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Exposing the Injustice and Corruption of Italian Politics through the Analysis of the Play ‘Accidental Death of An Anarchist’

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines Dario Fo's Accidental Death of an Anarchist, a satirical masterpiece that underscores the systemic corruption and hypocrisy within Italian politics during the 1970s. By leveraging absurdity, slapstick humor, and biting wordplay, Fo dissects the socio-political environment that enabled institutional abuses, exemplified by the controversial death of anarchist Giuseppe Pinelli. The play's evolving script and improvisational performances reflect Fo's commitment to addressing contemporary political issues, while its engagement with counter-information challenges the audience to scrutinize official narratives. Through the analysis of key scenes and character dynamics, this paper demonstrates how Fo critiques the complicity of law enforcement and other institutions in perpetuating injustice, ultimately advocating for transparency and social reform. By satirizing authority figures and exposing the fragility of their constructed truths, the play transcends theatrical boundaries, asserting itself as a potent instrument for political commentary and public consciousness.

Keywords: *Accidental Death of an Anarchist, Danrio Fo, Corruption.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Dario Fo's ‘Accidental Death of an Anarchist’ uses satire to critique the corruption and injustice present in the Italian political system, highlighting the need for social and political change. The following essay aims to prove that through its portrayal of the characters and events, the play exposes the hypocrisy and injustices of those in power.

‘Accidental Death of an Anarchist’ is one of Dario Fo's most well-known and acclaimed works, having been performed in more than 42 countries since its debut in Italy in 1970. The play is cited when Fo won the Nobel Prize in 1997. The play is loosely based on the death of the anarchist Giuseppe Pinelli, who died in mysterious circumstances after falling from the window of a police station in Milan when he was undergoing an investigation concerning a bomb blast

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that killed 16 people. (Powell et al.)

Fo added fresh material for the play inspired by the ongoing Calabresi-Lotta Continua trial to the script. Fo would introduce the play and provide updates on the case and trial before each performance. Normally, a discussion would follow each performance. The performance in Milan was sold out. *Accidental Death of An Anarchist* was performed by Fo and his troupe at least 300 times throughout Italy during the following few years, frequently in front of large crowds. According to Fo, 300,000 people saw the play. (Foot)

To understand the success and the significance of the play it is imperative to take a look at the political atmosphere in Italy during the 1970s while also looking at Dario Fo's background.

Richard Drake writes that in the 1960s Italy witnessed an economic boom, which caused mass migration to the city and Italy ceased to be a peasant state and became one of the major industrial nations of the west. In 1984 Italians were asked to vote for the historical development over the previous 50 years that they thought future historians of Italy would pay the most attention to and the majority of them chose terrorism, this was the palpable reality Italians lived in, even though they enjoyed economic success all that they could remember was the terrorism. Neo-fascists started carrying out terrorist acts and blamed the left wing for it. (Drake)

The left, therefore, has a huge ideological and cultural influence in Italy. Plays have largely been used as a medium to educate the working class about politics.

John Foot illustrates that Pinelli's death was a major event in Italy due to several reasons. First, the event's dramatic quality sparked discussion and curiosity. Second, Pinelli's death was closely linked to other tragic incidents that happened at the time, including the bombing of the Piazza Fontana for which he was arrested as well as the 1972 slaying of police inspector Luigi Calabresi, who was widely accused of being responsible for Pinelli's "murder." Finally, the Pinelli case's structure drew on leftist mythology and history. Many drew comparisons to the mysterious deaths of other anarchists who occurred in comparable situations in Italy. Pinelli's "fall" was part of a larger narrative that sparked emotions and memories beyond the event itself. (Foot)

Dario Fo was born into an anti-fascist and proletarian family. He did not begin his career by writing political plays and instead wrote comedic plays. He had gained a good reputation in the comedic scene of Milan and did well on both national radio as well as television. Fo was encouraged to embrace a more direct political stance as a result of the rising political radicalisation in Italy in the late 1950s and early 1960s. (Cowan)

Fo's plays are not concerned with conforming to traditional notions of great or even good theatre. The emphasis is not on the formal structure or expressive language but on exploring central political problems or situations. The plays may appear haphazardly constructed, consisting of a series of scenes rather than a cohesive whole, yet they maintain unity through their focus on a particular political issue. Fo writes his plays quickly, often in collaboration with his company who contribute to the subject, characters, and improvisation of scenes. Even after the text is written, the improvisation continues, leading to alterations in scenes and dialogue between performances. It is not uncommon for a play to be resuscitated months or even a year later, with significant changes to political themes, scenes, and dialogue. As a result, what the audience sees on stage rarely corresponds exactly to the printed version of the play. (Cowan)

II. ANALYSING THE PLAY

(A) Act One Scene One

The main character of the play is the 'Maniac'. The police arrested the Maniac on the charges of impersonation. The Maniac's creative use of vocabulary and syntax when describing his business card illustrates how language can be manipulated to further one's agenda, as demonstrated by the political class and state-run media. The author strategically uses humour and presents absurd and implausible scenes to show viewers the reality of the justice system. The Maniac also expresses his desire to impersonate a judge, this is foreshadowing what happens next in the play.

