

Accidental Death of an Anarchist as a Farce

Dario Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* (1970) is a brilliant example of farce used as a tool for political satire. The play, inspired by real events in Italy, exposes police corruption and government hypocrisy through absurdity, slapstick humour, and exaggerated characters. While the subject matter is serious—the suspicious death of an anarchist in police custody—Fo's treatment of it is comic, heightening the absurdity of real-world injustices. By employing elements of farce such as mistaken identities, rapid dialogue, physical comedy, and self-referential humour, Fo creates a play that is both entertaining and sharply critical of authority.

Farce as a Tool for Political Commentary

Farce is a form of comedy characterized by absurd situations, exaggerated characters, and rapid-paced action. In *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, Fo utilizes these elements to mock the incompetence and dishonesty of those in power. Through chaotic events and ludicrous dialogue, he makes the audience laugh while simultaneously exposing the grim reality of state-sanctioned violence.

The play revolves around the Maniac, a master of disguise who infiltrates a police station to investigate the death of an anarchist who supposedly “fell” from a window during interrogation. The Maniac outwits the police officers with his quick thinking and theatrical performances, revealing their contradictions and deceit. His antics transform the investigation into a chaotic and comedic spectacle, making the corruption of the authorities appear both ridiculous and dangerous.

One of the key features of farce is mistaken identity, which plays a central role in the play. The Maniac constantly adopts different personas to manipulate the police, exposing their incompetence. Early in the play, he convinces the officers that he is a judge conducting an inquiry, leading to a series of absurd exchanges where they unwittingly admit their wrongdoing. This exaggerated deception not only creates humor but also highlights the ease with which those in power can be manipulated.

Exaggeration and Absurdity

The dialogue in *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* is filled with absurdity, another hallmark of farce. The Maniac's exaggerated mannerisms and nonsensical logic make him a clownish yet incisive figure. For example, when the Maniac pretends to be a judge, he makes an absurd statement:

- "I am a bishop, a psychiatrist, a doctor of law, a bishop, a cardinal, a professor, a psychiatrist... did I mention bishop?"

This piling on of identities is not only comedic but also serves to blur the lines between reality and fiction, a key technique in farce. The Maniac's outlandish behavior forces the audience to question the credibility of authority figures, who are easily fooled by his disguises.

The police officers themselves are exaggerated caricatures, especially the Superintendent and the Inspector. Their incompetence is played up for comic effect, as they are easily confused and manipulated. For instance, when the Maniac convinces them to re-enact the supposed suicide of the anarchist, they eagerly comply, not realizing how ridiculous they look. At one point, the Maniac exclaims:

- "Splendid! That was a wonderful jump! Almost balletic!"

This line mocks the way the police attempt to justify their version of events, turning a tragic incident into a ludicrous performance. By making the officers participate in their own downfall, Fo underscores the absurdity of their lies.

Slapstick and Physical Comedy

Farce often involves physical humor, and *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* is no exception. The characters engage in frantic movement, exaggerated gestures, and slapstick sequences that heighten the comedic effect. For example, when the Maniac convinces the officers to restage the anarchist's fall, they scramble around the stage, trying to maintain their balance while contradicting themselves in their statements.

In another scene, the Maniac slaps one of the officers and then immediately apologizes, only to slap him again. This kind of physical humor makes the police appear foolish and undermines their authority. The contrast between the serious subject matter and the ridiculous way in which it is presented reinforces the play's satirical edge.

Self-Referential Humour and Breaking the Fourth Wall

Fo frequently breaks the fourth wall, a technique common in farce, to remind the audience that they are watching a performance. This self-awareness adds another layer of comedy and ensures that the audience remains engaged with the play's political message.

At one point, the Maniac directly addresses the audience, saying:

- “It's all a joke, dear audience! But don't worry—it's just as it happened in real life!”

This moment underscores the uncomfortable reality that the absurd events of the play are not purely fictional but based on real injustices. By acknowledging the theatricality of the play, Fo encourages the audience to think critically about the world outside the theatre.

Rapid Dialogue and Wordplay

Farce often relies on quick-witted dialogue and clever wordplay to keep the audience engaged. The Maniac's fast-talking nature and ability to twist words to his advantage create much of the play's humour. In one exchange, when questioned about his qualifications, he responds:

- "I am a certified madman. Here is my certificate, signed by three psychiatrists and countersigned by four nurses!"

This play on official documentation mocks the bureaucratic absurdities of the legal system, where meaningless paperwork can be used to justify anything. The rapid-fire exchanges between characters create a sense of escalating chaos, mirroring the disorder within the police force.

The Climactic Ending: Farce Meets Reality

While *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* is largely comedic, its ending serves as a stark reminder of the seriousness of its themes. The final scene presents two alternative conclusions: one in which the journalist, Feletti, is silenced and another in which she exposes the police. The play does not provide a resolution, leaving the audience to decide what happens next. This open-endedness subverts the traditional farcical structure, reinforcing the play's political message.

The abrupt shift from comedy to uncertainty forces the audience to confront the real-life implications of the play's events. Unlike traditional farces, which end in a neatly wrapped-up resolution, Fo leaves his audience unsettled, emphasizing that corruption and injustice continue beyond the stage.

Conclusion

Dario Fo masterfully employs farce in *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* to expose police corruption and government hypocrisy. Through mistaken identities, exaggerated

characters, slapstick humor, and rapid dialogue, he creates a play that is both hilarious and politically charged. The absurdity of the police officers and their cover-up highlights the real absurdities of authoritarian power, making the audience laugh while also making them think.

By blending comedy with serious political critique, Fo ensures that his message resonates long after the laughter fades. The play's open-ended conclusion challenges the audience to reflect on their own society and consider their role in resisting corruption. Ultimately, *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* demonstrates that farce can be a powerful weapon against injustice, using humour to reveal uncomfortable truths.