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STAGING THE STATE, PERFORMING POLITICS: A CURIOUS CASE OF DARIO FO AND FRANCA RAME

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the theatre of Dario Fo and Franca Rame through the conceptual framework of performative ideology, arguing that their dramaturgy does not merely represent political realities but exposes the theatrical mechanisms through which power legitimises itself in modern society. Drawing upon the traditions of medieval Giullari, Ruzzante, Commedia dell'arte, and twentieth-century experimental performance, the study demonstrates how Fo and Rame transformed popular theatre into a critical instrument for interrogating state authority, ecclesiastical power, capitalist hegemony, media manipulation, and patriarchal domination. Through close readings of major works including Mistero Buffo, Accidental Death of an Anarchist, Can't Pay? Won't Pay!, All Home, Bed, and Church, The Open Couple, The Rape, The Pope and the Witch, Johan Padan and the Discovery of the Americas, and L'Anomalo Bicefalo, the article reveals how institutional discourse operates as a repertoire of repeated performances that naturalize social hierarchies and ideological consent. The study further situates Fo and Rame within broader traditions of performance theory by engaging Stanislavskian realism, Meyerholdian biomechanics, Grotowskian actor training, and Lecoqian physical pedagogy. Their theatrical practice emerges as a dynamic synthesis of improvisation and discipline, bodily expressivity and political critique, collective authorship and popular communication. Particular attention is devoted to grammelot, clowning, direct audience address, grotesque embodiment, music, and anti-naturalist staging as strategies that dismantle official narratives and expose the performative foundations of authority. The article also reassesses Franca Rame's indispensable role as playwright, performer, feminist theorist, and collaborative creator whose interventions expanded the political horizon of popular theatre by foregrounding gendered forms of ideological regulation. Ultimately, the essay argues that Fo and Rame's theatre constitutes a radical counter-public sphere in which laughter becomes a mode of historical inquiry, performance becomes a practice of ideological demystification, and theatrical representation functions as a powerful medium for reimagining democratic agency and cultural resistance.

Introduction

The theatre of Dario Fo and Franca Rame does not simply represent politics; it shows that politics already arrives as theatre. In their work, "reality" is repeatedly disclosed as a cluster of performed scripts: police reports, courtroom protocols, televisual spectacle, Vatican ritual, parliamentary language, capitalist public relations, and patriarchal codes of marriage, maternity, and sexual respectability. The performative ideology in Fo and Rame is therefore not ideology treated as abstract doctrine, but ideology enacted through bodies, props, rhythms, institutional speech, and repeated social roles. Their major plays expose how states, churches, media systems, and families secure authority by staging plausibility; in response, Fo and Rame build a rival popular theatre that interrupts those scripts through clowning, improvisation, grammelot, grotesque embodiment, direct address, music, and public laughter. Fo's Nobel lecture makes that programme explicit: theatre must "show … what is happening around us," because art that does not speak for its own time "has no relevance" (Fo, "Nobel Lecture"). [1]

The article develops around five linked claims. First, Fo and Rame inherit from the Giullari, Ruzzante, and Commedia dell'arte a performance grammar that privileges the actor's body, anti-naturalist transformation, and proximity to popular audiences over literary fixity and bourgeois decorum. Second, they combine those popular forms with modern political pressure points: the Hot Autumn, Piazza Fontana, the strategy of tension, labour militancy, referendums on divorce and abortion, neo-fascist violence, media censorship, consumer inflation, Vatican authority, and the Berlusconi era. Third, their stage practice turns documentary actuality into comic revelation rather than realist reportage; the result is a theatre in which farce is not evasive but forensic. Fourth, Franca Rame's role is not auxiliary but constitutive: as actor, deviser, editor, workshop leader, feminist playwright, and political militant, she helped define the company's open scripting, audience-testing, and bodily rhetoric, while her monologues transformed domestic and sexual oppression into major sites of political analysis. Fifth, censorship and reception are not external accidents but evidence that Fo and Rame struck at the borders where institutional performance and public legitimacy meet. Their break with RAI in 1962, later television bans, Vatican denunciations, lawsuits, visa refusals, and recurring controversy around pieces such as Mistero Buffo, The Open Couple, and The Pope and the Witch confirm that their theatre repeatedly made official reality appear uncomfortably stage-managed. [2]

This article adopts a canonical and widely cited corpus: the early farses (The Virtuous Burglar, Archangels Don't Play Pinball, He Had Two Pistols with White and Black Eyes, Isabella, Three Tall Ships, and a Con Man), the transition to militant collective theatre (La signora è da buttare, Grande pantomima, The Worker Knows 300 Words), the breakthrough works (Mistero Buffo, Accidental Death of an Anarchist, Can't Pay? Won't Pay!), the Rame-centred feminist and collaborative plays (All Home, Bed, and Church; The Open Couple; A Woman Alone; The Rape; An Ordinary Day), and the later satires (Trumpets and Raspberries, The Pope and the Witch, Johan Padan and the Discovery of the Americas, The Devil with the Tits, Lu Santo Jullare Françesco, and L'Anomalo Bicefalo). This approach follows the recurring archive listings, official biographies, translations, and publisher canons rather than pretending that "major" is self-evident. [3]

