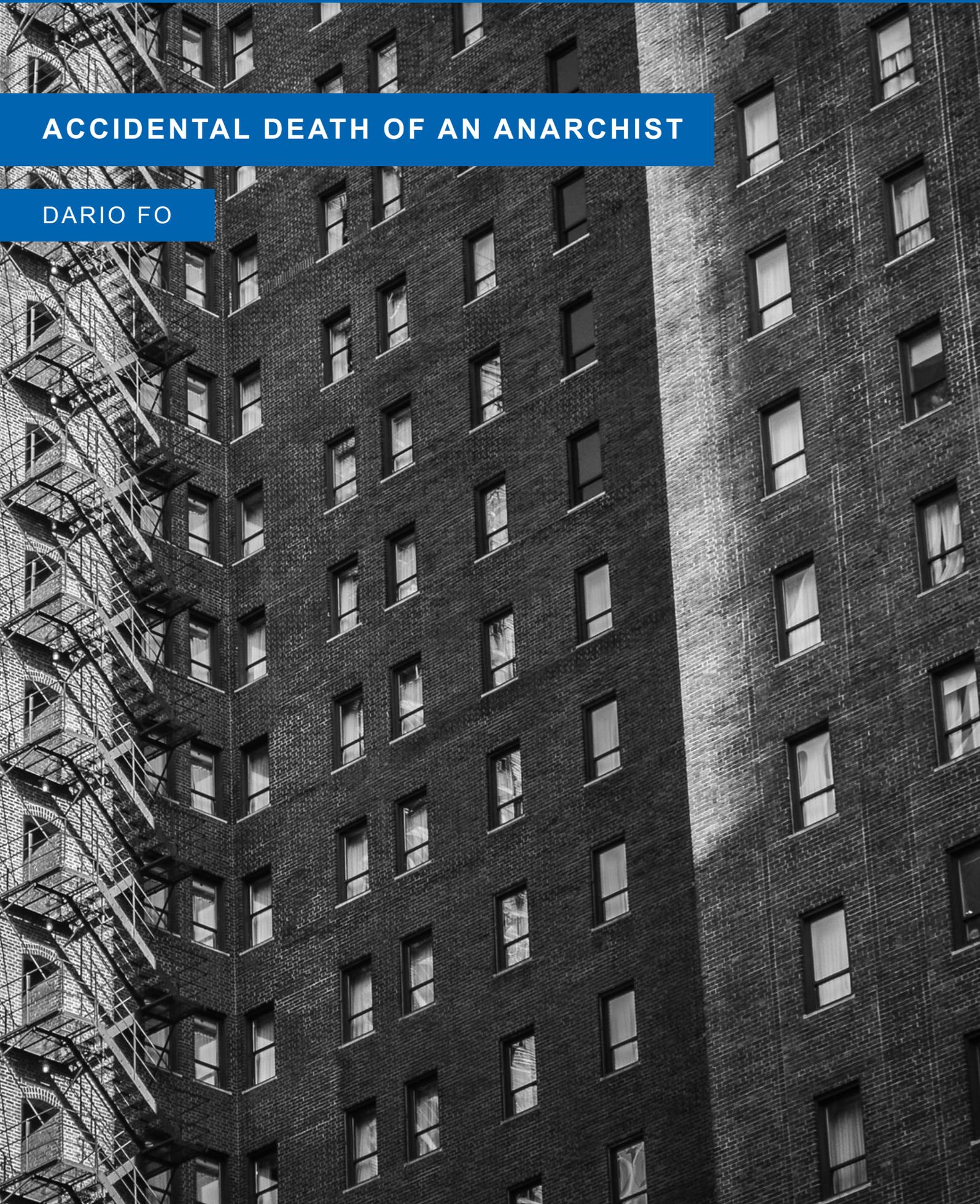


GCE / A LEVEL

ACCIDENTAL DEATH OF AN ANARCHIST

DARIO FO



## INTRODUCTION

*“The public who came to the theatre – progressive students, workers, but also large numbers of the lower middle classes – was overwhelmed by the grotesque and apparently mad way in which the play worked. They split their side laughing at the effects produced by the comical and at the same time satirical situations. But as the performance went on, they gradually came to see that they were laughing the whole time at real events, events which were criminal and obscene in their brutality: crimes of the state.”*

Dario Fo on the audience reactions to the first performances of *Morte accidentale di un’anachico* in Milan

Dario Fo has long been regarded as one of Italy’s foremost writers whose plays have been published and performed all over the world. He is also seen as one of the leading, modern political satirists. *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* is one of his defining plays and its origins are absolutely rooted in the Left wing, workers political struggle against injustice, oppression and corruption.

