

“Bringing pus to the surface”: Dario Fo and the dramaturgy of irreverence

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Introduction

This paper undertakes to examine the creative and dramaturgic intent of the Italian dramatist and 1997 Nobel laureate, Dario Fo (born 1926), who ranks among today’s most accomplished exponents and practitioners of socially committed theatre. In investigating the dramaturgic and stylistic orientation of Fo’s work, this discussion will in particular focus on *Morte accidentale di un anarchico* (*Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, 1970), one of his best-known and most-performed masterpieces. In this regard, a close examination of the dramaturgic mode and spirit of *Accidental Death* and of some of Fo’s other works, relative to his socio-political and artistic outlook, will shed considerable light on his craft and technique as a highly gifted dramatist, in spite of his notoriety as a subversive political activist at heart. It will thus be shown that Fo (as a political satirist, whose aesthetic and utilitarian precepts have earned him a considerable measure of notoriety and irreverence vis-à-vis established authority) has managed with great success to combine fulsome entertainment and bitter socio-political commentary.

Insofar as Fo’s theatrical technique and practice is concerned, he has had an unqualified share of international glamour and recognition with his repertoire of politically contentious farces. An accomplished mime and actor-playwright, Fo is Italy’s contemporary *homme du theatre* and one of the world’s most performed dramatists. Ranked with comedy greats such as Jacques Tati and Buster Keaton, there is “little doubt that Dario Fo is one of the great modern actors, as well as being a prodigious mime,” Tony Mitchell (1986: 7) points out. Joel Schechter (1994: 92) further bears testimony to Fo’s theatrical acclaim: “Few comedians in our century besides Chaplin have been better known than Dario Fo. The Italian Satirist’s plays are staged around the world. He has directed comic opera at La Scala in Milan. His one-man shows have been applauded everywhere from China to New York.”

Fo has not only been a successful actor and playwright; perhaps not surprisingly, he has been fondly described by Suzanne Cowan (1979: 7) as the epitome of the “Renaissance man,” whose “extraordinary versatility approaches the fifteenth and sixteenth century ideal of the cultivated individual.” Thus, besides being an actor-playwright, he has also been a director and set and costume designer, song-writer, choreographer, painter, scholar, and political activist.

As a political satirist, Fo has managed with great success to interweave aspects of revolutionary theatre with bourgeois, mainstream theatre. Internationally known *Accidental Death* seems to be one good manifestation of a theatre of lasting universality and popularity, a theatre that has effectively appealed to elite and popular audiences alike. Commenting on the universal popularity of Fo’s theatre, Mitchell (1986: 9) particularly takes note of the playwright’s comic orientation, which he describes as being “Most lively and communicative (...) [an] irreverent, popular comedy and political satire of the militant opposed to all forms of social and political repression (...) [and] [not] the reactionary comedy of the Whitehall farce or the TV comedian (...)”

To this date, Fo’s worldwide recognition is only too well demonstrated in the widespread recognition and numerous revivals of his major works. The writer of this article happens to be part of the revivalists of Fo’s work through his direction of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* while on study in the USA and, thereafter, in Malawi. Little wonder this paper, largely informed by my acquaintance in both theory and practice with some of the dramatist’s works, attempts in a small but perhaps considered way to share some insights into Fo’s approach to dramatic composition and handling of subject matter to underscore the mastery and dexterity of great dramaturgy at work.

Dramatic form and presentation

A good deal of much of Fo’s success as a dramatist depends on his choice of a farcical mode of presentation of the bulk of his dramatic works. Ordinarily farce is a dramatic genre that is primarily designed to provoke laughter as its chief end, relying heavily on the exploitation of ridiculous and exaggerated actions and improbable and incongruous situations, from which the humour largely derives. By choosing and negotiating this form accordingly, Fo manages to rise above many of the weaknesses that beset many a deliberate attempt at politically committed theatre.

It ought to be pointed out that the mere espousal of farce as a dramatic form does not in itself guarantee a successful realization of an effective theatrical intent. In fact, despite being considered as a low form of comedy, farce is a technically demanding form of theatre that requires impeccable attention to timing, pace, and rhythm insofar as acting technique and performance are concerned. Nevertheless, Dario Fo, accomplished dramatist that he is, handles the form with a bold mastery of skillfulness and craftsmanship.

To take an example of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, Fo undertakes to reveal the repulsive in a highly delightful way, defying the heavy-handedness that often belabours such attempts. In the play Dario Fo tells the story of an interrogation that involves a madman and police officers. The action of the play takes place at a Milan police station, where a suspicious looking madman has been taken in for what seems to be a normal day's routine questioning. But to the chagrin of the police officers, their suspect turns out to be their worst nightmare. Pleading insanity and, therefore, immunity from arrest and prosecution, the madman turns the tables round. Through a series of impersonations, he sows confusion and bewilderment among the policemen in an attempt to get them to admit responsibility for the death of an anarchist suspect, who died under their interrogation.

