

My Father's Funeral

Dario Fo

Extracted from My First Seven Years (plus a few more) by Dario Fo, with grateful acknowledgements to Methuen who publish it in hardback at £14.99. The translation is by Joseph Farrell who is Professor in Italian Studies at Strathclyde University.

My father died at the grand old age of ninety in the early months of 1987. He went quietly and serenely, almost unexpectedly, but he had made all the funeral arrangements in advance, starting with the band which he wanted to accompany his body to the cemetery in Luino. The conductor of the town's brass band was a long-standing friend of his. One evening some months previously, my father had paid him a visit to agree on the pieces to be performed. He even set about searching out and handing over the scores of the various marches he wanted played. His choice was a medley, rewritten in march time, of all the partisan songs from the valleys, including Ossola and the surrounding area, where the most bloody encounters with the Germans and the Fascist brigades had taken place. The first number on the programme was to be *Val Sesia*, a slow dignified number, as powerful as the river which gave it its name. The next work was to be the march of the partisans from Val Comeggia, which was more like a dance-hall waltz than a patriotic anthem: then came the famous *Se non ci ammazza i crucchi, se non ci ammazza i bricchi* (If the Krauts Don't Kill Us, If the Peaks Don't Kill Us) from Val Vigezzo, and so on, right down to the inevitable *Bella Ciao*, and a closing rendering of *Addio Lugano bella*.

A half-hour before the stipulated time, the little piazza in the spur of land where the Fo family lived was jam-packed with people. There were trade unionists, socialists and communists with their banners, a group of relatives of the Jewish families my father had helped to escape to the Canton Ticino, and finally a small delegation of anarchists. The railwaymen were the most numerous, but there were also border guards and, standing a little further off, representatives of the old smugglers from Pino. By the time the coffin was carried out of the house, people were crowded right up the streets around the piazza...more red banners seemed to be sprouting on every side.

We had to hurry things along: the road to the cemetery was quite long. The band took up its place at the head of the procession and struck up with *Val Sesia*. The coffin moved off, followed by all of us, sons, daughters and grandchildren, uncles and aunts, then banners and standards flying freely ... a real forest of flags. No priests, no nuns. The band was already a kilometre off, and still the tail of the procession had not moved from the assembly point. There was no doubt that the majority of the inhabitants of Luino and the Valtravaglia were there.

We walked along the lakeside and reached the long curve which rises up towards the hill. Down below, perched on a granite cliff, stood the Romanesque church with its high steeple. At that moment, the band was playing the waltz-time march, and the procession seemed to lurch a little. Ahead, the musicians quickened their step and accompanied the *allegro con brio* tempo of the piece they were playing with a swing of the hips and a drop of the shoulders. Many people in the cortège had almost forgotten they were participating in a 'mournful ceremonial', and executed little dance-step hops and skips, but then they composed themselves once again.

I imagined my father peeping out from somewhere or other, enjoying himself and guffawing...happily. (After all, wasn't his name Felice, which means 'Happy'?)

We were crossing the piazza in front of the old town hall: the band moved on to *Bella ciao*, played at the tempo of a cross-country race. As the coffin bearers speeded up, the whole cortège was forced to step it out more briskly. The skipping march would not do any more: we were now onto the rhythms of an infantry charge, with the attendant flurry of banners. Groups of curious onlookers lining the streets applauded and asked: 'What's the rush? Who are you going to bury?'

'A railwayman, and just for once he wants to be on time.'

We were now level with the Romanesque church: many people had gathered on the sloping piazza in front of the porch, but they had not come for my father's funeral. They were waiting for the hearse bearing the body of Piero Chiara, the famous author of satirical novels, all set in Luino itself. The body was to be brought from Varese where he had died, and it was late. But his crowd of mourners, seeing the arrival of an impressive cortège with a flutter of red flags and a scattering of anarchist banners, immediately exclaimed: 'Must be him! Obviously, an anti-cleric like him ... you could hardly expect him to bring along a procession of priests and bishops. Red he lived, and red he died!'

And so it was that, without another word, they all climbed down the two

'Blair is a horrible man. He is a complete liar, very crafty and would fit in perfectly in Berlusconi's cabinet. He comes across as pleasant and charming but he has just peddled in lies and duped the nation. I'm amazed the Labour Party hasn't got rid of him. His policies have been disastrous and he has taken Britain into a war in Iraq from which it cannot now withdraw.'

Dario Fo, Sunday Telegraph, 6 November 2005

staircases and lined up behind the multi-bannered crowd marching to the rhythm of a regimental band. Some of them began to sing quietly the opening words of the first verse:

*La mia mamma la mi diceva,
Non andare sulle montagne.
Mangerai sol polenta e castagne
Ti verrà l'acidità.*

My dear old mum, she used to say,
Stay clear of the hills and mountains.
Polenta and chestnuts are very poor fare
And they're bad for your digestion!

Another three hundred metres and this sea of people reached the great arched entrance to the graveyard and began to file in. Meanwhile, down below, in front of the church, the hearse with the body of Piero Chiara arrived. There was no one waiting for it except the sacristan, who was almost helpless with laughter as he observed the scene: 'There were lots of people here, but they all went off to the funeral of Fo, the station master!'

The driver of the hearse and his followers caught up with the mourners for their deceased before they disappeared into the cemetery. 'Hey, you've got the wrong funeral: your coffin's here, on this hearse. Go back to the church!'

'Oh, what a muck-up! Right, new orders: everybody back down!'

About-turn, a few oaths, a lot of laughter. The people started running, waving arms and shouting, all to a march tempo:

*La mia morosa la mi diceva
Non andare coi ribelli.
Non avrai piu i miei lunghi capelli
Sul cuseino a riposar!*

My darling love has said to me
Don't go to war to fight.
You'll no more play with my long hair
When you lie on my pillow at night!

If you think that this mad blunder, which looks as if it came from a farce, is the product of my wild imagination, all you have to do is get hold of the *Corriere della Sera* for 4 January 1987. There you will find the report of this impossible adventure, whose staging is beyond all doubt to be attributed to the jovial ghost of my father, Felice.