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Dario Fo: anarchist, playwright ... and Milan's next mayor?

From Joseph Farrell in Milan

'Milan, have no fear! I am not a moderate. If you are looking for a moderate, think twice about voting for me, because moderates will never resolve the problem of pollution, or save the lungs of pensioners or toddlers. Milan, if my music means you are becoming too old ... No moderate has ever made history, or won the Nobel prize. I will be a mayor w

Words of this sort are not the normal currency of a candidate for mayor of one of Europe's greatest cities, but Dario Fo's idea of a normal candidate.

Now 79, he has never before held elected office, and has made his name as author of plays flaying holders of political and ecclesiastical power. The primaries being held today to choose the candidate for the centre-left Union are the first of many hurdles facing him.

Although there are four names on the paper, opinion polls are unanimous that the real choice is between only two, Fo and Bruno Ferrante, ex-prefect of the city. Ferrante has been the front-runner all along, but the gap has narrowed and the most recent polls put Fo only two points behind his rival.

The Union is a bland name for a typically complex Italian coalition of around 10 parties – the number depends on what counts as a party – headed by former president of the European Commission, Romano Prodi.

The general elections in Italy are scheduled for April 9, and opinion polls put Prodi six points ahead of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. Berlusconi lost heavily in the recent regional elections, and the loss of Italy's second city would spell further trouble for the government coalition.

In December, Berlusconi announced, with no nonsense about primaries or consultation, that his candidate in Milan would be Letizia Moratti, currently minister for education and author of highly unpopular reforms. The universal belief is that the centre-left candidate will carry Milan.

Fo's campaign style could be defined as social seriousness spiced with theatrical exuberance. For the closing rally just over a week ago, he attracted an audience of more than 7000. The guest of honour was Ken Livingstone, whom Fo had met in London before Christmas to discuss congestion charges, cycling lanes, public transport and urban pollution.

At the Milan event, Livingstone watched, bemused and dazzled, the unfolding of Fo's unusual mixture of rock concert, circus, cabaret, fiesta and political demonstration, where guitars and the antics of red-nosed clowns filled the gaps between political speeches.

London, he agreed, is not ready for an event where the candidate illustrates his urban renewal policies with his own extravagantly coloured paintings displayed on a giant screen, and launches at intervals into musical numbers ranging from compositions of his own to an adapted version of Bertolt Brecht's Mack The Knife.

There's no shortage of critics among professional politicians on the left who are afraid of a movement that is out of party control, but they have been subdued, so vocal opposition has been left to fellow intellectuals.

The writer Vincenzo Consolo explained his support for Ferrante by saying: "I have every respect for Dario Fo, but I doubt if a man of his age and inexperience will have the energy to deal with the serious problems facing Milan today: pollution, smog, uncontrolled traffic, the decay of the city centre and speculators in the building sector."

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But Fo has surprised pundits with his eschewal of utopianism and his willingness to engage in debate on concrete issues facing all cities today. He attracted Livingstone's support with a reasoned manifesto mixing red and green policies.

Fo advocates a congestion charge but wants to combine it with free public transport in the city centre, to be subsidised by a new tax. He goes further than Livingstone in promising research on the possibility of making civic vehicles use rape seed oil, which produces no pollution, instead of petrol. This fuel is already, it seems, in use in some German towns. The paintings projected behind him as he spoke slammed the current administration's plans for demolishing certain areas of the city and building tower blocks, a process Fo promises to reverse.

During a recent press conference in London, one journalist pointed out that the city has been much discussed in Milan, but is Milan equally central to the thinking of Londoners?

"Elect Dario Fo, replied Livingstone, "and the whole world will be talking about Milan."

29 January 2006

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