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Dario Fo, the Commune, and the Battle for the Palazzina Liberty

In 1974 Dario Fo and 'The Commune' theatre collective were forced to engaged in a political battle to secure control of the 'Palazzina Liberty', a nondescript building once a market canteen, set in the middle of a park in a south-eastern suburb of Milan. Here, Tom Behan describes how mass support, derived from a revolutionary ideology, secured The Commune's control over the building for several years. The relationship between this political movement and the political content of the shows performed at the Palazzina is then discussed with reference to *Can't Pay? Won't Pay!*, *Fanfani Kidnapped*, and *Mum's Marijuana is the Best*. Tom Behan, is Senior Lecturer in Italian at the University of Kent at Canterbury. His article began life as part of the research for his *Dario Fo: Revolutionary Theatre* (Pluto Press, 2000), and forms a companion piece to 'The Megaphone of the Movement: Dario Fo and the Working Class, 1968–79', published in *The Journal of European Studies*, XXX (September 2000).

WHEN the Milan council finally get around to recognizing the contribution of Dario Fo, Nobel Prizewinner for Literature in 1997, to the city's culture and history, it is highly likely they will erect a statue in a prominent street or mount a plaque outside a prestigious theatre. An alternative but far too sensitive location would be Piazza Fontana, site of the bomb explosion which led to the arrest of the anarchist who promptly died accidentally – the death which gave rise to one of Fo's most famous plays, *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*.

This article suggests that such recognition might be better conferred elsewhere: on the Palazzina Liberty, a building now being run by the local council, situated in the middle of a park in an anonymous south-eastern suburb of Milan, about half way along the normal route taken from the city centre to Linate airport. Built in the architectural style which provided half of its name, from 1911 the building was the canteen for the city's main fruit and vegetable market until this activity was relocated in 1967.

The building fell into disuse until 1974, when the Milan council gave Fo the keys in order to make an inspection with a view to renting it.[1] Fo had been Italy's most famous dramatist and actor for many years, and on that basis had repeatedly asked the Milan city council to provide him with premises. Fo and the other members of The Commune theatrical co-operative had already made use of a privately rented fixed base in Milan from 1970 to 1972 – the Capannone di via Colletta. Not only had such a fixed base allowed for rehearsals and so on, it had also provided a political and cultural focal point for the far left in Milan.

Indeed, what follows cannot perhaps be fully appreciated without a brief explanation of the left-wing background of Fo's theatre. In 1968 Fo and his wife Franca Rame had abandoned commercial theatre and begun writing and performing for a mass working-class audience. By 1970 the tense political relationship they had had with the Italian Communist Party (PCI) had broken down, as both Fo and the revolutionary movement he was now part of could not tolerate either its Stalinism or its parliamentarianism.[2]

The Commune, the revolutionary theatre collective founded in 1970 by Fo and Rame, attracted a mass audience, performing to hundreds of thousands of people each year. But a price had to be paid for The Commune's uncompromising stance – bomb threats and

actual bomb attacks, denunciations from the PCI, police harassment and arrest at their shows, the cancelling of shows by worried theatre managers, and worst of all the kidnapping and raping of Franca Rame by neo-fascists in 1973.

It was against this background that the council gave Fo the keys to the building in March 1974. On what terms he was to be allowed to enter the building became hotly disputed once The Commune announced they were physically occupying it. A chorus of complaints then arose in bourgeois and Christian Democrat circles, leading to the Milan council immediately demanding that Fo and The Commune leave the Palazzina.

For the next seven years Fo and his comrades occupied the building semi-legally, with the support of the local community. What occurred during this period constitutes a fascinating mixture of radical politics and theatre. Given the close links between political events and theatrical performances which characterized Fo's mode of theatre during this period, and 'the movement's' participation in his shows, the Palazzina became very much the theatre of the movement, and so an organizing centre for the Milanese far left.

The first half of this article outlines the basis upon which the Palazzina was actually secured by Fo, and the second half discusses some of the productions staged there.

