

**FROM THE LADY IS TO BE DISPOSED OF
TO AN OPEN COUPLE:
THE THEATER PARTNERSHIP OF
FRANCA RAME AND DARIO FO**

Serena Anderlini-D'Onofrio

1. Introduction

The variety of comments generated by the Swedish Academy's decision to make Dario Fo the recipient of the 1997 Nobel Prize for Literature inspired me to come back to my Franca Rame scholarship, and my first article about her collaboration with Fo (1984). In 1984, I was an international graduate student from Italy who came to the US to study the presence of women in the textual production of modern drama. My horizon was just a bit wider than that of the teaching-oriented, gender-indifferent institutions where I had studied. My models of successful literary women were based on those that were part of a famous couple. They included Mary Shelley, Elizabeth Browning, Lillian Hellman, and Simone de Beauvoir. It was a model that, with its specific cultural variables, was prominent also where I came from, as attested by the female writers whose careers were launched by Alberto Moravia, including Elsa Morante and Dacia Maraini. I remember wondering who was going to be my "Dario" as I struggled with the material for my first article.

At the time, in American academic culture, the theoretical debate in the area of modern drama revolved around the status of individual performances and/or productions with respect to the dramatic text they actualized. It presumed a theater in which areas of competence were clearly defined, with writers writing, directors directing, and actors acting, in a system characterized by well-defined boundaries between areas of competence. It also presumed a theatrical culture in which dramatic texts were fully developed before the beginning of production. These principles accurately described the American theater culture that claimed the legacy of high European culture, but

they certainly contrasted with those of the theater culture with which I was familiar. In the mid-century, the community-based theater culture of Italian stand-up comedy and *varietà* was still alive enough to have called the attention of major Italian filmmakers.¹ It was characterized by loose boundaries between the areas of competence of directors, writers, and actors, with these three roles often conflated into one. Its performative spaces were street corners, restaurants, cafés, and community halls. They were sites of partly improvised textual production that happened *coram populo*, namely in a face-to-face commerce with the public in attendance. Its main feature was a participatory type of performativity, whose texts, when available, were testimonials of the collective experience therein implied. As a European child, I had the normative cultural awareness that, as Baudrillard would probably put it, existing and acting are coextensive (1994). And, as a participant in a subproletarian theater culture, I was not a stranger to the fact that, in more than one sense, performance is life. However, as a feminist-to-be, I was looking for a way to validate as culture the specificity of certain experiences that were part of women's lives.

As W.B. Worthen has recently noted, at the time the American debate was polarized between those who wanted to expand the field of theater and performance studies beyond its traditional boundaries, and those who insisted that performances discretely serve literary drama (1998). The latter postulated that the dramatic text was the discipline's primary object of study, while the former challenged this assumption (Elam 1980). Outside the academic walls, the performance art movement was developing, with its strong feminist impulse. Women like Laurie Anderson, Meredith Monk, Carolee Schneemann, Suzanne Lacy, and Judy Chicago were creating their own performative culture, opening up spaces for dramatizing women's lives (Roth 1983). The more traditional women who inhabited a man's shadow were considered traitors to the cause, with the admixture of envy and contempt that surrounded them. In feminist academic circles, the discussion was mired in the dichotomy theater vs. performance art (Case 1988). As a newcomer to the field of women's

¹ In their two landmarks of Neorealist cinema, *Bicycle Thief* and *Rome, Open City*, both de Sica and Rossellini represent this theater culture as a vital, if sometimes politically questionable, part of Italian life. They describe it as a community-based form of entertainment that sustains the natural talents of people who do not have a formal education, but are willing to try their luck in small artistic ventures rather than fully embrace middle-class values. Some of its ingredients are musical folklore, compassionate humor, and mildly risqué cabaret shows.

studies, I shared an investment in expanding the field with other feminist scholars of the time, but I was persuaded that women in supportive roles put more than their fair share of creative intelligence in the work done with their male companions. I felt it would be best to inscribe this energy in the feminist camp. Hence, I was not sure that a performance-studies approach would best apply to the work of Rame. Moreover, I was aware of the lesson of *commedia dell'arte*, a theater culture whose widely spread influence enabled the production of classics such as those by Shakespeare and Moliere, but left no literary legacy of its own. My main preoccupation was not focusing on the subversive value of performative moments, but rather validating the texts born out of these moments as part of a cultural legacy to be passed on to future generations. Given the situation, I decided to focus on Rame's achievements as an artist independent of Fo, rather than on her input on what they did together.

As I see it now, their practice of theater subverts the dichotomy in which the American theoretical debate was mired because it uses performance as the site of literary production. Indeed, in their populist, subproletarian theater spaces, roughly outlined tropes are acted out, thus allowing the emotional energy of the public in attendance to animate a performer's creative intelligence and energize his or her desire to expand areas of the piece into more articulate, expressive drafts. The repartee developed in production is sometimes taped, and then transcribed, with further editing. These *post-factum* play scripts are then printed and often translated, which makes them accessible for production to theater companies world-wide. Thus the very energy created by the simultaneous presence of audiences and performers in the theater space becomes literary.

