

APPENDIX 2

THE BIRTH OF THE VILLEYN

In the 1970s the Italian playwright and Nobel Prize winner Dario Fo wrote a set of comic pieces entitled *Mistero buffo* [Comic Mysteries]. One of them in particular is of scatological interest, and it is printed here together with Fo's own introductory material for his stage performances of the piece.

Introduction

Here we have a picture taken from a miniature. It shows a piece being acted out by a famous thirteenth-century *jongleur*, Matazone da Caligano. Matazone is a nickname which means 'cheerful fellow' (as you see, *jongleurs*' nicknames are not always rude – there are exceptions). Caligano, or Carignano, is a village near Pavia. The local dialect, a dialect of what was then the territory of Pavia, is very easy for us Lombards to understand. And, in fact, I played this piece in Sicily one time, and everybody was able to understand it. Anyway, as you can see, up there we have an angel; here is the landowner, the lord, the lord of the land... and here we have the peasant, or, rather, the villeyn.

What's going on in this picture? It depicts the moment when the landowner is being presented with the first villeyn ever to have been created by the Holy Father. The story of this piece is as follows: After seven times seven generations of working the land, Man goes to the Holy Father and says: 'Listen, I can't stand it any longer. I'm working too hard. You must relieve me of some of my work. You promised me that you were going to make things a bit easier for me!' 'What do you mean?!' says the Holy Father. 'I gave you a donkey, a mule, a horse, an ox, to make life easier for you.' 'Yes, true, but it's still me who has to push behind the plough,' said Man. 'And it's still me who has to go and muck out the cowsheds, and it's still me who has to do all the lowliest jobs, like spreading dung on the fields, milking the cow, killing the pig... I want you to create me someone who can help me in all this, in fact someone who can take my place, so that I can finally get some rest!' 'Ah, so it's a villeyn that you want!' 'What's a villeyn?' 'It's exactly what you're looking for... But obviously, you wouldn't know that, because I haven't created him yet! Come on, let's go and create him now...' So, they go to see Adam. No sooner does Adam see the Eternal Father arriving together with another man than, hopla, he wraps his arms round his ribs, and shouts: 'No, not again! I'm not giving up another single rib!'

Well, I suppose you're right too,' says the Eternal Father. 'But what am I supposed to do?' At that moment, a donkey passes by, and the Eternal Father has an idea: he waves his hand, and the donkey begins to swell up. It's pregnant.

Right: from this point I shall follow the original text. Here we have the words of Matazone da Caligano. A printed text exists, slightly different from the one which I am about to perform, which has been reconstructed by putting together various fragments, in order to give greater continuity and logic to the piece.

THE BIRTH OF THE VILLEYN

The story goes, in an old book long since forgotten, that with the passing of seven times seven generations from the sad day of his expulsion from Paradise, Man was fed up and beside himself with the amount of work that he had to do in order to survive. He went to see God, personally. He began weeping, and begged him to send someone to give him a

hand to do the work on his land, because he could no longer manage it on his own. 'But don't you have donkeys and oxen for that?' God replied. 'You are right, Lord God, but it is always we men who have to stand behind the plough and push it like wretches, and the donkeys aren't capable of pruning vines, and no matter how carefully we teach them, they haven't yet learnt to milk cows. All this labour is making us old before our time, and our women are fading away... They're worn out by the time they reach twenty.'

God, who is so good to all, when he heard these things, was seized with compassion. He sighed, saying: 'Well, I am going to create for you a two-legged creature who will come and relieve you of this suffering'. He went straight away to Adam: 'Listen, Adam, I come to ask you a favour: lift up your shirt, because I need to take another of your ribs, to use it for an experiment.'

But when Adam heard this, he began to weep: 'Lord, have pity on me, because you have already taken one rib in order to create my wife, the treacherous Eve... If you take yet another rib, I won't have enough left to keep my stomach in, and all my innards will fall out like a gutted chicken.'

'You're right too,' God murmured, scratching his head. 'What am I supposed to do?'

At that moment, a donkey was passing, and God had a sudden idea; when it comes to ideas, God is a veritable volcano! He waved his hand at the ass, and the ass promptly swelled up. After nine months, the beast's belly was swollen to bursting point... Suddenly a loud noise was heard. The ass let out an enormous fart, and at that point out leapt the villey, all stinking.

[*Aside*] 'Oh, what a lovely nativity!'

[*Aside*] 'Shut up, you!'

At that moment, a tremendous storm broke, and the rains flooded down, washing over the ass's offspring. Then followed hail and a blizzard and thunder and lightning and all kinds of things, battering the villey's body, so that he would be in no doubt about the kind of life that was in store for him. As soon as he was properly clean, the Angel of the Lord came down and called to Man, saying:

'By order of God, you, from this moment, will be the boss, the greater one, and he, the villey, the lesser one. Now it is written and laid down that this villey shall live on coarse bread and raw onions, broad beans and boiled beans and spittle.

'He is to sleep on a straw pallet, so that he always remembers his status. Since he has been born naked, give him a bit of rough canvas, the kind they use for holding fish, so that he can make himself a nice pair of trousers. Breeches, which must have an opening down the middle, and with no laces, so that he doesn't waste too much time when he pisses.'

We could almost be dealing with today's employers, here! As I go round Italy doing these shows, I often find myself brought up against these cruder facts of life. For example, we were performing in Verona one time, and some girls turned up in the theatre, with posters that they hung around the walls. They were on strike. They were on strike because their employer had banned them from going to the toilet. In other words, one of them felt the need... 'Excuse me, may I...?' 'No... No.' They were all supposed to go to the toilet at 11.25 sharp: the bell rings, and you do a wee. And anybody who doesn't feel the need at that precise moment, too bad; they have to wait till the next time.