The Maniac's extensive knowledge of the law serves as a tool to expose the police officer's ignorance of the very legislation they are entrusted to uphold. By highlighting their use of unfair tactics to deceive the suspect, the play sheds light on the flawed approach of the police. Furthermore, the police officer's inability to grasp nuanced concepts illustrates how they can themselves become victims of the very authorities they seek to obey. Through these insights, the play effectively critiques the flawed functioning of the law enforcement system and the negative impact it can have on society. (Counter Information in the Accidental Death of an Anarchist)

The anarchist's death circumstances are frequently mentioned in the Maniac's darkly humorous jokes. For instance, he says things like "Sir, you've got to let me stay, or I'll throw myself out of the window."

As the Maniac cheekily blows a raspberry at the Inspector, the latter responds violently. The Inspector strikes Bertozzo in the face, causing him to collapse on the ground. This shows us how the author uses humour to help keep the audience engaged and interested.

(B) Act One Scene Two

In Act one Scene Two the Maniac is then able to infiltrate the police station and impersonate a Judge who has come to investigate the death of the anarchist. He asks the policemen to recount what happened when the anarchist died. This scene reveals the primary conflict of the play which is the Maniac's desire to reveal the truth while the policemen want it to stay hidden and get off the hook. The characters' passion for achieving these conflicting objectives causes the discourse to become increasingly absurd and humorous.

The scene also highlights the questionable tactics used by the police during moments of corruption. For example, the proof that the Superintendent used to accuse the anarchist was that he was also a railway worker, which was just a coincidence, there was no evidence against the anarchist in the first place. Additionally, while investigating the policemen, the Maniac makes the police confess that they lied to the anarchist in an attempt to make him confess. The policemen also justified themselves by saying that such psychological warfare is required during an investigation.

We can see that the Maniac uses logic as an instrument of persuasion. Logical reasoning is employed to combat the public's emotional reliance on "benevolent" institutions like the police and government.

The Maniac's attempts to "help" the police by embellishing their story result in a series of increasingly absurd revisions. Initially, the policemen have second thoughts and are apprehensive about the Maniac's suggestions, but they are soon swayed as he persuades them with ease. The comedic effect of this is heightened by the fact that the police seem all too willing to accept the Maniac's outrageous additions to their tale.

(C) Act Two

The Maniac points out the logical discrepancies in the police reports, which leads him to create more absurd fabrications beyond those he created in Act One. As the characters act more and more ridiculously, the comedy intensifies, and the plot thickens with every new detail that emerges, heightening the sense of intrigue.

In the play, Fo uses a jerry-rigged bomb as a comedic prop that is combined with traditional slapstick routines to create a "paroxysm" of violence. This serves to replicate the original crime and complete the theatrical-political parallel. When Bertozzo enters the Piccini/reporter scenario carrying the explosives, the comedy turns into slapstick. Even though the degree of violence is uncontrolled and distressing, Fo intentionally exaggerates it to produce a reflective effect between the bomb and the farce. The bomb turns into a comic object, which not only

duplicates the original crime but also finalizes the theatrical and political correlation. In this sense, it serves to highlight the absurdity of political violence. Fo's use of theatricality as a tool for political commentary underscores his belief that theatre can be a powerful means for social criticism and reform. (Wing)

The play reveals that the true threat to the police force is not the exaggerated theatricality of the Maniac's performance, but rather the possibility of being held accountable for their corrupt actions. The danger lies in the actual script of events, which exposes the police's lies and cover-up. Bertozzo only begins to realise that the Maniac is an impostor when he deviates from his exaggerated performance and starts speaking truthfully. This highlights the power of truth and the potential consequences for those who try to hide it. (Wing)

The Maniac's wild behaviour escalates as he unveils more absurd traits. He sports a phoney leg, a patch obscuring one eye, a wooden hand concealed in a brown glove, and a counterfeit moustache. During a physical encounter with the Inspector, the Maniac's glass eye dislodges, and as he attempts to retrieve it, he inadvertently swallows it.

The author also highlights police bureaucracy and corruption as the Maniac makes several remarks such as “only senior officers can swear”.

In this particular section of the play, the policemen resort to improvised violence to silence Bertozzo, using kicks, slaps, and a gag in a sequence filled with hilarity. However, these actions illustrate how those in power manipulate the truth to maintain their authority, despite their seemingly comedic nature. The brutality displayed also serves as a poignant reminder to the audience that the anarchist likely endured similar physical abuse during his 72-hour detention and interrogation.

The symbolic significance of the Maniac's disguise is evident when the Inspector and Superintendent shake his wooden hand, which falls off twice. This can be interpreted as a representation of their eagerness to embrace deceptions that serve their purpose but also highlights how such lies can be easily exposed. How the male hand was replaced with the female hand highlights how lies can be effortlessly swapped out for one another if they don't fit the narrative.

The psychiatrist, the lawyer, the policeman, and lastly the priest are the disguises that the Madman adopts, and they all represent the institutions that he aims to overthrow. The mainstream information sources have become ineffective and unreliable, thus there is a need for counterinformation that, through sound dialectics, may allow truth to emerge. This gives the madman's counterinformation authority. (Counter Information in the Accidental Death of an

Anarchist)

III. CONCLUSION

Through its slapstick tone and witty wordplay, the play effectively exposes the blatant contradictions and deliberate omissions in the official police reports, thereby unmasking the outright lies propagated by the police regarding the case. By satirising the bureaucracy and hypocrisy of the police force, Fo intelligently highlights the grave consequences of corruption on society, including misinformation, fear, and violence. Although the play employs humour to drive its message, the underlying seriousness of the situation is not lost on the audience. Additionally, through the portrayal of its characters, the play effectively demonstrates how easily the truth can be manipulated.

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