Political Reality as Performative Intervention

To read Fo and Rame through performative ideology is to insist that their political theatre does more than carry opinions from stage to auditorium. It tracks the doing of power. In broad theoretical terms, ideology works by hailing subjects into roles and by naturalising institutional codes that are, in fact, historically made; performativity names the repeated acts and speech forms through which such identities and norms are brought into being rather than simply expressed. Fo and Rame's theatre repeatedly places those two insights on stage. Police officers rehearse innocence, judges rehearse impartiality, bishops rehearse sanctity, husbands rehearse masculine freedom, wives rehearse obedience, bosses rehearse inevitability, and television rehearses consensus. Their comic dramaturgy then interrupts the rehearsal, forcing the audience to see how official truth depends on role-play, costume, timing, and scripted language. In that sense, their theatre is political not merely

because it speaks about the state, but because it demonstrates that the state itself depends on performance. [4]

Fo's own formulation is strikingly close to this argument. In Accidental Death of an Anarchist, the Maniac describes his practice as a "theatre of reality," a phrase that condenses the company's lifelong method: real people, real institutions, real documents, and real news events are not transferred intact to the stage but re-performed until the absurdity of their self-legitimating scripts becomes visible (Fo, qtd. in Accidental Death of an Anarchist Study Guide). The same logic appears in the Nobel lecture, where Fo praises the anti-authoritarian jester tradition, insists that "laughter does not please the mighty," and defines artistic relevance in terms of historical address (Fo, "Nobel Lecture"). His major models, especially Ruzzante, are celebrated precisely because they put "the everyday life, joys and desperation of the common people" together with "the hypocrisy and the arrogance of the high and mighty" on stage (Fo, "Nobel Lecture"). The resulting aesthetic is neither pure documentary nor mere carnival. It is a deliberately unstable mixture in which the comic body unpicks the bodily rituals of authority. [5] That mixture explains why Fo and Rame often seem at once Brechtian and stubbornly non-Brechtian. They share with Brecht a commitment to historicisation, anti-illusionism, direct audience address, and a theatre that reveals social mechanisms rather than psychological depth. Yet their preferred means are less diagrammatic than Brecht's. They drive estrangement through masks, dialects, slapstick, accelerated entrances, clowning, gestural excess, and improvisatory rapport, so that alienation is produced not through cool distance alone but through comic overstimulation. Scholarship on Fo's relation to commedia dell'arte is especially clear on this point: the comic register is not decorative, but functionally political, since it deprives authority of solemnity and gives the actor a mobile repertoire of "masks" rather than a single realistic subject-position (Puppa; Davis). [6] By contrast with Artaud, Fo and Rame are not interested in destroying language in order to arrive at pre-discursive intensity. Yet they do share an investment in the body, vocal grain, breath, cruelty, and non-naturalist shock. The difference is that they harness these elements to legibility. Grammelot, clowning, song, and grotesque transformation intensify communication rather than abolish it. Jaffe-Berg's analysis of grammelot is valuable here: Fo's invented speech does not retreat from meaning but creates a collaborative field in which meaning is produced between actor and audience through sound, gesture, recognition, and suggestion. For that reason, ideological performance is confronted not by a withdrawal into abstraction, but by a more agile, more public, and more bodily politics of theatrical communication (Jaffe-Berg 29-45). [7]

The Political Scenario and Script of Italy in Late Twentieth Century.

Fo and Rame's dramaturgy is inseparable from post-war Italy's shifting political crises. Their rupture with establishment broadcasting in 1962 during Canzonissima was formative because it revealed, at national scale, how variety entertainment, social satire, and state censorship were entangled. Rai Teche's own retrospective stresses that Fo and Rame entered the programme with a stated intention to bring political and social satire before a broad popular television audience, while the archive records that they withdrew rather than accept renewed RAI censorship. Contemporary reconstructions of the incident point to sketches about mafia, occupational disease, and especially building-site safety as flashpoints, confirming that the dispute was not simply aesthetic but about who could publicly define social reality on the largest available stage.

The later 1960s deepened that conflict. Italy's economic slowdown and labour militancy culminated in the "Hot Autumn" of 1969, marked by strikes, factory occupations, mass demonstrations, and a new confidence in unofficial, rank-and-file action. Britannica identifies the period's epicentre at Fiat in Turin, while university teaching material on Accidental Death connects the Hot Autumn directly to fears among conservative and far-right groups that Italy was drifting toward socialism. Fo and Rame moved in exactly that atmosphere: away from commercial theatre, into collective organisations such as Nuova Scena, and toward a theatre that sought workers' clubs, occupied spaces, and popular venues. Their formal rejection of bourgeois realism therefore coincided with an institutional rejection of bourgeois theatrical circuits.

The bombing at Piazza Fontana in December 1969 and the death of Giuseppe Pinelli in police custody the same month supplied the decisive matrix for Accidental Death of an Anarchist. Treccani's reconstruction of the Pinelli case, Fo's official biography, and the study guide's authorial interview all converge on the key point: the police and state apparatuses attempted to produce a coherent public story around events that were in fact fractured, contradictory, and politically explosive. The play emerges from that struggle over narration. At the nearby Milan tribunal, as the archive notes, the police case against Lotta Continua unfolded in counterpoint with performances of Accidental Death, and Fo's company incorporated fresh revelations from the trial into the comedy. Political reality was therefore not simply represented after the fact; it was re-staged in an ongoing contest with legal and journalistic performance.

