

THE 1997 NOBEL PRIZE IN LITERATURE

was awarded to Dario Fo “who emulates the jesters of the Middle Ages in scourging authority and upholding the dignity of the downtrodden.”

I saw Dario Fo perform his one man show 20 years ago. My mouth never closed. Either because I was laughing so hard, or I was agape at the audacity of Fo’s irreverent assault on every social, religious and political convention and value in western civilization. Marriage. Sex. Taxes. Birth. Birth Control. Death. Doctors. Lawyers. The Pope. The President. Old Age. Youth. It was a never-ending parade, and none in it were too powerful or too precious to avoid the hatchet of Fo’s scouring wit and idiotic physical and vocal shenanigans. If there was no target too lofty, no situation too precious to escape Fo’s debunking of the sacred with the profane, it was because he is a clown. Give a clown a wall, he’ll walk into it. Give him a god, he’ll squirt water in its eye.

What’s so funny about the abuse of power? Or greed? Or people starving for a decent meal? And where is the dignity in idiocy? Or more to the point, what does comedy have to teach us that has any redeeming value? I can laugh like an idiot at just about everything, but shouldn’t we be taking to the streets to demand justice!

One hypothesis about comedy is that we laugh at the truth. I’m not sure it is the truth we are laughing at when we laugh at a state trooper who thinks he’s pregnant. But there is a truth in laughing at an authority figure who has fallen from grace. Or an oppressor who gets

hoisted by his own petard. Jesters existed in the Middle Ages to remind kings of their close association to the people, and of their own limitations and imperfections. Laugh at the king, and not only are we remembering that he’s one of us, but we touch for a moment our own power and resilience. Get the king to laugh at himself and everybody’s dancing in the streets.

Therein lies the redeeming value of comedy, I think. You can’t laugh at an idiot without recognizing yourself in it. You can’t laugh at yourself without feeling a certain compassion, maybe even a certain wonder and delight in that self, and in that human menagerie to which it belongs. Comedy allows us to embrace ourselves.

As long as there are human beings free to run amok there will be the humanists and humorists to make us laugh at “what fools we mortals be.” Or, in Walter Kerr’s words, to remind us that we are all “boobs of a feather.” As long as there are Nobel laureates doing the reminding, we shall have plays like *We Won’t Pay! We Won’t Pay!*

It is our hope that tonight’s performance will bring you as much delight as wonder. And that you shall leave the theatre amazed that in so much idiocy there can be so much dignity.

—JANE NICHOLS,
DIRECTOR