As performance studies gradually ate away at the space for theater studies, in the late 1980s and early 1990s there eventually was no position from which to argue that historically, theater has functioned as a site of literary production. As the Oscar-winning film *Shakespeare in Love* has reminded us, this happened even in the times of the Bard, who did not have a script when what was to be *Romeo and Juliet* went into its first production. For Fo and Rame, who claim a lineage from the early-modern popular tradition of the *commedia dell'arte*, this still currently happens. Recently, thoughtful academic arguments propose new, productive alliances between performance and theater studies (Diamond, Taussig, Worthen). These changes have prepared the space for my current argument, that Rame and Fo's theater is the performativity of their own collaborative literary production. Whether she works alone or with her husband, Rame's contribution is most effective in subverting the

dichotomy theater vs. performance art. Indeed, busting academic dichotomies is the thrust of Rame and Fo's artistic production. They insist that literature is not the product of an isolated, masculine mind inspired by a feminine muse,² but rather the result of the collaborative effort to bring a community's creative intelligence to life within the shared space of theater production (Fo 1977, 73-84). The dramatic text is then used to gather the creative energy thus inspired, based on an actor's memory, and/or taped record, of his or her performative elaborations (Rame 1975, v-xv).

Neither does this kind of theater practice suppress the erotic, creative, and intellectual energies generated within the performative space, nor does it sublimate these energies in aesthetic consumption. As they remain within the space of theater production, these energies enhance the sense of communal intimacy resulting from the experience of participating in the shows. When I first approached Fo and Rame, I, like the objects of my study, was imprisoned in a cultural model based on monogamy and monosexuality, a late-romantic ideal that celebrated the dual harmony of opposites given by heterosexuality. Then and now I was persuaded that Rame was an important artist who certainly gave more than she received in the exchange with Dario. As with the rest of us, her creative output was the result of a more or less fairly balanced system of intersubjective exchange of erotic, creative, and intellectual energies, in which Dario featured prominently for most of her life. The feminist rhetoric of which my voice was part was still captured in the myth of modernity, and its univocal, phallic subject. It emphasized women's aspirations to unified subjectivity rather than our search for alternative models based on interdependence and mutuality. All I could do in my article was emphasize what Rame had done on her own and how underrated she was in the partnership with her husband.

A few years later I learned that Dario and Franca had parted. Indeed, I was told that in a popular Italian TV show Franca declared that she was through with Dario, which surprised only those who still doubted her independent strength and talents. To me, her declaration seemed almost an inevitable result of her desire to really find her own centeredness, which was inspired by the popularity of her feminist militant theater of the 1970s (Anderlini 1991, 23-24). Today, as I come back to this topic and part of my creative/scholarly life, I do

² Dario Fo. *Mistero Buffo*. In *Le commedie di Dario Fo*, vol. 5. Turin: Einaudi, 1977.

know how to imagine different intersubjective models enabling narrative, artistic, and intellectual production. I no longer believe that male sexual energy is the enabling force of a woman's creative intelligence and production, nor do I believe that a woman's creative energy has no place outside a man's shadow. And, thanks to several decades of women's studies, I know many women who have created a reputation for themselves independently of men's support. My new intersubjective models are based on communities rather than couples, communities such as the ones that gather around environmentalist, feminist, bisexual, and holistic discursive practices. Therefore, I can take an integrated approach to the collaboration between Fo and Rame, one that, by emphasizing what keeps them together rather than what drives them apart, can do more justice to what Rame puts in their joint works.

This approach has the remarkable advantage of situating Rame's work as a performance artist within the wider horizon of the humanities, an area in which collaborative efforts deserve much wider acknowledgments. Indeed, responses to Fo's being declared a winner of the Nobel Prize have been very jarring, but the outrage of the scandalized and the excitement of the admirers point to the same direction: the absurdity of exclusively awarding the prize to a man who claims he could not have deserved it without the contributions of his collaborator and wife of 45 years, namely actress, activist, editor, co-writer, archivist, and *fille d'art* Franca Rame. As a way to assess the discursive gap in our cultural understanding of what it takes, in the humanities, to generate lifetime projects worthy of consideration for major awards, this paper will survey these reactions. It will then focus on three main areas of Rame's contributions to the life of the company she and her husband founded in 1959, and on the interdependence of its two main performers and writers. The paper will close with a current perspective on Rame's educational work on consensual, pleasurable, and nonviolent forms of sexual and erotic expression in our time.

2. Enthusiasm or Scandal? Acknowledging Interdependence and Collaboration in the Arts and Humanities

The award of the Nobel Prize to Fo has generated an interesting mixture of enthusiasm, indifference, and scandal, with very little attention to Rame's specific contributions from any position. Among the enthusiasts are those who have an investment in seeing a transcultural sense of humor rewarded. One is playwright Tony

Cushner, who could scarcely believe that the sentence “Dario Fo won the Nobel Prize” was the actual beginning of his article for *The Nation*, and not a line from an absurdist farce by Fo (1997). He was of course overjoyed that a playwright was rewarded. Likewise, Comparative Literature scholar Armando Gnisci was excited that the jury took into account Fo’s global rather than national reputation (Gnisci). Finally, a tongue-in-cheek accolade came from Italian stand-up comedian Stefano Benni, who gave Fo a “pretend prize,” for the “terrible trial” of keeping his cool while becoming a Nobel laureate (Benni 1-2). Benni’s alternative award kindly included Rame.

