

Counter information in the Accidental death of an Anarchist.

“ A theatre, a literature, an artistic expression that does not speak for its own time has no relevance”

- Dario Fo

When Politics fails people, Art comes to rescue. The artistic expression of Dario Fo does what it is called to do – it questions the conditions under which it is produced. Having spent his childhood in the town of Lago Maggiore, the rich storytelling tradition of the glassblowers and travelers was instantly picked up by Dario Fo. Also, the family of Franca Rame provided him with a rich tradition of plays which was incorporated in numerous of his plays. One might say that the material conditions and childhood days of Fo were spent in the marginal space of glassblowers and storytellers which was very influential in helping him understand the utility of the voices of the margins. His irreverence towards tragedy and drama and emphasis on the value of farce and the comic may also be understood in this context.

The Brechtian *Alienation Effect* brought about wonderfully well by the harlequin figure of the Commedia de Lart is used in the figure of the Madman who interrogates institutions and ideologies through multiple impersonations.

Counter information or *controinformazione*, as will be explored later, was a very specific term coined during the student protest movement of 1968 in response to *disinformazione* of the mainstream media. In Fo's play however, counter information has taken many forms and various dimensions. Fo presents before us the need and value of counter information in four broad ways : in the use of characters, in the use of language, in the progress of the plot and the genre of farce itself.

On the level of language, one notices that the masterful use of language by the Madman not only serves his personal purpose in the play but also informs the larger audience how language may be manipulated by the speaker.

Bertozzo : It says former university lecturer.

Madman : I'm sorry to have to say this, but you're the one who's guilty of fraudulent representation. You claim to have grasped the basic principles of our language and now it turns out you can't even read properly.

Bertozzo : What do you mean I can't ...

Madman: Didn't you see the comma after Padua?

Bertozzo ; Oh yes, there's a comma. You're right. There is a comma. I hadn't noticed it.

Madman : You hadn't noticed it. He hadn't noticed it. And through failing to notice it, you put me away for a very long time.

Bertozzo : You're a nutter all right. What's the comma got to do with anything?

Madman : Obviously nothing to a semi-literate..." Act 1, Scene 1

Instances such as this do not only help to demonstrate the wit and intelligence of the Madman and the lack of it in the policemen but what it does above all, is to demonstrate to the audience how language can be manipulated to serve one's own ends. This manipulation will also quickly be registered by the reader who can actually see the comma which might be missed by the audience relying solely on the dialogue. A piece of information may be lost between the visual and the auricular.

The card of our Madman provides all the information we require to get a very basic idea of who he is:

'Professor Antonio Rabbi. Psychiatrist. Former Lecturer at Padua, University'

However, it is not the entirety of the information but the manner in which that information is provided which matters. The malleability of a given information therefore creates a need for counter-information with the help of which the public can compare and decide what is and what is not.

Dario Fo wrote for the public and was not particularly interested in pleasing the bourgeois palette. A playwright with strong sense of social purpose, Fo stood for the working class – a huge chunk of people who do not craft the official narratives of history but nonetheless have to live within the circumstance framed by it. An unofficial but equally powerful counter perspective of a class is provided in the play when the madman speaks thus :

Madman : Even you, Miss Feletti, with your open mind and democratic spirit would find it hard not to treat these clapped out specimens as second-class citizens. And yet you tell me the Judge should have

trusted their memories on a matter of such importance? When at the time not only were they aged and under-nourished but also, no doubt, consuming vast amounts of alcohol. However, if you are well groomed, well dressed, well fed and white, and you smell of cologne and Chateaufort du Pape instead of sweat and special Brew, you can be any age you like and of course the Judge will declare your evidence admissible. ’

- Act 2 Scene 2

One must remember that one of the greatest aims of the play was to make people question the status quo through laughter and the subsequent thinking which followed it. With comedy, he can indeed search the profound. The fact that Fo's each performance was followed by a discussion sheds light upon the palliative nature of the play. In this regard, doing away with the seating arrangement of the theater based on class hierarchies and adopting instead the informal space of factories and schools where the working class could be directly approached was a fundamental departure from what was the norm. He laid a strong emphasis that it is *how things are viewed* which leads to the *determining of 'facts'* and by *literally changing the ways of perceiving 'facts'* Fo interrogated the idea of 'truth' itself . The alternative seating arrangement gave a new perspective to the play and it is this questioning of the normal which formed the basis of counter-information upheld by *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*.

The figure of the Madman, modelled on the harlequin figure is used not only to impersonate people but also to expose their faults through the very process . Through impersonation, the madman makes visible the other side of the impersonated mask : the counter identity of mask which is generally hidden from the public. Using the figure of the Madman, Dario Fo revisits institutions of authority and questions some of the fundamental principles on which it functions. The unholy nexus of judiciary, religion and later the media, tied by one bonding force of power politics is thoroughly questioned by the Madman.

The concept of keeping an elderly person as a judge is made fun of by the Madman with his humorous taunts. However, embedded within this humour is a reality which nonetheless exists and needs to be questioned :

Madman : And the judge, half-blind, half-crippled, half-senile. Give him a knighthood, a rise in the salary and put him in charge of a commission that's going to affect the lives of millions of people....These national treasures exercise a power to destroy or save us with less deliberation than they choose which Chablis to accompany their fish. - Act 1 Scene 1

Also , one may note that the disguises which the Madman puts on is that of the same authorities which he seeks to subvert: the psychiatrist, the lawyer, the policeman and finally the priest. The legitimacy of the counter information provided by the madman is derived from the fact that the mainstream modes of information have become inefficient and unreliable and therefore there is a need for counter information which, through sound dialectics, may allow truth to emerge. This is something *we* may take note of, living as we are in a post-truth world.