In the manner of an *agent provocateur*, the madman cons the policemen into revealing the unscrupulous and unethical methods employed in the anarchist's interrogation, during which he 'fell' to his death from fourth-floor window of the police building. In his various disguises, the Maniac relentlessly rips apart the official report which passed off the anarchist's death as a case of suicide. Joined by a woman journalist who is investigating the events surrounding the alleged suicide of the anarchist, the madman progressively exposes the inconsistencies and contradictions contained in the police and official reports. Having given the police officers enough rope to entangle and hang themselves with, the madman drops the last of his disguises to the utter consternation and bewilderment of the police officers.

Among other things, the theatrical and artistic worth of *Accidental Death* derives from its simplicity and directness of appeal. In terms of the plot structure of the play, a notable aspect is the urgency with which the action of the play moves forward at no expense to the relevant information. The swiftness of the play's action, in part, derives from Fo's handling of the overall

conflict of the play. The verbal gymnastics and part-physical escapades during the Maniac's encounters with the police officers progressively generate the play's overarching conflict, which the plot advances in flurried moments of activity alternating with moments of relative respite.

Dario Fo sets the racy tone and spirit of the play right at the beginning. The Maniac, around whom the action of the play revolves, is taken in for questioning in a police interrogation room, apparently for his earlier suspicious behaviour around the police premises. It turns out that this eccentric suspect is a 'mad' person, which perhaps is a disappointment for Inspector Bertozzo, who seemed all out to level charges against his "catch".

The opening scene of the play swiftly prepares us for the absurd and bizarre course of events through which the rest of the play is going to take us. As Inspector Bertozzo struggles to keep his questioning of the suspect on track, dramatic exposition is supplied at the same time. We discover the suspect is not merely mad, but a crafty breed of lunatic and trouble-shooter, possessing a pathological disposition to subverting authority. An obsessed impersonator of authority figures ranging from military and medical personnel to the clergy, the madman has had previous encounters with the law. As he is pitted against the Police Inspector at the beginning of the play, the apparent anarchic outlook of the madman is set against the seemingly orderly world of the police.

Within the same first scene of the play, Fo effectively employs a sort of play-within-a-play device to carry the madman's questioning of the police conduct forward. The Maniac unobtrusively slips in and out of the role of the police victim (the anarchist), with the police officers coerced and/or forced to recreate incriminating bits of their conduct of the interrogation that had led to the death of the anarchist. The role-playing that the Maniac and the policemen engage in goes beyond mere artifice, thanks to the creative genius of Fo; it makes the scene more dramatically captivating, heightening the tension between the madman and the officers and the anarchic humour deriving there from.

From then on, the second scene rapidly builds up to the end of the first act in increasingly flurried moments of activity that alternate with breathers in which the action and tension simmer down for a while before building up to the next climatic point. Such a wave-like sequencing of the action in the play speeds up the plot, translating into delightful cadences of sound and movement on stage, a feat befitting a dramatist of polished dramaturgic skill and craft.

The second act of the play is a single scene that continues to build up the farcical knock-about from the end of the first act. Thus the action at the end of act one spills over into the beginning of act two, making the transition between the two acts seamless. The theatrically effective climatic ending of the first act is the Maniac's creation of a "climate of subversion" by forcing Police Officer Pissani, a Superintendent, and a Constable to sing an anarchist song. This is the madman's new strategy, as Mitchell (1986: 61) rightly observes, to portray the police officers as "kindly sympathizing with the anarchist" so as to "shield" them against any accusations of foul play.

The end of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* almost duplicates the farcical build up of the first act. The Maniac, following a brief moment of relative calm as the disconcerted police officers feel the pain of their bruised egos for real, takes out a facsimile bomb and threatens to blow everyone up. He has all the policemen and the woman journalist, Feletti, handcuffed to a coat-rack, warning them that they have only five minutes before the bomb explodes. This is a moment of high and theatrically effective tension, but not without some countervailing humour that derives from the officers' screams for help. As the Maniac arrogantly and triumphantly walks out of the police office, leaving the officers to their fate, the image of the police, the judiciary, and related institutional agents has been considerably besmeared.

The lucidity with which Dario Fo has plotted and structured the action of *Accidental Death* leaves no doubt that he is a story-builder and -teller *par excellence*. Combining both literary and popular elements of theatre and integrating fact and entertainment in a highly organic vein, Fo vests the play with an organic blend of intellectual and creative values.