At 16:45 on the 12<sup>th</sup> December 1969 a slow burning fuse detonated 18lbs of explosives hidden in Milan’s Banca dell’ Agricoltura (National Agricultural Bank), in Piazza Fontana. The resulting explosion, ripped through the building killing 16 people and injuring 88. At the same time another bomb detonated in a bank in Rome and yet another unexploded device was discovered in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.



Soon after the Piazza Fontana explosion, the police arrested around 80 socialists, communists and known anarchists, including Giuseppe 'Pino' Pinnelli. Pinnelli was held in custody at the Milanese police headquarters, while another anarchist Pietro Valpreda, a poet, dancer and novelist was arrested and detained in Rome. At some point during Pinnelli's questioning, he fell to his death, apparently from the open window of the fourth floor interrogation room.

Quick to take up an investigation into police corruption and expose a government strategy to commit acts of terrorism which were then blamed on the Left side of the political spectrum, the militant newspaper *Lotta Continua* accused police inspector Calabressi of orchestrating the murder of Pinnelli. Calabressi's response was to swiftly take the newspaper to court, suing for defamation of character. It was this act of terrorism and the widely reported court case against *Lotta Continua* that forms the backdrop and inspiration for Dario Fo's political satire.

*Morte accidentale di un'anarchico* was first performed in Milan almost a year to the day after the original bombing on the 10th December 1970 by Collettivo Teatrale La Comune, a theatre company set up by Fo and his wife Franca Rame. Fo had recently turned his back on a very successful commercial theatre career to establish a more political performance circuit. 'Pino' Pinnelli's death and the *Lotta Continua* trial were perfect material for Fo's satirical writing and improvised clowning skills. From the outset of the first performance, Fo continually updated the script, sometimes daily as the trial progressed and further allegations of corruption came to light.

The political satire was reportedly performed to over half a million people within the first two years of its life, often provoking lively debate and discussion. During that time, Fo and La Comune were targeted by the authorities and "*subjected to provocation and persecution of all kinds, sometimes more grotesque and comical in their repressive stupidity than the very farce were performing.*" (Dario Fo)

Fo's aim was to add to the so called counter-information (*controinformazione*) that artists, writers and political activists were publishing and performing in order to counteract what the student movement of the 1960s called *disinformazione*; namely the biased and distorted view of current affairs that the right wing controlled media and industrial groups were manipulating. Many Italians believed that as well as the media, the ruling class controlled the state, the

judiciary and even the church.

Over the intervening five decades, the play continues to be updated and performed world-wide and has given countless theatre audiences the opportunity to satirise a politically 'corrupt' world through the farcical lens of the Maniac. For the actor and director, Fo's play is challenging, full as it is of Commedia Del'arte style lazzis and clowning, bawdy humour and fast paced comic language.

## **A word from the author Dario Fo about Accidental Death of an Anarchist.**

Speaking in an interview in 1985, Fo discusses the origins of Anarchist.

*"The events upon which the play is based took place in 1969. A bomb exploded in the center of Milan, near the Duomo. Sixteen died. The police blamed the anarchists, one of whom, Giovanni Pinelli, they seized. Later on he was thrown from a window at police headquarters. There is considerable evidence that Pinelli's death was murder, not an accident as the police claimed, so the title Accidental Death of an Anarchist, is ironic. We are sure it was not an accident. . . . It was murder. . . . But this is the official police characterization of the event. The case was filed as an "accidental death."*

Dario Fo

<http://bombmagazine.org/article/664/dario-fo>

Dario Fo has been credited as being the most widely performed contemporary writer in world theatre and was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1997. Actor, comedian, designer, clown, playwright, author, political activist and painter he continues to highlight the struggles of the common man and woman against corruption and injustice.