The 1970s also brought the "Years of Lead," the spread of right- and left-wing political violence, and an intensified politics of social rights. Franca Rame's biography is central here. The archive chronology records her work for Soccorso Rosso in support of arrested workers and students; Nobel and biographical sources register the 1973 abduction and rape carried out by neo-fascists; later scholarship and Rame-centred criticism insist that this violence cannot be separated from the militancy of her theatre. At the same time, the decade saw the 1974 divorce referendum, the 1978 abortion law, and the 1981 referendum confirming abortion rights—political battles that directly inform the feminist monologues and collaborative plays gathered around All Home, Bed, and Church and The Open Couple. Rame's theatre is therefore located at the crossing-point of class politics, anti-fascism, and second-wave feminism rather than in a purely "women's issues" sphere.

The later decades did not reduce the stakes; they changed their media and ideological forms. The early 1980s, shaped by industrial crisis and the Fiat wars, underpin Trumpets and Raspberries; the battles over sexuality, drugs, and Church authority animate The Pope and the Witch; the revisionist return to colonial and ecclesiastical histories structures Johan Padan and Lu Santo Jullare Françesco; and the media-saturated, Berlusconi-centred political landscape culminates in L'Anomalo Bicefalo. Fo's official biography notes that his Brecht adaptation for the Berliner Ensemble was rejected for political reasons, and the archive records later legal action around the Berlusconi-era satires. The shift is crucial: whereas earlier plays expose the police report, the labour law, or the courtroom transcript as ideological performance, the later plays increasingly target the televised, celebrity-driven, and post-ideological performance of power.

Reconsidering Method: Dario Fo and Franca Rame towards a Method of Acting

Certain commentators contend that the theatrical practice developed by Dario Fo and Franca Rame resists systematic theoretical interpretation because it privileges improvisation, unpredictability, and creative freedom over codified technique. Throughout his career, Fo frequently emphasized the importance of invention, spontaneity, and the actor's capacity to respond dynamically to audiences and political circumstances. This emphasis has often encouraged the perception that his theatre operates outside established methodological frameworks and therefore cannot be adequately understood through conventional acting theories. Yet such a conclusion overlooks the complex network of artistic traditions, performance strategies, and embodied disciplines that underpin Fo and Rame's theatrical production. Far from existing in a methodological vacuum, their work demonstrates a sophisticated engagement with diverse traditions of performance while simultaneously transforming them for contemporary political purposes.

An analytical engagement with acting theories should therefore not be understood as an attempt to impose rigid structures upon a fundamentally experimental theatre. Rather, theoretical frameworks illuminate the mechanisms through which Fo and Rame generated meaning on stage. Their performances reveal an intricate synthesis of improvisation and technique, spontaneity and discipline, popular entertainment and political intervention. The apparent freedom of their theatrical language frequently emerges from highly developed physical skills, precise comic timing, and a profound understanding of audience interaction. Consequently, examining their work through established performance methodologies enriches rather than restricts critical appreciation of their artistic achievement.

From the perspective of Stanislavskian performance theory, Fo's practice appears to depart radically from psychological realism. His frequent use of dialect fragmentation, grammelot, direct audience address, and rapid character transformation disrupts the continuity of character psychology that Stanislavski regarded as central to theatrical truth. Nevertheless, aspects of Fo's performance demonstrate affinities with Stanislavskian concerns. His characters often possess emotional credibility despite their grotesque exaggeration, and his satirical figures are grounded in recognisable social behaviours. Through acute observation of human conduct and a keen sensitivity to audience response, Fo generated performances that maintained emotional immediacy even while rejecting conventional realism. The result is a theatre capable of sustaining empathy and recognition within overtly anti-naturalistic forms.

Similarly, Franca Rame's solo performances reveal a complex interplay between alienation and emotional authenticity. Her feminist monologues frequently interrupt dramatic illusion in order to expose structures of patriarchal power, thereby encouraging spectators to adopt a critical perspective toward social reality. At the same time, these performances remain deeply rooted in embodied experience and affective intensity. The physical precision of Rame's stage presence, her control of rhythm and gesture, and her capacity to communicate lived experience through performance suggest important points of convergence with theories emphasizing corporeal expression, including those associated with Grotowski and Lecoq. Her work demonstrates that political critique and emotional depth are not mutually exclusive but can function as complementary dimensions of theatrical communication.

The influence of physical theatre traditions becomes even more evident when Fo and Rame are examined through Meyerholdian biomechanics, Grotowskian actor training, and Lecoq's pedagogy of movement. Their performances consistently foreground the expressive potential of the body as a site of social commentary and artistic invention. Comic exaggeration, rhythmic movement, improvisational responsiveness, and stylised gesture function not merely as aesthetic devices but as instruments of political intervention. Through these techniques, the performers expose institutional absurdities, challenge cultural hierarchies, and create forms of collective spectatorship that encourage critical reflection. The apparent disorder of their theatrical world is therefore supported by a coherent set of performative practices that draw upon both historical traditions and modern experimental methodologies.