His wide appeal as a storyteller largely derives from his lifetime fascination with indigenous narrative and popular forms of performance. In an introduction to Fo's book on his theatrical approach and style, Joe Farrel (Fo 1991: 6) underscores Fo's attraction to a popular theatrical form:

Although fascinated by Commedia dell'arte in general and by the colourful figure of Harlequin in particular, Fo's favoured model is the medieval giullare. The giullare is a figure from Italian history, and it is not easy to find the exact equivalent in English. Etymologically, the word is associated with 'juggler', but the English term has taken on a more limited meaning (...)

The giullare was the street performer of his day, the busker of the Middle Ages, with something in common with the Shakespearean Fool, but nothing at all with the aristocratic pet who was the Court Jester. Of his very essence, he was the people's entertainer, but also the people's spokesman, giving satirical voice to resentments felt by ordinary people against authority (....)

This figure has come to exercise an enormous fascination for Fo. Increasingly he has come to identify with him in every sphere, politically, culturally and theatrically. When making his break with conventional theatre in 1968, Fo announced that he was tired of being the minstrel of the bourgeoisie, and would aim in future to become the minstrel of the proletariat. It may be that he has reshaped the historical so as to provide himself with the model he was seeking, but the giullare has at least become a living being again rather than a figure from an antiquarian's notebook (....)

Although not necessarily far removed from the conventional, mainstream theatre structure, *Accidental Death* abounds with elements of popular theatre, in the sense of a people's theatre that not only goes beyond mere escapist entertainment and broad public appeal, but also seeks to bring to the fore felt resentments of the populace. Fo's handling of such aspects as characterization, highly physical action, and diction, among others, has no pretensions to the niceties and rigidities that often characterize elitist conventional theatre. For purposes of space, we will not go into specifics here, except to say that Fo's mastery of technique, despite his adoption of a farcical mode of dramatic composition and presentation, never lacks a sense of control and subtlety integral to his farcical framework. Failure by some, who have attempted to stage Fo's plays, to appreciate Fo's delicate balance between the buoyancy and exuberance on the one hand, and the internal finesse and gracefulness of action and style, on the other, has led to a compromising of the aesthetic integrity of the productions. In this connection, Mitchell, for instance, discusses how a London production of *Accidental Death*, despite its enormous success with audiences, watered down or even distorted Fo's message and intentions. Mitchell (1986: 98-99) observes that Gavin Richards' adaptation and direction of the play in an overly non-naturalistic style greatly compromised the

original's intent: "Richards' adaptation and the style of his direction of the piece . . . severely distorted the meaning and intention of the original, cutting it severely and adding speeches and stage business which often went completely against the grain of Fo's play, despite using a highly non-naturalistic, agit-prop form of staging in keeping with Fo's generally minimal use of sets and props."

While acknowledging that Richards' production was potentially accurate in approximating the theatrical verve and gusto of Fo's style, Mitchell seems to be largely concerned with how the production compromised the restraint and subtlety intended by Fo. He thus laments the play's loss of tragic background which he attributes to the reduction of the play's characters to mere stereotypes, the omission of certain parts of the original, the excessive "breaking of the fourth wall," and the recourse to easy "comic solutions" (Mitchell, 1986: 100-101). Fo himself (1983: 67-68), responding to an interview question to comment on how he had viewed the productions of his works in Britain, pertinently remarked as follows, with regard to *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*:

Some of the things that we have not liked have been largely a question of taste, related to our conception of what theatre should be. Obviously, the shows have to be altered when they are transported into a British context. They take on other values, other modes of expression, other cultural styles, etc. But at the same time, some of the shows – I am thinking of the production of *Accidental Death* (...), which I saw here in London – seem to me very overloaded, verging terribly on the grotesque. Many people, though, have said that they liked the production (...) even with the excessive buffoonery that they introduced into it. For us this buffoonery is "anti-style" (...) not style in some vague sense, but "style" in the sense of a satirical form of theatre that seeks to wound, to disturb people, to hit them where it hurts. Obviously, to achieve that effect, you are going to use elements of the grotesque. Many of the gags in *Accidental Death* were, precisely ours (...). But the point is that, precisely because these gags are so strong, you have to use them discreetly, with detachment. But in that production they were overplayed. They made too much of them.

Not only do Fo's comments here add weight to Mitchell's misgivings about the London production of *Accidental Death*, but they also definitively reveal a great deal about Fo's aesthetic taste and temperament vis-à-vis his comic intentions, which any meaningful presentation of his work should seriously take into consideration.

