



Sydney Theatre Company presents The Residents in



ACCIDENTAL DEATH OF AN ANARCHIST

Written by Dario Fo

Translated by Alan Cumming and Tim Supple

Directed by Stefo Nantsou

Teacher's Resource Kit

Written and compiled by Robyn Edwards and Samantha Kosky

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Sydney Theatre Company

Sydney Theatre Company, as the premier theatre company in Australia, has been a major force in Australian drama since its establishment in 1978. It was created by the New South Wales Government, following the demise of the Old Tote Theatre Company. The company presents an annual twelve-play program at its home base The Wharf, on Sydney's harbour at Walsh Bay, the nearby Sydney Theatre, which STC also manages, and as the resident theatre company of the Sydney Opera House. Current Artistic Directors, Cate Blanchett and Andrew Upton joined the Company at the beginning of 2008.

STC actively fosters relationships and collaborations with international artists and companies. Renowned directors Michael Blakemore, Max Stafford-Clark, Howard Davies, Declan Donnellan and Philip Seymour Hoffman have worked with STC in recent years and in 2009 Liv Ullman and Steven Soderbergh will direct for the Company. STC has presented productions by Complicite, Cheek by Jowl, Out-of-Joint and the National Theatre of Great Britain. In 2001 STC performed at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York with its production of *The White Devil*, returned in 2006 with its production of *Hedda Gabler* and will return again in 2009 with its production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* which will also tour to Washington.

STC has launched and fostered the theatre careers of many of Australia's internationally renowned artists including Mel Gibson, Judy Davis, Hugo Weaving, Miranda Otto, Geoffrey Rush, Toni Collette, Rose Byrne and Cate Blanchett.

In 2006 STC launched its first acting ensemble, The Actors Company, which, over three years, has performed an extraordinary range of repertoire including award-winning productions of *Mother Courage & Her Children*, *The Season at Sarsaparilla*, *The Lost Echo*, *Gallipoli* and *The Wars of the Roses*. In 2009 STC introduced its new ensemble of theatre-makers The Residents who will perform right across the full range of the Company's activities including Main Stage, Next Stage and STC Ed productions.

To access detailed information on Sydney Theatre Company, its history and productions please contact our Archivist Judith Seeff at jseeff@sydneytheatre.com.au

STC Ed

Since 1987 Sydney Theatre Company has presented productions and workshops for school audiences. Sydney Theatre Company is committed to education by programming original **productions** and **workshops** that enthuse and engage the next generation of theatre-goers. Within the STC Ed programme we produce a season of plays as well as collaborate with leading theatre-for-young-people companies across Australia.

Often a young person's first experience of theatre is facilitated by teachers. STC ensures access to all of its Main Stage productions through the **Schools Day** programme as well as producing and touring theatre specifically crafted to resonate with young people.

It's vital that students engage with work of the highest quality. Art can expand your view of the world and encourage innovative, engaged thinking and compassion. Sydney Theatre Company has an extensive on-line resource for teachers and students. Visit www.sydneytheatre.com.au/education.

We encourage teachers to subscribe to regular e-news to keep informed as well as access **heavily discounted** tickets and special offers.

For further information on STC Ed, please contact the Education Coordinator Toni Murphy at education@sydneytheatre.com.au

Accidental Death of an Anarchist

IMPORTANT INFORMATION

Venue: Wharf 2 Theatre

Suitability: Years 8-12

Running Time 90 minutes

There will be no interval.

We respectfully ask that you discuss theatre etiquette with your students prior to coming to the performance.

Running Late?

Please contact Sydney Theatre Company's main switch on 9250 1700 and a message will be passed to Front of House.

Booking Queries

Please contact the STC Ed Booking line on 02 9250 1778 or education@sydneytheatre.com.au

General Education Queries

Please contact Toni Murphy, Education Coordinator on 02 9250 1795 or education@sydneytheatre.com.au

About Accidental Death of an Anarchist

Prologue

The Prologue details the real-life event that gave rise to Fo's fictitious play.

On the night of December 12, 1969, a bomb exploded and killed sixteen people at the Agricultural Bank in Milan. At the same time, another bomb exploded at a bank in Rome which did not go by without causing casualties, and another bomb was discovered at the tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Milan police arrested an anarchist, Giuseppe Pinelli, and accused him of the crime. At a certain point in his interrogation, the anarchist flew out the window of the police station. The same day, another anarchist - a dancer by profession - was arrested; he was suspected of being the one really responsible for the bomb in Milan.

