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Deliberate birth of an activist: Fo runs for mayor in Milan

FROM RICHARD OWEN IN MILAN

OUTSIDERS, says Dario Fo, think of Milan in terms of fashion and style, "but the people who run the city have neither elegance nor moral values. This used to be a city in which engineers, architects and artists all thrived."

That's why Italy's finance and fashion capital could soon find as its mayor the Nobel prize-winning playwright, a man with a reputation as an anarchic clown and a merciless, sharp-tongued satirist of the rich and powerful.

At his flat in a slightly shabby art deco block at the wrong end of Milan, Signor Fo — who is backed by an assortment of Communists and Greens — says that it is "about time the corrupt, money-grabbing bastards who have run this city for decades were thrown out".

The passion for the underdog that has turned him from scourge of politicians to potential city father at the age of 79, partly stems from his origins in a Lombard family of farm workers, builders and railway workers (his father was a station master).

On a side table, beneath his collection of theatrical masks, stands the 1997 certificate for the Nobel Prize for Literature, awarded for storytelling monologues such as *Mistero Buffo*, and plays such as *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* (1970). His latest satire is *L'Anomalo Bicefalo (The Double Headed Anomaly)*, with himself as Italy's Prime Minister, the media magnate Silvio Berlusconi, and Franca Rame, his wife and leading actress, as Veronica Lario, Signor Berlusconi's wife.

The mayoral election in May to replace Letizia Moratti, the Education Minister and centre-Right contender, will follow hard on the heels of a general election in which Signor Berlusconi faces a struggle. But first Signor Fo, 79, faces a US-style primary against a rival centre-Left candidate, Bruno Ferrante, the former chief of police in Milan. According to one poll, Signor Ferrante has 45 per cent of left-wing voters' support, while Signor Fo is only just behind with 43 per cent.

The irony of that vote next weekend is not lost on Italians: the villain of the piece in *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, Fo's best known work, is the chief of police in Milan.

The Fo campaign bus heads for the piazza in front of the recently restored 18th-century La Scala opera house, where refugees from Eritrea are holding banners in the bitter cold outside the nearby town hall to protest against the council's alleged failure to give them winter shelter.

In a surreal scene that could be taken from one of his plays, an incensed Signor Fo storms into the council chamber to hear a debate on the issue, shouting, "Shame!" and "Liar!" from the public gallery as a council official claims that the refugees have turned down the shelter offered to them, "preferring to stand in the snow outside for the benefit of the TV cameras".

"We need a revolution!" he tells me as he sweeps out. "This cynicism and indifference cannot go on." When I ask him whether writers and artists should

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enter politics, he points to Renaissance Italy as a precedent. "Machiavelli and Leonardo Da Vinci held political office. So did actors and dramatists in ancient Athens."

He decided to stand for mayor, he says, "out of desperation at the dismal state Milan has fallen into." Under successive centre-Right administrations, "vested interests" had prospered and "ordinary citizens" had suffered. "If I become mayor I will find out what people want and do it. We need a dialogue with the people."

I ask him whether voters might think that his age was an obstacle. "Well, I am becoming forgetful, but I haven't lost my marbles. I don't think I'm Napoleon." Signor Berlusconi, "who does", is "a spiv and a liar. His friend Tony Blair is a liar too. And they both continue to lie even when the lies have been exposed," he adds.

Signor Fo makes frequent admiring references to Ken Livingstone, whom he met last month in London.

At another meeting, hands flailing and eyes popping, he tries to persuade the taxi drivers of Milan to adopt rape seed oil as fuel, one of the measures that he intends to introduce if he becomes mayor. The taxi drivers, a tough and sceptical lot, look unconvinced until, in a coup de theatre, one of Fo's assistants staggers in with a huge glass jar of the oil.

He launches into an election speech on the virtues of bio-diesel, park-and-ride schemes and congestion charges to free Milan city centre from clogged up traffic and pollution. This will enable taxis to make three journeys across town where they now struggle to make one, he says. "You know, I might vote for him," one driver says.

DARIO FO: FROM RESISTANCE TO REBELLION

- Born March 1926 in San Giano on Lake Maggiore
- Went to Milan in 1940 to study at Brera Art Academy; studies halted by Second World War
- Conscripted into army of Mussolini at end of war, but escaped and hid in attic
- Parents were in the resistance, smuggling Jewish scientists and British PoWs into Switzerland
- In 1951 he met his future wife, Franca Rame, who becomes his leading actress
- Awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1997
- Was denied a US visa for years, authorities saying La Signora è da Buttare (1967), was disrespectful to President Johnson
- Works cover topical issues and include Accidental Death of an Anarchist, above, about the police killing of a political activist
- Dario Fo has pledged to put an end to corruption, cynicism and indifference if elected mayor



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