The Italian literary establishment reacted with a mixture of condescension and sanctimony and hardly even mentioned Rame. The major complaint was that a literary prize had been given to an actor, which ignored the real scandal that the prize had not been jointly assigned to the performing couple. Predictably, the dean of Italian literary critics, Carlo Bo, lamented the collapse of traditional values. He positioned Italian-literature Nobel laureates in a downward spiral, from the pure poet Eugenio Montale (in 1963), to the contaminated “actor” Dario Fo, a profession that stuffy Italian literati feel entitled to be condescending about (Trotta). Of course, Bo forgot to mention that in 1934 Pirandello, another Italian playwright and sometime director, was also awarded the Prize.

A moderately conservative commentator was especially advised of Italy’s current efforts to establish a reputation as a respectable, well-organized, and modern country, and wary of the persistence of negative Italian cultural stereotypes. He remarked that the decision to reward an Italian comic actor officially certifies that “Italy is a country of clowns,” with its only valuable contributions to world culture being jesters and banter (Veneziani). Ironically, a similar kind of male-centered comedic style based on the body’s physical energy is what earned Benigni his recent success as first foreign Oscar-winning best actor. The Pope, preoccupied with his own performances as religious leader, has often failed to appreciate Fo’s P.R. for the Scriptures, which, in the playwright’s mildly blasphemous parodies of Medieval genres, are reinterpreted as the secular wisdom of the working classes. This time he reconfirmed his bias, by ranting against the Academy that “giving the prize to someone who is also the author of questionable works is beyond all imagination (“Dario Fo: A Cross between Bertolt Brecht and Lenny Bruce”).

And finally, Fo, the only one logically entitled to being scandalized, declared himself “flabbergasted” as he learned about the award on the freeway, when a nearby driver approached him with a sign

("Nobel a Dario Fo: 'sono esterrefatto'"). When he showed up before the King of Sweden to accept the Prize, Fo proclaimed that he was receiving it also on behalf of Rame (ANSA). He thus pointed to the absence of acknowledged team work in the humanities, and became the first male humanist to share, at least symbolically, his Prize with a major female collaborator.³

The American mainstream press gave basic information on Fo's theater and politics, and mentioned the generic input of his wife.⁴ But in general, on this side of the Atlantic the award met with a certain degree of indifference, or perhaps slow-motion reaction, in both theater and Italian studies communities. For example, ATHE, the professional association for theater in higher education, did not have a Fo panel in which to host my paper on Rame. The MLA accepted the proposed Fo special panel, which was scheduled at the tail end of the conference, when participants are more preoccupied with packing than with scrutinizing the decisions of the Swedish Academy. The plenary-session type of room the panel was assigned might indicate that planners presumed a more cosmopolitan public than MLA-ans turned out to be. Italian American communities manifested a much lower degree of excitement for Fo's Nobel Prize than they did for the success of Benigni's film in the Hollywood awards. This might suggest that, regardless of how important its influence might be on other cultural and/or artistic discourses, the idea of a people's theater really belongs to the past.

More to the point, the wide range of responses to the award measures the ideological rift between today's literary and theater/performance culture, a rift that has grown wider on account of the gradual impoverishment of higher education in the humanities, and concurrent rise of media power. This gap calls for more interdisciplinary work in literature, theater, cultural, and women's studies. In my early interview with Rame, I focused on a woman's ownership of her work when in a team with a famous husband (1991).⁵ In a more

³ A visit to the Nobel Prize Website shows the disparity in acknowledgment of team work between the sciences and the humanities. Between 1957 and 1997, at least 22 Nobel Prizes for Physics were jointly awarded to two or more members of a team. As early as 1903 and 1911, a famous couple was awarded the Prize, Pierre and Marie Curie. To this day, however, no Nobel Prizes have been awarded to literary teams or couples. <http://nobelprizes.com>

⁴ I refer in particular to the following sources: "Dario Fo: A Cross Between Bertolt Brecht and Lenny Bruce"; "Nobel Watch 1997. Prize Goes to 'Subversive' Playwright"; and "Italian Wins Nobel," by Jim Heintz).

⁵ Other interviews on related subjects are those with playwrights Dacia Maraini, Natalia Ginzburg, and Ntozake Shange.

recent work, I focus on the creative endeavors of women with middle-class status in a modern, industrially developed society, who are apt to creating systems of sustained interdependence with other subjects, and thus are ultimately more resilient and adaptable than their male counterparts (1998, 52-69). One such subject is Franca Rame, whose resilience and adaptability to circumstances have produced a highly successful female-centered theater practice over a period of four decades and changing historical circumstances.

