

PRESS REVIEWS

Edinburgh Fringe Festival, 5-31 August 2009

'FRANCIS THE HOLY JESTER' by Dario Fo, performed by Mario Pirovano

'On a warm summer evening in London Mario Pirovano transported his audience to medieval Italy, and created an unforgettable encounter with Francis of Assisi. Pirovano's evocation of history was impeccable, yet the message he conveyed was as fresh as can be: a powerful critique of greed and hypocrisy, and a timely warning against squandering the truly important gifts of life: nature, love and friendship.'

Professor **Miri Rubin**, Department of History, Queen Mary, University of London

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This production is the most entertaining and funny history lesson you could hope to see, given a captivating performance by the charismatic Pirovano.'

David Chadderton ***** British Theatre Guide

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'... Fo has set out to spread the true story of this radical preacher, and the result is a deeply entertaining theatrical experience. One not to be missed.'

Chris Wright **** Three Weeks

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'Irresistible and fiercely funny, Mario Pirovano's acting will leave you in stitches and begging only for more. In the first play about the life of St. Francis of Assisi to be performed in English, Italian satirist Dario Fo's long-term artistic companion appeared at the Pleasance as a charismatic storyteller, brilliant actor, and passionate translator.

Originally devised as a monologue, the play in the hands of Pirovano is a public argument. His skillful interaction with the audience in the crammed theatre could never leave you feeling a distant observer. On the contrary, his fresh remarks about the jester role of Berlusconi, and clever observations on the difference between then and now – delivered in a scandalously hilarious way – were nothing short of riveting.

The charming image of the 13th century daredevil was drawn in four separate scenes from his life: Francis meets the wolf in Gubbio, The Tirade of Francis in Bologna, Francis goes to the Pope in Rome, and finally, his death. The stories themselves, like the acting – in which the school of the great comic and director Dario Fo could easily be recognized – were equally gripping. (...)

All in all, it was an excellent performance, rewarded by the audience with that Fringe rarity: three warmly-received curtain calls.'

Minka Paraskevova ***** FringeGuru

'...Pirovano performs with enthusiasm and high energy, accompanying every line with movements, facial expressions or gestures that sometimes approach the manic style of Robin Williams but that, like his stories, are rendered friendly and unthreatening by his obvious pleasure in sharing with us.'

Gerald Berkowitz, The stage newspaper

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'Francis of Assisi – Saint, founder of the Franciscan order, lover of animals and apparently stand-up comic. At least that's the suggestion of this wonderful show. Penned by Dario Fo and performed with exquisite timing and exuberance by Fo veteran Mario Pirovano these four tales of the life – and death – of the Saint tell of a man of wit and love for life and humanises a figure all too often seen as remote and well, saintly. There's bawdiness, drunkenness, sex, violence, toilet humour and pigs all crammed into this show and Pirovano brings it all beautifully to life. Definitely worth seeing and even giving it a second visit.'

Neil Mc Ewans **** Evening news

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'Many shows have been described as 'life-affirming', and the word has entered that canon of reviewer/promoter jargon, making it lose its significance and meaning. When I describe Francis, the Holy Jester as life-affirming, I do so because it reminded me of the glory of good story-telling, of simple and evocative theatre, and reminded me what it is to be alive and happy. This production is brilliantly realised and performed, and I recommend it whole-heartedly and completely. If you see one show this Edinburgh Fringe, watch Francis, the Holy Jester!

Being a little bit of a theatrical snob, my expectations of this show were extremely high. A new play by Dario Fo, and what's more, a show directed by Dario Fo? How could this not be brilliant, I found myself thinking. Fo is one of the greatest living playwrights in the world, a revitaliser of commedia dell'arte all over the world, and I was expecting something truly spectacular.

I was not disappointed. The show started in a typical Fo manner, a man stumbling on stage, asking the technicians if we had already started... Some of the audience seemed a little confused and bemused, but the drama students sitting in front of me clearly knew what was going on: Fo's plays and his theories are all about getting the audience involved, meeting and engaging with a real person over a portrayed character, and Mario Pirovano did not disappoint.

He immediately launched into a diatribe about Francis of Assisi, the famous Francis the deacon, the monk, the story-teller, and how the church had maligned his story. Fo loves his religion and loves challenging accepted beliefs, and we were left in no doubt where his loyalties lie when Pirovano launched into his first story of Francis, a speech the monk gave to one of two warring cities, which was full of delightfully abstract allusion and wit. Here was the Francis of Assisi the church tried to hide, the joker, the jester, who taught through humour the message of Christ. As the stories went on and on, flowing out of Pirovano like a river, this new Francis of Assisi became delightfully visible, an imp on the story-teller's shoulder, guiding us through his magical world.

Pirovano's performance, and his ability, are astounding. He portrayed every character in each tale with pizzaz, verve and energy, and jumped between them like a spinning dervish, prancing from toe to toe and making the entire stage his own with simple, subtle gestures and movements, and incredible vocal control. His voice could boom, as well as travel with a whisper, and his singing made the rafters quiver. What makes this all the more impressive is that Pirovano's English is not that brilliant. He has a thick Italian accent, at times nigh-on incomprehensible, but I was never lost, never misunderstood. His words and his movements and his enthusiasm translated all boundaries of language, as did the story he told. (...)

This is a truly remarkable show, and deserves accolades for its achievements. I recommend it whole-heartedly to anyone who needs a little life-affirmation, and anyone else who is looking for something a little different this Fringe Festival. Truly impressive!

Chris Hislop ***** Fringe Review

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'To watch Mario Pirovano introduce a very responsive audience to the journey into the world of the mediaeval storyteller was in itself an enjoyable experience. A man dressed in black on a naked stage, bringing us all the colour of the period, by word and action, is the true origin of Fringe theatre. Modern comparisons, including a joke about Berlusconi, were part of the first steps in applying his mental makeup.

Francis of Assisi is generally known to us as the monk who talked and cared for animals, and was responsible for the establishment of the Order of Friars Minor or the Franciscans. His philosophical tales are often confused with the same stories about our own St Kentigern.

However Dario Fo's excellent script and direction takes us into a different realm of comprehension and shows Francis to be very much a humanitarian philosopher and a practical realist. This was beautifully conveyed by Pirovano's acting and perception of the role.

Playing to a full house, the journey we were taken on, was full of morality stories involving peasants and animals, such as the wolf of Gubbio which he colourfully narrated. He illustrated the real art of the troubadour, and painted us a rich fresco of the era of the crusades, through the stories of Francis.

These monologues show us how Francis told the Gospels in the vernacular, after he had been given a special dispensation to preach in the vernacular rather than Latin, by none other than Pope Innocent III himself.

Mario Pirovano is a great artist and a great teacher, even in his second language. This great piece of theatre had mediaeval humour, pathos and unique artistic craftsmanship. (...) I look forward to future productions from this maestro.'

John Ritchie ***** Edinburghguide.com

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'Francis the Holy Jester might just be the most lovingly presented show on the Fringe this year. Written by Nobel Prize-winning Italian author Dario Fo, and wonderfully translated into English and performed by his close associate Mario Pirovano, it recounts with energy and colour four events from the life of Saint Francis of Assisi, he of 13th-century Doctor Doolittle fame. (...)

No need for set, props or special effects here. Pirovano is able to paint a Bellini Renaissance-style landscape with a sweep of the arm (...)

This gentle old-fashioned story is the sort that troubadours might have told in Francis' own time. But when the Pope and future saint are quibbling over who's the best narrator, you can't help but point the finger at Pirovano himself.'

Nancy Groves, www.watsonstage.com