

In what ways do the comic techniques in Dario Fo's 'Accidental death of an anarchist' highlight the issues in the play?'

In 1970 a left wing Italian playwright, Dario Fo, wrote a politically based play, 'Accidental death of an anarchist', he labelled it a 'Farce of power' (Dario Fo, authors note). The play is based on a true event in Italian history. On December the 12th 1969 a bomb exploded in a Milan bank, killing more than 16 people, the blame was immediately put on the anarchists, the States' scapegoat. One anarchist, Pinelli, miraculously 'flew' out of a fourth-floor window during questioning by police. The death was labelled suicide and the anarchist made public enemy no.1. The play 'accidental death of an anarchist', rooted in tragedy, is overall, a comedy, it uses facts and documents from the massacre investigation and turns them on their heads. The play itself takes place in a police station where a MANIAC, initially brought in for questioning about his histrionic mania which had caused him eleven arrests, the maniac using clever disguises (hidden in numerous carrier bags) presents himself as a distinguished judge to the police. They then begin to 'iron out the creases' of the statement they made to the high court, regarding the 'accidental' death of an anarchist, who, according to the police, was seized by a 'raptus' and threw himself from the window to a gruesome death. The play follows the policemen as the Maniac leads them into disclosing their involvement in the death of the anarchist. The Maniac then sheds his disguises to reveal himself to the police and a journalist (Maria Felletti) as a controversial writer of the extreme left-wing. The Maniac handcuffs the police force to the window frame, sets a bomb, and leaves Maria Felletti with a life-changing decision, to leave the policemen to die or to save them; the play has two alternative endings, depicting the two paths she could have chosen. The idea behind the play is to be 'both hysterical and educated' (Theatre critic) by the play. The playwright uses different types of comedy to highlight political issues in the play. Farce, satire, irony, and dramatic irony, and just a few of the comic types one meets in the play.

Farce is the word used to describe a comical visual situation such as in the first scene when the Constable gets his hand stuck in a mousetrap. Fo uses this type of comedy right the way through to depict the buffoonery of the police force and how utterly ridiculous they are, for example an excerpt where the maniac and policemen discuss childhood toys, namely a train set:

.....
MANIAC: Tell me did it go 'Who! Who!'

PISSANI: Yes.

MANIAC: Wonderful. How did it go?

PISSANI: Who! Who!

SUPERINTENDENT: I had one, too.

MANIAC: Let's hear it.

SUPERINTENDENT: Chich Whoo- ch ch Whoo Whoo!

MANIAC: (singing) Pardon me boys-

ALL: Is that the Chatenuga choo choo. Whoo! Whoo!

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Farces preliminary objective is to make people look stupid, Fo, sets the play from the beginning as a political farce, therefore reinforcing the stupidity of the police and what they resemble, namely power and the state. Fo, as the maniac, succeeds in making the police, an institution; look incompetent and unworthy of their positions. Dario Fo is a left-winger, and aimed, by using farcical situations, to disclose and expose the police for the pre-adolescent morons he sees them as, hence the train set and singing.

Satire, and I quote, is 'using humour or exaggeration to show what is bad about a person or thing' (The Oxford school dictionary). Although this is not a very detailed explanation, I think it outlines the meaning effectively. The satirising of the police and State is a key issue in this play. The Maniac in his many disguises appears so full of flaws to an onlooker that one must decree that the policemen, a symbol of responsibility, are easily manipulated and fooled. This can clearly be seen in situations throughout the book where the policemen are sure they are in control but are clearly not. The best example of this is at the end of the play when the Maniac produces a recording of the policemen, confessing their guilt. This shows how the Maniac has been playing with the police force all along, and what imbeciles they are:

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FLETTI is transfixed by tape. As it plays, the MANIAC divests himself of his disguises.

MANIAC: Everything is on there. Everything you said since I first came in.

FLETTI turns to see MANIAC. Intake of breath

FLETTI: You!

BERTOZZO: You know him?

FLETTI: Yes. Paulo Davidovitch Gandolpino.

THE FOUR POLICEMEN: No!!

FLETTI: Prose pimpernel of the Permanent Revolution.

THE FOUR POLICEMEN: Ah!!

FLETTI: The notorious sports editor of Lotta Continua!

SUPERINTENDENT: The organ of Jewish conspiracy itself!

MANIAC: the 'lunatic' fringe. Get it?

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Another example of political satire, but now more serious is about capability:

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FLETTI: You can't intend to commit slaughter in cold blood?

MANIAC: Why ever not? You think they wouldn't? Haven't even....

FLETTI: You can't take the law into your own hands?

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The satirical quality of this extract is Fletti's high moral view of the law even though she has heard the tapes. She argues that the Maniac can't take the law into his own hands, even if the policemen are villainous. But haven't we learnt from the play that the police/law/state, do not have a clear sense of the law and wouldn't perform justly

anyway? And what hope do we have for justice when the 'Law' can't even take the law into its own hands?

Irony is also used constantly throughout; it basically means saying the opposite of what you mean in order to emphasize your point, or an oddly contradictory situation. It is ironic that the police are being told what to do by a maniac. It is also ironic that the Superintendent, a fascist, although oblivious, is talked down to and responds to the command of a man who is, underneath the disguises, a member of an extreme left-wing party. Also there are the many scenes when they are preparing the report with the 'Judge' (Maniac), in these scenes the maniac takes issues like violence and turns it on its head to show how far the police will go to avoid scandal:

.....
MANIAC: ...My hotel, you see, was right next to the police station and I simply could not get a wink of sleep the whole time I was there for the shrieks and screams and slappings and loud thuds. Naturally, I assumed as any citizen who reads the papers and watches T.V would, that these were the sound of suspects being beaten under interrogation by brutal country coppers. All too clearly now I see how clearly mistaken my impressions were. Those shrieks I heard were shrieks of laughter, the screams were screams of merriment and mirth accompanied by bright slapping convulsions of humorous hysteria....
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Dramatic Irony is similar but involves situations where the characters are oblivious to a fact, which is only meant to be understood fully by the audience. The best example is the Maniac, we all know that he isn't what he has professed to be from the beginning, and it is only the characters that are in the dark. There are no direct examples of this because it is an audience's secret, so to speak. The discovery of this in the plot will lead to the end of the story, as it is one of the main keys. Detective novels and films are run on this exact basis, and it keeps an air of suspense over the proceedings.

The issues in the play are most definitely highlighted by Fo's use of different comic techniques. They make the play more enjoyable and bring together two very important things in every day life and make it easier to take in than a long-winded entirely political play. Comedy has long been known as a good medium for politics, It doesn't bore or patronise the audience and it makes the issues more appealing to a greater number of people.