

Accidental Refutation of the Moral

By David Ramsay Steele

Dario Fo is an Italian anarcho-socialist who writes farces. No - that isn't a heavy lump of sarcasm, although I agree that there's very little written by anarcho-socialists that doesn't have its comical side, as readers of *Freedom* can testify.

In all seriousness, Dario Fo does write farces. They are fine farces and worth going to see. *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* did very well at Wyndham's and more recently *Can't Pay? Won't Pay!* was pulling them in at the Criterion.

But they are farces with a political message. Humour is ill-suited for radical persuasion. The comic has to build upon shared assumptions and an atmosphere of trust. If the shared assumptions are not there, the audience will say that it just isn't funny, and nothing could be more fatal. Humour is good for reinforcing common beliefs that already exist, bad for making converts.

Fo's farces remain funny to non-socialists mainly because they are skilfully crafted situation comedies which owe little to the political line. To say that *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* is anarchist or socialist is a bit like calling *A Night in Casablanca* a plea for the Third World. In both Fo plays there is a snappy little political sermon at the end, peppered with a few topical cracks at British politicians, presumably mixed in by the stage company. After a couple of hours' laughter it would be mean to begrudge them their little ideological "commercial".

The usual problem in combining entertainment with a political message is that the message will be completely detachable from the fun. The audience swallows the sugar and spits out the pill. But a more embarrassing fate has befallen *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*. The action of the play conclusively refutes the political message! Fo has painstakingly constructed an

ingenious and delightful farce, tacked on his conclusion, and failed to notice that the farce works only because the audience knows full well that the conclusion is false.

A farce requires some danger - of embarrassment at least. A bedroom farce would be unthinkable in a culture which knew nothing of prudery or fidelity. By contrast, Fo's story is about the sadistic doings of the Italian police, and their desperate attempts to conceal those doings. The farce relies on the danger of the policemen's lawbreaking being found out. When the uniformed thugs are finally exposed, the anarchist hero gets into an argument with bourgeois democracy, as typified by a Communist Party journalist (this is Italy), who recommends exposure of the evil deeds, arousal of public opinion and peaceful reform through the democratic process. Our hero replies with a fine tirade linking the Italian cops to fascism, Chile and H-Blocks. The punch line is: "Do you think you can disarm these scum with the ballot box?".

Anyone who has followed the story attentively must want to shout: "Yes!". The entire plot, each of its twists and turns, hangs on the policemen's fear of being found out. The mention of "loss of pension" through infraction of the rules sets them quaking in their bloodstained boots. The story is funny only because the bad cops are at the mercy of public opinion and democratic political authority. These scum have been armed by the ballot box alone and could be disarmed by the ballot box alone. Anyone who did not know this to be true would find the whole play mystifying rather than rib-tickling. Fo knows it. The anarchist hero knows it. The audience knows it.

There is just a fleeting glimpse of something else: a sizeable proportion of the oppressed toiling masses tacitly demands that the police beat the stuffing out of deviants and misfits of every stripe. But this fails to awaken the author from his romantic revolutionary reverie, in which "the people" are trodden down by "fascists". And the audience do not want to be awakened. This is a night at the theatre, after all: we didn't pay good money

to be made to think about unpalatable political realities.

Accidental Death is very good farce, but politically it is evasive to the point of contrived imbecility. The anarchist whose departure from this Vale of Tears was expedited by the boys in black had been picked up on suspicion of killing innocent people with a terrorist bomb. Naturally, he had nothing to do with it, for the play informs us that most (and strongly hints that all) bomb outrages have been perpetrated by fascists and police agents, usually the same persons. It would be pointless to deny this. (As for the poor sods in the H-Blocks, subjected to the indignity of being treated just like any pickpocket or drug-pusher, they are doubly innocent - they didn't do it, and they did it for Ireland.) The play might have mentioned the hypothetical possibility that some proletarian militant, momentarily befuddled by the ideological state apparatuses, could misread the current requirements of the dialectic and take it into his head to blow some of his fellow species-members to bits. Fo might have condemned this along with the fascist police bombings, or he might have cleared his throat and said well-it's-not-quite-the-same-thing-let's-not-be- simplistic. Instead he dodged it.

