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The Maniac as the Apocryphal *Intervento*: How Form Determines Substance in Fo's Accidental Death of an Anarchist

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ABSTRACT

The *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* (1970) is one of famed Italian play-wright Dario Fo, written as a response to the neo-fascist tension that reached a boiling point during the 'Hot Autumn.' A period of immense turmoil in late 20th-century Italy. The play draws from the conventions of the Brechtian form and *commedia dell'arte*, aptly transforming them into mechanisms that can help both the play and spectators subvert the high cultures of Gramscian cultural hegemony, absorbed into ADA's comic microcosm. This essay explores how political and theatrical realms are immortalised and then pit against each other through the course of the play, with the character of the Maniac acting as a rhetorical device acting as the connection between the two. In essence, this paper believes that Style is considered over substance in many of the styles of theatre *Accidental Death* operates within; the stylistic elements that quantitatively constitute the Brechtian form, *commedia dell'arte*, and farce allow them to subvert the 'high cultures' that are held culpable in Gramscian cultural hegemony, all of which ADA absorbs into its comic microcosm. This leads to a sustained paradox between the political and theatrical dimensions of the play, where the theatrical lends credence to the political through the use of fictional formal elements.

Keywords- Accidental Death of an Anarchist, Dario Fo, Brecht, Commedia Dell'arte, Fascism

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Accidental Death of an Anarchist (1970) is a play that is relatively unconventional in form, reimagining a range of theatrical conventions typically characteristic of the Brechtian form and *commedia dell'arte*. The formal aspects of each interact with the other to construct ADA's discourses and how its script works to shift the mode of creative production from the bourgeoisie state to collectively provide a counter-narrative to the events surrounding Giuseppe Pinelli's death. The play would not have been able to sufficiently create its ideological condition without utilising these formal techniques; its style determines its substance, much like theatrical pieces that could more neatly fit into the styles of theatre mentioned above. The stylistic elements that quantitatively constitute the Brechtian form and *commedia dell'arte* allow them to subvert the 'high cultures' that are held culpable in Gramscian cultural hegemony, all of which ADA absorbs into its comic microcosm. This leads to a sustained paradox between the political and theatrical dimensions of the play, where the theatrical lends credence to the political through the use of fictional tropes. This essay primarily focuses on the role of the Maniac and his mask as a rhetorical device; the *intervento*, or the intersection between the theatre and socio-political oppression (Wing 1993, 311).

To provide background, Richard Sogliuzzo describes Dario Fo's particular brand of theatre as 'agitational propaganda theatre,' (Sogliuzzo 1972, 72) operating within what Fo himself refers to as the reactionary dimension; one could construe ADA as a response to the 'strategy of tension' carried out by neo-fascist groups in Italy during the 'Hot Autumn,' a period of socio-political turmoil, in order to discredit labour advances between 1969-1972. (Hood 1986, XIV). Within this context, ADA has an undeniable ideological dimension that is expressed using, according to an interview with Fo conducted by *The Drama Review*, two fixed points; the storyteller (tracing back to the 17th century) or the voice of the story, and the jester, or *giullare*, an element of medieval performance traditions. (Ballerini et al. 1978, 36-37) Both are facets of a broader objective; to revive pre-capitalist theatrical forms, forms that would be deemed low-brow or misplaced within the Gramscian cultural hegemony, which ranks kinds of art dependent on the class category they cater to (Scapolo 2014, 688). In the words of Fo, 'classical theatre is fundamentally a class theatre.' (Ballerini et al. 1978, 42) Fo deems the fundamental aspects of his theatre; the 'literary,' consisting of the text/script itself as a product of the social class that writes or performs it, and the 'situation,' that refers to the conflict that contextualises what occurs on stage, preceding the text. (Ballerini et al. 1978, 42-43)