In terms of the handling of formal farcical attributes, Fo's treatment of such aspects as impersonation and highly physical action greatly contributes to the theatrical effectiveness of his plays. Impersonation perhaps finds its best realization in *Accidental Death*. The play's main character, the Maniac, variously disguises himself as an investigating judge, a bomb expert, and a bishop, for example. Fo's conceptualization of the Maniac goes beyond mere theatrical artifice. In the Maniac we have a highly technically stretching role. A trickster and manipulator, the Maniac is a jack-of-all-trades, with a propensity for mimesis. We first meet him in the play when he has been taken in for questioning at the police station, and we learn that he had already been arrested twelve times before for impersonating a range of authority figures that include a surgeon, an army captain, a naval engineer, and a bishop. We also learn that he had been to sixteen mental institutions, regardless of the truth of his claims. (It is quite difficult to determine with certainty where his madness, pretended or otherwise, begins or ends.) Whatever the case, despite being a "certified lunatic" as he often claims to get himself off the hook, the Maniac is a resourceful, tenacious, and calculating character; his is a multi-layered, chameleon-like personality, very elusive and unpredictable. The histrionic and creative resourcefulness that Fo invests in the Maniac serves the playwright very effectively insofar as the play's assault on institutional dishonesty and social injustice is concerned. Although the Maniac may seem not far removed from a merely self-indulgent and shallow villain pursuing his cause with a demonic fury and sadistic zeal, his actions are accordingly well motivated, lest they betray facile characterization on Fo's part.

Michel Foucault's description of a madman, as viewed in the Middle Ages, throws more light on Fo's conception of the Maniac's role in *Accidental Death*. He thus comments:

In farces and soties, the character of the Madman, the Fool, or the Simpleton assumes more and more importance. He is no longer simply a ridiculous and familiar silhouette in the wings: he stands centre stage as the guardian of truth—playing here a role which is the complement and converse of that taken by

madness in the tales and satires. If folly leads each man into a blindness where he is lost, the madman, on the contrary, reminds each man of his truth; in a comedy where each man deceives the other and dupes himself, the madman is comedy to the second degree: deception of deception (Foucault 1965:14).

Seen in the light of Foucault's remarks, the part of the Maniac in the play merits a more carefully considered approach, in order to avoid the temptation to gloss over the subtler aspects of the role. Additionally, thus, the Maniac serves the function of advancing the plot in *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*. His character is inextricably linked to the play's action. Apart from generating humour through his zany antics, which in turn create many complications in the play's plot, the Maniac virtually determines the pace and rhythms of the play; his varying moods and states of mind accordingly set the pace of activity. For example, there are times when the Maniac slows down the activity in order to savour or check the effect of his ruses on the police officers. At others, he jazzes up everything in order to divert or confuse his interrogators. Such is the mastery of technique that Dario Fo displays throughout his other works, of which *Accidental Death* is just a representative example.

If Alan Cumming's and Tim Supple's remarks in a note to their new version of *Accidental Death* are anything to go by, then they give one a fair insight into Fo's mastery of dramatic technique. Cumming and Supple (1991: xxiii) observe that:

The farce never overwhelmed but arose from the policemen's attempts to preserve their integrity and power in the face a madman's piercing logic. People revealed themselves through action and situation: never were they defined by caricature. And the satire never lost a subtlety and restraint; never did the play's hilarity reach such a pitch that we would lose sight of the target, or release the anger and indignation in the play. It seemed to us to be endlessly varied in tone and rhythm and tirelessly able to maintain the irreverent perspective of the madman. And always we felt the presence of the man who had died and the mighty structures of power that held up the fragile dignity of the police.

While Fo in *Accidental Death* maintained a conventional theatre framework, nonetheless interwoven with elements of revolutionary indigenous popular theatre, it is in *Mistero buffo*, among other later pieces, that he fully espoused a “journalistic, topical documentary political theatre [framework]” (Mitchell, 1986: 75). Thus *Mistero buffo*, among Fo’s other plays, most notably exemplifies the presentational, non-illusionistic mode to which he shifted following his dissatisfaction with the mainstream, elitist conventional dramaturgic mode.

Modelled on the style of the medieval strolling performers, *Mistero buffo* is a mosaic of a popular narrative and legend, poetic and choral chants, explanatory descriptions, and dialogue. Dario Fo himself played all the roles in the style of the travelling comics of the Middle Ages and the Commedia dell’arte clown. Drawing on religious stories and popular secular tales of the Middle Ages, the play consists of such episodes as “The Marriage at Cana,” “The Resurrection of Lazarus,” “Boniface VIII,” “Death and the Fool,” and so on.