Recognizing these methodological dimensions does not diminish the originality of Fo and Rame's theatre. On the contrary, it reveals the extent to which their achievements depend upon the creative adaptation of diverse performance traditions. Their work demonstrates how inherited techniques can be reconfigured to address contemporary political realities, producing a theatrical language that remains simultaneously accessible, subversive, and formally innovative. What appears at first glance to be unrestricted improvisation is often the result of rigorous artistic labour and accumulated performative knowledge. Consequently, the theatre of Fo and Rame should be understood not as a rejection of theatrical method but as a dynamic reimagining of method itself, one in which discipline and freedom operate in productive tension to generate politically engaged performance.

Conceptualizing Popular Theatre, Acting, Staging, and Music

The most durable constant across Fo and Rame’s oeuvre is the primacy of performance over literary closure. Their theatre is actor-centred, mobile, and structurally open. Cottino-Jones emphasises that their work drew not only on commedia masks and dialect but also on mime, acrobatics, clown routines, and a method of script-making in which ideas were collectively developed, repeatedly rehearsed, and then effectively given a “final rehearsal” before an audience invited to respond. This recalls Brechtian testing, but it is more improvisatory and more dependent on the actor’s immediate calibration to spectators’ energy. For that reason, Fo and Rame’s texts are best understood as performance scores rather than fixed literary objects. They remain deliberately permeable to topical insertion, local adaptation, changed political references, and renewed gestural invention. [13] Stage space in this theatre is correspondingly economical. The original 1970 Accidental Death performances at the Capannone di Via Colletta used a simple raised end-on stage with rudimentary

settings and lighting, creating what the study guide calls an improvised "in the moment" feel. That external bareness does not signal aesthetic poverty; it redistributes scenic labour to the actor. Costume changes, props, vocal shifts, and gestural transitions become the true machinery of transformation. The same pedagogical source suggests that thrust or apron staging intensifies the play's direct address and sense of immediacy, which neatly generalises to Fo and Rame's practice as a whole: the fewer the buffers between playing area and auditorium, the easier it is to turn spectators from consumers into participants or at least co-witnesses. [14] Grammelot is the fullest example of this transfer of theatrical power into the actor's body. Jaffe-Berg shows that Fo's nonsense-speech is neither meaningless noise nor merely a practical trick for multilingual touring. It is a "form of co-creation" in which performer and audience jointly construct intelligibility from phonetic suggestion, rhythm, and expressive movement; it also carries a political charge because it can operate as a "refusal to speak in the language of power" (Jaffe-Berg 29-45). Fo's Nobel lecture connects this practice back to Ruzzante's polyglot theatrical language, built from dialects, Latinisms, and invented sounds, while The Tricks of the Trade frames the same field through masks, gestures, dance, mime, and songs. In other words, Fo's anti-naturalism is not anti-linguistic but anti-monologic: official language is countered with a theatrical language that cannot easily be monopolised by institutions. [15] This helps explain the peculiar politics of Fo and Rame's aesthetics. Their theatre is deeply artful but militantly anti-refined. It does not seek the polished illusionism of prestigious repertory houses, nor the tragic seriousness traditionally granted to "high" political drama. Puppa notes that Fo's relation to commedia dell'arte is not folkloric nostalgia but a strategic refashioning of comic forms for modern political struggle. Even the actor's "mask" in plays such as Can't Pay? Won't Pay! or Accidental Death is less a literal object than a relay of social positions—worker, madman, judge, husband, pope, tycoon, housewife—that can be entered, exited, and exposed as contingent. The audience sees not the depth of a stable character but the labour of role-construction. That is precisely how performative ideology becomes visible. [16] Music and song are not marginal embellishments in this system. Fo and Rame's workshop texts explicitly link popular theatre to song, and the archive history foregrounds Ci ragiono e canto as a major component of their return to television in the late 1970s. Scholarship on Fo's use of Gramsci identifies that work in particular as part of a recovery of popular song and chant, while discographic and archival traces show that the production mobilised regional folk materials and singers. In the plays themselves, music often operates not as lyrical inwardness but as mnemonic shorthand, comic counterpoint, or collective pulse: the Internationale in Accidental Death, protest-song genealogies in Ci ragiono e canto and Fedayin, and the recurrent use of chants, fanfares, and comic sound effects in farce. Music, then, is one of the means by which individual scenes are returned to collective memory and public ritual. [17] Major Plays and Close Readings The early farces matter because they establish the company's basic dramaturgical arsenal before the political theatre of the late 1960s made that arsenal explicit. The Virtuous Burglar, Archangels Don't Play Pinball, He Had Two Pistols with White and Black Eyes, and Isabella, Three Tall Ships, and a Con Man already rely on disguise, adulterated authority, accelerated reversal, mistaken identity, and social hypocrisy. The archive's chronological index and later playographies confirm these works as part of the stable canon, while publisher and summary materials show how they move through bourgeois interiors only to destabilize bourgeois confidence. Read retrospectively, they are not "merely" apprentice farces. They are laboratories in which respectability, property, and role-playing begin to appear as theatrically fragile. That same fragility later becomes overtly political when the hypocrite is no longer only the adulterer or petit-bourgeois liar, but the police commissioner, the Vatican spokesman, the industrial magnate, or the liberal husband. [18] The transitional works of 1967-69—especially La signora è da buttare, Grande pantomima con pupazzi, and The Worker Knows 300 Words, the Boss Knows 1000—mark the decisive passage from satirical social comedy to militant popular theatre. Archive and biographical sources place them beside the emergence of Nuova Scena and Fo and Rame's move outside state theatrical structures. The formal importance of these plays lies in their turn to allegorical masks, puppets, collective signs, typified social figures, and a more overt attack on imperialism, finance, the Church, and ruling-class spectacle. The body ceases to be