Something similar occurred in New York in 1921, when the anarchist Salsedo flew out the window of a police station, around the same time that Sacco and Vanzetti were arrested for a crime never proven against them. Their story has nothing to do with the one we are telling now. But from these stories we can conclude that many anarchists are obsessed by the urge to jump out of the window, because they believe they are able to fly.

It is an illusion of theirs that when they're two or three yards from the ground, they merely have to open their arms and move their feet to fly up again. Some observers have suspected that anarchists are able to fly, but they are also so underhanded that they smash themselves to the ground, just to incriminate the police and other state institutions by dying.

Anyway, the investigation of the death of the anarchist in Milan was filed away in the archives. The dancer anarchist was proven innocent after three years in jail. Public pressure has frequently been exerted on authorities to re-open the investigation of the anarchist Pinelli's death in Milan, but they keep postponing it.

Discussion Questions / The Prologue and the Narrative

How was the prologue dealt with in this STC production? Is it necessary?

If you were directing for an Australian audience in 2009, would you choose to use it and how, or not in your 2009 production of the play? Justify your choices.

Italian authorities still have not reopened the investigation into Pinelli's death. Thus there has been no public resolution to these events. Consider the ending of the play.

Is there a resolution and/or is blatant corruption dealt with in a satisfactory way? What feelings are you left with at the end of the performance? Why might the playwright have chosen to end his play in this manner?

Social, Political and Cultural Context

Fo was a political playwright, drawing the audience's attention to acts of government corruption that still plague Italy's people today.

- What form of political, capitalist religious corruption does the play explore? Is it as evident in our context as it was and continues to be in Italy? Do the events that transpired in *Accidental Death of An Anarchist* resonate in our society today? Why or why not?
- Does Stefo Nantsou's direction of the 2009 production sustain the play's political relevance or is it just for a good laugh? Is it political, evocative or just funny?

Pre-performance Activity / Corruption

Research and discuss other examples of governmental corruption, historical examples such as Watergate and more contemporary examples such as the Monica Lewinsky Case. Find your examples from politics, finance and religion.

Why do people cover up and abuse power?

Debate / Which side are you on?

Debate: This play can't be performed successfully outside of Italy.

Assess the success of this STC production for Australian audiences. Does this play make an Australian audience laugh? Has the director helped the actors access the comedy, the clown and the farce and are we as an audience laughing as a result?

Alan Cumming and Tim Supple's translation and Stefo Nantsou's adaptation of *Accidental Death of An Anarchist* is very topical, with humour and satire deliberately and effectively targeted at events and institutions currently in the news. Would this production be as effective nationally? Internationally? How might the play change from production to production, from city to city?

Research Workshop / Satire

Dario Fo's play continues to be performed successfully, 40 years after it was written. Why?

There are numerous news headlines that could provide fodder for comedy such as this.

Brainstorm some examples from international news, national news, local news and your school community that would be worthy of social commentary.

What is the common element in all of your examples? What is common in Fo's work that makes his social commentary play timeless?

Who might be the most appropriate audience for each one? What other institutions or organisations might have been worthy targets of this type of satire?

Themes and Ideas

Accidental Death is rooted in the actual, and for all its rich, farcical inventiveness is, in a sense, a political documentary; that much the more incisive for the grotesquery of its action.

Laura Richards, *International Dictionary of Theatre Plays*, 1992

- criticism of oppressive forces in society
- loss of individual freedom
- reform versus revolution
- fear and submission

Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the evils Fo targets in this play?
2. What police practices are exposed in this play? Why are deceit and fraud used? Does the end justify the means?
3. What does the play say about authority and power?
4. Fo was awarded the Nobel prize for literature in 1997. There was some controversy about this decision and the Vatican spoke out against the award. Why do you think this was so?

Research and Performance Activity / The Cover Up...

Research 3 contentious political events that have occurred in Australia's recent past, such as the Haneef Affair, Rudd's Ute Scandal.... something which has involved a media or political cover-up.

In your research, include jokes and political cartoons about the issues, even if they involve black humour or if they are discriminatory and cruel, to assist in developing ideas for status relationships, dramatic moments and points of tension.

Identify the main "players" and a key moment or point of action in the development of events. In preparation for an improvised scene, assign a particular character type to each of the performers such as authority and clown.

Using these characters, re-enact the key moment then, *the manic judicial investigator enters turning the "rational on its head"*. Exaggerate the characters and use *grammelot* [onomatopoeic language, made up of sounds and intonations but few real words] or non-language [sounds like real language but has no meaning] in your scene.

The dramatic intentions of your performance are to expose the corruption and amuse your audience.

