

The Playwright as Deviser:
a case study of Fo's
Accidental Death of an Anarchist

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This essay examines the role and the relationships of the playwright in and with the process of devising a play. For "devising" I refer to a mode of creation of an original performance which differs from the practice of traditional theatre. The differences can be found in one or more of four aspects, which for traditional theatre are: the leading role of the text, the hierarchical organization of the company, the bourgeois audience and the theatrical space of the performance.

Because it is a case study of Fo's creation of Accidental Death of an Anarchist in 1970, this essay analyses if, how and why we can define Fo's process of composing a play as "devising" and in what aspect it differs from other practices of the same name.

1. The story of the facts.

On the 12th of December of 1969 a bomb explodes in Piazza Fontana in Milan: sixteen people die and more than one hundred are wounded.

The police arrests several people from the anarchist groups of the town. On the night between the 15th and 16th Giuseppe Pinelli, one of the anarchists, falls from the fourth floor of Milan Police Station. The Police defends itself with different contradictory versions of what has happened. In the meantime, the anarchist Pietro Valpreda is indicated as the main author of the massacre of Piazza Fontana.

The left-wing organizations assume that this action is a cover-up of the bombs, using the anarchists as scapegoats. A book called The Slaughter of State is published. The left-wing groups believe that there is "a tension strategy" going on to justify a possible coup by the most right-wing parts of the establishment under American influence and in connection with fascist groups; the coup would be a reaction of the movement of protest of 1968.

The death of Pinelli is taken as the symbol of the violence of the Police and the power. Three thousands people participate in the funeral of the anarchist. Franca Rame is a personal friend of Pietro Valpreda: she goes to visit him in jail and she is sure as many other people with the same political conviction that he is innocent.

On the 21st of May of 1970, the judge Caizzi dismisses the case of Pinelli, defining it as "accidental death". A month earlier, Luigi Calabresi, the Police senior officer who

was present during the interrogation of Pinelli sued for defamation the communist newspaper "Lotta Continua" (Non-Stop Fight), which had called him "the killer of Pinelli". The trial will start in October.

On the 5th of December La Comune, Dario Fo's new company, goes on stage in Varese with the play Accidental Death of an Anarchist.

2. The story of the Text¹.

The Anarchist comes to Fo's mind straight after Pinelli's death. It was not only the death of the 'suspect', but mainly the bomb and the cover-up by the establishment which concerned him. Fo starts to gather information, writing notes, testing ideas. He discusses with the actors of the company, and above all with the people of the audience at the end of the performances, during what he calls "the third act".

The play goes through at least two different rough outlines before Fo comes out with the idea of the Madman in the Police Station, which appears in a short script of four pages: Pinelli's Case: Counter-Investigation. Fo rushes to meet his company which is rehearsing Tutti Uniti! Tutti Insieme! Ma Scusa Quello non è il Padrone?. He reads it to Franca Rame and the other actors, obtaining suggestions and the confidence that the that is the right way.

In less than ten days the first draft of the play (a eighty pages long script) is ready. Although supposed to go on stage in October, the Anarchist is postponed to December, as La Comune decides to devise a play about the fights in Jordan: Vorrei Morire anche Stasera se Dovessi Pensare che non è Servito a Niente.

¹ This account of the story of the composition and the changes of the Anarchist derives from the research in Fo's personal archives and from the talks with Dario Fo and Franca Rame.

During the touring of the play in 1970-'71, Fo makes changes listening to the audience suggestions and continually adapting it to the news of the facts which he receives directly from the lawyers of "Lotta Continua". Maybe the most important change involves the end, which in the final version is left more open and ambiguous than the previous one.

The text of the Anarchist keeps changing until 1972. In that year, after the trial of "Lotta Continua" has reached an abrupt end for the death of Calabresi, shot just outside his house, the Anarchist is published, obtaining the first final version. La Comune starts the season with a new play, Pum Pum! Chi è? La Polizia!, which Fo had in mind since the composition of the Anarchist (the first draft of Pum Pum! was among the notes for the Anarchist with the title A Ballet for Valpreda) and which is about the same topics of the Anarchist. This last play was thought not able anymore to cope with the reality, so there was a need for a complete new play: the Anarchist goes on the press, and Pum Pum! on stage.

In 1974, the Anarchist is published by Einaudi, the actual Italian publisher of Fo. The title is definitively set, while the text has not really changed, apart from two notes at the end and without the prologue at the beginning. The disappearance of the prologue means the dropping of any pretence of a play about an analogous fact happened in America during the 20s.

The text is changed in 1986, when Fo put it on stage again, to prevent the destruction of Pinelli's memorial stone. The changes are mainly of a theatrical nature, as Fo felt the new audience more used to TV shows needed a faster pace. The changes occurred this year (1998) to the text which will be published in Italy probably next year are mainly again for theatrical need apart from the probable disappearance of the two ending notes referring to the play as a device for the revolution in Italy.