*Accidental Death of an Anarchist* asks the audience to consider a number of political questions with one simple one at its heart; is it right that an innocent man should die at the hands of the authorities who then act with impunity and without fear of prosecution? Fo's genius is to turn a real life tragedy into a piece of knockabout theatre without exploiting the real victims, presenting a searing indictment of injustice and corruption.

‘Pinelli, or rather his corpse and with it the 16 corpses of the massacre, were a constant presence on stage. This was something the public commented on during the discussions at the end of each performance.’ - Dario Fo

## THE MAIN CHARACTERS

Fo creates a circus of absurd characters that revolve around the whirlwind of confusion the Maniac in his various guises, creates during the course of the play. Students will need to explore the characters through the fast paced physicality of the action and comedic exchanges of language. There is much fun to be had in exploring the characters through the traditions of the Commedia Del’arte, but students should remember that apart from the Maniac and perhaps the Constable, the characters are inspired by real people and the script has its origins in *“the authentic documents - and complete transcripts carries out by the various judges and police reports - we turned the logic and truth of the facts on (their) head.”* Dario Fo

## THE MANIAC

*“I realised we needed a decoy character, a surety so to speak. And then I got the idea that this surety could be a Madman who holds the key....To all the madness, and he becomes normal while everything else is abnormal. A total reversal.”*

Dario Fo

<http://sol.du.ac.in/mod/book/view.php?id=954&chapterid=607>

The Maniac is the pivotal character in what Fo describes as ‘a grotesque farce’. Ironically labelled ‘mad’ as he is the sanest character in the play, it is the Maniac’s skilful manipulation of the hapless police that exposes their contradictions.

*He looks like the cliché idea of a disciple of Freud; wild hair, thin spectacles, goatee beard, shabby suit or mac. He sits calmly. He carries about four plastic carrier bags stuffed with god knows what.*

By pretending to be various figures of authority including the investigating judge Professor Malipiero, the Maniac dupes the officials to re-create the events with the purpose of showing the inconsistencies in the official reports of the anarchist's "leap" and to confess their responsibility in the anarchist's death.

**MANIAC:** *Committed sixteen times, same thing every time - 'Histrionic mania' from the Latin, 'histriones, 'to act the part of' - my hobby, you see, the theatre; and my theatre is the theatre of reality so my fellow artists must be real people, unaware that they are acting in my productions, which is handy, as you see, I've got no cash to pay them.*

The Maniac's multiple personas and controlled mania along with his disguises and props pulled out of various plastic bags, present a huge challenge for any actor. Quick fire exchanges of language, slapstick clowning and lazzi routines contrast with substantial monologues and speeches. The Maniac is the narrator and political commentator and the lens through which the audience will judge the guilt of the other characters and the institution they represent. The Maniac's use of direct address, breaks the fourth wall and makes the audience a co-conspirator in his endeavour to uncover the lies of the police.

Students may wish to explore the Commedia tradition of the Zanni – the mischievous Arlecchino and Pulchinella, but should remember that Fo's Maniac is astute and controlled, the chaos he contrives serves no purpose other than to expose the truth.

## **BERTOZZO**

**BERTOZZO:** *'I ought to warn you that the author of this sick little play, Dario Fo, has the traditional, irrational hatred of the police common to all narrow-minded left wingers and so I shall, no doubt, be the unwilling butt of endless anti authoritarian jibes.'*

The first police officer the audience meets, Bertozzo sets the context of the play through direct address. Bertozzo initially tries to charge the Maniac with any crime he can, before he eventually accepts defeat and releases him. After being tricked into being punched in the face by Pissani, Bertozzo does not come back into the play until the Act two when he becomes the foil to a series of slapstick routines.