Workshop Activity / Struggle for power

Collect a varied selection of props and objects in a box. Students to choose ONE each.

Use the prop in a way that gives status. Another player has to use as many strategies as possible in an improvisation to acquire that prop and to thus gain status. Try to imbue status and the “stakes” in dialogue. The more farcical and ridiculous the object it is, the better and more challenging the status change will be.

Post-production Discussion / Responses?

What was the response of the audience to the STC production? In response to Fo’s intention to expose corruption, were you provoked enough to want to make changes? What do you walk away with, do you feel empowered, does the play challenge you to respond to corruption in our society? Does it reveal corruption to you in our society; does it make you want to do something about corruption? As member of public what might you be able to do to change that?

Characters | The Pecking Order

The role of any great clown is to make us look at ourselves.

Carey Purloff
www.pbs.org/newshour, October 1997

The Trickster: The clever trickster figure in Fo's play effectively exposes the lies and collusions of the corrupt police officers, conveying a sense that the truth can indeed be known and justice can indeed be served.

Consider how the following was explored in the STC production:

- the device of the clown who is stupid and simple
- stock characters or using names as character types
- status
- physical transformation

Workshop Activity / Status games

Pre-production: Students list the characters from the play, and then place them into order from highest authority to least. Students take on the roles of characters, physicalising and verbalising the characters as they would expect the stereotypes to behave.

Post-Production: After having watched production who has the highest status? How are they identified for us through:

- Fo's language
- the production's design
- the actors' physicality
- the characters' relationships

How have they been made particularly Australian?

Within the dramatic action of the play, the police impersonate other people. Who do they impersonate and why do they engage in this corrupt behaviour?

What techniques or conventions are used to make clear to the audience that the actor who is playing the policeman is then impersonating someone else?

Workshop Activity | Impersonation

Think about someone you and your audience know well. Imitate the physicality, walk and mannerisms of this person. Interact with other students in the class using their voice and style of expression. You may do this as a whole class experience or selected students may stand up and present their impersonation to the class.

Debrief (as audience):

- Did you remain aware of the actor underneath the character? Were you amused?
- What choices did the actor make to ensure you never lost critical distance in relation to who was on stage?
- What is the impact of presenting the character through impersonation, rather than being that character?

Dramatic Form and Structure

It is hard to describe Dario Fo plots because they are anarchic. And all of them deal with subverting either church ideology or government ideology or capitalism...

Carey Purloff



Pre-Production Research Activity / Commedia dell'Arte

Prior to viewing the production, students may be interested in studying how traditions from this ancient style of theatre can translate into a contemporary work. The following categories may serve as a starting point for discussion and exploration:

1. **Stock types** - Discuss the stock figures of Commedia dell'Arte. Who are they based on? What purpose do they serve? What are the equivalents of these stock types in *Accidental Death of An Anarchist*?
2. **Traditions** - What are some of the traditions of Commedia dell'Arte? How are they adapted in this contemporary drama?
3. **Comedy** - How is comedy traditionally achieved in Commedia dell'Arte? Is it used similarly in *Accidental Death of An Anarchist*?
4. **Design** - Commedia dell'Arte is noted for its specific designs, notably in costume, which is often highly symbolic. Were any of these traditions reflected in the design of DTC's production?

The following link may provide a good starting point.

www.delpiano.com/carnival/html/commedia.html

Dramatic Techniques

- circus
- farce
- mime
- music
- song
- clowns and jesters
- mask
- techniques of Epic Theatre such as presentational acting and alienation
- grotesque
- asides
- meta-theatre

Workshop Activity / Guess the technique

In small groups, select one of these techniques and recall a moment from the play where it is used. Describe or recreate this moment in enough detail for your reader/audience to be able to picture what occurred. Have your audience “guess” the technique.

What effect did this technique have on the audience in this moment in the play? How did it enhance dramatic meaning?

Apply another technique to the same scene. How is the dramatic effect changed? What new discoveries about character, themes and performance style did you make?

Ron Jenkins [one of Fo’s translators] calls what Fo does, Epic Clowning because it is the kind of clowning that goes deep into human hungers ... he is talking about people who are hungry not only for food but hungry for dignity, hungry for justice.



Commedia Workshop / The Clown

RESOURCE: *Commedia dell’Arte: An Actors Handbook* – Arlecchino p228-229 monologue “I am consumed with hunger. I could eat my eye.” [search Google using this opening line or [click here](#)]

Explore the tragedy and physical comedy, and the extremes of emotion in Fo’s monologue as Arlecchino. What performance and comedic skills does this performance demand? Where does the comedy lie? Where does the tragedy lie? What is challenging about attempting to perform both of these dramatic forms and creating the tension between them all at once? In what moments was this achieved in the STC production?