In these episodes, Fo combines the roles of teacher and actor/mime/clown in his efforts to demystify and subvert accepted wisdom, beliefs, and all that might be considered as weapons of oppression wielded by the privileged against the common people. In this regard, Fo reinterprets the gospels according to a down-to-earth viewpoint of the oppressed in which Jesus is depicted in humanist terms. In like manner, the playwright supplies a cutting edge to the popular tales in their exploration of the Oppressor/Oppressed dichotomy that permeates the bulk of Fo’s subject matter. The following speech from “Birth of the Jongleur” (a story in which Jesus Christ transforms a peasant into a jongleur) encapsulates Fo’s theatrical and irreverent intent in *Mistero buffo*, as well as in the rest of his work:

I am Jesus Christ. I have come to give you the power of speech. This tongue of yours will lash, and will slash like a sword, deflating inflated balloons all over the land. You will speak out against bosses, and crush them, so that others can understand and learn, so that others can laugh at them and make fun of them, because it is only with laughter that the bosses will be destroyed. When you laugh at the rulers, the ruler goes from being a mountain, to being a little molehill, and then a nothingness (...) (*Mistero buffo*, 1997: 53).

Mistero buffo alone amply demonstrates Fo's artistic mastery in realizing to the full his dramaturgic intent insofar as his 'unorthodox' but highly ingenious handling of form, content, and language is concerned.

Fo's subject matter

To talk about Fo's subject matter as separate from other related aspects of his dramaturgic technique that would merit close attention (save for considerations of space) is appreciably a tall order, considering how the playwright intricately dovetails form, content, and style into a unified totality of dramaturgic intent. Nonetheless, with regard to subject matter, the bulk of Fo's work, in keeping with his subversive and instrumental intent, is largely preoccupied with attacking institutional authority. This is more at the political and religious levels.

At the political/institutional level, the police and the judiciary have had a bitter dose of Fo's satire. In his assault on state institutions, the police and judiciary, for example, have been portrayed as being in collusion with the then Italian government in the perpetration of repressive fascist tendencies. Fo's indictment of the Italian brand of police brutality and government dishonesty perhaps finds its best expression in *Accidental Death*. Fo based this play on actual events surrounding the death of Giuseppe Pinelli, a left-wing activist who died under police interrogation. A suspect of terrorist bombings at the Bank of Agriculture in December 1969 in Milan, Pinelli 'fell' from a fourth-floor interrogation room at the Milan police station. Police and official records, full of inconsistencies and contradictions, explained the tragic death as a case of suicide. But, notwithstanding the unscrupulous attempts by the Italian government and its watchdog institutions to suppress and distort the truth about the fate of Pinelli, it was eventually revealed, largely through the independent left, that Pinelli had actually been hurled out of the window by police interrogators. It was further revealed that the bombings of the Bank of Agriculture had been instigated by the fascist-style leadership.

Little wonder *Accidental Death* preoccupies itself with state abuse of power. In a highly satirical vein, the play sets out to indict state-sanctioned violence and repression, painting a sordid picture of the Italian police and judiciary. The police, an institution ostensibly entrusted with the protection of the people, is exposed as the government's favoured instrument for instilling fear in the populace and for maintaining state hegemony without any regard for the

freedom of the individual. The judiciary, supposedly the watchdog of the rights and freedoms of the people, is shown to be a dishonest institution, lacking in principle and integrity. The police-judiciary collusion that is under attack in the play reveals much about what actually happened during the state investigation into the death of Pinelli. In the enquiry, the police and courts are said to have joined forces in hushing the truth about the death of Pinelli. Of the law courts, Suzanne Cowan (1979: 10-11) observes: "As a traditional ally of the police and one of the country's leading reactionary institutions, the court attempted both to suppress information about the case and to obliterate all traces of evidence pointing toward fascist responsibility for the terrorist attacks."

In its incisive attack on the police, *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, portrays the police officers as dishonest, roguish bullies who seize every opportunity to instill fear among their victims. In the disguise of an investigating judge, the Maniac lambasts the police officers thus:

(...) First of all you arbitrarily detain a free citizen, then abuse your authority by keeping him over the legal time limit, after which you traumatize the poor signalman by telling him you've got proof that he set the dynamite in the railway; then you more or less give him the psychosis that he's going to lose his job, then that his alibi about the card game has collapsed (...)
(Cowan 1979: 23)

In the probing counter-investigation that the Maniac engages in for the larger part of the play, the police conduct is heavily undermined. The policemen are shown to be liars, who offer inconsistent and contradictory information to the press and television. As if that is not enough, the law enforcers are also revealed to be responsible for sowing extremist violence with the aim of providing the government with a pretext for censorship and repression. In so doing Dario Fo underlines the fact that the play is not so much an indictment of police brutality per se as it is about the warped Italian political set up with its various institutions.