primarily an instrument of comic confusion inside private plots and becomes instead the site on which social antagonism is drawn. In this respect, the transition is less from "non-political" to political than from implicit ideological theatre to deliberately counter-hegemonic performance. [19] Mistero Buffo is the first full masterpiece of that new phase because it fuses archival recovery, clowning, grammelot, and anti-clerical counter-history into a single performative machine. Publisher material describes it as a recreation of the vitality of medieval mystery theatre; Fo's Nobel lecture roots its practice in Ruzzante and the jester tradition; later official commentary confirms its continuing notoriety, especially after the 1977 television broadcast that the Vatican denounced as "the most blasphemous show in the history of television." The crucial point is that the work does not simply mock Christianity from the outside. It reclaims sacred narrative from below by shifting perspective toward peasants, fools, mothers, grotesques, and the crowd. Authority is not only criticized but displaced as hermeneutic monopoly. The clown becomes a rival exegete. Thus Christ, Mary, saints, and prelates are re-performed in an idiom that strips holiness of its institutional costume and returns narrative power to popular speech, breath, and bodily enactment (Fo, "Nobel Lecture"). [20] Accidental Death of an Anarchist remains the clearest embodiment of political reality as performative ideology. Fo's own retrospective description is precise: the play is based on the Milan bombing, the arrest of Pinelli, and the official classification of his death as "accidental," a classification Fo called ironic because "we are sure it was not an accident" (Fo, qtd. in Accidental Death of an Anarchist Study Guide). The dramaturgical brilliance lies in making the police reconstruct their own lie. The Maniac's impersonations do not merely trick the officers; they compel them to produce contradictory versions of the truth as dramatic performance. The police station becomes rehearsal room, courtroom, farce machine, and state theatre all at once. Feletti's arrival extends the mechanism by linking Pinelli's death to the broader strategy of tension and to disinformation, the distorted public language through which power re-narrates its own violence. The final false endings sharpen the point further: no tidy conclusion can stabilise justice because the audience has been brought to the edge of decision. The play does not resolve ideology; it hands the crisis back to the social body. [21] The study guide's staging notes are especially helpful for understanding why this dramaturgy works in performance. The Maniac is written as both fool and commentator, a figure whose plastic bags, disguises, verbal velocity, lazzi, clowning, and sudden monologues continually shift the scene's register from slapstick to political exposure. Fo insisted that Pinelli's corpse and the bombing victims were a "constant presence on stage," even though the visible action is comic; the dead weigh on the farce from within. That structural doubling is what rescues the play from triviality. Its laughter is not analgesic. It is a way of forcing spectators to notice that state violence survives by miscasting itself as procedure, objectivity, and tragic necessity. The Maniac does not introduce theatricality into sober reality; he shows that the sober reality was already a badly scripted show. [22] Can't Pay? Won't Pay! shifts the scene from police headquarters to the circuits of consumption, but the underlying strategy is the same. A "spontaneous community action" at the supermarket sets the plot in motion, and the ensuing comic epidemic of concealment—bags of groceries, feigned pregnancies, tactical lies, comic policing—turns inflation itself into an absurd social script. The key insight is that commodity law and domestic morality are shown to depend on a theatrical policing of the body. Food hidden under coats, bellies, and furniture becomes a stage image of scarcity's ideological management. The play's title is itself performative: not a description of poverty but a collective speech act of refusal. Its extraordinary portability in translation and performance history confirms that the local context of 1970s Milan also yielded a more general grammar for staging the absurdity of economic realism. [23] If Can't Pay? Won't Pay! exposes consumer capitalism, All Home, Bed, and Church and The Open Couple expose the everyday micro-performances of patriarchy. The archive defines Tutta casa, letto e chiesa as satirical monologues on women's condition, and theatre materials describe later English-language versions as a popular approach to feminism that mixes mime, storytelling, burlesque, and stand-up. The design is crucial: monologue allows the female speaking body to occupy space usually administered by husbands, priests, employers, or psychiatrists. Domestic interiors become traps, but also resonant chambers in which the smallest repeated gestures—answering doors, serving meals,