Comic Workshop / Creating & Performing Farce

Define farce. What examples of farce do you know? Consider all forms of performance stand up comedy, skit shows, TV series, film and plays.

In groups of 4, improvise the retelling of an event, one line at a time. With each line, the event is to become more and more exaggerated to the point of ridiculousness, where what you are describing and recounting is irrational, improbable and outrageous.

Refine and rehearse your improvised story, ready for an audience.

Remember: Farce must be played for absolute truth and in all seriousness by the actors for it to amuse the audience. Concentrate on sustaining your focus and conviction as with each line, so that the event you retell becomes more and more outrageous.

Actor-Audience Relationship

Fo's "intimate sense of the audience", is often described by theatre critics as 'pure theatre', that breaks through the 'fourth wall' and "lands right in the emotional and political lap of the audience. . . . It's impossible to sit in a Dario Fo performance and not feel implicated, not feel made fun of, not feel enormously amused and profoundly moved."

Elizabeth Farnsworth, Nobel Prize interview, 1997,
www.globetheatrelive.com

The Alienation Effect

It is a part of Fo's intention, to make people question themselves.

Playwrights with strong political convictions such as Fo tend to employ and develop dramatic techniques that distance the audience from the work, so that they would think critically about what they were watching. These techniques are called the Alienation Effect, after the language of the playwright who pioneered many distancing methods, the German, Bertolt Brecht. He wanted his audiences to ask, "What if things were done differently? How might the world change for the better?"

One alienation effect besides acting techniques that are not quite realistic, is the *self-reflexive strategy*. This means that a playwright includes moments when the play refers to itself as a play. For example, the actors might refer to themselves as actors, or the actors might speak directly to the audience, destroying the illusion of "reality on stage" and reminding the audience that a play is taking place. Moments such as these reveal the audience's identification with the actors and story, encouraging the audience to evaluate the action they are watching on stage.

Here is a self-reflexive moment from *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*. As this excerpt demonstrates, Fo has his actors speak directly about and to the audience.

JOURNALIST: And I suppose you have plenty more of these very well-trained operatives scattered around the Left groups?

SUPERINTENDENT: I see no reason to deny it, Miss. Yes we do.

JOURNALIST: I think you're just calling my bluff, there, Superintendent!

SUPERINTENDENT: Not at all ... In fact you may be interested to know that we have one or two right here in the audience tonight, as usual ... Watch this.

He claps his hands. We hear a number of voices from different parts of the auditorium.

VOICES: Sir ...? Yessir ...! Sir ...!

The MANIAC laughs, and turns to the audience.

MANIAC: Don't worry—they're all actors. The real ones sit tight and don't say a word.

Workshop | *The Alienation Effect*

Stage this moment from the play. In your rehearsal, focus on building the tension between the Journalist and Superintendent so that Voices and The Maniac actively break the tension. The desired effect is to surprise the audience by breaking the 4th wall, effectively jolting them from an emotional engagement with the action.

How successful were you in achieving Bertolt's and Fo's aim of alienating your audience? Explain.

Post-Production Discussion /What did you see?

- In the 2009 STC production, how was the audience involved in the drama?
- What surprised you about the relationship between actors and audience?
- How did the shape of the stage or performance space affect or contribute to the actor/audience relationship?
- How did the intimacy of Wharf 2 enhance the atmosphere?
- Did you notice the audience around you?
- What were some of the reactions?
- Did audience involvement in this production differ from that which you usually experience at a theatre event?
- What is the effect of this type of theatre?
- Which characters break the 4th wall, speaking directly to audience? What do other characters do during this moment; where are they on stage when they speak to the audience? In what way does this manipulate our understanding of the action?

Performance Style

Political theatre employs a presentational style of acting. The actors do not conceal their presence behind the character in order to ensure both audience and actor remain at a distance from the character from where they can critically observe and judge his/her actions. Theatre director and playwright, Bertolt Brecht is a pioneer of this style of performance for political purposes in his Epic Theatre.

Workshop | Directing

You are the director (Nantsou) taking your 2009 STC production on a national OR international tour.

Outline some of the changes you will make to ensure the play remains relevant and entertaining to the audience. Also indicate the aspects of your current production you will not change. You may consider casting, costume, set, characterisation, contemporary references, dialogue and comic business.

Design

Workshop Activity / Masks and props

How do Commedia characters use the features of their masks and costumes to give them status? e.g. sword nose...