In his condemnation of the Italian judicial system, which is shown to be partial and indifferent to the police miscarriage of justice, Fo alerts us to the breach of justice nurtured by the Italian fascist political machinery. Among other things, Fo abhors the arbitrary dispensation of justice. For example, in the following speech by the Maniac, the author vilifies the judiciary for its abuse of power:

(...) the older and more feeble-minded they [the court judges] get, the higher the ranks they're promoted to. They are given important, absolute powers! You see a bunch of little old men, made out of cardboard and utterly incapable of moving their limbs; wearing satin cordons, ermine capes, shiny black top hats with golden stripes that make them look like bit players from the comic opera of Venice; doddering along with faces resembling small, dried Piedmontese mushrooms (...) pairs of spectacles hanging from their necks by little gold chains, otherwise they would lose them; they can never remember where they put them down. Well, these characters have the power to save or destroy however and whenever they will: they toss out certain life sentences just the way someone might say, "hey, may be it will rain tomorrow!" Fifty years for you (...) thirty for you (...) for you only twenty – because I like your face! They dictate, legislate, sentence, decree (...) and they are sacred, because don't forget that in our country it's still criminal slander to speak badly of the high court (...) (Cowan 1979: 16)

Such an irreverent speech greatly dents the reputation of the judiciary, as well as castigates the government that nourishes grossly tainted systems.

Fo takes on clerical authority by drawing attention to the relationship between Church and State, hinting at the collusion that can take place between the two institutions. Fo's attack on the Church-State collusion in *Accidental Death* is not fortuitous. As Paul LeChat (*Italy*, n.p., n.d.) comments, the Church, the Catholic Church in particular, is a very powerful institution in the Italian socio-political landscape, hence "[a]ny analysis of the elements in Italian political (...) [discourse] must take into account the role of the Church. The presence of the Church is felt everywhere: in history, in architecture, in monuments, in the rhythms of life and also above all in people's minds. Its presence equally makes itself felt through third parties, on government and parliamentary benches. In fact, it represents true political power (...)"

Towards the end of *Accidental Death* when Officer Bertozzo comes into the picture to reveal the trickery of the madman, he finds the Maniac already donned in a guise of a bishop in order to further disorient his interrogators. In

having the Maniac do so, Fo launches into parodying the Church and its ritual. Significantly, the madman's impersonation of the bishop, as Mitchell (1986: 63) points out, "enables Fo to broaden the implications of the play's situation, satirizing the church and discussing implications of scandal (...)" Thus observes the Maniac (as Bishop) in the play:

The important thing is to convince people that everything is going fine. America which is a highly developed nation, is up to its ears in scandal. They murder a president, because he's not conservative enough (...) The C.I.A. and F.B.I. themselves are involved in the assassination (...) About twenty witnesses get bumped off (...) public opinion is stunned, scandalized (...) there are investigations, trials; the press and television scream, make accusations and denunciations – and as a direct result, to replace the murder victim, they first elect Johnson and then Nixon, no less!(...) [S]candal is the antidote to an even worse poison; namely, people's gaining political consciousness. In fact, has the American government ever imposed any censorship to keep the people from finding out about the murder of all the leaders of the black movement, or the massacre of thousands of helpless Vietnamese? Not in the least; on the contrary, for weeks the T.V. and newspapers hollered from the rooftops about the shameful killing, the horror and indignation (...)(Cowan 1979: 41)

Although Fo sets out to parody the Church and its ritual, at the same time he avails himself of the clerical authority that goes with the pomp and splendour of the pontifical figure to universalise the issues of the play. No wonder Fo is able to extend his indictment of government dishonesty and corruption even to established and seemingly flawless democracies of Britain and North America, for example. But also by having the Maniac pretending to be a bishop, Fo is underscoring the Church-State collusion.

While church and religious dogma particularly come under bitter scrutiny in *Mistero buffo*, reference also ought to be made to Fo's stint with the Italian national radio in 1950 before solidly establishing himself as a writer-cum performer and director. Even at this earlier stage of his theatrical career, Fo was already the typical embodiment of anti-establishment sentiment. Through his series of comic monologues that he performed on the Italian national radio *Poer nano* (Poor dwarf), Poor Dwarf, the narrator, set out to subvert religion

dogma and accepted conventions. Describing his irreverent approach (with specific reference to one of his most popular sketches, *Cain and Abel*), Mitchell (1986: 38) quotes Dario Fo as saying:

Cain was the victim and not the executioner, the Almighty knew everything but was absent-minded and caused chaos and confusion which his son had to remedy – witness the story of original sin (...) these reversals were not just done for their own sake, but were a sacrosanct refusal to accept the logic of convention, a rebellion against the moral contingent which always sees good on one side and evil on the other (...) The comedy and liberating entertainment lies in the discovery that the contrary stands up better than the common place (...) There is also the fun of desecrating and demolishing the sacred and untouchable monuments of religious tradition.