The term *giullarata* is used on occasion throughout this essay, referring to the theatrical structure the *giullari* (the travelling troupes of the Middle Ages) and Fo himself utilised in order to delineate socio-political events. A key characteristic is the narrator's ability to meld himself into a play's characters, giving them a voice that appears to originate from the wider context that the play takes place in. The play-write is infused into the play's narrative. This is the groundwork for a critical *commedia dell'arte* technique of framing characters; an emphasis on the mask. Often utilised by play-writes like Molière, the mask acts as, in Fo's own words, 'the dialectical synthesis of conflicts.' (Ballerini et al. 1978, 43) Each character is the manifestation of several conflicts that are never completely synthesised, something evident in the rapid perspective shifts the Maniac undergoes and in how the play does not have any real resolution. (Ballerini et al. 1978, 43-44) The mask is the collective voice of the story unrelated to the individual actions of the actor on stage; roles and typologies of characters are fixed by convention. The Maniac is a depiction and a subversion of the state's many changing faces, with the police's perceived validity of his renditions and costumes wholly dependent on how beneficial each one is to their (and by extension, the state's) ends. Take for example, what he tells the Superintendent and Inspector Pissani; 'The Minister of Internal Affairs...unless you can come up with a miracle you will be made...example of' followed by, when quoting the Minister, 'you must provoke the kind of atmosphere in which we can justifiably demand greater repressive powers.' (Fo 1979, 30) The First Councillor to the High Court, Marco Maria Malpiero, the man the Maniac first pretends to be, is an agent of the state with the express intention of 'handling' the situation. The state and its institutions understand and recognise that folly and fiction are the only things that will save their legitimacy, in the eyes of the public.

The Maniac is the archetypal *giullare*, what Walter B. Scott refers to as the 'clever clown'; a madman with a fool's license to critique institutions with little regard, until of course, he begins to be taken seriously by the public. (Scott 1951, 33) In fact, it is interesting to note how the audience themselves may have initially thought that he was a nebulous fool, but may increasingly find themselves conflicted regarding what they are meant to perceive.

This effect on the audience plays into how the play's theatrical framing works to position Fo himself as the *giullare*, and his working-class audience as the medieval peasantry the *giullare* historically appealed to (Wing 1993, 311). Fo's *giullare* exists with no conscience; he is an apocryphal device that relentlessly seeks out his objectives without worrying about being respectable or even particularly credible, two traits a bourgeoisie bureaucracy treasures. The

Maniac possesses no allegiance to any socio-political alliance; he is critical of both the state and its agents, and the radical left anarchists, who he refers to as ‘idiotic’ (Fo 1979, 62). This allows him to exist within a dialectic, what even the police officers within the play admit is the best way to deconstruct an event (Fo 1979, 62). The consistent use of improv is meant to agitate the audience, steadily accelerating the narrative and highlighting the contradictions present both in the state and in the audience’s own conscience.

This back and forth between what the Maniac seems to represent at a given moment and the other characters actively create the link between the audience and himself. This is due to the aforementioned agitation that is fostered through the *giullari* framing, where the object or source of oppression is merely alluded to until the very end of the play. By never clearly identifying the victim or perpetrator: the protagonist or the antagonist, Fo is able to shift the responsibility of drawing parallels between an obviously political piece of theatre and their own state of conditions to the audience themselves, not the theatrical representation they are seeing. This is achieved through what author J.L. Wing (1993) refers to as ‘iconicity;’ character fragments and bits of interactions that are difficult to follow in message and tone. Fo, through both of these framing devices, creates a theatrical and political montage (Jenkins 1986, 175) where shifting perspectives foster a communal experience among the play’s spectators. The audience, since they are never given the opportunity to associate with only one point of view, end up actively participating in the creation of ADA’s message; they are no longer mere spectators, they are a part of the play’s very fabric.

One might notice that this brief analysis of the audience’s importance has its roots in certain Brechtian traditions, setting the stage for how the play functions within and critiques illusionary theatre. Brecht emphatically derided what he called the ‘culinary theatre’ of the bourgeoisie, the kind that kept its spectators at a distance (Wing 1993, 304). The bourgeoisie play was meant to be passively consumed; its existence could be boiled down to its aesthetic value, a value that must be accepted uncritically, maintaining its dominance in the Gramscian cultural hegemony. While the aim of bourgeoisie realism was to smooth over contradictions, *commedia*’s objective is to push them to the forefront; an observation key to the Maniac’s rhetorical function. Oppositional techniques to highlight these contradictions include the aforementioned dialectical perspective shifting (*discorsi*), breaking of the fourth wall (*slittamento*), grotesque and slapstick humour and character discombobulation (*tormentoni*) (Wing 140, 1990). Once the audience’s perception is sufficiently split, Fo uses the gap created to achieve a Brechtain

Verfremdungseffekt where spectators are now implicated in the play's message (Wing 1993, 305). The script is no longer a piece of illusionary theatre meant to be used and discarded. It is now a carnivalesque, 'low-brow' mode of production, subverting something that is typically only in the state's possession.

