

Ron Jenkins

THE OVERLAPPING DIALOGUES OF DARIO FO.
LETTERA SULLA DECIMA ISTA

The staff and participants of ISTA have always arrived with the ghosts of their teachers trailing behind them. I arrived with the spirits of Dario Fo and Franca Rame, who taught me that Arlecchino and Colombina are immortal; I Made Djimat, who introduced me to sacred laughter in Bali; Etienne Decroux, who terrified me into appreciating the geometry of the human musculature; and Lou Jacobs, who showed me that circus clowns are also acrobats of the soul. These ghosts encountered the ghosts brought by other participants: Meyerhold, Brecht, Sanjukta, Grotowski, Artaud, Mei Lan-Fang, Stanislavski. Some of the ghosts were present in spirit. Others appeared in the flesh. In 1996 Dario Fo was one of the guiding spirits of ISTA who appeared in person.

Fo is the theatrical equivalent of a medieval miniaturist. His texts are densely packed with rich details that come alive in performance like an illuminated manuscript dancing off the page. When Fo presented his work at the 1996 session of ISTA in Copenhagen, he dissected his theatrical artistry, one brush-stroke at a time. The text he analyzed was a fragment from his masterpiece *Mistero Buffo* that re-imagined the biblical story of Lazarus' resurrection.

It was an honor for me to translate his demonstration from Italian into English, as I had done many times before in New York, Washington, Cambridge, and Milan. As always I made mistakes, and as usual, Fo transformed my mistakes into theatrical gold, beginning with his introduction when I mispronounced the name of the village where he grew up on the shores of Lago Maggiore.

«It sounds better the way he says it» Fo joked, generating laughter and a bond of intimacy with the ISTA participants that remained unbroken from that moment until the standing ovation he received on leaving the stage. Fo would go on to analyze the gestures used by farmers and

fishermen as they worked, and show how they were transformed into stories and song, but even before beginning his demonstration Fo had already begun to highlight the relationship between work and theater by calling attention to the dialogue between himself and his translator.

Unlike many individuals who make presentations to international audiences, Fo did not pretend the translator was not there. He acknowledged me, and the work I was doing, with a joke, as he had done whenever I served as his simultaneous interpreter. The improvised remark was central to his performance technique, which relies on establishing an honest and direct dialogue with the audience. Speaking to a multi-lingual international audience at ISTA Fo's joke established their shared interest in transcending the barriers of language through art.

The link Fo created with the audience at that moment was only the first step in the complex unveiling of his theatrical techniques that took place at ISTA. As Fo explained the methods of montage he used to perform monologues that required him to assume multiple roles, it became clear that he was constructing his monologue with a web of overlapping and interlocking dialogues. Having established an immediate dialogue with his translator and the ISTA participants, Fo went on to explain how the characters in his version of Lazarus's Resurrection were in dialogue with each other, verbally, physically, and musically. The characters spoke to each other, gestured to each other, and spoke directly to the audience about each other. On another level Fo's retelling of Lazarus' resurrection was in dialogue with the bible's "official" story, and invited the audience to compare the two versions as they watched. In Fo's story the cemetery guardian charges admission to see the resurrection, hawkers rent chairs, and gamblers take bets on whether or not Christ will succeed in bringing the dead man back to life. The contrast between Fo's emphasis on the commercial exploitation of the miracle and the audience's memory of the biblical version created the paradoxes, inversions, and incongruity that are essential to the overlapping dialogues embedded in his performances.

At ISTA Fo added an extra level of dialogue to the Lazarus piece with a preface that demonstrated the parallels between the movement patterns of a Venetian gondolier and the rhythmic structure of a Venetian folk song. Fo sang the song as he pantomimed the gondolier propelling his boat with a pole. There was a crescendo each time the pole was thrust into the floor of the canal, a vibrato as he bent over to guide

the pole through the rippling waves, and a sustained legato as he readied himself for the next stroke. As Fo performed it, the gondolier's work was a dance, choreographed to the same eight-beat measures that he used to sing the song. The poetry of the movements was heightened even further when Fo transformed them into the dance steps of a traditional Renaissance pavan. The transition from work gestures to dance moves was effortless. Fo had demonstrated persuasively the link between work and art that he first experienced in the fishing village of his childhood when the fishermen told him stories while repairing their nets. The gestures they used to remove bits of debris from the net and sew its torn strands were incorporated into their stories, so that the net became a prop that could be transformed into a windy sky, a stormy sea, or the sails of a schooner, according to the demands of the narrative.

These vivid demonstrations were fresh in the minds of the audience as they watched Fo perform his version of the Lazarus story. This set up a new discourse in which the gestures of the working people in the cemetery were in dialogue with the gestures of the gondolier and the fishermen Fo had introduced in his prologue. His performance transformed the work-gestures used by the salesman to hawk his chairs and the gate-keeper to throw stones at gatecrashers into transcendent choreography. The audience could not help but compare these movements to the dances of the fishermen and the gondolier that Fo had presented a few minutes earlier as emblems of the connections between art and manual labor. «The gestures of their work» said Fo of the fishermen from Lago Maggiore, «were the gestures of their life».

The intricacies of Fo's interlocking dialogues were appropriate to the work of ISTA, a gathering that invites participants to enter into ongoing dialogues with multiple theater traditions from around the world. At ISTA Japanese Kabuki is in dialogue with Brazilian Candomblé. Indian dance is in dialogue with Shakespeare and Goethe. Fo threw himself into the bubbling discourse by improvising with a Balinese masked clown and greeting him as «Fratello mio, Arlechino».

This intimate and complex presentation of Fo's work in the context of the world's great theater traditions took place a year before Fo won the 1997 Nobel Prize for Literature. The ISTA demonstration stays with me as a treasured counterpoint to recent commercial productions of Fo's plays that display little understanding of the traditions embedded in his scripts. Last year in New Haven the lead actor in Fo's *Acci-*

dental Death of an Anarchist added a string of extraneous cartoonish jokes to Fo's text, and then turned to the audience to say, «Dario Fo, doesn't care what we do. He's happy in Italy collecting his royalties». This lack of respect would not be possible for those who attended the 1996 ISTA in Copenhagen and were fortunate enough to see Fo in an environment that honored the intricately layered complexity of his performance techniques. To see Fo engage in a theatrical dialogue with the Bible and the fishermen of Lago Maggiore on the same stage where Balinese clowns had demonstrated theatrical techniques rooted in a dialogue with the Mahabharata and the rice farmers of Batuan was a rare privilege. Eugenio Barba added the voice of history to the overlapping dialogues awakened by Fo's work when he said he hoped the audience members would one day tell their children they had seen Fo perform and find a way to pass on the true traditions embodied in his work.

Barba's passionate commitment to passing on traditions is at the heart of ISTA, and Fo's demonstration exemplified the urgency of that task. Since then the world has lost many of the artists who embodied the great theater traditions of their nations, including Fo's wife and collaborator Franca Rame, who was born in a traveling theater company and, according to Fo, had the collective memory of four hundred years of European theater in her DNA. For Fo «forgetfulness is the world's most dangerous disease», and in his demonstration at ISTA he offered theatrical memory as an antidote.

Recalling Fo's presentation at ISTA brings to mind something Fo had said at a museum of history in Cagliari in 2000: «Memory... everything begins from there. Not only for remembering things, but for learning the significance, the place and the time that are inside and behind every word. I am an actor... for me memory has to enter through the mouth... to listen means to move your lips, your feet, articulate your face, stretch your throat, learn to speak... to become the instrument of your own memory, as if you were looking for a piece of music on a guitar... then your imagination takes you further. It enables you to remember more».