These qualities are legible even by simply assessing her contributions as an actress. In the company's "political pieces" in the 1960s she played dramatic and/or allegorical female characters which reminded the public of women's situations by using tropes from popular culture such as the Virgin at the Cross, and the mother of Italian partisans. In the militant 1970s, she played the performance-style feminist monologues of *Female Parts*, which presented a collection of issues debated in the women's movement of the time (Fo and Rame). In the recessive 1980s Rame starred as the protagonist in *An Open Couple*, the company's comic drama about the crisis of monogamy and monosexuality (Fo and Rame). And finally, in the sex-phobic 1990s, Rame came up with *Sesso? Grazie, tanto per gradire* (Dario Fo, Franca Rame and Jacopo Fo). This monologue, whose title roughly means "sex? Thanks, just a taste," is organized as an educational parable about the healthy practice of consensual, non-violent erotic pleasures and sexualities.

3. The Partnership: Keeping a Poised Exchange of Energies

The first area of collaboration between the two artists is what Dario calls Franca's "dowry." It is the knowledge about a people's theater and culture that Franca brought to the company as a young actress (Allegri 95). When she married Dario in 1954, Franca was a *filie d'art* and expert actress. She had a special bridal gift of experiences, tropes, and know how rooted in the tradition of popular art she inherited from the itinerant company of her ancestors. The group went back to the days of the *commedia dell'arte* and eventually disbanded as a result of the rise of cinema and television entertainment. Franca fell short of being literally "born on the stage," as her mother, a female lead in the company, resumed her role eight days after she gave birth to her child, and, as a way of baby-sitting her, kept her in her arms throughout the show. As she moved out of her family, Franca became an accomplished actress who successfully played in the urbane, light comedies of the time. When she met Dario, she was

quite glamorous in the Feydeau burlesque *Don't Walk Around all Naked*. But most importantly she had been an integral part of a holistic system of theater production based on collaborative improvisations in which everyone's role was acknowledged, and on a gutsy, sanguine sense of humor designed to entertain peasants and blue-collar workers in the least elegant sections of town. She was not prepared to allow state censorship or commercial demands to take away the freedom and creative intelligence she had acquired (Anderlini 1991, 25-27).

In the first years of their marriage, Franca encouraged Dario to found an independent theater company with her. Her motivation was her desire to do something more spiritually and intellectually satisfying than being the beauty onstage in the commercial theaters of the time (Anderlini 1991, 26-28). She partly obtained what she wanted. In the first ten years as a company with its own bourgeois comedies and satires, she usually got parts that were written expressly for her. This valorized her talents and personality, and gave her a chance to play a wide range of emotions. It was mischief mixed with irony in the female leads of *commedie brillanti* like *Archangels don't Play Pinball* (1959), *She had two Guns, with Black and White Eyes* (1960), and *He who Steals a Foot is Lucky in Love* (1961). It was earthy humor for *La Marcolfa*, and tragic compassion for "Mamma Togni" in *People's War in Chile* (1971).⁶ At this early stage of the company's development, Rame had a role in the creation of the company's texts, since she participated in the process of revising scripts in response to audience reactions, as they were put into their initial production stage. Yet up to this time, she might have seen this role as one limited to that of the female lead who slightly modifies her part to suit her personality.

Later, the company abandoned the bourgeois theater of the time to become the harbinger of a new political consciousness apt to analyze the politics of the 1968 revolution and its aftermath. Thanks to its position in the Atlantic Alliance, Italy was getting access to the privileged status of a "first-world" country whose high technology and infrastructure would eventually attract lower-status immigrants from "third-world" countries. Italians resented the cultural influence of American capitalism but were afraid that a political move towards socialism could cause a return of fascism. The political farces of this period analyzed various aspects of these specific historical

⁶ The texts of these plays were published as plays by Dario Fo. See *Le commedie di Dario Fo*, vols 1, 6, 7.

circumstances. Their focus on ideological issues positioned female characters in the background. Often they did not have a human dimension of their own, but were either symbols or allegories. For example, the female journalist in *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* (1970) was a “straight man” figure that allowed the comic lead to get the laughs. In *The Lady is to Be Disposed of* (1967), the agonizing old woman who stands for the obsolete political ideology of the Christian Democratic Party is a symbolic figure that allegorizes a political situation (Fo 1988). In other cases, the female lead was part of a group of naturalistic female characters who rebel against injustice, such as the homemaker in *Can't Pay Won't Pay* (1974), who fights inflation by participating in the organized shoplifting called *spesa proletaria*.

The political plays were organized as farces with a lot of stage business and a male comic lead impersonated by Fo. At this time, Fo started to tap into the tradition of stand-up comedy, and especially its Italian models like Totò and Petrolini (Fo 1991, p. 24, 88, and 150). Comic routines were organized based on a two-man system made of a *comico*, the comic leader who gets the audience to laugh, and a *spalla*, the “straight man” who feeds the comic leader the cue that leads up to the punchline. Fo did not have a male *spalla*, and the tradition of Italian misogyny constructed women as people to be laughed at. Hence, many of the pieces in this period got organized as comic farces in which Fo plays the *comico* and Rame the *spalla*. His character is the center of comic energy, hers a mere vehicle of it. A good example is the well-known *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* (1970), a satire of the collusion between Italian police and fascists in failing to properly assess responsibilities for a major terrorist massacre, the *Strage di Piazza Fontana*, in 1969.