## INSPECTOR PISSANI

MANIAC: *It's good old Inspector Defenestration himself...Our little joke...from the french fenetre meaning window, i.e. 'defenestration', to chuck out of the same'.*

The character of Pissani roots *Anarchist* back in the real events of Milan explosion. Pissani is Fo's satirical representation of Commissario Luigi Calabresi who brought the case against Lotta Continua. He was the chief interrogating officer implicated in Pinelli's death and his polo neck sweater and sports jacket that Fo describes in the original would have been a familiar image to the Italian audiences of the time from Calabresi's photographs in the papers.

## SUPERINTENDENT

Pissani's superior and the highest status police officer who has to manage the confusion of the Maniac, the failings of his colleagues and the questioning of the reporter Fellini. Oafish and belligerent, and not averse to 'getting rough' with suspects, it is his statement accounting for the suicide of the anarchist as a 'raptus' that the Maniac in disguise as the judge, first ridicules. The Superintendent is not averse to shifting the blame to others in a bid to save his own skin.

As the judge's review becomes more involved, along with Pissani and the Constable, the Superintendent is tricked into thinking that the Maniac is indeed there to help them absolve themselves from the death of the railway worker, leading to the unlikely rendition of the Internationale at the end of Act One.

## THE CONSTABLE

A police officer of low ranking, but none the less culpable - he supports his superiors but clearly has a self-preservation streak when he feels threatened. The Constable has some funny one-liners that he interjects at various points.

CONSTABLE: *It was just the odd joke, your Honour, you should see the Inspector when he's on form. Keeps us all in stitches. Ha ha.*

The same actor plays two different constables, one on the first floor of the police headquarters and the second on the fourth floor - prompting the Maniac to ask him 'Do I know you?' as he suspiciously eyes the addition of a fake moustache.

## FELETTI

The only female character in the play and an opportunity for Fo to explore the theme of reform verses revolution and the role of the press and journalists in securing change. Feletti appears in Act Two demanding answers to the public outrage caused by the police's account of the death of the railway worker anarchist. She goes on to question the use of police spies infiltrating Left wing political groups who committed atrocities to discredit the political opposition to the establishment. A direct reference to the so-called 'strategy of tension'.

FELETTI: *Listen!! There have been 173 dynamite attacks in the last fourteen months, that's twelve a month, one every three days! It has been proved that 102 of these were the work of known fascists! There are serious indications that of the remaining 71 over half are attributable to fascists or extreme right paramilitary groups. Would you agree with these figures Superintendent?*

Feletti is composed, abrupt and confident and is likely based on real investigative journalist Camilla Cederna, who was a celebrated reporter for the Italian weekly L'Espresso. Feletti and the Maniac seem to want the same thing; to expose corruption. However where, she believes that a scandal, well reported in the press is beneficial and will lead to real change, the Maniac sees her as someone who will profit from the scandal and that such scandals merely lead to reform, when what is needed is revolution

**MANIAC:** *You are a journalist Miss Feletti, so you want to use your pen to lance the public boil; but what will you achieve? A huge scandal, a heap of big nobs compromised, head of the police shunted off into retirement.*

**FELETTI:** *Not a bad day's work.*

## THEMES

### REVOLUTION VERSES REFORM

Dario Fo is a radical writer and *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* advocates revolution. Wholescale and widespread corruption is challenging for any society to overcome. At the time Fo wrote the play, Italy was locked in a struggle between the establishment and those who wanted radical change. How to facilitate that change was, and is, something that continues to elude many people who find themselves in the same position around the world. The question of change by reforming and improving the existing system bit by bit, or completely dismantling society through revolution and rebuilding from the ground up, is tackled through the discourse of Feletti and The Maniac in Act Two.

**MANIAC:** *While you Communist Party journalists pass yourselves off as champions of truth and peddle your reformist illusions in the capitalist press I'm supposed to defend democracy by volunteering for the mortuary slab! Why not ask yourself, Miss Feletti, what sort of democracy requires the services of dogs such as these?*

It is political corruption and the ambition of the authorities to keep their absolute power that Fo is concerned with. The ludicrous antics of the police trying to defend their corrupt and unbelievable account of the 'suicide' of the anarchist represent the establishment, struggling to maintain their status in the face of increasing scrutiny, public scepticism and anger. In the play, the characters become bigger than the sum of their parts and take on the mantle of the pillars of society they represent.