The Palazzina Secured by Mass Support

The background to the clash that was to unfold between Fo and the city council was that the Palazzina had been steadily decaying for several years. This was probably the main reason why the council had offered it to Fo in the first place: on the one hand they never anticipated that Fo would try to refurbish such a dilapidated place; on the other, if he refused to rent the premises it would put the council in a stronger position to refuse any future requests.

Once Fo and The Commune had decided to try to refurbish the Palazzina, the most urgent task was to make it inhabitable – one of the fundamental problems being that it was infested with rats. So the first task was to clean it up. One of the earliest volunteers recalls:

> So Fo and The Commune started to ask, 'Who knows how to do this?', 'Who knows how to do that?' It then starts to emerge who is an electrician, a carpenter, who knows how to do building work, and so on. I didn't know how to do any of these things so I used to carry material back and forth.[3]

Eight full lorry-loads of rubbish were eventually taken away. Piero Sciotto, a prominent member of The Commune and soon to become a regular performer in Fo's shows, recalls that most of the lorries were full of rubble and old mattresses. Once a minimum of safety and hygiene had been achieved, 'there was the building work, the windows to be repaired, the ironwork to be painted, everything needed to be cleaned. It was a huge job done by volunteers. All the materials, such as the glass and paint, had to be paid for. Everything else – the labour – was unpaid.'[4]

This initial work was done largely by political activists, who all sympathized with The Commune's revolutionary politics and cultural activities. In order to secure their tenure on a long-term basis, however, gaining the support of local people became a priority. So on 27 March The Commune distributed a two-sided A4 leaflet to houses in the surrounding area. This explained that they had been evicted from their previous theatrical base in August 1972, and briefly mentioned the fact that the authorities had a history of harassing their activities.[5] They further informed local inhabitants that The Commune's cultural association already had almost 30,000 members in Milan alone, and that their theatrical performances could now register a total national audience of 700,000 each year. In other words, it was absurd for the city council to deny a fixed space to what was in all probability Italy's most popular theatrical company.

The leaflet took great pains to explain that the whole Palazzina project would not be 'a "foreign body" in relation to the life and the problems of the local area, a "theatre" which

has a superficial relationship with its "audience".' Therefore, the opening of a library was proposed, along with the showing of films 'which are not the same old pornographic ones or ones along the lines of "Get your coffin ready".' Furthermore, there were plans for children's shows, a nursery and an after-school club. The leaflet ended with a political attack against Christian Democrat councillors, and called on the workers and students of the area to join with The Commune in rebuilding the Palazzina as an authentically popular cultural centre.

These initiatives were already gaining support. On 26 March the local branch of the Socialist Party (although it was in alliance with the Christian Democrats on the city council) had already passed a motion calling on the council to let the Palazzina legally to The Commune. However, the main council, on Christian Democrat insistence, swiftly passed a motion ordering the eviction of The Commune from the building. The occupiers hit back with a leaflet entitled 'The Rats Thank the Christian Democrats', and called for a 'massive presence' at the Palazzina on the following Saturday. A show was also publicized for the next Sunday, 31 March, involving Fo, Franca Rame, Enzo Jannacci, and two Sicilian singers, Cicciu Busacca and Piero Sciotto. The leaflet also called on people to sign a petition, and to collect leaflets from the Palazzina for distribution.

The Commune estimated that 5,000 people attended the 'meeting show' of 31 March in the park outside the Palazzina – for which amplification was supplied by two HGV batteries, since the council refused to supply electricity. Fo's performance was bitingly sarcastic, referring to the Christian Democrats' unnatural interest in rats, and how these politicians wanted to leave the Palazzina empty so that the rats could gorge themselves there.[6] A sympathetic newspaper described the crowd as being made up of 'people from the neighbourhood, mothers with prams, workers, lots of young people'.[7] At 1999 values, over £1,500 in donations had been raised on 31 March,[8] and by that stage 12,000 people had signed a petition in support of the occupation.

The Commune had also begun to spread the word further, by going to perform at the Alfa Romeo factory just north of Milan. At the end of the day a support group was set up which included Factory Councils, anti-fascist committees, political organizations, cultural associations, and school groups. A mass lobby was called for the coming meeting of the local council on 3 April.