In the play, the police are accused of arresting two innocent anarchists, one of whom is then conveniently killed in a pretend suicide to avoid further investigations. The anarchist alluded to in the title is Pinelli, who died a death similar to the one therein described. His companion, Valpreda spent about ten years in prison, awaiting for his trial in a system that lacks provisions for bail. Eventually, the slow-paced judicial machine found two fascist paramilitary terrorists to be the culprits. Rame's character is a journalist who investigates the “suicide” at the police headquarters. Fo's character is a “mad-man” successfully disguised as police chief. He plays devil's advocate, and, confronted by the journalist, he readily admits to the connivance between police operations and state ideological apparatus. He even satirizes the global political system which relies on it,

including the Cold War Order and American capitalism. The trope casts Fo's character as the comic leader, Rame's as the *spalla*. Thus, when the journalist and the madman discuss the relationship between free speech and consumer capitalism, Rame brings up the unresolved murders of many leaders in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. This feeds Fo the grisly punchline, that "free speech" amounts to "burps free of charge" when it comes in combination with American capitalism (Vol. 7, 72). The line goes over very well with Italian left-wing viewers that relish spoofs of American culture. Rame's role is essential in the comic routine, but it is not recognized and uses a narrow range of her talents.

In another play of the period, *La signora è da buttare* (1969), misogyny is connoted in the very title, *The Lady is to be Disposed of*: The play is about the Cold-War Italian political party that functioned as the major ally of Washington, the *Democrazia Cristiana*. It is symbolized by a *vecchia signora*, an old lady, who is dying and is about to be preyed upon by its rapacious ally, a vulture made in the guise of the American eagle. The play's political satire pivots on the symbolic construction of the party that sold out to American neocolonial power as feminine cowardice. The party that represents socialist ideals and national autonomy is constructed as masculine courage. The allegory is fully supported by the grammatical gender of their names and acronyms: *la D.C.*, or *la Democrazia Cristiana* takes a feminine article, *il P.C.I.*, or *il Partito Comunista Italiano*, takes a masculine article. The mannequin representing the political party under accusation lies in her deathbed for most of the show. She moans breathing her last whenever another character looks inside the curtains that surround her (Vol. 7, 85-180). Puffed up with pillows and other costume stuffing, Rame plays a rather silly and laughable "fat woman," who feeds cues to Fo's punchlines.

When I interviewed her in 1984, Rame claimed to be known as the "tyrant" of the company, because she would insist that a play be modified until she felt it was just quite right (Anderlini 1984, 34). I would not be surprised to learn that she acquired this fame during this intermediate period in the company's development. In these rather overwrought ideological pieces, she probably acted as a censor who told her husband that something was redundant, or as a doctor who found out what was wrong with a theatrical situation that did not yet work out. Her situation was similar to that of many women in the culture of the Italian left, who shared a political ideology with their male partners, but were starved for their own centeredness and a sense of belonging.

The subsequent shift in the company's orientation enabled Rame to step out of Fo's shadow, and get a more accurate sense of her talent. The 1970s were intense years of activism for the women's movement. Women already had equal opportunity in education and access to professional careers, but needed equality in family law and reproductive options to actualize them. The women's movement successfully established fair divorce and abortion laws. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that Rame felt the need for a show of her own. Rame had personal and political battles to fight, both as a partner in the company and as Fo's wife. Naturally, she wanted roles of a different kind, yet she did not have confidence in herself as a writer. The situation determined a major change in the direction of the company's development.

In some ways playing together was limiting to both artists, for the available interactions were contained within the minimum common denominator of their shared talents. Since Rame tends to be succinct and dramatic, while Fo tends to be wordy and funny, this common ground was actually very narrow. This new phase in their collaborative partnership was inaugurated when Rame gave Fo his "assignments." She wanted to stage some feminist monologues, and gave him the tropes for them: a homemaker locked up in her house by a jealous husband, an exploited female factory worker and mother, a rebellious female child who turns into a sexual commodity for her male partners, and so on. These performance pieces focus on central issues in the Italian and European feminist debate of the time, such as women's sexuality, birth control and abortion, the double shift and the double moral standard, and shared parenting. The texts went through various printings because they changed and developed as they were acted. In this case, Fo was not even present and female spectators formed the majority of the public. Hence, Rame not only came out of the masculine shadow, but she even used the reputation she and Fo had established together to get that creative energy to flow into a woman-centered show. Eventually, the monologues were arranged in a sequence called *Tutta casa letto e chiesa*, which also included the more tragic monologues *Medea* and *I, Ulrike, Cry*, on infanticide and terrorism, respectively (Rame and Fo). With the *comico/spalla* routine behind, Franca finally had the stage to herself and could use all of her talents. She later came to see these shows as her first affirmation as an actress. But even though she did not yet see herself as a co-author, in these "assignments," Rame was the one who gave the trope to Fo and developed his first drafts. At this time, therefore, her editorial, writerly, and authorial efforts became totally intertwined with Fo's, and with their shared commit-

ment to transform the space of performance into a site of collaborative, improvised literary production.

