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## **Dario Fo's Dynamic Frameworks in *Trumpets and Raspberries***

### **Abstract**

*This paper examines the application of the 'framing' technique by Dario Fo in his play *Trumpets and Raspberries* so as to extend the definition and concept of metadrama beyond a self-conscious exposure of theatricality. A variety of frames expose camouflaged power systems forming the ideological bases of representation. This takes place through two stages in Fo's play: firstly the voluntary destruction of dramatic illusion, and secondly the exposure of the unconscious and paradoxical theatricality of reality.*

**Key words:** framing, metadrama, theatrical semiotics, signification, representation, kinesics, proxemics.

This paper explores how Dario Fo uses the device of 'Framing' in his play about playacting *Trumpets and Raspberries*, to extend the concept of Metadrama beyond its existing dimensions. The "act of self-consciousness by which a play draws attention to its own fictional status as a theatrical pretence" ("Metadrama") becomes in Fo an act of meaning making. The exposure of the artificial construct of various performative frameworks demonstrates the dialectically opposite, yet paradoxically composite relation between Art and Life. Thus, "the drama within drama as well as drama about drama" (Ringer 7) definition, is extended. What the audience accept as natural is cleverly revealed to be socially, culturally and politically constructed. This exposes the camouflaged power systems that form the ideological basis of representation. A rebound effect is created in which, the first stage involves a voluntary and self-conscious destruction of theatrical illusion. The second stage is the audience's involuntary acknowledgement of the unconscious theatricality in real life.

From the moment the curtain is raised, the human body is surrounded by stage objects. Within a physical stage, space stands for something reacting to and producing a reaction in an audience. In order to do so it has to be framed within a performative situation that establishes a signification. In the identification of various types of

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frames, this study will therefore draw on the tenuous relationships of Semiotics, Kinesics and Proxemics to Performance. This is because, “To perform...is to frame what one is doing with a particular kind of self consciousness, a certain kind of form consciousness” (Kemp 156), and therefore framing estranges the signifying process. Theatrical semiotics, particularly in *Trumpets and Raspberries* helps to identify a variety of frames (ranging from verbal and gestural to visual and musical) of signification and communication that constitute metalinguistic discourse. This is because, “signs do not refer to things, they signify concepts, and concepts are aspects of the thought and reality” (Scholes 172).

The opening scene of *Trumpets and Raspberries*<sup>1</sup> establishes Fo’s creative use of verbal narrative frames (or story within story element). Within the performance of the doctor asking Rosa to identify a badly burnt individual as her husband, the narrative is interrupted by Antonio himself. He self-consciously refers to the dramatic construction of illusion in, “Excuse me ... I’m going to have to interrupt at this point...” (221), and reveals that the burnt man is in fact Agnelli his employer, the head of the Fiat Corporation whom he has unknowingly rescued from his kidnapers. Thus the framing effect created by the story within the story device, become a signification of Insider and Outsider view. Gaps in the Doctor’s consciousness are filled in by Rosa’s story as, “Oh we’ve been communists for generations from father to son...” (219). The cultural is seen as a political and social construct substantiated by Rosa’s assessment of Antonio’s affair with Lucia as, “of course, she was always there behind him...the bitch...she’s an extremist. She doesn’t have a party card ... not even a socialist card! She’s one of those intellectuals who are always trying to teach us, the working class, everything” (219). Similarly, gaps in Antonio’s narrative are filled in by Lucia’s references to news reports. The superimposition of these narrative frames creates not only a subjective reality through narrator control, but also subverts it. The Doctors dispassionately forensic discourse frames Rosa’s passionate outbursts creating melodrama. And Antonio’s courageous rescue of Agnelli is framed by the journalistic medium as, “Factory Worker in Frazzle Mystery” (228) subverting his heroic act to, “I’m an accomplice! Or rather, the main organiser of the kidnap“ (227). Fo shows how historical telling of a story is discourse dependent, and history thus becomes a product of rhetorical and narrative devices. This indicates that history is not a fixed absolute and for any narrative to be considered historical it must contain a dual vision of the process and the product. Therefore, “The history evoked as ultimate reality and source

of truth manifests itself as narrative construct, stories designed to yield meaning through narrative ordering” (Bennett 52).

