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Histrionic Blasphemy: Dario Fo's *Mistero Buffo* and the Catholic Church

Robert Henke

In April, 1977, the Italian television channel RAI 2 aired the late Dario Fo and Franca Rame's *Mistero Buffo*, a collection of stories from the Bible and church history enacted in the single-performer, *giullare* style that Fo famously developed. On RAI 1, at the same time, was showing Franco Zeffirelli's *Jesus*, a series on the life of Christ, designed by the famous director in his own words to "create a mood of pacification, of love" in his television audience¹. The Vatican did not only make its preference clear, but declared, in their official newspaper, Fo's irreverent treatment of sacred stories to be "the most blasphemous program ever broadcast in the history of world television²." Predictably, Fo embraced the critique by declaring "This is the best compliment the Vatican could have paid me³." The Vatican Secretary of State actually called for priests to devote their upcoming sermons to condemning *Mistero Buffo* – it is not clear how many complied – and dozens of Catholic institutions attempted to try Fo in court for blasphemy. The Vatican was unable to stop the showing that spring, but did manage to keep Fo off the air for seven years: a rebroadcast of *Mistero Buffo* scheduled for 1982 was canceled. During a 1984 tour of *Mistero Buffo* to Argentina, the Church stridently attacked it and production incurred both peaceful and violent protests⁴.

What were the issues in what has been called by Ron Jenkins "a scandal of epic proportions⁵" and to what degree might Fo be "guilty" (whether voluntarily or not) of blasphemy? Although the positions of Zeffirelli, a practicing Catholic, and the Church have been identified by some critics, they in fact are distinguishable, Zeffirelli giving considerable more credit to Fo as a theatrical artist than the Church. Zeffirelli, who largely supported Fo's work throughout the years, simply didn't want the two shows, both treating the same subject but so different in tone and

¹ Dario Fo, *Mistero Buffo*, in *The Collected Plays of Dario Fo*, vol. 2, trans. Ron Jenkins, New York, Theatre Communications Group, 2006, p. ix. This edition will henceforth be cited in the text as Jenkins, MB.

² *L'Osservatore*, April 24, 1977. Quoted in Tom Behan, *Dario Fo: Revolutionary Theatre*, London, Pluto Press, 2000, p. 102 and Jenkins, MB, p. xi

³ *La Repubblica* April 25, 1977. Quoted in Behan, *op. cit.*, p. 102 and Jenkins, MB, p. xi.

⁴ Behan, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

⁵ The title of the introductory chapter in Jenkins, MB.

approach, airing at the same time. He feared that the “mood of pacification, of love” that he had carefully been trying to cultivate in *Jesus* would be abruptly destroyed by the “climate of violent de-sanctification” introduced by the drunkards, thieves, cursing peasants, and all-too-human Marys and Lazaruses of Fo’s irreverent gospel⁶. Zeffirelli was worried about a television-viewing public that “wasn’t used to [the] kinds of shocks” administered by Fo’s gritty stories⁷: a paternalistic sentiment, to be sure, but not outrageous when one considers moments like the raising of Lazarus in *Mistero Buffo*, when the resurrected body is avidly described by an excited, plebeian crowd member who has just made a bet on whether the “witch doctor” Jesus can pull off another miracle this time. The emphasis in Fo’s version is on the rough-and-tumble crowd gathered to watch the miracle, which is presented as a virtuosic performance, staged in before pickpockets, fish vendors, and others trying to make a profit on the occasion or betting on the results. So the crowd member who has put his money on Lazarus rising from the tomb describes him emerging: “*S’è muntà in genogio! ... Oh varda! Ol va, ol va, l’è in pie, ol va, ol val ol borla, ol va ol va sü, sü, ol val ol val l’è in piè*”⁸. Such insistent physicality, after the earlier description that “only worms” were rising from the grave, goes well beyond the incarnational dimension of Christianity that, Erich Auerbach has argued, in Dante and other authors, redeemed the low style in western literature⁹; for Zeffirelli it fixates on the grotesque and the carnivalesque in ways that run contrary to the gospel message.

