proven that it had all been organised by Carabinieri officers from the Pastrengo department. General Giovanni Battista Palumbo was delighted when he heard that I had been kidnapped and said: "It was about time". The names of the principals and the rapists are revealed in the legal documents signed by the Milanese

magistrate Guido Salvini twenty-five years after the events, a period of time after which a crime has lapsed and those who are guilty are guaranteed immunity.

The text is based on my experience, but is told as the experience of another woman, it is a civic testimony that I offer hoping that it will be useful. A lot of young men write to me: "I was about to... then I had your image in front of my eyes with your *Stupro* and I stopped." It should be performed in primary schools. Only if we explain to children what violence is, particularly rape, can we hope for a better world for everybody.

Translated from Italian by Stefania Taviano

FRANCA RAME (Italy) was born in 1929. She comes from a family of travelling players and has been on stage since she was eight years old. She married Dario Fo in 1954 and since then has been collaborating with him as actress, writer and editor. She first founded the theatre company Fo-Rame with her husband, and in 1968 La Nuova Scena and later La Comune. Franca has performed internationally and is known for her theatrical talents as well as for her social and political activism.

STEFANIA TAVIANO (Italy) is a lecturer in English at the University of Messina, Italy. She holds a PhD from Warwick University in Translation Studies, with a final dissertation on *Italian Language on the 20th century stage* and she has translated several plays which have been performed abroad. She has published articles on Dario Fo and Franca Rame and other renowned Italian theatre-makers.