Fo adds a final comment upon the reform versus revolution debate in the final scene of the play. The Maniac produces a bomb and gives Feletti the choice of joining the ranks of the extremists and becoming an accomplice to a terrorist by saving herself and letting the bomb explode or saving the corrupt officials and relying upon their integrity to come clean and face trial. Feletti chooses the latter only to become their latest victim. Fo cleverly gives us a false ending so we can see both versions played out, leaving a final instruction to the audience.

MANIAC: *Oh Dio! Which ever way it goes , you see, you've got to decide. Goodnight.*

## STRATEGY OF TENSION AND FEAR

Like many influential plays that have stood the test of time, *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* was born from the crucible of great social unrest. The power struggle between the authorities and those who wanted fundamental social change in the 1960s and 1970s was an evident and everyday part of life for many Italians. The establishment led by the Christian Democratic Party feared that the extreme political Left would seize power and control, demanding revolution rather than moderate reform. By committing terrorist acts and blaming them on the 'anarchists', the authorities hoped the public would back a firm authoritative hand against these 'enemies of the state'. This became known as the 'strategy of tension' as the state perpetrated bombings and acts of terrorism, creating a climate of fear amongst many, hampering and discrediting the efforts of revolutionaries like Fo.

Actors can explore Fo's allusions to the strategy of tension through the language of the Maniac and particularly the exchanges with Feletti who raises the question of police infiltration into political groups. Through Feletti, Fo includes statistics about the number of terrorist attacks carried out by far right organizations. It is easy to see why Dario Fo was reviled by many in authority. In 1973 his wife and long-time collaborator Franca Rame was abducted, horrifically beaten and raped by a gang of masked men. A crime that was later linked to neo-fascist groups and the Milan police who were incensed by Fo's mockery of the judiciary. Further evidence uncovered in the 1990's, suggests that the perpetrators were acting on orders that came directly from government ministers.

## MADNESS

By creating a protagonist that is a 'certified mental case', Fo asks the audience to consider if the Maniac is truly crazy, or is it the world around him that is mad? In a world where the ultimate power of the police means their corruption goes unpunished, who is the more mad; those who accept that or those that question it? As the Maniac acts increasingly erratically, spinning more and more lies and adopting ever more ludicrous disguises, he manages to reveal more and more truths. It is the police figures who grow in madness, as they desperately accept the Maniac's outlandish fabrications in order to save their own skins. Truth and falsehood begin to blur as the death of the anarchist is examined and re-invented. Fo is satirising the institutions that allow violence and corruption to pertain. Ironically protected from prosecution by virtue of his mania; it is only the archetype 'fool' that can see, comment upon and expose these untouchable pillars of society.

## VIOLENCE

For a play with a backdrop of an act of terrorism that explores a murder in police custody, *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* has no real depiction of violence apart from the slapstick, knockabout clowning between the characters. Through the comedic hitting, slapping and kicking, actors might wish to explore this implied violence and what it represents. Actors will need to find time to choreograph safe ways to present this action and improvised acting exercises exploring *lazzi* will be beneficial in exploring timing and comedic tension. As the audience laughs, there is an uneasy sense of the brutal interrogation techniques that many of the original audience considered to be commonplace in police stations across Italy.

MANIAC: I expect you fancied roughing him up a bit?  
PISSANI: Never touched the bastard.  
SUPERINTENDENT: Very even tempered. The whole proceedings.  
MANIAC: Don't get me wrong. Just a little slap, pchew!, across the chops?  
PISSANI: Never got near him.  
MANIAC: Bit of a massage, to relive his tensions...  
MANIAC starts to massage  
CONSTABLE MANIAC: Shoulders full of cramps...yes...  
CONSTABLE: Left a bit.  
MANIAC: Left a bit. There.  
CONSTABLE: Lovely.  
MANIAC: ...After all those hours... and then...Sudden karate chop.  
MANIAC: ....Ka...  
MANIAC: ....Ka! Ya! Eeeeeeaah!