Sustaining the Campaign's Momentum

This local council meeting, because of the surrounding lobby, became a mass meeting of hundreds, with Fo giving one of the opening speeches in which he described the crumbling conditions of the Palazzina. A local trade unionist read out a motion which indicated the support of local union branches for Fo. But such was his political reputation that despite this widespread support the council voted in line with the main city council. The Communist councillors voted with the Christian Democrats, the three Socialists being the only ones who opposed the motion.[9]

The following day The Commune viewed this so seriously that two separate A4 leaflets were produced. A partial list of the organizations which formed the support group was also published, which included Factory Councils of companies such as ABB, Alfa Romeo, IBM, Olivetti, and Sit Siemens. Some of the political organizations included the Socialist Party, the Radical Party, Avanguardia Operaia, Lotta Continua, PDUP, and the State University's 'Student Movement'. Another 'meeting show' was then called for 7 April, which would include both speeches by workers' delegates involved in battles and occupations for decent housing and Fo performing *Mistero Buffo*, his most famous show.

Campaign committee meetings were held every evening at 7.00 p.m. during this period, at which organizational tasks were decided upon for the following day. However, the meetings were

used above all as an occasion of total participation in which everybody can get to grips with the problems that need to be solved. . . . The main

problem, especially in this early phase of rooting the whole project within the neighbourhood, is one of avoiding all forms of restriction as regards local people, who must progressively become the political leadership of the Palazzina.[10]

Support was growing steadily, and up to 15,000 assembled in the park outside the Palazzina to watch Fo perform and to take part in the mass meeting. A motion was unanimously passed 'to link our struggle with workers' struggles, with the struggle for decent housing, and all popular movements fighting for a new, collective, socialist existence'. It was announced that a puppet workshop was to be held on 12 April (using the internal space for the first time), with an open-air puppet show on 14 April.[11]

These mobilizations obviously involved large numbers of local people. It was becoming clear that the narrow base of political support Fo had enjoyed just a week or two before had rapidly become far wider: in the final analysis, Fo and The Commune were refurbishing for free this significantly sized building, and setting up services and facilities for local people which were in demand, whereas the city council had let the building rot for seven years.

On the morning of 16 April – and virtually simultaneously with discussions between the council and The Commune – a squad of council engineers started to erect a ten-foot high fence around the Palazzina, effectively enclosing the building. The Commune, using typewriters and cyclostyle, rushed out a leaflet with the final words: 'Everybody to the Palazzina Liberty at 7.00 p.m,' and at 1.50 sent a telegram to the city council which stated: 'We will hold you responsible for any damage to people or things.' The following day another leaflet called for a 'Mass presence at the Palazzina'.

Over the following two days hundreds of local people either sat in front of the technicians[12] or harangued the council workers who were putting up the fencing, until the city council confirmed the work would be suspended. As a Commune leaflet argued: 'In the face of a neighbourhood's unity and specific preferences, no provocation can hold out.' On 19 April The Commune sent a letter to people in the locality in which, even though the outcome was defined as being positive, members of the Palazzina support group were invited

to come regularly to the Palazzina, and take part not only in the cultural programmes (theatre, etc.), but also – and above all – in managing the entire project. Everybody is good at something, and can join all those who have already directly committed themselves.

The Palazzina Becomes a Focal Point

Such was the attraction of the Palazzina as a meeting place that after the traditional workers' march on the morning of 1 May a 'working-class party' was held outside the building. The event lasted from midday to midnight and involved 5,000 people, and the many activities included children' games, a coconut shy with figures of the fascist leader Giorgio Almirante, the senior Christian Democrat politician Giulio Andreotti, and Richard Nixon; bookstalls, restaurants, craft stalls, free medical advice, a traditional dance area, as well as singing and theatrical performances on the main stage. Despite all this, Fo announced that he was due in court the following morning, accused of illegally occupying the Palazzina. He invited the crowd to lobby the hearing.[13]

The Palazzina also became a focal point to discover the minute-by-minute results of a national referendum held on 12 May, called to abrogate a law which had recently legalized divorce.[14] The law was endorsed, with 59 per cent of voters declaring themselves in favour. Once the results became known on the following evening, 5,000 people spontaneously marched off from the Palazzina to the city centre to celebrate, coming back to their base and holding a party until dawn.[15]

A second court hearing took place on 17 May, and a leaflet produced four days beforehand called for 'the largest crowd possible' to demonstrate in front of the court. On 20 May a further leaflet announced that theatre workshops were already taking place, with a children's painting class also being held. In the near future both a library and a clinic were due to open.