In the meanwhile Fo was also creating his own theatrical performances with his character of the poet *giullare* which started in *Mistero buffo* and then evolved into several other pieces (1977). He learned that he could make people laugh without the *spalla*, and he actually developed a more elegant performative style, which relied on mime rather than props. His performer/character even created his own language, a mixture of old and new Northern Italian dialects called *Grammelot* (Fo 1991, 42-65, 74-80).⁷ During this period the two partners experienced personal problems and eventually, always by Rame's initiative, drifted apart. Rame did not claim ownership of the one-woman-show texts she elaborated based on her husband's first drafts. Nonetheless the authorship was collaborative, and, when he had them published Fo acknowledged this by having Rame's name appear on the jacket next to his. Rame continued to use the technique of developing and organizing texts in performance, based on improvisations inspired by specific audiences and/or circumstances. Therefore, even though materially she did not write, she actually composed important parts of the texts as a result of these exchanges of creative energy with the predominantly female public that went to *Tutta casa*.

As late as the mid-1980s, Rame would still not see herself as a writer, and I remember that when I interviewed her on this topic she was rather embarrassed. She looked like a young bride afraid to upset her husband. Yet it was precisely this personal tension which inspired an excellent character for Franca, the female lead in *Coppia aperta*, a satire about machismo in open marriages which denotes a more reflective time in Italian *femminismo* (Fo and Rame 3-34). At this time, the possibility of becoming "like men," of imitating their culture, was being evaluated in Italian feminist discourse. It was eventually turned down in favor of what Luce Irigaray called "assuming the feminine role deliberately" (Irigaray 76). This act of choosing the feminine from a feminist viewpoint valorized women's interdependent and collaborative traditions and cultural practices. This feminine

⁷ Fo explains the nature of Grammelot in the first chapter of his actor's manual, *Tricks of the Trade*, 1991. There he claims that this lingua franca was used by the Italian *dell'Arte* comedians when they became exiles due to the Counterreformation. As they went on to act in foreign countries, they had to invent a universal language based on onomatopoeia and mime, so that audiences could understand their shows. Fo's Grammelot is a recuperation of this early modern language, in accordance with his parodies of medieval genres and general effort to revisit premodern times.

feminism sustains female centrality and uses it as a basis to examine the positive aspects of women's culture. Accordingly, in *An Open Couple*, Fo does not appear and Rame gets to play opposite another actor. She is an ex-homemaker who now lives on her own and has liberated herself through independence and activism. Her character is the central source of comic energy, causing the audience to laugh at her husband, at his sexual bravados, and at her farcical descriptions of the men with whom she had semi-serious romances. The husband character is the *spalla* who feeds comic energy to her centrality.

For example, in the first part of the play the two ex-spouses present to the public the events that lead to their separation. Rame explains that as a result of the sexual liberation movement in the 1970s, her husband declared heterosexual monogamy to be a patriarchal, oppressive institution, and started to have an excessive number of affairs. Rame, more accustomed to behaving modestly as she had been raised to, had strong emotional feelings for younger men, but was too shy to act on them. Since the open-couple system had been agreed upon by both parties, he gave to a listening Franca the details of all his affairs. Birth-control systems were new in the culture and somewhat intimidating to some of his young female lovers. Faced with one of his partner's resistance to them, he became so arrogant as to ask Franca to take her to a gynecologist to fit her with an Intra Uterine Device, commonly called IUD. As the two performers evoke the scene, the husband patiently explains to Franca that she is such a dependable person that he thinks "with [her] [his younger lover would] go for sure" (83) ("con te ci viene di sicuro" 15).⁸ This allows Franca to further elaborate on the imagined doctor's office scene, in which she would candidly say: "Doctor, could you please fit my husband's girlfriend with an IUD," and hope that the physician would understand the open couple's queer sense of humor (83) ("Dottore, metta la spirale alla findanzata di mio marito" 15). The crescendo leads up to the punchline, which floors the husband's machismo as Franca explodes: "I'm going to fit you with a coil, in your foreskin! So when you pee you look like a sprinkler" (83) (La infilo a te la spirale... nel prepuzio! Così fai la pipi a girandola! 16).

⁸ Quotations from the original refer to the play *Una coppia aperta, quasi spalancata* published in Vol. 9 of Fo's *Commedie* (1991). The translated quotations are from my adaptation of the play, parts of which have been published in *VIA: voices in Italian Americana*, for a special issue on Italian American theater (1998 78-95). *Coppia aperta* was first translated by Stuart Hood for *Theater* 27: 1 (1984): 19-31.

She then proceeds in the same vein, explaining how her husband eventually became a sexual maniac always in pursuit of some female prey. She claims he was infected with an alleged virus, the “homicoccus” (84) (“l’arrazzococco,” 16), as a result of which he became fixated with collecting, not “mushrooms,” but “mushroomies.” Embarrassed, she proceeds to specify that these collectibles are commonly called “mousies... pussies” (84) (“funghette... passerine... topole,” 16). Then she mentions the kinds of visions his activities gave her, as she fantasized of all these used and abandoned sexual objects as fellow women:

I swear, it is now an obsession with me . . . I see them everywhere . . . instead of the soap bar . . . Oh, a little pussy, good morning! I put on a shoe . . . Oh goodness, what’s there? A mouse!!! No, a pussy! I see these pussies spread all over the place . . . used and abandoned . . . eyeing sadly from ashtrays full of cigarette butts . . . How do I keep them alive? I water them. The special, invigorating liquid, is provided by the sperm bank, of which my husband is a honorary member” (84) (“Giuro, ormai per me è diventata un’ossessione . . . me le vedo dappertutto . . . al posto cella saponetta nel bagno . . . oh . . . una topina . . . buongiorno! Mi infilo una scarpa . . . oddio che c’e? Un topo!! No, una topa! Me le vedo ‘ste topine sparse per la casa . . . usase e poi abbandonate . . . che occhieggiano tristemente dai portaceneri pieni di cicche . . . Come le tengo vive? Le annaffio. Il liquido apposito, vivificante, me lo passa la banca del seme, di cui mio marito è socio onorario” 16-17).

Having thus ridiculed her husband’s machismo, she proceeds to confess her fantasy of female genital symbols, which displays, in a quasi homoerotic manner, Rame’s sense of female solidarity against the culture of Italian machismo exemplified by her husband’s behavior.

The story continues as Rame, now an independent, sophisticated, and cultured woman, has taken a younger male lover, who represents the new generation educated by the women’s movement. She casually discusses her new lover with her visiting ex-husband. He sounds rather fresh, smart, and desirable and Franca asks her ex to please leave before he arrives. The husband believes she is afraid the lover will not live up to her description—that he won’t really look like competition to him. She tactfully explains that, on the contrary, she is ashamed to have her lover see the kind of macho guy she used to go out with. The husband, who is drinking some sparkling water to look dignified, cannot swallow properly and begins to hiccup. As he spits the water up, she goes for the punchline: “There’s no need to sprinkle in my house. I don’t do the ironing any more!” (“Non mi inumidire la casa. Non stiro più” 25). Eventually, she rejects the sexual advances of her ex, who is now turned on by her again since

another likes her. The play concludes with the husband pretending to commit suicide as the lover arrives.

In positioning Rame as the center of the play's comic energy, this production inaugurated a phase in her development dominated by the search for a non-institutionalized female-centered performative space. An *Open Couple* was followed by a number of short plays on women's sexual expression. In the romantic farce *Rientro a casa* (coming home) it is a search for genuine emotion and spontaneous, compassionate sexual and erotic expression (Fo and Rame 1984, 23-28). The comic monologues *The Freak Mama* and *A Woman Alone* focus on married women who discover sexual pleasure with younger male lovers. In this phase Rame's work was parallel to Dario's and to the work that the two did together sometimes with the input and/or participation of their son Jacopo.

Rame has continued to develop the theme of sexuality in her recent production *Sesso? Grazie, tanto per gradire* ("sex? Thanks, just a taste," also translated as *Sex: Don't Mind if I do*). The text is coauthored by Franca and Dario with their son Jacopo, author of the book from which the play is taken *Lo zen e l'arte di scopare*. The play is organized as a mock course in sexuality in which a wiser woman, Franca, imparts the rudiments of a positive sexual education to younger women and men. Her "love lessons" are designed to facilitate the enjoyment of consensual and nonviolent erotic pleasures that benefit the spirit and create peace and harmony in the social environment. They include chapters on male genitals, menstruation, virginity, male impotence, and the clitoris. The course is introduced by a parody of Adam and Eve's first sexual intercourse in the Garden of Eden, and ends with a lesson of advice to male and female sexual players. The sequence is based on the findings of the Hite Reports, which emphasized women's autonomous eros and the independence of clitoral orgasm. In their approach to these delicate anatomical and personal matters, these lessons are a good example of a positive feminist compromise in the debate over the three related issues of pornography, free speech, and violence. They demonstrate that even in an age characterized by rampant fears of sexual contamination, free speech can be used to educate people to the enjoyment of healthy, nonviolent, and highly erotic sexuality. They also suggest productive ways of spending the energy currently consumed in divisive academic arguments within the feminist debate in America. These lessons of love are very simple, non-offensive, and funny. Even though they focus on two-gender couples, any sexual player can learn something useful from them. As harbingers of a new positive

movement that values embodiment, eroticism, and sexuality, they anticipate the kind of education that makes these areas of human experience healing and enjoyable for everyone.

The third role Rame plays in the Fo-Rame company is that of activist and archivist. Like a good manager, she draws raw materials for the company's theater practice from current issues and cultural dynamics. As she gives these materials back to the public by making the company's texts and records available to interested parties, she directs the dissemination of knowledge about the company's work, or, as Derrida would put it, she shapes this knowledge by controlling its repertoire (1998). As a scholar in Italian studies, I have often been pleasantly surprised by the effectiveness with which the company provided materials for my work, especially considering the general disorganization in the country. When I interviewed her, Rame claimed that she was the archivist in the company (Anderlini 1991, 28). She provided scripts and clippings free of charge, and invited me to get back in touch with her for further materials. Her agents have sent me scripts and clippings free of charge up to this time. Since Fo and Rame's plays are widely staged in many languages by companies around the world, Franca's role as archivist is especially important. As an archivist, Franca seems especially invested in having their texts survive their time. Unlike the *commedia dell'arte* type of scenarios used by her parents, she clearly wants these plays to have a life of their own, and acquire, when all is said and done, a well-deserved literary status.