Can't Pay? Won't Pay! has altogether less zest than *Accidental Death*. Even the obligatory rousing Italian revolutionary song at the end isn't quite so rousing. The preaching is even less convincing, because *Accidental Death* is dominated by the self-confident joker, and we expect him to tell us what's eating him, whereas *Can't Pay? Won't Pay!* is about two ordinary working-class married couples, who end the play with a deeper understanding of capitalist oppression and the best way to fight the bosses: organised thieving. If you want it, take it. If we had to identify the "theme" of the work in an Eng. Lit. class, we might write: "Theft as the solution to working-class problems".

That theft is an inefficient way to distribute goods is illustrated inadvertently in the play. Antonia steals, among other things, frozen rabbits' heads and a can of dog food, though she has no dog. Things stolen as the opportunity presents - rather like things queued for in the heavily regulated societies

of Eastern Europe - will not correspond so well to the consumer's preferences as things chosen at leisure from open shelves. The thief's gain is less than she could derive from receiving the money value of the stolen goods in things freely selected, but the loss to the rest of society is no less. This disadvantage can be partly remedied by a well-developed market in stolen goods, though that is not entirely in the spirit of Fo. Also, theft leads to relative underproduction of things easier to steal. If pork chops are stolen more often than luxury yachts (value for value), then more luxury yachts and fewer pork chops will be produced, the higher the level of theft.

Among the theatre company's topical British insertions is a prediction of four million unemployed shortly in the UK. This gloomy eschatology sits badly with the anarcho-hippyist spirit of the play, which is better attuned to the upswing of the trade cycle. *Can't Pay? Won't Pay!* first appeared in 1974, in time to combine the euphoric cornucopia mentality of the 60s with exasperation at runaway inflation and disruptions of the market caused by price controls. That Fo is more socialist than anarchist comes over in his contempt for those who cheat the controls for profit.

It is a most embarrassing joke on the socialist pseudo-left that during the boom of the 50s and 60s they hankered for a good slump which would make the workers more revolutionary but now we have a slump which has made the workers *less* revolutionary (if that were possible). This play was written during the previous conjuncture, and the only way to beef up the appeal to faith in the coming slump is to turn it into faith in the worsening of the present slump. But amid the slump of the 1980s, it seems incongruous both to wish for things to get more grim and to preach "There's plenty for everybody - just take what you want".

Taking food from supermarkets, as Fo urges, will only hurt other workers who will have to pay higher prices for food. But doesn't it hurt the capitalists too? Isn't there some satisfaction in that? Leaving aside the fact that most capitalists are also workers and most workers are also capitalists, the capitalists who invest in farms, food

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warehouses, food processing and supermarkets will lose only insofar as a rise in theft marks down the past valuation of assets. Making an investment which under-rates subsequent losses due to theft is no different to any other entrepreneurial mistake. There is no reason to suppose that an increase in theft will lower the customary rate of return on invested savings. True, the capitalists will suffer, along with the workers, in that capitalists are also consumers of food, and the increased amount of scarce resources which will have to be set aside for anti-theft measures will lower the incomes of workers and capitalists in general. Is that much of a consolation?

When Antonia gets a "free" rabbit's head or toilet roll, it is paid for by other people, overwhelmingly by other working-class people. Amid all the flimsy "arguments" against stealing which Fo easily ridicules, this simple and unanswerable objection is never raised. Nor does he allude to the possibility that some even more advanced thinker might walk into Antonia's living room and take away the furniture, for which he can't or won't pay.

I'm just making a few observations - not complaining. Fo's plays don't really have much to do with politics, whatever Fo may imagine, and it doesn't matter much that the politics are evasive and feeble. The plays are very funny.

Free Life