Zeffirelli argued that the gospels should not be “subjected to satire,” and that Fo’s emphasis on “pagan joy” distorts the meaning of Christianity¹⁰. Fo, following Antonio Gramsci’s ideas about popular culture, was dedicated throughout his career to reconstructing the rough, alternative culture of medieval Europe as an authentic political voice. If Fo mixed fiction and fact, canon and *apocrypha*, sacred devotion with wild invention, this was the culture of the *popolo* inventing itself, providing new ways of seeing and understanding the world. From Fo’s point of view, this Bakhtinian culture of medieval sacred irreverence positively had to include scenes like the Wedding at Cana, which Fo faulted Zeffirelli for having cut from his version of the Jesus story. For Fo, Zeffirelli’s cutting of the water-turned-into wine episode ignores and even opposes the great, popular “culturally elevated” popular tradition that reads the gospels “as a return of springtime.” Zeffirelli may be defending Church doctrine by valorizing the official, written version of the gospels against Fo’s

⁶ Jenkins, MB, p. xi.

⁷ Jenkins, MB, p. xii.

⁸ “He has risen to his knees! ... Oh, look, he’s getting up, he’s getting up, he’s up on his feet, he’s up, he’s up, he’s falling, he’s getting up, up, he’s up on his feet!”, *Mistero Buffo*, in *Le commedie di Dario Fo*, ed. Franca Rame, vol. 5, Turin, Einaudi, 1977, p. 105.

⁹ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis, The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Williard R. Trask, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1953, pp. 84-89.

¹⁰ Jenkins, MB, p. x.

popular tradition, but the Fo-Zeffirelli dispute is not mainly doctrinal, as some critics have claimed: Zeffirelli is speaking as an artist, who wants to create a certain effect in his audience, and a lay believer. Zeffirelli wanted to create a mood, a climate, emphasizing episodes like the Sermon on the Mount. Fo practices the art of the grotesque, and could perhaps point to Dante and his radical mixture of high and low styles in the *Inferno*, which is full of farts, shit, and Popes in compromised positions. Pope Boniface VIII, whom Dante hated so much that he effectively put him in hell before he died, makes up one of the most famous bits in *Mistero Buffo*. Zeffirelli would counter Fo's invocation of Dante that we do not encounter these grotesqueries in *Il paradiso*. Fo would in turn respond that that was precisely why he had no interest in either the actual place or Dante's poem about it. We should resist the temptation to reduce Zeffirelli here to a straw man; it is a compelling and interesting debate.

Is Fo guilty of the Church's charge of blasphemy: "speaking against God in a contemptuous, scornful, or abusive manner"? If Fo is not strictly blasphemous, he certainly likes to court the limits of blasphemy, again and again, although both in his *discorsetti* – informal lectures before the scenes and in the *giullare's* speeches themselves – he seems oddly conscious of blasphemy as an issue: characters who blaspheme are usually compelled to defend themselves afterwards. Fo's theological strategy, if he has one, is to make a sharp division of labor between God the Father and his angelic entourage on one hand, and God the Son, who has been plunged into the vale of earthly tears, so that he is probably guilty of blasphemy against the Father but not the Son.

"The Birth of the *Giullare*" tells the story of how an oppressed, desperate peasant was eventually fashioned by Jesus himself into the world's first *giullare*. At the beginning of the story, while still a peasant, he possesses a rocky terrain, and desperately digs unsuccessfully for water day after day. Only when he finally screams out "Damn you, God!" and kicks his pickaxe into the rock does water gush forth, to which he says, "O Lord! ... thank you! I guess you have to curse to get you to make miracles, Holy God!"¹¹ In the "Massacre of the Innocents," a woman whose child has been killed in Herod's slaughter has gone mad, coming to believe that a lamb she has stolen from a sheep pen is her child. As Fo tells it, as if he is curiously trying to attenuate the act of blasphemy, it is under the excuse of madness that she hurls insults against God the Father for allowing Herod to slaughter children as the price for his son's entry into the world. In the *discorsetto*, he acknowledges, even he excuses, the women's blasphemous imprecations against God the Father as the "*più grande bestemmia mai udita*" [greatest blasphemy ever uttered]. Such hatred accrues against God the Father, argues Fo/*giullare*, because he is the one who has

¹¹ Fo performed these pieces in multiple ways, and there are different transcribed versions. Here I follow Jenkins, *MB*, p. 12.

