



ACCIDENTAL DEATH OF AN ANARCHIST

The Task of Anarchy



Deborah McAndrew reflects on bringing Dario Fo to the English stage.

Translation, transposition, transformation... it's all about words. For Percy Shelley, writing in response to the Peterloo Massacre of 1819, *Anarchy* was a very dirty word. Dario Fo's *Anarchist* is an innocent idealist, who inexplicably 'falls' from a 4th floor window whilst in police custody. Both writers were responding with righteous anger and keen political intent to acts of extreme brutality by government forces.

Shelley's lines *And many more Destructions played in this ghastly masquerade, all disguised, even to the eyes, like Bishops, lawyers, peers and spies...* could be a litany of the many guises of the Maniac in Fo's iconic play. Just as Shelley regards the various spheres of power in England and the corruption beneath, so Fo brilliantly lampoons each sector of Italian governance with vicious precision, as in increasingly outrageous costumes the Maniac presents grotesques of the Judiciary, the Military and the Church.

Striking similarities, and yet they each define anarchy in such opposite terms. It's a knotty problem, paradoxical even, that words we rely upon for certainty can be so slippery. Bringing Dario Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* to a 21st Century English audience, for whom Shelley's definition is more apposite, is no small task. Neither is it only the word 'anarchy' that trembles with uncertainty in translation.

There is only one true version of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* and that is Fo's original Italian text. It is possible to present it faithfully, in its original time and place but, notwithstanding the fact that literal translation has something of the flavour of a Eurovision song lyric, to do so surely betrays the very essence of the work. It doesn't feel enough to cut and paste contemporary political comment into those speeches where the playwright makes his direct attack on the Italian government, the US and the world at large. No, the context has to shift across the whole play for it to matter to us, now; for us to feel like this play is about us, speaking to us about our time.

Britain today is very different to Italy in the 1960s, nevertheless our government agencies are difficult to call to account; foreign policy is duplicitous, at best; and our police are more than capable of presiding over an almighty and monumental cock-up - the kind of cock-up that costs an innocent man his life.

It's presumptuous to attempt to transpose the politics of the original play into modern Britain, but it must be done. Often I've heard players of Fo in this country complain that the performance lacked focus because they didn't know whether they were in 'Middlesbrough or Milan'. The language, location and the social context have to be transposed, but Fo's politics are unequivocal; it's hard to argue with the sublime observation, *lo scandalo e il concime della socialdemocrazia*, (scandal is the fertiliser of social democracy), and contemporary parallels will always be there.

When *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* was first staged in December 1970, it ran in tandem with an associated libel trial. Luigi Calabresi, the chief interrogating officer present at the death of the real *Anarchist*, Giuseppe Pinelli, was suing the editor of *Lotta Continua*, in which a series of cartoons had accused him of Pinelli's murder.



A painting of the Peterloo Massacre published by Richard Carlile



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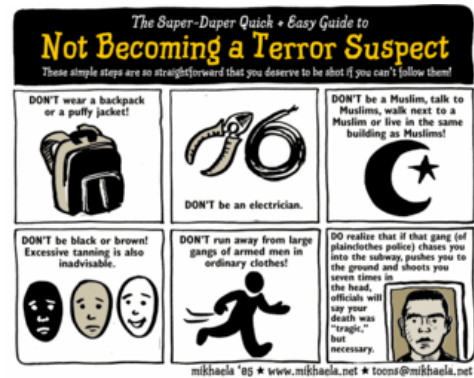


Today, in 2008, our production opens in the same week as the inquest into the death of Jean Charles de Menezes reopens. It's a comparison too poignant to miss. However, just as Fo never refers directly to Pinelli, you won't hear de Menezes named in the Broadsides production. Inference is enough and I take my lead from Fo. It's far more powerful to not say what is in everyone's minds. Like Chekhov and Pinter, Fo knows that what remains unspoken is as powerful, if not more so, than what is actually said.

So much of Fo's theatre responded to contemporary current affairs and was created for a politically literate audience that it has been described as *teatro da bruciare*, (throw-away theatre). Not so. Dario Fo's political integrity scores a direct hit at the human condition

for all time; just as he knows that a pompous bloke slipping on a glass eye will be funny forever. It is my adaptation of his play that must be thrown away, like every other version, in every other language. Only Fo's text should be preserved, to be revisited by each generation and, like the rare jewel it is, polished and buffed to a rejuvenated glister.

So what of that troublesome word – *anarchy*? It is anachronistic, no doubt, and carries secondary meaning for the English speaker; but that for me is its greatest asset. It allows the piece, despite the 'update' to work as a kind of parable.



In a play examining a society reeling from a series of bomb attacks, the word 'terrorist' comes to mind more readily than 'anarchist'. However, I have assiduously avoided the 'T-word' precisely because that is not what this play is about. I don't want to get sidetracked into the thorny undergrowth of anti-terrorist ideology, race and religion. This play is about what a terror threat does to *us*; how we respond, and how our values are stretched to breaking point and beyond. It cannot be accepted that extraordinary rendition, Guantanamo Bay, the shooting of an innocent young man on the London Underground and all the other abuses, political, military and economic that have characterised the last seven years are in any way justified by the 'current climate of terror'. Fo's brilliant satire provides us with a framework for that painful self scrutiny which any truly civilised society must continually undergo.

However they individually define *Anarchy*, Dario Fo's task and Shelley's too is to ask the difficult questions and provoke a sense of moral outrage in those who receive their art. As Percy Bysshe puts it, '*Science, Poetry and Thought are thy lamps...*'

