

Absurdity and Surrealism in *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*

Dario Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* (1970) is a masterful blend of political satire, absurdity, and surrealism. Inspired by the real-life case of an Italian anarchist, Giuseppe Pinelli, who mysteriously "fell" from a police station window while in custody, the play transforms a dark subject into a comedic yet unsettling theatrical experience. Fo uses absurdity and surrealism to highlight the ridiculous contradictions within corrupt political and law enforcement systems, making his critique of authority both humorous and deeply unsettling.

The play's absurdity arises from its exaggerated characters, illogical reasoning, chaotic structure, and self-aware theatricality. Surreal elements, such as the Maniac's shape-shifting identities and the distorted sense of reality within the police station, create an environment where truth and fiction become indistinguishable. This essay explores how absurdity and surrealism function in the play, supporting Fo's broader political message.

Absurdity as a Tool for Political Critique

Absurdity in theatre refers to situations where logic is abandoned, creating a world that is both chaotic and strangely familiar. Fo employs absurdity to expose the irrationality of those in power. The play's protagonist, the Maniac, is a madman who constantly adopts different disguises to outwit the police. His behaviour is wildly exaggerated, yet his madness paradoxically reveals the truth, making the supposedly rational authorities appear foolish.

One striking example of absurdity occurs when the Maniac convinces the police officers that he is a high-ranking judge investigating the anarchist's death. Instead of questioning his credentials, the officers eagerly comply with his increasingly bizarre demands. This blind obedience highlights how those in power often prioritize appearances over reality. The Maniac mockingly proclaims:

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

This nonsensical repetition reinforces the play’s central theme: authority figures are more concerned with hierarchy and status than with truth or justice. The Maniac’s ability to switch identities so easily also underscores the fragility of institutional power, suggesting that those in charge can be easily manipulated.

Another absurd moment occurs when the police attempt to reconstruct the anarchist’s supposed suicide. The officers eagerly participate in an exaggerated re-enactment, tossing themselves around the room as they debate whether the anarchist jumped or was pushed. The Maniac, orchestrating the scene, exclaims:

- “Splendid! That was a wonderful jump! Almost balletic!”

Here, the absurdity of the situation mirrors the absurdity of the official narrative. By turning the investigation into a farcical performance, Fo mocks the way governments fabricate stories to justify their actions.

Surrealism and the Blurring of Reality

Surrealism in *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* manifests through exaggerated performances, dreamlike illogic, and the play’s self-referential nature. The world of the play is not bound by conventional reality; instead, it operates on its own strange logic,

where disguises are immediately believed, characters contradict themselves without noticing, and time itself seems fluid.

One of the most surreal aspects of the play is the Maniac's ability to manipulate reality through language. He controls the narrative so completely that even the police, who should hold power, become his puppets. His wordplay confuses and overwhelms them, creating a dreamlike atmosphere where truth is constantly shifting. At one point, he declares:

- "I have a certificate of madness, signed by three psychiatrists and countersigned by four nurses!"

The idea that madness can be officially certified is itself absurd, but in the play's world, bureaucratic documents are treated as absolute proof of reality. This moment satirizes the way official records are often used to legitimize falsehoods.

Another surreal element is the Maniac's constant breaking of the fourth wall. He directly addresses the audience, drawing attention to the fact that the play is a theatrical construction. In one scene, he suddenly turns to the audience and says:

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

This self-awareness forces the audience to question whether the events of the play are any more absurd than the real world. By blending fiction and reality, Fo creates a surreal environment where political corruption is exposed not through realism, but through theatrical exaggeration.

Contradictions and Logical Illogic

Fo uses contradictions to create an atmosphere of absurdity, exposing the hypocrisy of those in power. The police officers frequently contradict themselves, revealing their own incompetence. For example, in one scene, they struggle to explain how the anarchist managed to jump out of the window. One officer claims that the anarchist took a running leap, while another insists he was seated and simply rolled out. The Maniac seizes on these inconsistencies, highlighting the absurdity of their explanations.

- “So, gentlemen, was he standing, sitting, or flying? Or perhaps he teleported?”

By presenting a real-life tragedy through illogical reasoning, Fo mocks the way governments fabricate official narratives to justify their actions. The constant reversals and inconsistencies create a sense of instability, making the audience question everything they hear.

The Surreal Climax: Multiple Endings

The climax of the play heightens its surreal and absurd nature. The final scene presents two possible endings: one where the journalist Feletti is silenced and another where she exposes the truth. By offering multiple endings, Fo refuses to provide a definitive resolution, reinforcing the surreal idea that reality is fluid and subjective.

This uncertainty mirrors the broader political message of the play. The audience is left unsure which version of events to believe, much like in real-life political cover-ups. The

Maniac's final trick is not just deceiving the police, but deceiving the audience itself, forcing them to confront their own complicity in accepting official narratives.

Conclusion

Absurdity and surrealism in *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* serve as powerful tools to expose the irrationality of political corruption. Through exaggerated characters, illogical reasoning, and self-referential humour, Fo transforms a real-life tragedy into a darkly comic theatrical experience. The Maniac, with his ever-changing identities and rapid-fire dialogue, disrupts conventional power structures, revealing the absurdity of institutional authority.

By blurring the lines between reality and fiction, Fo forces the audience to question what is true, both within the play and in the world outside the theatre. The play's surreal elements—such as contradictory logic, physical exaggeration, and multiple endings—underscore its central message: the truth is often stranger, and more absurd, than fiction.

In the end, *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* is not just a play about one historical incident; it is a broader critique of power, deception, and the absurdity of authoritarian control. Through humor and surrealism, Fo exposes the terrifying reality that those who enforce the law are often the ones who break it the most.