feigning calm, managing sexual expectation—reveal themselves as ideological rehearsal. Una donna sola is especially devastating in this regard, because enclosure itself becomes a visible stage convention rather than a naturalised fact of marriage. [24] The Open Couple sharpens that feminist logic through farce. Its premise is brutally simple: a husband insists on the modernity and liberatory virtue of an "open" marriage, but only so long as openness means his own serial infidelity. The wife's repeated collapses and suicidal gestures are therefore not merely comic set-pieces; they materialise the psychological violence hidden inside progressive male rhetoric. When the wife finally acquires an actual alternative relationship, the husband's ideology disintegrates. The play's achievement lies in exposing a whole vocabulary of masculine emancipation as performance: the husband acts radicalism, tolerance, anti-possessiveness, and sexual democracy, but only as roles that preserve dominance. When the wife begins performing agency on her own terms, he can no longer sustain the script. The fact that Italian censors restricted the piece to adults when Rame attached The Rape as a prologue reveals how quickly domestic comedy opened onto the public scandal of sexual violence and state complicity. [25] Rame's The Rape is indispensable to this corpus because it discloses the limit case of performative ideology: the female body made legible by law, media, and masculine violence only under conditions set by the aggressor. The archive identifies the monologue as Rame's text from 1975, and later criticism repeatedly situates it within both personal testimony and political theatre. What makes the piece historically and theatrically significant is not confession alone, but the way it anticipates the critique of "secondary violence" performed by police, judges, public morality, and spectatorship itself. In performance, the monologue refuses melodramatic inflation. Its force comes from controlled recounting, bodily memory, and the exposure of the institutional scripts that frame rape victims before they can speak. It thus extends Fo and Rame's anti-authoritarian theatre into feminist terrain where the state and the intimate sphere can no longer be cleanly separated. [26] The 1980s and 1990s show Fo and Rame adapting the same formal intelligence to new political formations. In Trumpets and Raspberries, mistaken identity becomes class allegory when a Fiat worker and Gianni Agnelli blur through reconstructive surgery; the face itself becomes a social mask, and capitalism appears literally as a matter of cosmetic fabrication. In The Pope and the Witch, Vatican ritual, anti-drug moralism, and media spectacle collapse into slapstick panic, exposing the Church as a performer of sanctity trapped by its own public image. In Johan Padan and the Discovery of the Americas, colonial history is retold through a trickster survivor whose comic narration dismantles triumphalist imperial scripts and re-centres subaltern cunning, translation, and improvisation. In The Devil with the Tits and Lu Santo Jullare Françesco, late Fo continues to attack institutional sanctimony by subjecting gender, theology, and saintly legend to grotesque reversal. The mode changes less than the targets do: the same actor-centred comic intelligence keeps revealing that power is a costume sustained by repetition. [27] The Berlusconi period makes this argument almost embarrassingly explicit. Archive and review sources identify L'Anomalo Bicefalo as a two-act satire about Silvio Berlusconi, staged with Fo and Rame themselves, while reception material links it to legal controversy and blocked television circulation. The premise—Berlusconi revived with Putin's brain—pushes political identity toward delirious corporeal farce, yet the extremity is diagnostic. The media-politician appears as a synthetic body assembled from state violence, celebrity optics, judicial scandal, and post-ideological marketing. If Accidental Death targeted the police report, L'Anomalo Bicefalo targets the media-amphibious leader whose authority depends on permanent performance. Fo and Rame's long arc is thereby complete: from exposing the state's tragic farce to exposing postmodern politics as a grotesque variety show. [28]

Franca Rame, Feminism, and Collaborative Authorship

Any account that treats Rame as merely the actress carrying Fo's texts radically misreads the evidence. Fo himself used the Nobel lecture to insist that without Franca at his side he "would never have accomplished" the honoured work and that she "had a hand in many of the texts of our theatre" (Fo, "Nobel Lecture"). The archival and bibliographical record reinforces that statement. Publisher biographies and theatre databases credit Rame as stage performer, writer, editor, and co-author of

major works ranging from All Home, Bed, and Church to The Open Couple, A Woman Alone, An Ordinary Day, and Seventh Commandment: Steal a Little Less. Joseph Farrell's summary of Rame's career is even more pointed: her fame as actor, author, feminist, and political activist was so tightly bound to Fo's that her independent contribution was repeatedly obscured. In a scholarly article on restructuring this material, the correction must be explicit: Fo/Rame is not a polite formula for marital partnership but the name of a real collaborative method. [29]

Cottino-Jones gives the most concrete description of that collaborative method available in the sources consulted. She stresses the company's constant search for close relations between actors and spectators and reports Rame's own description of script-making as collective musing and iterative rehearsal, culminating in audience discussion. That matters for authorship because it relocates creation from solitary writing to workshop process, actorly testing, and embodied revision. Rame was not only a performer applying pre-existing text; she was one of the agents through whom theatrical language was generated, edited, and continuously retuned. Her long family inheritance in theatre craft—later highlighted in technical and biographical materials—also means that she brought a performative intelligence distinct from, though deeply allied with, Fo's. [30]

Rame's importance is especially visible in the feminist monologues and one-woman structures that reorganised Fo/Rame theatre around female embodiment. The shift is not from politics to the personal, but from one field of ideological performance to another. In the women's pieces, domestic labour, sexual availability, religious guilt, beauty norms, and maternal expectation are treated not as private themes but as repeatable coercive scripts. Juliet Guzzetta's overview of Rame describes her as one of the most visible and pioneering figures in post-war Italy, deeply engaged in Marxist theory and politics, concerned with workers and women, and committed to integrating political organising into performance. That integrated activism is exactly what the monologues stage. A woman speaking alone is never only alone; she is crowded by the institutions that have taught her how to stand, speak, desire, fear, apologise, and survive. [31]