These elements of irreverence and non-conformism, inherited from the anti-establishment, indigenous popular tradition, were to permeate the biting political satires that followed in the development of Fo's theatre career. The official stage sampled a dose of Dario's irreverent satire in 1952, when he performed *Poor Dwarf* at the famed Teatro Odeon.

Fo's thematic preoccupations also raise questions about capitalist exploitation, economic struggles, and the plight of the working class, as in *Won't Pay? Can't Pay!*, for example. In this play, in which two housewives will not stop at anything to hide their spoils (looted in the wake of skyrocketing prices in a Milan supermarket) from their reactionary husbands and police, Dario Fo's revolutionary intent is all too pointedly laid bare. While the play's focus is on working-class women's struggles, it touches on a wide range of felt concerns of the underclass in general. In a Marxian vein, it deplores capitalist exploitation, raising questions about such issues as worker compensation and welfare, for instance. Thus one of the housewives, Antonia, accuses the police as the conniving agents of the oppressive machinery:

(....) In our case sweating eight hours a day on the assembly line, like animals, and in your case making sure we behave – and most of all – pay the right price for everything. You don't ever check, for example, that the bosses keep their promises, pay what they have agreed, that they don't kill us with piecework, or by speeding up the line, or screw us with their

three-day weeks, that they comply with the safety regulations and pay the proper compensation, that they don't just up the prices, chuck us out in the street or starve us to death!?" (*Can't Pay?* 1982: 16)

But while Fo is not afraid to advocate the revolution of the underclass in the play—and admittedly in a manner that almost borders on the overboard—he saves the situation by his skilful use of countervailing irony, comic interplay, and a dialectical approach to characterization. Take, for instance, his persistent attacks on the police as the watchdog for the ruling class; at times he leaves us wondering whether they are indeed the right culprits. At some points, the police make it clear that they are aware of their predicament in which they are forced to earn a living by taking sides with the “devil”. “You working classes have got to stop seeing us as ignorant twits. You see us as creatures of habit with no brain (...) A guard dog who can't disagree or have an opinion (...)” (*Can't Pay?* 1982: 11), says one officer, who moments later adds: “(...) What choice did I have? Emigrate, sweep the streets or join the police. What would you do?” (*Can't Pay?* 1982: 12).

The forte of the scope and appeal of Fo's subject matter, in part, derives from his realization of the need to contextualize the issues he deals with in a wider geo-political scale. Admittedly, his works are deeply rooted in the Italian cultural and socio-political matrix, but Fo nevertheless remarkably endeavours to avoid the trap of merely restricting himself to the realities of his temporal and physical universe. After all, such issues as political repression and intolerance, racism, bigotry, religious hypocrisy, social injustice, capitalist exploitation, and institutional malaise, for instance, are not only endemic to Italy.

Fo does not spare even the highly developed democracies in his attack on corruption and scandal, for instance. In *Accidental Death* Fo has the Maniac say:

The [British] Minister of War involved in a ring of prostitutes, drug-dealers, spies! Did the State collapse, by any chance? The Stock Market? Not at all in fact, both state and stock market were never stronger than after the scandal. People thought: Yes, something is rotten, all right, but it's come to the surface. We swim about in this shit, we drink it, but nobody can try to

tell us to pretend it's tea with lemon, no! We know it's shit, and that's what counts (Cumming and Supple 1991).

The Maniac continues with his invective as follows:

(...) Or take Watergate [scandal], for instance. The whole White House on a gangster's payroll, the big cheese pronounced guilty, what happens? He writes a best-seller, meets David Frost, lectures at Oxford, and he's laughing all the way to the fucking bank; and Carter promises "open government." You see, scandal followed by promises.

What happens in *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* thus indeed resonates with actual acts of police/state violence and aggression that abound the world over. To cite a few actual past incidents, selected at random, the Chinese government may readily come into the picture, for example. On 4 June 1989 the Chinese government ruthlessly suppressed pro-democracy demonstrations by killing and arresting thousands of student activists in Tiananmen Square, Beijing. At home, in the southern African nation of Malawi, one may talk of the May 18, 1983 'government'-sanctioned secret police operation that resulted in the brutal assassination of three cabinet ministers and a parliamentarian for expressing views that were seen as dissenting to the then authoritarian regime of Hastings Kamuzu Banda; the four politicians, it was revealed after the demise of the Banda dictatorship, were allegedly beaten to death with claw hammers and metal rods, following which the government at the time announced, to an incredulous and shocked nation, that the four had died in a car accident.

