

HUNGER IS A REOCCURRING THEME

in the comedies of Dario Fo. His characters are not just hungry for food. They are hungry for dignity, hungry for justice, hungry for love. The protagonists of *We Won't Pay! We Won't Pay!* are driven by their collective hungers to break free from the constraints in which their poverty has confined them. Their initial challenge to the laws of the “free market” propels them into a comic defiance of the laws of human reproduction. Men get pregnant, women give birth to cabbages, and amniotic fluid becomes the source of a gourmet meal. Slapstick confusion begets new understanding as the mechanisms of farce become metaphors for liberation.

Although they inhabit a world of spiraling absurdity, Fo's characters are as real as their hunger. A few months after the play's 1974 premiere in Italy, several women were arrested for “liberating” food from supermarkets in much the same manner as depicted in *We Won't Pay! We Won't Pay!* The prosecuting attorneys tried to draw Fo into the

trial as an accessory for inciting the crime, but the judge overruled the suggestion, apparently agreeing with the author, who claims that his plays are nothing more than “documentary reflections of a world in which reality has become its own satire.”

We Won't Pay! We Won't Pay! has been staged in more than thirty countries around the world. “It's a mistake,” says Fo, “to dismiss these people as crazy Italian caricatures who speak in phony accents, sing corny love songs and eat pasta on red- and-white checkered tablecloths. The stereotypes that foreigners have of Italians are full of clichés that keep us at a distance and prevent a genuine understanding of the problems we all share in common.” Like Chaplin's tramp reduced to eating his shoe in *The Gold Rush*, Fo's clowns suffer from hungers with which everyone can identify. Samuel Beckett wrote that “Nothing is funnier than unhappiness.” In the comedies of Dario Fo, the same might be said of starvation.

—RON JENKINS, TRANSLATOR