divided the world into the haves and the have nots, creating social classes as divisions¹². Or at least so it seems. Earthly paradises abound in *Mistero Buffo*, which distinctly recall the fabled peasant utopias of the many *Cuccagna* poems written by late medieval and Renaissance *giullari* and performed in Italian piazzas, but heaven itself and its ministering angels is something else, distinctly conceived in Marxist terms. It is a bloodless domain of escapism created to make people forget about their present struggles. "Mary Under the Cross" imagines the mother of God only learning that her dear son will be crucified at the last minute. Seeing Jesus on the cross, she wildly screams at the angel Gabriel, who years before had been the messenger of her holy conception: "Open your wings again, Gabriel, go back to your beautiful and joyous heaven ... There's nothing for you to do here ... on this filthy Earth ... in this tortured world. ... You're not used to it, Gabriel ... because there's no noise in heaven, no crying, no war, no prison, no lynched men, no raped women! No, there's no hunger, no famine ... no one paying with pain for the sins of the world."¹³ Bloodless angels, in Fo's cosmology, are bad guys: when the first peasant is born from a donkey in the piece "Birth of the Peasant," an angel quickly descends to read a document asserting the hierarchy of landowner and peasant. The "Wedding at Cana" opens with a fierce dispute between an angel and a drunk over who has the right to tell the story: the angel has the official, written version, presumably the pristine text of a church-sanctioned *sacra rappresentazione*; the drunkard knows what he knows by having been there and gloried in every divine drop. "*Jesu, sei di-vino*,"¹⁴ he exclaims, as he gleefully traces the descent of wine down his passages, drop by drop as if were a holy infusion. Written culture belongs to God the Father and the angels; oral culture belongs to Jesus, thieves, and drunks.

Fo, who as *giullare* is only thinly separated from his protagonists, is probably guilty as charged at blasphemy against God the Father, if with a curious penchant for apparently worrying about it. Job never cursed the Lord, but Fo's suffering peasants certainly do. But his attitude to God the Son, who took on the joys as well as the travails of the human condition, wine as well as weeping, is completely different. In the "Birth of the *Giullare*," the water unleashed by the peasant's curse, aided by the work of the peasant and his family, creates a paradise of grains, fruits, flowers, and birds, for which he duly thanks God. But then a man who claims to be the owner of the entire valley shows up, demanding the land back. The owner sends in succession a priest who invokes the rights of the owner with a string of Latin gibberish, and then a notary who invokes the oppressor's use of writing against the

¹² Rame, ed. *Le commedie*, p. 28.

¹³ Jenkins, *MB*, p. 137.

¹⁴ Rame, ed. *Le commedie*, p. 65.

peasant, unfurling a fancy antique parchment, which in Rabelaisian fashion, traces the rights of the land from a certain King Bozo the First down to the landowner¹⁵. When the stubborn peasant still does not budge, the landowner shows up again and rapes his wife in full view of their children. The family is shamed, the wife goes mad, the family wastes away and dies, and the peasant languishes in despair, alone on his land. He prepares to hang himself, but not before he curses God: "Lord, I tell you that it was a huge cruel joke to let me taste heaven on earth and then ... throw me down into hell without pity! ... I would like to return to you this life of shit that you have given to me. Take back this life!"¹⁶ This blasphemous, but completely understandable imprecation is however heard by Jesus, who has suddenly entered the room, as a beggar with two others to ask the peasant for water and food. The peasant takes a quick break from his hanging to feed Jesus and the beggars. Here, Fo could not be more christologically orthodox, invoking the "whatever you did for the least of these brothers" passage from the New Testament¹⁷. Jesus knows everything that has happened to the peasant: his cultivation of the soil, the landowner's rape of his wife, the death of his family. He seems to be able to absorb the peasant's curse against his Father. He faults him for only one thing – for not sharing the land with others – and says that he must now tell others about what the landowner has done to him, as a *giullare*: "And don't recount each thing whiningly, but with a chuckle ... teach them to laugh! Transform even terror into laughter. Take the chisellers who try to cheat you with their endless babbling and turn them upside down with their asses in the air! ... And let everyone mock them with belly laughs ... so that the laughter will melt their fears."¹⁸ Bakhtin celebrates such fear-dispersing laughter in his discussion of practices such as the Orthodox Paschal Laugh: the priest tells a joke on Eastern morning to his congregation in order to scare the devils away and clear the way for Christ's resurrection (and the return of springtime, for Fo).