In Apartheid South Africa it was common knowledge that many political detainees were being hurled to death from interrogation-room windows high up in multi-floor buildings; the then government condoned and hushed such cases of police brutality, passing them off as accidents or cases of suicide (very strikingly typical of what is being probed into in *Accidental Death*). Even the United States of America, the so-called bastion of democracy, has not been exempt from related acts of institutional malaise. In 1995 television viewers around the world witnessed the Los Angeles Police Department wrestle to keep afloat, following charges of perjury and evidence tampering in the investigation of the murder trial of former American football great, O.J. Simpson. Need one mention the hitherto persistent speculation about state involvement in the 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy?

Or more recently, there have been a number of events that have led to accusations and counter-accusations between the Government of Malawi and civil society. One sad event was the alleged police shooting to death in cold blood of a 10-year-old young girl in the city of Blantyre, following demonstrations against the outcome of the country's presidential and parliamentary elections in May 2004. Hitherto, neither the Ministry of Home Affairs nor the police as a government institution have owned up to the circumstances of the death of the young girl, despite all the indications of the irresponsible conduct of the police. This is but just one of the many cases that have happened lately in Malawi that do amply demonstrate the lack of government's accountability and integrity whenever the image of its institutions is at stake. More can be said about this self-righteousness, propagated through intimidation, harassment, and propaganda, which is the order of the day in a number of countries across the African continent, with Zimbabwe as one of the most notable examples.

What about the circumstances surrounding the United States' and allied forces' invasion of Iraq in March 2003 in the name of counter-terrorism? Allegations of document tampering by the Bush administration and Tony Blair's government surfaced and continue to surface even now, two years after the Iraq war. But even though the grounds for the war in Iraq have been substantially dismissed as whitewash, US President, George Bush and Britain's Prime Minister, Tony Blair, have hitherto continued to wallow in rhetoric of self-justification to, at least, salvage their bruised egos and con the skeptical world into sharing their professed cause for the war against Iraq. Then talk of Guantanamo Bay Prison in Cuba, opened for the so-called illegal combatants in January 2002. Presently, the prison is hosting thousands of terrorist suspects being held without trial, following the Bush anti-terrorist campaign that came in the wake of the 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States. But up to now, the Bush administration and its military have continually denied allegations of abuse and torture of the prisoners, one of the most recent allegations being the flushing of the Koran down a toilet to extract confessions from the detainees.

Such and many more incidents happening around the world cannot escape the kind of trial that Fo launches in *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*.

Conclusion

In his handling and presentation of dramatic form and subject matter, Dario I does manage to skilfully weave fact and fiction in a manner that in his ov

words “seeks to wound, to disturb people, to hit them where it hurts” (Fo, 1983: 54). To use of one of his lines in *Mistero buffo* (1997: 53), Fo does “lash, and (...) slash like a sword, deflating inflated balloons all over the land.” Such is Fo’s stylistic signature that paints the sordid and repulsive in bold and incisive strokes of verbal agility.

His linguistic idiom, devoid of any shallow pretensions to literary or formal style, has a directness and freshness of appeal that is commensurate with his otherwise contentious subject matter. Fo’s sentences display a roving quality of construction, with a colloquiality of diction in which dialect, slang, humour, and metaphor compensate for the underlying gravity of his subject matter. Inevitably, one is left with a delightful and compelling experience of theatrical skill and craft in abundance.

When Dario Fo was presented with the coveted Nobel Prize in Literature in 1997, the presentation speech by Professor Sture Allen of the Swedish Academy attempted to sum it all thus:

(...) The decisive thing is that he has written plays which arouse the enthusiasm of actors and which captivate audiences.

(...) The rhythm of the actors’ lines, the witty wording and the aptitude for improvisation combine with strong intensity and artistic energy in the profoundly meaningful, steady flow of his flashes of wit (...) Fo’s work brings to the fore the multifarious abundance of the literary field.

(<http://www.nobel.se>)

Professor Allen’s bit of eulogy befittingly points to the range and depth of theatrical mastery characteristic of Fo’s dramaturgy; at the same time, it does awe one into a feeling of not being up to the mark in doing justice to the dramatist’s artistic stature. Certainly, given the scope of this paper, it would be quite presumptuous to end with the impression that the discussion has measured up to the depth of Fo’s artistic and creative aptitude. Suffice is to say that the paper has only attempted to deal with some of the salient aspects of Fo’s dramaturgy on the understanding that a fuller appreciation of the dramatist’s theatrical technique and practice would in part derive from a much more detailed examination of a good number of his other works and career within the context of his socio-political and artistic world view.

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