

Gemma Singh

ACCIDENTAL DEATH OF AN ANARCHIST By DARIO FO CONTEXTUALISATION

'Accidental Death Of An Anarchist' was written by Dario Fo, in 1970 and was first staged in 1979. The play is a provocative piece of drama, containing highly dangerous issues concerning the corruption of political authorities. It's controversial issues and perfected physical movement captivates an audience through it's comic theme as well as pungent serious elements.

Dario Fo was born in 1926; he is the son of a railroad worker. Fo is a popular and controversial playwright as well as actor and director. He is well known for leading the field in political satire internationally and in Europe for over 30 years. Fo's main targets (so called inspired attacks) have been corruption in the Italian Legal System imperialism and capitalism .Fo began his career as a performer in the satirical cabaret-style revues (which probably influenced his continuous pleasure in writing plays with a main theme pungent political satire – like 'Accidental Death Of An Anarchist'). In 1973, his wife Franca Rame, was kidnapped, tortured and raped by a group of fascists, to punish them for their political activism. However this never drove the exceptional author to stop producing satirical plays, in fact it probably gave some form of motivation to continue the journey of 'Accidental Death Of An Anarchist' and its "biting political satire".

'Accidental Death Of An Anarchist' reflects tradition from which it came – Italian street farce, commedia dell arte and undoubtedly political satire.

An Italian tradition that follows through the play is La Commedia Dell Arte, this literally means 'Artistic Comedy'. The commedia dell arte began in the second half of the 16th century in a period of time when theatre plays were cold and classic. However this evolved over the years into a popular, entertaining, loud and colourful representations, which blossomed all over Italy, thus subverting the rules of theatre. Inspiring Fo, the sense of commedia dell arte speaks louder than words, With the powerful mix of various elements give strong impulses "to the initiative": popular themes (corruption, satire, authority etc.), plots full of climax, exaggerated physical movement, (such as acrobatic jumps, karate acts) made it a success. Emerging from various popular forms, performers created stock characters, such as Harlequin, Jongleur, Pantaloon and so on. Each actor had speeches and bits of business known as Lazzi. More specifically, Lazzi is theatre trickery, e.g. jokes, optical illusions, physical movement and the like.

In 'Accidental Death Of An Anarchist', the Maniac is the chief device of farce, satire and even slapstick. Fo created Maniac from the template of the 'Jongleur' (originating from classical traditions.) This character would hide behind farcical, "mask of a fool and proceed to make scathing, satirical attacks on authority figures with the mask as his protection". The Maniac accomplishes this by changing into many different disguises. Fo gave the Maniac disguises to use him as a comedy device as well as reveal Fo's political conviction.

This play was written about what Italian people refer to as the 'strategy tension'. This is a scheme carried out in the late 1960's early 1970's by right winged extremists in the military and secret services to "discredit the Italian Communist Party, by staging a number of leftist bombings". The most notorious of these incidents occurred in Milan on 12th December 1969. A bomb exploded in an agricultural Bank. It was a massacre with more than 16 dead. Instantly, the anarchists were blamed for the slaughter. One, Giovanni Pinelli, having been taken to the police headquarters, flew out of the window on the fourth floor. The police declared that Pinelli had committed suicide after having been convinced that the real culprits were no other than Valpreda, Garganelli and the other members of the Milan group. The subsequent cover-ups, inquests, re-cover ups and traits lasted for years.

Ten years later at Cantazoro in Southern Italy the trial came to an end. Three fascists were condemned to prison. Later it was discovered one of them was an agent for the Italian police. With further connections, Generals and Ministers were first condemned and then acquitted. It was only the criminal 'labour force' that went to prison.

At the height of the events, Fo wrote this provocative piece, where instead a certified “psychotic” yet cunning Maniac runs amok the police station, disguising himself convincing the officers to re-open the case an exploit the ‘bent’ police force by playing on their inadequacies, their fear.

Fo inspired by numerous social events in late 60’s early 70’s undoubtedly influenced some of the issues present in this play such social class and the church Fo succeeds in voicing these issues to the public, skillfully educating them through loud refreshing comedy. The play can be linked to the Worker’s Revolt (Lotte Operaie), which comprised of long hauling strikes and demands, with working conditions improved and fairer wages were proposed, the revolt did not stop there. ‘Proletarians’ now wanted more recognition and successfully blunted the political awareness of this working class, which could no longer be considered ‘poor’ or ‘proletarian’ in the more Marxist and nineteenth century sense of the word. This is symbolic in ‘Accidental Death Of An Anarchist’ as Fo creates the dramatic irony that he uses to satirise the class system. The dramatic irony comes when the audience knows that the judge to whom the police are cowering is really the maniac, which creates the humour. Through this mistaken identity, someone, who comes of a class lower than the police officials in both wealth and status is able to adopt a power position on stage and by manipulating and ridiculing his social superior, creates a great shift in the power dynamics of the scene. This shift shows the audience how ludicrous the class system is, that it is built on ignorance and can be infiltrated by a man who is ‘certified’ as crazy.

Fo utilises Miss Feletti as a representation to convey the issue of feminism, an era of a major challenging issue, known as the emergence of women. One of the two endings in the play, shows how Miss Feletti is grabbed, handcuffed and left in the explosion, even after rescuing the four officers. This ending reflects the idea that society rejects this new change in conjugal roles as well as the independence to go to work and receive the same pay of men. The change in the conditions for women, especially in Europe and in Italy, was the greatest transformation of the 1970s and, perhaps, of this century. The post-war reconstruction efforts aimed at greater well being also caused many women to work outside the domestic environment. Life outside the home, direct dealings with society and economic independence all encouraged women to demand recognition of their role in all areas of society and life. This stereotype of ‘women being in the kitchen’ was the preferred norm of the ruling class and the church. However young people and intellectuals began to dispute the validity and structure of this traditional family idea. In spite of this the Church established its power by exploiting the bugbear of the Cold War, aligning itself with political parties. These political parties positioned themselves on the conservative side, called the Right wing. Fo’s view on the church are voiced through the Maniac “this bishop to whom I was referring was an inveterate hypocrite. A liar, a cheat and a disgusting leech”. This was a very dangerous, powerful issue, as religion especially the Church was a significant part of Italian culture, which no one would talk about. In attempt to educate the audience of issues based in society, Fo not only uses satire to expose the police force but in many ways to expose an important issue of a corrupted religion. In the period of which ‘Accidental Death Of An Anarchist’ was set to imagine that the police is dishonest but religion too (the one place you ‘believe’ you could trust)

In the 1960’s, (the Economic Boom) the seed of political corruption was a renewal of the ‘Mafia’, in a more modern version. Stripped of its traditional “peak-cap and shotguns” appeared again in an industrial guise, well hidden within the nation’s economic activity. It engaged in activities of all kinds such as construction, drug distribution, and in those of a very secret kind behind with certain politicians in positions of power and prestige. The votes of the large electorate that, particularly in the South, could be controlled by organised crime. All this favoured the ‘democratic’ maintenance of Italian politics in its conservative position, on what is known as the Right wing. This significant part of culture influenced the direction of his writing. The concept that corruption in the police force, especially the brutality, exploiting the concerning issue that cover-ups occur, not just mildly through verbal lies but the threatening idea that the legal system, often likely to resort to crime in bid to save their own skins. The crime being that