This is why Rame's theatre is best read as a feminist expansion rather than a deviation from the company's political method. She imports into Fo/Rame dramaturgy a sharper attention to the performative labour expected of women: keeping house, pleasing men, modulating voice, narrating injury credibly, surviving humiliation without public disorder. In those pieces, the comic does not evaporate, but it becomes unstable, sometimes painful. Cottino-Jones is right to identify the theatre of Fo and Rame as "militant and popular" in Gramscian terms because it shows the hidden face of power through a wide repertoire of techniques. Rame's contribution is to insist that this hidden face includes the power that circulates through marriage, respectability, erotic ideology, and the juridical treatment of rape. Far from narrowing the theatre's scope, her feminist interventions make the concept of political reality more exact. [32]

It is also important to note that Rame's post-1973 work carries a distinct politics of voice. The violence committed against her was not passively transcribed into theatre; it was transformed into a mode of resistant address. Later criticism and public commemoration continue to treat The Rape as historically catalytic because it turned a target of neo-fascist terror into a speaker whose authority derived precisely from refusing the institutionally scripted image of the victim. That refusal has a formal corollary in Rame's performance style, which often replaces external scenic elaboration with vocal timing, breath, bodily memory, and the precision of comic-fragile shifts in register. If Fo's body often appears as the elastic body of the jester, Rame's body becomes the contested site where humour, trauma, polemic, and endurance must occupy the same stage-time. [26]

Reception, Censorship, Comparative Tables and Timelines

Reception history confirms rather than merely surrounds the argument made so far. Fo and Rame's theatre was repeatedly met as if it had crossed a boundary between representation and intervention. The 1962 Canzonissima conflict produced lawsuits and, according to the official biographical record and foundation commentary, a fifteen- or sixteen-year effective ban from RAI. Mistero Buffo caused fresh uproar when broadcast on television in 1977. The Open Couple faced age restriction when paired with The Rape. U.S. authorities refused Fo and Rame entry visas in 1980 and again in

1983, with the Nobel bio-bibliography connecting the exclusion to Fo's association with Soccorso Rosso. Late works such as L'Anomalo Bicefalo generated legal and broadcasting disputes. The pattern is strikingly consistent: institutions respond not as if these plays were "just plays," but as if the theatre had become a dangerous rival public sphere. [33]

Performance history likewise underlines the works' capacity for translation and renewal. The theatre of Fo and Rame has been staged across numerous countries, as the Nobel biographical page records. Accidental Death had a Broadway run in 1984 and continued to be adapted, including Tom Basden's Sheffield and West End version in 2022-23; the published script description stresses that the play still feels "bang-up-to-date." Can't Pay? Won't Pay! was adapted for London in 1981 and subsequently circulated widely in Britain and the United States. Mistero Buffo has returned in recent productions, including a 2025 Scottish staging advertised by the Italian Cultural Institute as a work that still "questions history, mocks the elite and speaks truth to power." Such afterlives do not erase historical specificity; they prove that Fo and Rame designed plays structurally capable of local re-inscription. [34]

Title	Year	Dominant themes	Staging conventions	Political targets	Musical elements
The Virtuous Burglar	1958	Bourgeois hypocrisy, adultery, property, deception	Door-slamming farce, concealment, mistaken identity	Respectability, private ownership, gendered duplicity	Minimal; rhythm derives from verbal farce
Archangels Don't Play Pinball	1959	Urban marginality, class absurdity	Ensemble farce, caricature, role-play	Bourgeois morality, social hierarchy	Comic cadence, popular revue inheritance
He Had Two Pistols with White and Black Eyes	1960	Violence, grotesque masculinity, authority parody	Hyperbolic character work, accelerated clowning	Militarised masculinity, bravado, social pretence	Revue-style timing
Isabella, Three Tall Ships, and a Con Man	1963	National myth, conquest, imposture	Historical travesty, carnivalised role-switching	Imperial myth-making, official history	Balladic and pageant-like possibilities
La signora è da buttare	1967	Capitalism, imperialism, spectacle	Allegorical satire, anti-naturalist imagery	American capitalism, media myth	Satirical song/revue residues
Grande pantomima / Death and Resurrection of a Puppet	1968/71	Fascism, rebellion, state spectacle	Puppets, masks, collective signs, pageant	Church, finance, army, fascist residues	Processional/rhythmic montage
Mistero Buffo	1969	Counter-history, anti-clericalism, popular speech	Solo/actor-centered storytelling, grammelot, direct address	Church hierarchy, doctrinal monopoly, elite culture	Vocal score, chant, rhythmic speech
Accidental Death of an Anarchist	1970	Police violence, truth production, state lying	Minimal set, disguise, direct address, false endings, lazzis	Police, judiciary, media disinformation	Snatches such as the Internationale; comic sound punctuation
Fedayin	1972	Anti-imperial solidarity, testimony	Recital/collective performance, documentary montage	Colonial violence, state repression	Songs and cultural performance integral to structure
Can't Pay? Won't Pay!	1974	Inflation, consumer	Domestic farce, body-based	Capitalist pricing,	Protest-rhythm and comic repetition