The madman uses the law and quotes specific sections from it to demonstrate how ill-informed the policemen are about the very law they seek to enforce. Their mode of misleading the suspect is used to expose how they resort to unfair means. Furthermore, their lack of perspicacity in understanding complex matters point out how they themselves are or can be made the victims of the powers they seek to serve.

When the Madman claims that he studied the law in the madhouse, the humour rests not only in the place of his apprenticeship but on the fact that madhouses have been filled by the lawyers. This comedy is also used to deal with current realities and subvert authority. Here, one may understand the living conditions of the real madhouses which is funny and sad at the same:

Bertozzo : When did you ever train?

Madman : I have been inside sixteen different mental hospitals. Day after day, night after night. I have eaten with them, I have played with them, and most importantly, under any other practicing psychiatrist in our country, I have slept with them. Several at once sometimes. *Because there are never enough beds.*” - Act 1 Scene 1

Fo views official history as an ideological tool used by the establishment to keep the working class in a deep slumber and further what Gramsci would call a ‘hegemony through consent’. The legitimacy of the police records is challenged by not only showing that they are incompetent but also that they resort to unfair means and that ‘facts’ are manufactured to fit into a theory, or worse, a sinister agenda set by the powers that be. Interestingly, an intense logic is used by the madman to drive home this point.

Superintendent : But we had our suspicion. As the accused was the only anarchist in Milan who was also a railway man, we deduced that it must be him.

Madman : Of course, of course. So as it was clearly a railway man who planted the bombs on the railway, we can also deduce that the notorious bombing of the Palace of justice was perpetuated by a judge ; that the bank of agriculture was bombed either by a banker or a farmer and the Tomb of the Unknown warrior by a dead soldier. Come on, gentlemen. I am here to conduct a serious enquiry, not to fuck about with kindergarten logic.” - Act 1 Scene 2

Logic therefore becomes a powerful tool of persuasion and logical thinking is used to counter the emotional dependence of the masses on "benevolent" institutions whether it's the Church or the Government.

Madness in itself is a powerful counter-informative tool. The official narratives and institutions gain their legitimacy through their ancestry. Institutions depend on repetition, be it in the domain of law which has an entire tradition of going by what has happened in the past – in the types of cases that were fought and the outcomes that resulted or religion which depends on the repetition of rituals and verses -the repetition of taking the sacrament which is theatrical in nature and that of the recital of apostle's creed which is verbal. This form of official , institutional repetition is countered by the repetition of the 'unofficial' narrative which then becomes a 'disruption'. Madness has traditionally been viewed as a disruption and is often relegated to the margins because the center not only fails to understand and accommodate it but also feels threatened by it. However contradictory it may sound, this 'disruption' has had a continuity in history – not only in the Italian farce tradition but also in the English drama. The figure of the Fool in *King Lear* and *As You Like It* and the crazy rant of Porter in *Macbeth* have been the bastion of logic and these characters of the margin have been used to articulate the mental, moral and political breakdown of the center. This tradition of locating all that is wrong with the center in the articulation of the margins has also had a history which is as 'legitimate' as the official history. This history has been used by Fo and its heritage helps in adding legitimacy to the 'disruption' which is so hated and feared by the establishment

Maria Feletti brings some very important pieces of counter information through her journalism – the provocation of the police during the interrogation of the suspect, the suspicious parabola of his fall, ,the absence of the tape which recorded the over-punctual calling of the ambulance and the bruises at the back of the dead man's neck. The importance of the journalist to stay true to her work in order to function as a tool of counter information is sufficiently highlighted by Fo. One must keep in mind *that counter-information* was a very specific term used against the term *misinformation* disseminated by the pro-establishment newspaper which covered the news of Piazza Fontana bombings . La Stampa, the newspaper which suggested the involvement of the anarchists in the Piazza Fontana bombing was owned, in part by Fiat. The paranoia of the U.S in putting an end to the specter of 'Communism' a specter which it feared without understanding or alternatively because it *did* understand it, was also propagated by the pro-establishment newspapers. Pio Baldelli, the journalist who covered the death of Giuseppe Pinelli was being prosecuted when the play was being performed and Fo was reprimanded for criticizing Lyndon Johnson the President of a country which was far beyond the Pacific. In this regard , the necessity of the press to stick to facts is highlighted very strongly. Furthermore, the dangers of the press itself being used

to divert the gaze of the public from important matters to the trivial is also highlighted towards the end of the play. Fo's master stroke in sustaining his political message throughout the play is located precisely in this point. After demonstrating the need and the effectiveness of counter-information throughout the play, he points out at the dangers of the counter-informative tool of the margins from being absorbed by the center to fulfil its own purpose

Fo therefore locates the importance of counter information in the use of characters, in the use of language, in the progress of the plot and the genre of farce. *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* is a truly remarkable play in that it not only points towards the need for a strong body of counter-information to function as checks and balances on power wielded by an authoritative regime but also contains within itself a self-critique which grants it a defense against being appropriated by the centers of power. Furthermore, the flexibility and the energetic pace of the play endows it with a dynamism which only gets better with repetition and reproduction.

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