These women were on strike in order to obtain the privilege of doing a wee when they felt the urge. I don't know how the story finished up... but maybe the most grotesque incident was at the Ducati plant in Bologna, a very large factory, world-scale – a major plant, in short. So, what happened there? The bosses of this particular factory decided to cut down the time allowed to workers for going to the toilet. Some people would stay in there for four minutes, some for as long as seven minutes, and the employers had had enough! They argued with the trade unions, and there was a tremendous struggle, and after while they decided: 'Two minutes and thirty five seconds are more than sufficient for a person to fulfil their bodily needs...' Now, put like that it sounds almost reasonable. A person would think: 'Well, they must have carried out studies, they must have consulted technicians and experts etc.' But I can assure you, believe me, to do it in that time would be a record!

Two minutes and thirty-five seconds: a record! And these days, the Ducati workers don't just go to the toilet... they go into training at home first. If you don't believe that this is a record, try it for yourself. Take a couple of interesting books, wait for a good day, put on a nice record of soothing Hawaiian music (it's very helpful in this connection...) and, as you will see, IT CAN'T BE DONE! And it particularly can't be done when you're neurotic about clocks that go tick-tock, tick-tock. Yes! Because in every toilet at the Ducati factory there is a timing mechanism! As soon as you go in, it starts, tick-tock, tick-tock. But the truly grotesque part of the situation is still to come. How do you know when your time has run out? Obviously, you would imagine that the worker goes into the toilet cubicle [*He mimes going into a toilet*] and tick-tock, tick-tock... he takes a deep breath... [*He takes a deep breath*] ...like when you're about to dive into a cold swimming pool... and then [*He mimes*] tick-tock... tick-tock... PEEEEEP! [*A whistle*].

Now, it's logical that if the gadget is going to go off, it means that there must be a button under the toilet seat. No? That way, when you sit on the seat, it pushes down the button and sets off the timing mechanism. But the employer knows that the worker is pretty smart. Given half a chance, he'll try to avoid actually sitting on the seat, and will balance on his toes, posed over the pan, so that he can stay in the cubicle for hours on end. 'Ah!' says the employer. 'Now I'm going to fix you.' So, the push-button is not fixed under the toilet seat at all, but works off the door-handle! In other words, as soon as the worker puts his hand on the door-handle, the electric switch trips, and it begins. Tick-tock... tick-tock. 'Damn these braces, I can't... Hell and damnation... The paper...' [*A whistle. Then, looking down into the pan*] 'Pardon the intrusion.'

So, you have to get into training. You have to arrive with your bowels well loosened and ready for action... The first thing to remember is that you should arrive without your trousers on. You should have your trousers already folded, on your shoulder... Actually, this can look quite stylish... like a sort of scarf... Your shirt should be tucked up, like a native dancing girl [*All this is mimed*] because otherwise it'll get in the way. And above all, don't suddenly stop and think: 'Oh God...' [*He tries to cover himself in front with his hands*] You must forget all that silly stuff about nudity being embarrassing.

A German academic by name of Otto Weininger has made some extraordinary studies of this question: this man discovered that it is only when you adopt an attitude of shame that others become aware of the fact that you are naked. It's logical. If you go around like this [*He mimes a person covering his genitals and his backside with his hands*], people will immediately point at you: 'Ooh! A naked man!! Look, Mummy, a naked man!' But if you free yourself of this idiotic sense of shame, and just relax, then who's going to worry? There you are, stark naked, happy, relaxed, walking down the street, and people will say: 'Oh, look, a duke!'

So there you are, the worker must become a duke when he goes to the toilet; and, in addition to learning how to match the speed of the assembly line, he must also learn to handle the time limits set by the toilet cubicle. These two aspects of time and motion are

different, but fundamental. [*He mimes a worker going into a toilet cubicle and sitting down*] One... two... three... A dance!

I would like to pause for a moment on one detail of this story: the question of the soul. As Matazone says: 'You, villey, you cannot have a soul, because you were born of an ass.' Well, this is virtually an advice to him to accept his condition, to not accept the soul, inasmuch as the soul provides a pretext for one of the greatest blackmails ever perpetrated against mankind. We find this sentiment in Bonvesin de la Riva, in his *Dialogue Between the Soul and the Body*: 'Thank the Lord, Soul, that you do not have a backside, because, if you did, I would give it a good kicking: you are like lead to me; I cannot fly, because you weigh me down.'

Now, why this rejection of the soul? Because it is one of the greatest blackmails that the bosses can use against us. In a moment of desperation, one might come to the point of saying: 'So what do I care, let's have at least a minimum of dignity. I am going to stab that bastard boss of mine!' So then: the boss, or rather the boss through the medium of the priest, comes along and says: 'No! Stop! Do you want to ruin yourself? You have suffered all your life, and now, shortly, you are going to die. You have the possibility of going to heaven now, because Jesus Christ told you that since you are the last among men you shall enter into the kingdom of heaven... And now you want to ruin everything? Think what you're doing, don't get rebellious! And wait for the after-life. I, for my part, am damned! I, for my misfortunes, am a boss. And what did Jesus Christ say about me? He said: 'You will never enter into the kingdom of heaven. You are like the camel which will never pass through the eye of a needle.' You see the con? Obviously, I, as employer, have to make my own little Paradise here on earth, and it's for that reason that I keep you down and rob you and grind you down. To be sure, I even rob you of your soul, it's true! I want my little Paradise here and now; it may be small, but I want it all for myself; and I want it for all the time that I am here on earth. You are lucky, though! You will have everything. You will have Paradise! You will only get it after death, it's true, but you will have it for all Eternity!'

Translation: Ed Emery

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