
House & Home

Playwright of the people

JUNE 25, 2010 by: Emily Backus

Dario Fo, 84, is an Italian satirist, theatre director, actor, author, playwright and painter. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1997. He lives with his wife, Franca Rame, an actress and playwright who has been Fo's creative and business partner since the 1950s. Fo and Rame recently built an ecological home adjoining their son Jacopo Fo's rural hotel, Libera Universita' di Alcatraz, in the hills near Perugia, Umbria. Dario's home serves as a prototype for an ecological village Jacopo is developing on a piece of the family's 4.75m square metre private forest.

What is special about your house here in Umbria?

The light, the breadth. There is an extraordinary silence. The trees almost enter the house. There is luminosity, breath – this house has a lung. And then there's this. Come here, dear, look. It is hollow. [Bangs on the wall.] Inside there is metal, cloth, ground material, wool. It is a huge defence against the elements.

How did you get the idea to build this house?

Jacopo studied housing insulation and energy savings for quite a time. Look at this wall, how wide it is. In normal construction this doesn't exist. And these stones are not real stones. They are stone moulds. They are made of ground up stones, which are put in a resin bath. They are incredibly light, and they look just like stones, but they are much stronger, more compact. They don't break.

How long did it take you to build the house?

It has actually been assembled. It is prefabricated. A factory in northern Italy, in Friuli, built the essential parts. This wood is special, structural, compressed in a special way and is called glued laminated timber. As Jacopo has explained, if there is an earthquake, the house won't collapse because there are steel trusses throughout that bind everything together. This is an earthquake zone, but there is no need to be afraid of anything.

What is the relationship of your home to your work?

I am here with three collaborators, and we are doing work together on three pieces, one after the next, preparing them. We live here, we work here, we take walks outside. This place is extraordinary, it stimulates images and the imagination. One feels physically well here.

You also have a home in Milan. How much time do you spend there as opposed to here in Umbria?

My job forces me to travel a great deal, and not just in Italy. I find myself in Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, France, Germany, Belgium, Spain. I also often find myself performing not as an end in itself, but because a factory is closing and the workers are desperate or because there are tensions at a school and people need my support. I travelled to universities throughout Italy a few months ago. I did nothing but travel, perform and teach, because this government is cutting funds. Then there are new theatre companies that find themselves in disastrous situations because they don't have the means to continue. So I go and put on a show to raise money.

Can you compare the house in Milan to this one in Umbria?

Our home in Milan is in a beautiful building dating from the early 1900s. We renovated the place and it has been our home for 35 years. But even when we ran our theatre, we spent eight or nine months touring around Italy. We would spend two or three months in Milan, and then the whole year travelling around Italy and abroad.

Given that you travel so much, where do you consider home?

The place I go to work. In the summer, for example, we used to go to the sea. We had a rural peasant house that we renovated near Cesenatico, and that was our home. Now it has become this one, which is futuristic and full of extraordinary things. Listen for a moment. You can hear nature here. It is open, you can breathe in nature. It's magic. It's not like you feel in prison. Milan is just din and dust. I don't love Milan at all. Also, it is managed in a horrendous way. It lacks civility and humanity, with its corrupted air and traffic. No one bothers to show respect there. Here, instead, when the sun sets the birdsong never finishes. Look, look over there where you can see the trees moving.

What is the story behind your desk?

A carpenter made this desk out of discarded pieces from an old building that was demolished. It came out heavy, but beautiful. Essential. This table leg dates from the end of the 1800s – exquisite, but restored. Everything in this house is made by hand, I think that is important.

Why do you compose on oversized, unlined, loose-leaf paper with a wide felt-tipped pen?

Because I need a lot of space, so that I can insert things, add ideas from my assistants. And then I draw a lot. When I have a moment of crisis and run out of ideas, I draw. These over here are enlargements of sketches. This is a portrait of one of my granddaughters. Before doing it, I made a small draft. It is completely in pen point.

Is this house also a strong response to something? Is there a message in it?

Yes! Mostly to the banality and the lack of imagination and courage there is in this society. Because everybody could build homes similar to what I am doing, if in a different measure – naturally saving much more [money] than I have. You can do politics through projects, and this house has a political sense to it. It is a place that shows how you can save enormously on energy, and how homes can be completely autonomous.

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