A 'meeting show' during the early weeks of occupation, held on the balcony of the Palazzina Liberty. Franca Rame is speaking, Piero Sciotto is standing to the right of the microphones with his arms folded, and Dario Fo is on the far right, dressed in black. Reprinted by kind permission from *Pupazzi con rabbia e sentimento* (Scheiwiller).

By this stage – that is, in less than two months – more than 100,000 people had taken part in the Palazzina's activities, and the petition had reached 20,000 signatures. Obviously numbers like this had made the authorities wary of intervening directly, and this was also a period in which the Christian Democrat government was more generally on the defensive: as The Commune argued, the vote on 12 May had shown that 'Christian Democrat manoeuvres can be defeated'.

It was already becoming clear that the authorities would not attempt an outright eviction at the Palazzina, so the legal arguments were allowed to rumble on over the next few years without directly affecting the running of a very full political and cultural programme. At this juncture, as one sympathetic newspaper wrote:

> It has become normal for many workers, students, families and couples to meet up on a Sunday at the Palazzina Liberty. . . . It has become our festival, in opposition to the idiocies you see on television and the false illusory escapisms of individual isolation.[16]

On 23 May there was a day of solidarity with the struggle for democracy in Portugal – the first big event held inside the actual building.

The Christian Democrat city council leader, Massimo De Carolis, finally agreed to debate with Fo in early June, and revealed that his objections were not really legalistic but political:

> I cannot recognize that Fo's political line is acceptable. He is an enemy of the system and cannot logically ask us, who are the system, for preferential treatment or help. . . . We are not giving you the Palazzina because you spit on us morning, noon, and night. . . . The truth is that the system treats revolutionaries like you with kid gloves.[17]

Ten days later three sticks of dynamite were found in a phone box close to the Palazzina

after an anonymous tip-off.[18] Six months later a bomb exploded just outside the window where the three members of the Palazzina's night security service normally slept. Luckily they had moved to another room, although the building was slightly damaged and windows were broken in nearby houses.[19]

Like most acts of terrorism, these were the actions of a frustrated minority and did nothing to stop the activities of the Palazzina, which continued with a major three-day conference on popular culture in mid-June. The conference itself saw the participation of many famous names on the Italian cultural scene, another example of the legitimization of Fo's occupation of the building. Amongst the participants were Corrado Augias, Pio Baldelli, Cesare Bermani, Giorgio Bertani, Bernardo Bertolucci, Giorgio Bocca, Camilla Cederna, Umberto Eco, Giorgio Gaber, Francesco Leonetti, Mario Monicelli, Ettore Scola, Paolo and Vittorio Taviani, Saverio Tutino, and Cesare Zavattini. Other participants came from France, Germany, Holland, and Switzerland.[20]

Modern Classics Premiered in a Squat

The struggle to secure the Palazzina meant that Fo and The Commune were becoming closely, almost symbiotically, linked to their supporters, and shared their worries, hopes, and priorities. The political solidarity and unity which had been experienced since March was to find a strong artistic echo in the premiere, on 2 October, of Fo's next play, *Can't Pay? Won't Pay!*

By now a real theatrical environment had been created inside the building, which could seat from 600 to 800 people. A review of the first night published by Milan's main newspaper, *Corriere della Sera*, described 'an atmosphere of rough and ready pioneers, without a hint of smugness. It was more a feeling of determined enthusiasm: here we are, and here we're staying.'[21]