Illusionary, fictional stories are imbibed in the play; the Maniac and his accompanying characters all operate within and find power in fiction, only to achieve different ends. While the Maniac uses his constantly changing version of reality to expose the truth, the police operate within fiction to conceal it, transforming it into something more palatable. For example, in the original version of Pinelli's death, the police rely on the idea that the anarchist underwent a 'raptus,' or a sudden onset of immense emotion or guilt, which led to him throwing himself out the window. The Maniac however, explains that this version would support the belief that the police intimidated Pinelli, essentially amounting to abetment of suicide (Fo 1979, 27). What is ironic here is that the Maniac (as Marco Maria Malpiero) is simply stating the truth; a truth that has become unacceptable in the police's narrative. All the characters seem wholly arbitrary, trying on different roles and motivations depending on the story they wish for the audience to believe. Even as the group attempts to build a story that the audience will believe, everything they do hinges on a lie; the anarchist was pushed, his death was never accidental at all. It follows that the theatrical representation of an event within a piece of supposedly realistic theatre is inevitably linked to political fallacy. This premise increasingly becomes more obvious as the play progresses. To discover how fiction demystifies reality, it would be worth analysing each aforementioned oppositional technique with specific regards to the Maniac's development, showcasing how the process of theatre becomes the farcical mechanism wherein the cultural and material hegemony of the state is diluted and the truth discovered through fiction.

In ADA, the police treat events around Pinelli's death as little more than targets of manipulation, with a total of four fictional iterations (including the one that is told to Feletti) of how his death transpired. Each version falls firmly within the realm of fiction, and stories are naturally subject to the whims of their author (Wing 1993, 141). Each version, within its own script, is enacted using rather carnivalesque *commedia* elements, such as, as mentioned; heavy improv, grotesque and slapstick humour involving the physical deterioration of the human body, song and costume. The combination of these oppositional techniques means that authority, as an abstract force that constantly changes its host, is always something to be

challenged. Fo's authority as the play-writer is called into question almost immediately by the characters and through the dialogue he has created. For example, in the words of Inspector Bertozzo: '...the author of this sick little play, Dario Fo, has the traditional, irrational hatred of the police common to all narrow-minded left-wingers.' (Fo 1979, 2) Soon after, Bertozzo is punched in the face (just one example of how comedy intersects with violence), much in part due to the Maniac's own actions, in a scene framed like a moment of comedic retribution. In this way, the audience receives the impression that Fo is a part of the Maniac; the first example of how the theatrics of it all, confined to the comic microcosm (a miniature society that consists of characters that both represent and are at odds with society at large (Longman 2008, 10)) of *commedia*, intersects with the political sphere that Fo draws from. Fo's fictional renditions of the fall in turn deride the state-authorised narrative around Pinelli's death. Each oppositional technique then serves to question the authority of the script itself. This is evident in the way the script seems to be at odds with itself, with the Maniac (more often than not) interrupting its own progression.

The Maniac feels like he is actively rewriting the script. A formula is followed; the Maniac and the police officers build a narrative that attempts to escape state-culpability for Pinelli's death before the Maniac seems to abruptly switch tone, criticising and mocking the officers for their incompetence or outright corruption. For example, when building the third version of events before Feletti is introduced, the Maniac goes from supplementing the police's case about attempting to save the victim before suddenly questioning if Pinelli was a tripped, before simply observing as they argue amongst themselves and the third proposed explanation crumbles (Fo 1979, 44). This shows the audience that the Maniac has been given the power to both push people in traditional authority positions, like the policemen, into fictional frameworks and also pull them out.

As the play progresses, the police's renditions under his guidance become more and more unhinged, nonsensical, and of course, theatrical. Language does not seem to mean anything; it is an utter distraction, a way to convince the public of the police's many iterations. For example, the original version has the Superintendent saying to Pinelli, 'It's no use trying to pull the wool over my eyes.' The Maniac then points out that this is not believable; he tells the Superintendent to take inspiration from 'documentary,' after which the line becomes, 'right you filthy pox-ridden...' (Fo 1979, 22-23). It is interesting that again, the Maniac pushes the policemen closer to what likely actually occurred on the night of Pinelli's death, but this also reinforces how

pointless and inaccurate the 'official' version of events is. Much like the 'culinary theatre' Brecht so despised (as aforementioned), this is a case of style over substance; empty and inauthentic meant for senseless consumption. It is made clear that the cops have no linguistic integrity; nothing they say is credible even within the confines of each fictional version. Their words do not mean anything, and theatrical credibility is equated to political credibility (Wing 1990, 144).