## BRECHT

*“Every artistic expression is either influenced by or adds something to politics.”*

Dario Fo

Like Brecht, Dario Fo’s political theatre is designed to encourage the audience to think, make informed judgements and take action. Fo incorporates many of the tenants of Epic Theatre into his writing and performance. By encouraging his audience not to be a passive passenger on a cathartic journey, Fo’s theatre promotes reaction and discussion. Students exploring the play might wish to consider moments where the forth wall is broken by the action or actors. For instance, Fo employs direct audience address on numerous occasions which reminds the audience they are watching a play which is the representation of an event – not the event itself. The Maniac’s many changes of character, discourse on acting and the rewards of playing a judge, neatly encapsulates the Brechtian ‘actor as demonstrator’ model. Students could make an interesting comparative model of Fo’s dramatic techniques against Epic theatre.



1970 performance at the Capannone di Via Colletta in Milan.

The action shifts between two rooms on two floors in the police headquarters and the frantic action and fast pace means that actors have to be absolutely comfortable with moving round the set. Chairs, desks, filing cabinets and doors all interplay in a complex choreographed sequence of physical routines. The constant references to the audience and the breaking of the Fourth wall make the play an ideal candidate for an agit prop style of performance; simple set and props, suggestions of doors and the ever present open window, actors setting props and scenery add to the fast frenetic pace that the play demands. A thrust stage or apron stage would add a sense of immediacy and support the direct address and involvement of the audience in the action.



1970 performance at the Capannone di Via Colletta in Milan.

The original performances in December 1970 at the disused factory Capannone di Via Colletta in Milan were on a very simple end-on raised stage in front of a passionate, interested audience. Simple lighting and rudimentary settings adding to the improvised 'in the moment' feel of the performance.



1970 performance at the Capannone di Via Colletta in Milan.

As Fo states;

The English public, seeing this play in its present adaption, obviously cannot feel the real, tragic, tangible atmosphere which the Italian public brought with them when they came to the performance. It can only share this only by the act of imagination or - better still - by substituting the violence practised by the powers in Italy (the police, the judiciary, the economy of the banks and the multinationals) equally tragic and brutal facts from the recent history of England.

## DARIO FO



1979 Belt and Braces performance of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, Half Moon Theatre, London

Students will need to understand that Fo's political theatre is by its very nature rooted in a particular social, political and cultural context. Dario Fo maintains a strong control over his plays, only sanctioning adaptations and translations that he feels are appropriate and relevant to the country and time of performance. In Gavin Richard's particular adaptation of Gillian Hanna's translation, Fo recognises that some of the original political satire has been sacrificed 'in favour of solutions that are exclusively comic.' However the play remains overtly political.

*'.....[Accidental Death of an Anarchist] celebrated its 250th performance at Wyndhams Theatre on Friday October 31st. It is now the longest running alternative theatre production ever, and continues to generate a whole new West End audience. Its success has opened the West End to a whole new range of productions from the fringe and from small theatres. Many consider that this achievement has changed the face of London theatre permanently.'*

(This Is London magazine, November 1980)

Under Richard's direction and chiming with the political, alternative theatre scene that Belt and Braces Theatre Company were very much a part of in the UK, the performance ran for two years in the West End following an extensive tour national tour starring Alfred Molina. In 1983, Gavin Richards went on to create a television version of the play and like Fo, excelled in the role of the Maniac. Belt and Braces Theatre Company was set up in 1973 and disbanded in 1984 and is a very relevant starting point for students to explore the alternative theatre movement of the 1960s, 70s and 80s and draw comparisons with La Comune collective.

*Kind people, gather round and listen. The jongleur is here! I am the jongleur. I leap and pirouette, and make you laugh. I make fun of those in power, and I show you how puffed up and conceited are the bigshots who go around making wars in which we are the ones who get slaughtered. I reveal them for what they are. I pull out the plug, and ... pssss ... they deflate. Gather round, for now is the time and place that I begin to clown and teach you. I tumble, I sing and I joke! Look how my tongue whirls, almost like a knife. Remember that.*

Mistero Buffo 1969, Dario Fo

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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