Even the cast and rehearsals illustrated the pressing need to write and stage a work quickly in order to catch a given political moment, and then to perfect things along the way. One day over the summer Fo asked Piero Sciotto, who until that point had only sung Sicilian folk ballads for The Commune, to take one of the major roles in the play, that of Luigi. Making use of a 'large dose of madness', Sciotto agreed to try. Here, he reveals how he worked alongside Fo:

> I wasn't a trained actor, it was all spontaneous, instinctive. On the other hand Dario is a master of the art of theatre, but he's not a teacher. If you watch Dario, understand something, steal it, and make it your own – you can do anything you want. But Dario doesn't show you a method, he doesn't teach. He explains his method to you, which works fine for him, and which can work well for many others too.
>
> When we were rehearsing, if I got the intonation wrong, for example, Dario would say: 'It would be better if you did it like this. But if you can't manage it I'm not bothered, it's not important.' Getting my technique right meant using up a lot of time, and we wouldn't have managed to get anything done.[22]

Sciotto concludes that, despite these weaknesses: 'It worked. But like all the shows it was held together by Dario.'

Can't Pay? Won't Pay! is probably Fo's most popular play in English translation, and has as its central theme the day-to-day struggle for economic survival of a working-class family – the very kind of family which had supported the Palazzina during its early months of occupation. And in this sense Fo's Palazzina period represents a fascinating symbiosis between writer and audience. Not only had such a close relationship been developed over the recent months, but the subject-matter of the play had been taken from contemporary real-life events.[23] As the critic of *Corriere della Sera* wrote:

> This is a theatre which runs to the beat of current events, with newspaper headlines contained within it. It is a theatre which deals with the raw, unresolved, and immediate problems of the audience: scripts written in a few days and then changed as a result of the debates held immediately after every performance.[24]

Perhaps another reason for the play's success was its family setting, with the butt of many jokes being two rather slow-witted husbands.

Fo's next major play, *Fanfani Kidnapped*, had its premiere on 5 June 1975, and was again partially a result of the interaction between Fo and his audience. By late 1974 the Palazzina had become an organizing centre for workers resisting the effects of the developing economic recession, as Piero Sciotto here explains:

> The co-ordinating committee of small factories in occupation in Milan was one of the most important episodes in the life of the Palazzina. . . . It was at the Palazzina that workers found out about the situation in other factories. As a collective, we in The Commune started to put on shows in which the profits were given over to these struggles, and then we pushed for shows within factories. . . . A general awareness emerged from all this which didn't exist before, and from this environment the idea of *Fanfani Kidnapped* emerged.[25]

The Humiliation of Fanfani

Amintore Fanfani was one of the senior politicians of the Christian Democrat party, first serving as Prime Minister in 1954 and for the sixth and last time in 1987.[26] Generally on the right of his party (he had been a member of the Fascist Party in his youth), Fanfani had increasingly become a hate figure for the left as a result of his leadership of the bellicose Catholic fundamentalist campaign against divorce in 1974.

Not only did Fanfani have ambitions to become President of the Republic at this time, but in the period leading up to council and regional elections of 15 June he launched the Christian Democrats on a virulent 'law and order' campaign.[27] Concerned at the prospect of Christian Democrat victory, Fo wrote his new play in just eight days and, despite being banned from television screens since 1962, briefly performed some sketches from the show as part of an election party political broadcast of the far left party PDUP.

Fanfani is mercilessly ridiculed in the show, often through a simple but effective theatrical device. Fo, who is more than six feet tall, sometimes played Fanfani, who is about five foot, standing in a trench cut into the stage. Amongst various humiliations, Fanfani is forced to dress up as a woman who gives birth to a fascist child. The main structure of the plot is that Fanfani's kidnapping is ordered by fellow Christian Democrat leader Giulio Andreotti to create a fear in the public's mind of general lawlessness, and so to steer the electorate to vote for 'law and order' policies. In a statement which was controversial at the time, but which few would contest today, Fo outlined the general purpose of the play:

> It is a grotesque representation of authority, and the excessive arrogance of Christian Democratic power. In other words, the play isn't intended to demonstrate that Fanfani is a villain and the DC his victim. It explains that Christian Democracy as a whole has represented a moral outrage for thirty years in its arrogance, its contempt for the people, and its embezzlements.[28]

As in the national referendum on divorce, Fanfani's aggressively right-wing campaign proved a failure. The Christian Democrats lost heavily in these elections, and soon afterwards Fanfani was sacked as national secretary of the party. Although the play was well received, its primary function as a kind of theatrical political pamphlet has meant that *Fanfani Kidnapped* has never been translated into English.