When the peasant tells Christ that he lacks the gifts of storytelling, the beggar-god will not take "no" for an answer and declares "I, Jesus Christ, will this moment give you a kiss on the mouth and you will feel your tongue whirling like a corkscrew and then it will become like a knife that cuts and slashes ... shaping words and phrases as clear as the gospels. You'll make the soldiers, notaries, and priests turn white, exposing themselves as naked as worms!"¹⁹ The *giullare*, newly christened by a big fat kiss from Jesus, will as intermediary correct blasphemy against God the father and redirect the peasants' anger against the *padrone*. He will tell the people that it

¹⁵ Jenkins, MB, p. 14.

¹⁶ Jenkins, MB, p. 16.

¹⁷ Matthew 25:35-40.

¹⁸ Jenkins, MB, p. 17-18.

¹⁹ Jenkins, MB, p. 18.

is not God, in fact, who steals and oppresses the poor; it is the *padrone* and the unjust laws written against the poor. Jesus has finally made us right with his Father in heaven, but not before we have cursed him. Here, effectively, is Fo's response to the Church's charges against him during the *Mistero Buffo* RAI controversy.

By no means am I suggesting that Fo suddenly turned Christian; he remained firmly atheist his entire life, from cradle to grave. But as the "Birth of the *Giullare*" and all of *Mistero Buffo* demonstrate, he became intensely interested in the idea of Christ as a mediator between heaven and earth, defender of the poor, and a scourge of the powerful. The supernatural elements of the gospel such as the Virgin Birth and Christ's many miracles were never his objects of attack. The miracle of raising the dead Lazarus may also be, at least from the perspective of the plebeian crowd, a spectacular performance, but it is a miracle nonetheless. Seeing the wedding party in despair over the house wine turned into vinegar, Jesus goes to work. As he deftly moves his fingers over the water vases, he recalls a sleight-of-hand artist working the piazza, but magically, the water becomes wine.

For Fo, the eventual gravitation to the Christian stories almost logically followed from the Gramscian valorization of popular culture, which in Italy was largely religious. Needless to say, his leftist comrades in the late sixties and early seventies were puzzled by this turn, and it is worth noting that among the great political dramatists of the twentieth century – Brecht, Boal, Bond, Churchill come to mind – Fo is almost alone in pursuing religious subjects, to which he would return in his 1999 *giullarata* of St. Francis. For Fo, it was important not to reduce popular religious culture to escapist opiate but to examine its considerable social and political resonance²⁰.

Until fairly recently, the Church's attitude to Fo has been mainly oppositional, The Vatican didn't take an aggressively public stand when Fo was performing in factories and even the occasional church, but airing the show on national television in 1977 was another matter. When Fo returned to a religious theme in his 1999 *Holy Jester Francis*, which featured Francis as a radical, pro-peasant, anti-war *giullare*, it looked like the occasion for another scandal. A Franciscan priest named Tommaso Toschi sharply criticized the play, accusing Fo of distorting Francis into a Marxist revolutionary²¹. Toschi further claimed that Francis could not have given an anti-war speech in Bologna, as Fo claimed he had, because the war had never happened. Fo, who as a great storyteller continually invents historical events out of non-existent or flimsy evidence on this occasion provided the ultimate twist: he produced legitimate documents that authenticated the war²². And other historians

²⁰ Joseph Farrell, *Dario Fo and Franca Rame: Harlequins of the Revolution*, London, Methuen, 2001, p. 90.

²¹ Farrell, *op. cit.*, p. 283.

²² Farrell, *ibid.*

came to support Fo in this dispute instead of Father Toschi. A critic of *Avvenire*, the official Vatican newspaper, expected nothing but heresy when he came to Spoleto to see the initial performance of *Holy Jester Francis*. Instead, he reported that he actually found nothing offensive about the play, even arguing that the Church owed Fo a debt of gratitude for being willing to talk about the gospel. In an age of unbelief or abstract, bloodless theology, Fo was to be commended for bringing the historical Jesus and figures like Francis back to life.²³ Not long before he died, Fo remarked in an interview how pleased he was with the Francis of our own times, the present Pope. The scandalous *éclat* of *Mistero Buffo* in 1977 still resonates, but some things have changed.

²³ Farrell, *ibid.*

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