3. Analysis of the Process

To analyse the process of devising the Anarchist we have to undertake an operation of decomposition of Fo's theatre into its theatrical and ideological elements, obtaining the basic components of a complex pattern which in reality is a whole continuous structure. And, because we are specifically looking at the Anarchist, we need to be aware how specific elements appear in the play. The continual viewpoint of the analysis will be Fo as a playwright, and specifically as the playwright involved in the process of writing the play, rather than in the playwright whose literary, theatrical and ideological aspects can be taken from his final work.

The Text.

As we have seen from the historical account, Fo's text continually changes. This aspect derives from two set of influences.

The first is the popular theatre. Fo began his career as a comedian, and then in comic shows called *rivista*, at the time very popular in Italy. The *rivista* was considered as a minor genre and its text was not the leading sign of the performance. Through Franca Rame, Fo meets another tradition of theatre: the popular touring company of Nineteenth Century Italy (Rame's family was one of them), which used to devise plays to perform in towns, based on the fact happened in the town itself. Another tradition, that of the *Commedia dell'Arte* Italian actors, suggested to Fo the

use of the 'accidents' during the performance. Even if the use of the 'accidents' reaches the zenith in Mistero Buffo (which was firstly devised in 1969, just before the Anarchist), the use to get gags and jokes from real facts can be considered as a high form of use of an external accident in the performance.

A fourth set of popular roots is the oral theatre of Medieval jesters, whose text where almost all of an improvised nature: *the players are not 'actors' - they are the immediate creators of the performances and interludes. Their creativity relies on their capacity to extemporize dramatic text out of 'secondhand' or 'used' plays combined with other materials, including literary and folk narrative, by their own improvisatory skill*². Another oral tradition are the storytellers of Lake Maggiore, where Fo was born and grown up, which transmitted stories never written down (only now, by Fo himself), through a tradition which dates back to the Medieval Ages.

All these traditions provide Fo with extreme flexibility in dealing with the text, and the awareness that the text is only one of the many signs of the performance.

The second line of influence is the political theatre. Fo's plays have a political viewpoint and a political aim: they are about contemporary reality, or with allegories of easy interpretation. The main 'general' influence is Brecht, but not for the process of composing the play. Brecht, like Fo, used to change his scripts during rehearsal, but this technique was not a political device in itself. Fo stated instead that *the theatre we make is a theatre to burn, a theatre which will not appear in the history of the bourgeoisie, but rather has the same function of a newspaper article, a rally, a political action*³. So, the malleable condition of a devised play, whose flexibility allows it to deal with contemporary reality, is seen by Fo as one of the necessary condition of the

² Carnival and Theatre, by Michael D. Bristol, London 1985. Pg. 117.

³ Quoted in Dario Fo, by Roberto Nepoti and Marina Cappa, Rome 1997. Pg. 11.

political function of the theatre. In this respect Fo is thus closer to the agit-prop theatre, to the Russian Blue Blouse movement, or to the American Living Newspapers.

For what concern the ideology of the text, the secondary role of the text in Fo's theatre do not derive from a post-modern philosophical position, but rather from recovery the historical roots of popular theatre. This position is coherent and linked with the marxist ideology of Antonio Gramsci, who stressed the need for the intellectual to create a popular counter-culture (a "national - popular" culture)⁴.

The Company

La Comune did not devise plays in a way which could have questioned Fo's authorship. "Fo was our company's writer" stated to me Franca Rame. However, discussions were endless inside the company, about political and theatrical subjects. And, more important, Fo had the role of playwright, director, and actor. So, the collaborative nature which is at the base of so many devising experience is at the base of Fo's work as well: inside himself. Fo's way of writing a play is proof of this: there is no scheme of plot, no outlined structure to begin with, but ideas, images, stories, jokes which slowly develop into the shape of a theatrical dialogue.

Of course a collaboration of a team is not the same as the triple role of the same person. However, this characteristic of Fo is an element which weakens the 'status' of the text, which has to cope with acting and directing inventions which have the same importance of the written word.

The Audience

⁴ A Gramsci Reader, edited by David Forgacy, London 1988. Pg. 363 - 370.

After 1968, Fo and Rame left the traditional theatre. This choice had different reasons, and one of the most important was the search for a true popular audience, which was identified through an ideological choice. Fo's first alternative company, Nuova Scena (New Stage) toured Italy through the network of cultural clubs of the Communist Party (ARCI). In 1970 La Comune created its own network of private clubs.

Apparently, the audience of working class people was Fo's 'target audience'. Franca Rame has denied that "Fo used to write for an audience", thus separating the moment of composition of the play from the reception of it. However, there might be a compromisory explanation. Fo developed a popular aesthetic of the theatre analogous to McGrath's⁵ since the beginning of his career: the choice of the audience in '68 was a natural development. So, there was no apparent change in the way Fo composed his plays.

For our concern, it must be pointed out that there was a sharp ideological awareness especially in the first plays of Fo after '68, which had a teaching purpose, i.e. to explain communism to the masses. He aimed to show exploitation and the ways to overcome such exploitation.