Disorientation on the Far Left

Despite these defeats for Italy's largest party, and the dominant party of coalition governments since 1945, by the mid 1970s the far left which had emerged after 1968 was beginning to enter a serious crisis. Hopes of fundamental change, let alone of revolution, had been receding since 1973–74, and the PCI was slowly becoming a 'party of government' rather than a 'party of struggle'. Enrico Berlinguer had called for an 'historic compromise' with the Christian Democrats in late 1973, and in early 1976 he famously declared that he felt safer on the western side of the Iron Curtain. In the interim period, he had also called on his party and supporters to accept lower living standards in the face of an economic crisis – the so-called 'policy of sacrifices'.

Many of the radicals and revolutionaries who had entered politics in 1968 based much

of their hope on the idea that the PCI could be pushed to the left, yet the opposite was in fact happening, with the PCI crucially pulling millions of working-class sympathizers along in its wake.[29]

Perhaps the largest of the revolutionary organizations, Lotta Continua (Continuous Struggle), received a rude awakening when it discovered its real membership level at its first national congress, held in January 1975: approximately 8,000.[30] Both Lotta Continua and other groups had presented candidates at the June 1976 general elections, and had received the relatively disappointing tally of half a million votes, or 1.5 per cent of the total – half of what opinion polls had predicted.[31] Another demoralizing factor was that the PCI did not receive enough votes to be able even arithmetically to form a left government. Disorientation among revolutionaries increased further, and in October Lotta Continua, perhaps most representative of the post-1968 groups, decided to dissolve itself.

Some activists, frustrated by their lack of success, turned to individual terrorism, which took its most notorious form in the shape of the Red Brigades. Although numerically the organization never had more than a few hundred members,[32] what became politically significant in this period was that many radicals took the view that members of the Red Brigades were part of 'the movement', being defined as 'comrades who make mistakes'.

Sympathy towards left-wing terrorism was also reflected within The Commune. Members including Franca Rame and Piero Sciotto were extremely active within Soccorso Rosso (Red Help), a legal aid network for left-wing prisoners – which in 1976, in the introduction to a collection of Red Brigade documents, had written of the Brigades: 'For their origins, their political practice, and for what they have written we recognize them as comrades, and when reaction attacks them we are on their side.'[33]

Such public sympathy did not seem an important issue in 1976, but it became a leitmotiv of state repression following the kidnapping of Christian Democrat leader Aldo Moro in 1978, thus increasing the general sense of disorientation.

The number of radicals tempted by terrorism was very small – indeed, most of those who left revolutionary politics had simply drifted back into a conventional lifestyle. Another choice was to experiment with recreational drugs, whose increasing availability was to form the subject of Fo's next play, which opened at the Palazzina on 2 March 1976 as *Mum's Marijuana is the Best*. The question of recreational drug use had come to represent an increasingly important issue within the revolutionary milieu in this period, as it became clear that many activists, often depressed by the downturn in struggle, were tempted to use such newly accessible drugs as heroin and amphetamines as a form of escapism.

Revolution and Recreational Drugs

Once again using his traditional devices of farce and paradox, Fo plays the grandfather of a working-class family who, together with his middle-aged daughter, has recently discovered drugs. Much of the comedy revolves around the incongruous nature of two relatively old people apparently experimenting with all manner of drugs – but at the end both grandfather and daughter reveal that this has all been an act. They had been pretending to take drugs in order to show the younger generation how fantasy becomes more important than reality after excessive drug use, and therefore a diversion from real political struggle.[34] As Fo put it before the premiere, the target of the play was 'the absurd and ridiculous myth of broadening your mind through drugs, of "marijuana is good for you".'[35]