The way dialogue is constructed, the use of onomatopoeia, and songs each play into and construct the carnival of ADA, of which the Maniac is the main character. Through sheer absurdity does the demystification of Pinelli's death take place. The medium is the message, and the fact that such carnivalesque elements are so central to ADA's story (Sogliuzzo 1972, 77) speaks to how dedicated Fo was to using primarily 'proletarian' forms of entertainment to deconstruct the dominance of the state and its instruments. For example, the cops and the Maniac have an odd conversation about trains ('Choo choo...Whoo whoo') and sing a song (Fo 1979, 37-37), out of which an emotionally moving narrative about brotherhood and harmony emerges to set the stage of Pinelli's death. This highlights the level to which this is a performance; it is entertaining. After all, is the best way to encourage an audience to sympathise with an unsympathetic character not to give them an emotional backstory? (Wing 1990, 144) Another great example is when the Maniac, while mocking Inspector Pissani's poor attempt to defend the police's interrogation methods, begins to dramatically monologue, punctuating each dialogue with laughing, miming being beaten, and somersaulting (Fo 1979, 41). These actions all harken back to his role as ADA's *giullare*, the black mime one may find performing at a low-brow carnival. Eventually, these carnivalesque elements lose their festive connotations; they are adopted to unmask the contradictions and assumptions of the social order (Scapolo 2014, 698). What was once frivolous is now to be taken seriously, evolving the play's structure. This links to the use of grotesque and slapstick comedy, where humour is linked to violence, the final oppositional technique used to link politics and the theatre.

The Maniac, at his core, is a mirror of how the state is deconstructed throughout the increasingly unbelievable renditions of Pinelli's death. This is seen in his carnivalesque subversion of how, for example, he chooses to disguise his final character: Captain Marcantonio Banzi Piccini. Costumed in a ridiculous ensemble of a false moustache, glasses, a wig, wooden leg, false hand, eye patch and a crutch (Fo 1979, 50), his costume begins to physically fall apart as the 'scene' between Feletti and the police officers deteriorates, as Feletti

gradually begins to unravel the truth and Bertozzo, who had only just reappeared, becomes increasingly incensed at his exclusion from what has essentially become a piece of illusionary theatre in and of itself. As the truth is uncovered, as the Maniac announces dramatically that ‘corruption is the rule,’ he loses his eyepatch. As the body of bureaucracy descends, as does the Maniac’s disguise, amounting to the ‘grotesque,’ a key element of *commedia* (Farrell 1995, 311-312). A connection is drawn between violence, authority, and comedy.

The only thing that amplifies and legitimises the Maniac’s deconstruction of the state is his control of the theatrical narrative within the script. Anyone not part of the improv game of the report fabrication between the Maniac, Pissani, the Constable, and the Superintendent is also excluded from the political realm of constructing a solid report that rids the State and its instruments of blame, and is met with a slapstick rendition of violence. See, for example, how Bertozzo is attacked (in a way framed as comical) for suggesting that Piccini is not himself. For him to expose the ‘lies’ that the others are happy to go along with because they benefit the state, he has to control the theatrical narrative. When he demands that Piccini reveals himself, the Maniac does, while also ending the improv and becoming the play’s *intervento*, exposing the ‘true’ version of events. He becomes the intermediary between the political truth and the popular, illusionary theatre on stage.

This analysis goes to show how the Maniac becomes the device that links the theatrical and political dimensions together, and how formal elements of *commedia dell’arte* and the Brechtian form allow for ADA to demystify Pinelli’s death as effectively as it does, incorporating the audience into the collective construction of ADA’s narrative. The two spheres interact with and reinforce each other to effectively demystify events around an event that institutional forces consistently attempted to shroud in fallacy. The political realm and the play’s spectatorial impact is reliant on its form and its use and subversion of illusionary theatre and medieval theatre tropes, particularly as explored through the character of the Maniac.

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