Title	Year	Dominant themes	Staging conventions	Political targets	Musical elements
		revolt, legality, hunger	concealment, rapid reversals	policing, moral economy	
All Home, Bed, and Church	1977	Female oppression, domestic labour, sexuality, religious control	Monologues, direct female address, pared-down staging	Patriarchy, Church morality, family discipline	Voice-led rhythm; occasional song-like refrain
Trumpets and Raspberries	1981	Corporate power, class masquerade, terrorism, media	Double-role identity play, farcical body transformation	Fiat, Agnelli, industrial capitalism	Brass/fanfare imagery in title and comic pacing
The Open Couple	1983	Sexual politics, false emancipation, marriage ideology	Two-hander/one-act farce, repeated entrances, confessionality	Patriarchal liberalism, masculine double standards	Often light or incidental; rhythm carried by repartee
The Pope and the Witch	1989	Church hypocrisy, drugs, sexuality, global moral theatre	Grotesque ecclesiastical farce, anti-ritual parody	Vatican authority, prohibitionist morality	Liturgical parody and comic ceremonial sound
Johan Padan and the Discovery of the Americas	1991	Colonialism, migration, trickster survival	Solo narration, dialect, actor-generated scenography	Colonial triumphalism, official historiography	Oral-musical storytelling cadence
The Devil with the Tits	1997	Corruption, gender reversal, political scandal	Grotesque satire, carnival inversion	State corruption, clerical-political patriarchy	Popular comic rhythm
Lu Santo Jullare Françesco	1999	Saintliness from below, poverty, anti-authoritarian Christianity	Jester narration, hybrid sacred-comic form	Ecclesiastical decorum, elite piety	Hagiographic-oral rhythm
L'Anomalo Bicefalo	2003	Media power, Berlusconi, post-ideological spectacle	Grotesque political fantasy, celebrity body satire	Berlusconi, oligarchic media-state fusion	Campaign/media jingle logic implicit
Sotto paga! Non si paga!	2007	Updated precarity, new capitalism, continuity of revolt	Revision of earlier farce for contemporary conditions	Neoliberal austerity, low wages	Re-uses comic/protest energy of 1974 play

The table shows a clear historical drift without a formal rupture. Early works train audiences to distrust bourgeois surfaces; the militant years add collective signs, direct address, and documentary pressure; the feminist and later satirical works relocate the same suspicion toward the family, the Church, the corporation, and media-managed politics. Throughout, music functions less as psychological underscoring than as collective punctuation—folk recall, chant, ritual parody, or comic propulsion. [35] A final limitation should be stated plainly. Some relevant criticism and reviews remain pay walled or available only in abstract/archival metadata, and the category of

"major works" is inherently selective. This essay therefore privileges what can be established with highest confidence from official archives, Nobel materials, reputable reference works, accessible scholarship, and documented performance records. That limitation does not weaken the central conclusion. Across six decades, Fo and Rame repeatedly show that political reality is sustained by theatrical means—and that popular theatre can interrupt, parody, and redistribute those means. [36]

Conclusion

The theatrical enterprise of Dario Fo and Franca Rame occupies a singular position within modern performance history because it reveals the extent to which political reality itself is structured through acts of performance, repetition, representation, and ideological staging. Rather than treating politics as an external subject matter to be dramatised, their theatre demonstrates that institutions such as the state, the judiciary, the Church, the media, the family, and the capitalist marketplace derive authority from carefully rehearsed social scripts that present historically contingent arrangements as natural and inevitable. By exposing these scripts through satire, grotesque embodiment, improvisation, grammelot, clowning, and direct audience engagement, Fo and Rame transformed the stage into a critical apparatus capable of dismantling the symbolic foundations of power.

The analysis undertaken in this study has shown that the political significance of Fo and Rame lies not solely in the radical content of their plays but in their performative methodology. Their actor-centred dramaturgy reclaims the body as a site of political knowledge, while their adaptation of popular traditions disrupts the cultural hierarchies that separate elite art from collective experience. Through works such as Mistero Buffo, Accidental Death of an Anarchist, Can't Pay? Won't Pay!, The Open Couple, and The Rape, ideological structures become visible as theatrical constructions sustained through ritualised behaviour, institutional language, and embodied repetition. The resulting theatre functions simultaneously as historical archive, political intervention, and aesthetic experiment, generating a mode of spectatorship grounded in critical participation rather than passive consumption.

Equally important is the recognition of Franca Rame's constitutive contribution to this theatrical project. Her feminist monologues and collaborative authorship expanded the analytical scope of political theatre by demonstrating that domination operates not only through public institutions but also through intimate and domestic performances of gender, sexuality, and social conformity. Her work transformed personal experience into a site of collective political reflection and established a dramaturgical vocabulary through which embodied oppression could be rendered publicly visible.

Fo and Rame's legacy endures because their theatre offers a profound critique of ideological naturalization while affirming the emancipatory possibilities of collective performance. Their work demonstrates that laughter can function as a form of political cognition, that theatricality can expose hidden mechanisms of domination, and that popular performance remains a vital medium for contesting hegemonic narratives. In an era increasingly defined by media spectacle, manufactured consensus, and performative politics, their theatre continues to provide an indispensable model for understanding how power is staged, challenged, and transformed through cultural practice.

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