What was politically significant about the play was that Fo was putting on stage a mirror-image of one of the symptoms of crisis experienced by revolutionary groups. At one point, one of the characters explains why he doesn't want to give up his heroin addiction:

I don't give a damn about starting to live a normal life, because I can't see any future there,

any development. And I already know the script backwards: unemployment – fight back! Working on the assembly line like a dog – fight back! A cut in your wages, bust-ups at home, hangover on a Sunday – fight back! Sackings, lay-offs, firings – fight back! Struggling all the time! . . . and then the Communist Party finally forms a government with the Christian Democrats and we get social peace! No more fight back! Is this the future? If it is, then I don't want any part of it. I'm going to get off my face![36]

The grandfather character, played by Fo himself (who was about to turn fifty), replies immediately, openly criticizing the younger generation's lack of political commitment: 'Get moving, there are thousands of workers who live in exactly the same situation as you, and they're not giving up like you have, they're not giving in.'[37]

Arguments rage within this working-class family, and the son criticizes his mother for losing her political commitment due to being distracted by her own apparent drug use:

You're not interested in politics any more, all these community campaigns going on. . . . Last Monday we had to decide about the nursery, and you weren't there. . . . And to think that once upon a time you were always up the front! I bet you don't even know that the Council has just got an eviction order for all these occupied houses.[38]

Publicly airing one of the contradictions of the increasingly disoriented far-left milieu caused considerable resentment among many of the revolutionaries present, who probably still formed a majority of the audience at the Palazzina. What many far left critics of the play overlooked, however, was a series of clear statements in which the underlying causes of drug abuse were addressed:

It's not the stupefying effect of the drug that kills you, it's what lies behind it! It is the fact, for example, that over the last two years 65 per cent of young people, male and female, still haven't found their first job . . . . It's the desperation in discovering you don't have a future, the understanding that all the so-called sacred values on which the system is built – the nation, the family, honour, good manners – are all a load of rubbish! [39]

Even though some sections of the play seem like a political debate within the far left, others show considerable foresight on Fo's part. At this time drug abuse in Italy was a very recent and therefore relatively unknown phenomenon: in 1974 only eight people had died of an overdose, with police seizing just 1.5 kilos of heroin.[40] In this context Fo's understanding of how drugs were rapidly becoming the new 'enemy within' is remarkable:

Any pretext will do: yesterday they attacked you because you had long hair, the day before yesterday because you were Jewish, on Thursday because you were a Protestant and swore the earth was round, on Saturday because you were hiding in the catacombs with the Christians and next Sunday they'll attack you again because you've become a vicious anti-Communist.[41]

Despite the play's merits, some commentators viewed it as containing an unsatisfying mixture of farce and political polemic.[42] Instead of the 'external' political targets of the state in *Accidental Death of An Anarchist*, or the economic injustices of capitalism as ridiculed in *Can't Pay? Won't Pay!* here the target was 'internal' to the revolutionary movement: recreational drug use. The prominent highlighting of a serious problem amongst revolutionaries was symptomatic of a much more general malaise within the movement, despite the mass following it had gained since 1968.

Some Conclusions

Fo's writing clearly underwent a significant change following the relative lack of success of *Mum's Marijuana is the Best*. Up until 1976, he had been writing one or two-full length plays every year for some twenty years, but his next full length play – *Trumpets and Raspberries* – came all of five years later, in 1981.

Fo subsequently leapt at the opportunity of being able to give several of his shows on television (the broadcasts amounting to a total of sixteen hours), from which he had been banned since 1962. The agreement was made in late 1976, and instead of the normal procedure of recording plays in studios, Fo decided to perform the plays in front of a live audience at the Palazzina. What is inter-

esting is the choice of plays: apart from the inevitable *Mistero Buffo*, virtually all of the other shows were from his less radical, pre-1968 repertoire – material which was now at least ten years old.