A metadramatic exploration of identity is undertaken in the actors preoccupation with playacting in *Trumpets and Raspberries*. The actor, an iconic sign for his real self in stage performance, plays the character of Antonio, a shop steward and Rosa's husband. His wife tells us that Antonio has changed from his former self (as the character), as a result of an affair with Lucia. He is described as a symbol of capitalist commercialism, “running in a red suit with ‘Parmalat’ written all over ... a pom-pom hat with ‘Michelin’ stamped all over it, and ‘Marlboro’ track shoes...” (217). Also, in recounting his rescue of his employer, Antonio becomes a player enacting his own psychological reality. Later on, Antonio becomes a fictional representation of his own self, when his identity is surgically given to Agnelli. The shop steward's character is ostended in the course of the play, or de-realized to make it stand for the conformism of the Italian Communist party too. These manifold roles create a complex semiotic framework. Antonio is a hero in his story, a villain and unfaithful lover in his wife's version of the narrative, an accomplice in the news stories, and a betrayer of fellow worker confidence in rescuing a capitalist destroyer of labour unions.

Ironically when Agnelli assumes the identity of Antonio, the latter loses his identity too. Both undergo torture. Agnelli is tortured psychologically by the inspector and magistrate, being reduced to a neurotic patient willing to reveal names of terrorists. Antonio is physically tortured by his wife till he also confesses under duress, “I've been like a son of a bitch” (283).

To appreciate Fo's treatment of pretence in performance, Steven Connor's classification of performance into ‘acting’ and ‘enacting’ proves useful. Acting means doing something with immediacy and spontaneity, whereas ‘Enacting’ means a sense of playing out, impersonating, imitation and even doubling of action (120-122). Interestingly, Fo's characters in their roleplay produce intentionally what is believed to be unintentional such as Rosa's pretending to faint when she sees the dummy, or contriving to lose her balance in Lucia's presence (1.1). Other than the Double's Satchmo impersonation, he pretends to go floppy under the doctor's injections and suddenly turns around to say, “I'll tell you...” (255) and has to be shut up. The actors also make a self-conscious reference to their pretence of a character in roleplay such as when the actor playing doctor “feigns” embarrassment and consternation (2.1), or when the

actors pretend there is a “slipup” on stage (2.2). Sometimes a character unintentionally does what is conceived to be intentional in psychoanalytic slips of tongue, as when the inspector inquires from the doctor, “Excuse me Professor, did you give the prisoner...sorry the patient, permission to leave” (240).

Not only are frames created by roleplay, but they are also broken. The actor is often required to step out of his role to acknowledge the public in a frame breaking effect of direct address. This is similar to Brechts’ ‘gestus’ of showing as a form of theatrical foregrounding. Besides Antonio’s interruption in (1.1), the actor playing Antonio’s part apologises to the audience and says, “well it could have happened to anybody...particularly real doctors...OK, let’s start again where we left off...” (266). Rosa also addresses the audience to clarify, “Ladies and gentlemen, three days have passed since the last scene...Anyway, back to the play” (289). Closely connected to roleplay and pretence is the use of masks as representative of the entire theatrical apparatus employed by the Commedia dell’Arte characters and types. Masks in Fo are a Carnavalesque element and also used for disguise, roleplay and pretence. Early in *Trumpets and Raspberries*, the mask making process becomes an identity forging activity as the doctor explains, “you project the image of the patients face, from the photograph, and then you reconstruct it around a wax skull” (230). The process is extended to the bone structure and skin. Thus the Body acts as a frame for the mask transforming its inertness into movement. The Double pulls out a mask of flexible elastic tapes from his bag much in the manner of the maniac in *The Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, and also uses a different mask to eat through, connecting an output socket to a meat mincer. It is this mask which Rosa forces Antonio to wear resulting in his role switching with the Double.

Costume complements the use of masks as performative elements. Antonio puts on the Double’s overcoat, slipping into his identity. Characters wearing commando costumes populate Rosa’s house to indicate the presence of the militant in the domestic.

Self conscious proxemic manipulation of stage space creates not only a play within a play effect but actually inverts audience and stage space. In Act I, the recovery ward becomes the laboratory of a mad scientist creating a monster since the stage directions state that Rosa “approaches her husband, who is walking like Frankenstein!” (239). Then a courtroom where the doctor, inspector and magistrate interrogate Agnelli, even resorting to black mail, “Certainly and sign

it..." (243) much in the manner of the kidnappers he has escaped from. Thus Agnelli regresses on stage from patient to prisoner, coherence to incoherence and adult to infant as he cries, "Vroom...Chugga chugga...Bang" (244). As the characters are de-realized through theatrical discourse manipulation, the audience are realized as players in the drama of real life. Through Rosa's illusory cinematic frame created with, "ooh, the suspense is killing me! It reminds me of a film I saw..." (236), the audience witness a doctor's psychological evaluation as, "In the central posterior part of the brain ... is the memory warehouse" (241). This is transformed into a police investigation, "so the trauma will have wiped out all his tapes?" (242) begun deceptively as, "we only want to have a little chat among friends..." (243). The audience witness the independent chairman of Confindustria reduced to a dependent, insecure neurotic with Agnelli's, "Won't you give me a little cuddly wuddly..." (246). Physical space is thus realized as virtual space.