Theatrically, leaving the traditional theatre has meant for Fo the definitive undertaking of "the destruction of the fourth wall", meaning with this expression every device employed for the suspension of disbelief, from the lighting to the Stanislavski's acting. This ideal of "togetherness"⁶ with the audience involve all aspects of Fo's theatre. For what concern his writing, Fo has always stressed how many of his performances change every night through improvisation in accord to his sensitivity of the audience, how the "third act" might mean a change of the play and

⁵ *A Good Night Out* by John McGrath, London 1997. Pg. 53 - 60.

⁶ This expression in *Dario Fo* by Tony Mitchell London 1984.

how, on a ideological level, he has opposed the so-called "cultural colonialism": the production of a play for a traditional theatre and then the touring for alternative audience. A new audience needs a new theatre, with plays with a content able to involve it. All these aspects, which derive from an ideal of togetherness of both theatrical (comic farse - jesters) and ideological (counter-culture of the working class) origins stress the flexible nature of Fo's texts and their distinctive relationship with the audience.

The Anarchist

Most of the patterns outlined above are present in the Anarchist. The tradition of popular comic farse weakens the text of the play because it puts it at the same level of the other elements (stressing the leading role of the acting). The theatre of political action aims to a flexible text to deal with reality. Fo's triple role of actor, director and playwright, his sensitivity towards the audience and the "third act" allow for continual changes. All these aspects go for a flexible text which is devised every day on theatrical and political links with the audience.

The ideology of counter-culture becomes the political class struggle of early '70s, and the ideological aim of showing the exploitation becomes the political practice of counter-information: to tell a truth which the power tries to cover up to the people. So the text changes every night to keep the content up to date with what is going on outside the theatre. Many people used to come over and over to watch the performance only to get fresh news. Fo did this operation in his own theatrical way,

adding the news with fresh jokes and gags, coherent with the ancient jesters' practice of *ridere dicendo verum*⁷ (to speak truth laughingly).

The changes of the frames of the text (introduction, prologue, notes) shows the different political use of the text in response to the contemporary politics, but the text never changes for only political reasons: in '86 Fo uses the text for a new political aim but he changes it for theatrical motives.

In the '70s, many critics accused Fo of being only an ideological mirror, showing to the audience only what they wanted to believe. Therefore the function of counter-information would be only apparent. But the criticism, not groundless, misses the point of Fo's theatre, which wants to put the people themselves on stage, to create a theatre which would be absolutely opposite to the one of the bourgeoisie. He wanted to be "People's Court Jester" after all.

4. Conclusion

We can then conclude that the Anarchist has been devised by Fo, not in the collaborative way we use to refer to with the term 'devising', but still using the text in a process based on higher freedom and spontaneity than the traditional theatre. The process was not text-led and it had a target audience different from the bourgeoisie audience. There might have been an implicit hierarchical organization in La Comune, but, for the composition of the play, this was balanced by Fo's triple role. We have not dealt with the problem of the 'space', as for Fo it coincides with the one of an alternative audience.

⁷ Carnival and Theatre, pg. 125.

What makes Fo's devising very different from other practice with the same name is the result rather than the process. Fo's plays (and the Anarchist is no exception) are very far from the kind of highly visual performances which are usually the end of the devising process: they have a plot structure, simple lighting, ecc. The cause is to be looked in the theatrical philosophy which is the background for the devising operation. While most of the UK devising companies have a post-modern basis, Fo refers to old forms of popular theatre for ideological choice.

The Anarchist has been a successful comedy all over the world, even if it is a play devised from a specific facts and for a specific audience. The problem, however interesting, is out of context here, because in this essay the subject is the process of composition rather than the performativity of the finished work. Anyway, the process reverberates its flexibility in the published text, allowing the endless adaptations of the play. Everywhere outside Italy, the Anarchist is adapted to the surrounding reality, with Fo's approval. However, the play has an identity, a core which makes it recognizable: the only place where Fo felt the adaptation to be a betrayal was New York, where the play has been wiped off of all the political content. It was still a good *farsa*, it was not anymore the Anarchist⁸.

Appendix

Apart from the Anarchist, whose original Italian title is Morte Accidentale di un Anarchico, the Italian names of all Fo's plays quoted have been used in the essay.

⁸ Theatre Audiences, by Susan Bennet, London 1990. Pg. 107 - 108. The fact has been confirmed to me by Franca Rame, who said they wanted to sue the author of the adaptation!

Here is a translation:

- Mistero Buffo (1969)

Comic Mystery

- Pum, Pum! Chi è? La Polizia! (1972)

Knock, Knock! Who's There? The Police!

- Tutti Uniti! Tutti Insieme! Ma Scusa Quello non è il Padrone? (1971)

All United! All Together! Hey, Wait a Minute, isn't that the Boss?

- Vorrei Morire anche Stasera se Dovessi Pensare che non è Servito a Niente

(1970)

I Would Want to Die This Very Evening If I Thought It Had All Been for

Nothing

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For the story of the composition of the play and for general comments, ideas and suggestion the talks with Dario Fo and Franca Rame and the access to their personal archives have been of invaluable importance.

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