4. Conclusion

Often accompanied by unsustainable technological developments, performativity is a pervasive feature in post-modern, media-oriented cultures. This situation produces an even stronger need for participatory educational spaces in the humanities designed to generate positive communication and harmony. In today's media-dominated society, literary culture feels defensive due to the erosion of its status. Even though theater culture has been associated with license, promiscuity, and scandal, by its own tradition, physical organization, and structure, it is in a key position to mediate the educational conflict between media and conventional narratives.

The intriguing work produced by the theater partnership of Franca Rame and Dario Fo facilitates such mediation. In their four decades as a collaborative performing couple, Rame and Fo have provided successful models of educational spaces for the entertainment of the

masses where the public's creative intelligence and participation are rewarded. With their range of modes, themes, and styles, they have created a holistic system of literary and theatrical production that successfully challenges constructed bipolarisms such as the one between theater and literary cultures. In short, they have demonstrated that even in today's performative, or, as Gianni Vattimo would put it, "transparent" society, theater, and, as a consequence, drama, is a collaborative art (Vattimo 1-20).

In a modern feminist perspective it was important to focus on Rame's work independent of Dario. But postmodern discursive spaces suggest a focus on the collaboration between the two performers. Their teamship is the very reason Fo's work merited the Nobel Prize, and therefore points to the necessity of a literary culture more aware of performative art forms that are by necessity collaborative. Rame and Fo's creative process involves managers, administrators, stagehands and actors within the company, as well as viewers of the initial productions whose responses help to reorganize, develop, and polish the rough drafts of the company's new plays. The energies contributed by each player in the partnership are integrated into a larger force which is carried forth into the end result. This happens even as postmodern literary culture still relies on a system of copyrights based on individual ownership and property values.

Naturally, some will argue that these collaborations happen in all literary genres. Yet the performing arts have the power to amplify them, thus begging the question of how they can be acknowledged and critically examined. Many collaborators are more or less replaceable, but the contribution of Franca Rame is one that Fo, by his own admission, could not do without (ANSA).⁹ The three areas of Rame's contributions to her partnership with Fo facilitated the development of the company and the growth of its international reputation in a major way. Her contributions in the areas of acting, writing, and archiving

⁹ The Italian bulletin from ANSA describes Fo's behavior at the Awards Ceremony in great detail. He thanked the Academy for the award, and claimed to accept it for both him and Franca. Then he proceeded to introduce his absent wife by way of showing a picture of her. As he explained, "we have played all over the world in occupied factories, prisons, and churches even consecrated ones. We have suffered threats, insults, trials, and violence, especially Franca. Yet we have endured, she has most of all." "Abbiamo recitato in tutto il mondo, nelle fabbriche occupate, nelle prigioni, nelle chiese, perfino quelle consacrate. Abbiamo subito anche minacce, insulti, processi e violenze, in particolare Franca. Ma abbiamo resistito. Soprattutto lei ha resistito" (ANSA 5, my translation).

demonstrate that Fo had good reasons to express his desire that she too be rewarded.

I believe that for both Rame and Fo their partnership is a space of growth through contrast whose stages of development are connected like Vico's historical cycles (Vico 397-418). As in the philosophy of history that governs their theater, the past is a mirror of the present that helps us understand where we are in the new cycle. Cultural and spiritual forces run their course and then return in a different guise. It is by interpreting these processes that human beings understand our mutual interdependence and sense of irony. So it was by transforming their partnership according to changing cultural circumstances that Rame and Fo kept it productive and vital.

Rame's initial focus on the sex/gender system of production and reproduction, and on women's position in modern culture, has recently evolved in wider concerns with eroticism, violence, and healing energies in postmodern, global societies. Fo's initial interest for ethical responsibilities and ideological conflicts within male working-class culture in modern consumer society has evolved into a quest for the epistemological sources of a premodern culture, to be found in popular medieval genres. Even in the period during which they had their own separate shows, both Rame and Fo contributed to each other's work in spite of their separate personal lives. As they became more independent, they opened up their complementary talents and perfected their styles. His is marked by long-winded narratives whose emotional tones include the grotesque, satire, banter, license, and blasphemy. Hers is tersely dramatic, with high emotional moments interspersed with sarcasm. Eventually they got back together on a different basis, probably realizing that their partnership was equally empowering to both artists.

Over the years the company's texts benefited from the holistic approach to theater production made possible by Rame and Fo's partnership, even as their stages of development are marked by varying balances of female and male energy. They have brought their brand of community-based performance to a variety of public spaces, including conventional theaters, television, videos, factories, stadiums, cultural circles, and piazzas. They have also made their works available for production in translation to other performers worldwide. The absurdity of having Fo be the sole recipient of the Prize demonstrates the need for more acknowledgment of collaborative efforts in the humanities. As Rame's case demonstrates, it is mostly women who lose when these partnerships go unrecognized. Hence, the need for more interdisciplinary work in theater, literature, cultural, and women's studies

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Serena Anderlini-D'Onofrio
Universidad de Puerto Rico
Recinto de Mayagüez