Kinesics (i.e. Body movement) as a performative device is very significant too in *Trumpets and Raspberries*. Proximal movements (towards speaker) are interestingly more frequent than Distal movements (away from speaker) allowing possibility of greater confusion. Rosa bumps into Agnelli's statue and in her ignorance utters the truth, "I thought that was the patient" (215). By freezing shots in stills, slow motion or repetition they are seen as constructions throwing images into signification. Other than the purely photographic in Rosa's pictures of Antonio, Lucia refers to ear mould identification as a "snapshot of yourself as a baby" (235). Actors also freeze on stage to create the framed effect such as when Antonio tells his rescue story or when a bullet meant for him hits the magistrate. The Agents freeze into sculptures after adjusting the Greco-Roman bust and wig, and the inspector and Agnelli are frozen in a frame of police-capitalist collusion as they touch forefingers in grotesque allusion to Michelangelo's "Creation" painting. Such alienation of movement for purposes of social criticism is characteristic of post-Brechtian theatre too so as to break down stereotyped actions into framed sequences – to make the audience aware of the ideological structure of the represented relationship. Repetitive movements such as the sequence of misdirected injections administered to the inspector instead of Antonio, and the Double jerking his head like a flamingo, likewise create frames.

Fo also draws on the kinesics of marionette theatre and conventions of puppetry to indicate the fictional status of his characters and theatrical realities of the play. We see the dummy manipulated by strings as the orderlies connect wire ends from an overhead frame to his extremities in the hospital ward. His facial movements are also amplified by these wires. In fact, as the play progresses, the mime and gestures of many characters begin to resemble puppet movements. The doctor is lifted horizontally to operate like an angel and Rosa curls up in a heap on the floor as if crushed when Antonio refuses to eat. There are also many swift puppet-like movements, such as characters diving for objects or crashing flat on their faces. Body movement is frozen in cinematic frames as in references to King Kong or Frankenstein, or in Cartoon clips with dislocation of jaws, furniture sprouting aerials, water spouting from Antonio's swollen belly, or Antonio trumpeting like an elephant through his clarinet.

Keir Elam states, "Gesture...constitutes the essential mode of ostending body, stage and onstage action in (actual) space" (73), and Fo uses gestures in their iconic, symbolic and deictic signification. Rosa's tying a scarf around her head or the inspector banging his fists on the table are iconic images of a headache and frustration. Rosa's mimes sticking needles into her ears becomes symbolic of Lucia and Rosa's shared torture of Antonio. Sometimes the gestures also parody a magic show. Rosa pulls straps out of a drawer; the Double pulls a mask out of a plastic bag. Rosa straps the double to an armchair, and the Group leader puts his head in stocks in the manner of a master escape artist and his assistant.

Stage accessories are also exposed as artificial constructs of illusion. Agnelli's bust in 1.1 is replaced later with a plastic head and wig hinting at an identity crisis. The papier maché bust of a two headed mythical Greco-Roman character indicates Agnelli and Antonio's shared identity. By the end of the play inanimate furniture is animated by disguised policemen and agents. Even the window runs onto and off the stage at Rosa's cues. Thus Fo's metadrama shows theatre not as imitation of reality but as imaginative representation of real life.

Musical interludes frame the scenes and the farcical humorous situations such as when Rosa releases the levers of the dummy and there is pandemonium. Performance becomes occupied with the conventions of the performance itself as we hear different types of music. Antonio, forcefully fed, plays the blues on his clarinet which deteriorates into rock. In 2.2, the Agents enter ballet style to the

accompaniment of waltz music. The juxtaposition often becomes grotesque, as furniture rotates to merry-go-round music at the end. Hence Fo's metatheatrical elements reveal the truth in the falsehood of theatre, the reality in the illusion, and the imaginative in the imitative.

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<sup>1</sup> All textual references taken from: Dario Fo. *Trumpets and Raspberries*. Ed. Franca Raune. Transl. and adapt. R.C McAroy and A.M Giugi. London: Pluto Press Ltd, 1984. Print.