Although such a selection illustrates Fo's detachment from the more militant aspects of the early years of the Palazzina, the underlying causes of this shift are to be found in the changing political nature of his audience. Speaking in March 1977, Piero Sciotto commented:

> All the revolutionaries and militant workers of Milan got into the habit of meeting up (at the Palazzina). . . . Although the Palazzina no longer has this function, due to the change in the nature of the movement, militant theatre continues.[43]

Fo's political commitment and writing had by now become the act of an individual artist, and not that of a member of a mass radical movement – simply because ten years after 1968 'the movement' was severely reduced in size and lacking in political initiative. Not that Fo ever repudiated his past activities at the Palazzina: for example he starred in the last major show performed there, a revival of *Can't Pay? Won't Pay!* in September 1980.

By 1980 the political momentum which the Milanese far left had possessed in 1974 had largely dissipated, so Fo and The Commune agreed to hand back the Palazzina to the council and returned to the commercial theatrical circuit the following year.

The militant politics and theatre of the Palazzina Liberty period constitute a fascinating illustration of how art and civil society inhabit the same world, drawing upon and interpreting the same economic and political developments. Two events alone from this period – the composition and performance of *Can't Pay? Won't Pay!* and the television recordings broadcast in 1977 – are enough to warrant some kind of commemoration. Yet all the activities of the Palazzina were achieved in the face of virulent and persistent opposition from all the major political parties.

Today the Palazzina is a music conservatory which houses the city council's ceremonial band and bears no traces of Fo's activities. I vary my opening proposition: if the Milan city council were ever to commemorate the time he spent there, it would be an act of gross hypocrisy by virtually all the parties represented on the council. Just as the plaque to the anarchist who died accidentally was placed and maintained in Piazza Fontana by left-wingers, it would be more fitting that any commemoration of Fo's activities came from outside the institutions, from the very people without whose active support of the Palazzina none of this would have been possible.

Notes and References

1. Chiara Valentini, *La storia di Dario Fo* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1997), p. 155.
2. See Tony Mitchell, *Dario Fo: People's Court Jester* (London: Methuen, 1999), p. 95–8.
3. Interview with Emilio Orsino. Born in 1944, Orsino has attended most of Fo's plays since the mid-1960s.
4. Interview with Piero Sciotto. Born in 1943, Sciotto worked closely with Fo from 1973 to 1980, and again from 1984 to 1992.
5. Unless otherwise stated, all quotations in this section are taken from leaflets and letters written by The Commune and held in Fo and Rame's personal archives. The main series is named 'Palazzina Liberty', and the specific folder is 17B, January–April 1974.
6. Lanfranco Binni, *Attento te . . . ! Il teatro politico di Dario Fo* (Verona: Bertani, 1975), p. 185.
7. *Il Manifesto*, 2 April 1974.
8. Conversion to a contemporary amount in sterling has been done by using a table of historical coefficients published monthly by the financial newspaper *Il Sole 24 Ore*, called 'Indici Mensili'. The December 1999 edition was used, with lire converted into sterling using an exchange rate of 3,000 lire to the pound.
9. *Il Giorno*, 4 April 1974.
10. Binni, *Attento te . . . !*, p. 184.
11. Ibid., p. 186, and 'Palazzina Liberty', folder 17B.
12. Franca Rame, interviewed in *Com Nuovi Tempi*, No. 13 (9 April 1978), cited in Enzo Colombo and Orlando Piraccini, *Pupazzi con rabbia e sentimento* (Milan: Libri Scheiwiller, 1998), p. 192.
13. *Corriere d'informazione*, 2 May 1974.
14. *Il Milanese*, 19 May 1974.
15. Binni, *Attento te . . . !*, p. 189.
16. *Servire il popolo*, 1 June 1974.
17. *Settegiorni*, 9 June 1974. It is unclear whether De Carolis was already a member of the secret P2 Freemasons' lodge at this time, given that membership only became public knowledge in 1981.
18. *Brescia Oggi*, 14 June 1974.
19. *Quotidiano dei lavoratori*, 22 December 1974; *Il Giorno*, 23 December 1974.
20. Binni, *Attento te . . . !*, p. 129.
21. *Corriere della Sera*, 4 October 1974, cited in Aldo Bisicchia, *Teatro a Milano 1968–78* (Milan: Mursi, 1979), p. 111.
22. Interview with Piero Sciotto.