Create simple politician masks e.g. John Howard, perhaps using enlarged images from political cartoons. Use the masks in a variety of improvisations, giving dialogue to these characters. Develop the most successful improvisation into a scripted scene.

The challenge for this play is how to transform from one office to the other on stage. First, what has to be decided is how much it is necessary to differentiate between the two offices.

Pre-Production Activity / Transformation of Set

Collect all kinds of pictures of police interiors, including both American and Italian.

How necessary is it to set the play in Italy? How important is it to have a recognisable feeling of the police and a station?

What typical comic, farcical aspects of set design would you expect to find in a set for *The Accidental Death of an Anarchist*? How does the set design from the STC production meet these expectations? How does it vary the tradition of farce in making new design choices? What is the effect of these choices?

Workshop Experience / Selecting and Designing a Space

You are directing and designing a contemporary production of the play for a venue other than Wharf 2.

You are to select a theatre venue and stage space and provide 3 reasons to justify why your choice suits the needs of the play in relation to the actor and audience. Draw an aerial sketch of the space indicating entrances and exits, fixed set pieces and the position of the audience in relation to the stage.

Language

- grammelot – onomatopoeic language , made up of sounds and intonations but few real words
- particular technique for ridiculing laws and government red tape, and for satirising bureaucrats

Workshop Experience | The language of status

Devise an exchange between a character of power and a low status character. Use *grammelot* to subvert the expected status relationship. In other words, the low status character is to appear smarter to the audience.

Characters might be teacher / student, parent / child, boss / worker, police/ thief, celebrity/paparazzi or journalist

Workshop | Tableaux and Action

While the levels and focus are used to give the priest status in this image, bring this tableau to life subverting his status through techniques of language such as *grammelot*.



Humour | crossing the emotional distance

“Don't call my play a comedy. There is a misunderstanding of the word. I call it farce. In current language, farce is understood as vulgar, trivial, facile, and very simple. In truth, this is a cliché of official culture. What they call comedy today has lost the rebellious strain of ancient times. What is provocative and rebellious is farce. The establishment goes for comedy, the people for farce.”

Dario Fo

Fo's writing allows many kinds of unrealistic or exaggerated movements to exist in his comedy and with that theatricality, the story becomes even stronger.

The Bawdy and Slapstick

Bawdy and slapstick humour is considered populist because it is humour that anyone can appreciate - such as a disdainful fart. Fo's use of bawdy humour and slapstick action is, like his use of the trickster Maniac, a populist element of his play—a convention designed to appeal to all audiences and not simply to the elite bourgeois.

Bawdy humour depends on the inherent humour in bodily functions, such as the fun Fo derives from the farting Maniac: "Yes, you can tell him that too: Anghiari and Bertozzo couldn't give a [sh—t]! (*He lets out a tremendous raspberry [fart]*) Prrrutt. Yes, it was Bertozzo who did the raspberry. Alright, no need to get hysterical ...!"

Slapstick humour is similarly body oriented, as it involves characters tripping or falling, somehow being made ridiculous (without any lasting harm coming to them). An example of slapstick in *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* is when Bertozzo receives a big punch in the face from the inspector, who believes Bertozzo has sent the raspberry his way.

Workshop Activity / Australian larrikin humour

In small groups, devise a variety of scenes that use the dramatic technique of transformation of actor to create humour and highlight the comedy that defines our “larrikin tag”.

One actor plays the investigator and victim, transforming in front of the audience between both roles.

What farcical aspects of situation are revealed?

What aspects /moment of physicality, irony or satire in the situation; dialogue and use of language, can you use to make your audience laugh?



Workshop Activity / Offsider Nodding

Improvise a scene with one student in role in a position of power, delivering a speech to captive audience. Enter the clown who stands behind this character and mocks and upstages him/her for comic effect without drawing the character's attention, only the audience's attention. Use mime and gesture only – no dialogue or comment. Try different entrances, surprising the audience, vary pace and character and justifying reason for being there.

Discuss what was effective in creating satire and humour for the audience. What political comment was made, who gained status, and what elements of the character were successfully ridiculed? What performance skills were required by both performers and what elements of drama were used to effectively present this to audience? What challenges did "the stooge" face?

Watch the following extract from *The Chasers' War on Everything*, "Background Nodders" featuring Craig Reucassel on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wifAm6BrU8w>

How does this performance use examples of Fo's techniques of actor audience relationship, acting style and political intention? What is the effect on audience? How important is the skill of the actor ... timing, mime, gesture, sense of play, contradiction in creating the humour and satire? Comment on HOW the actor plays fool but in his choices, the politician becomes the fool.

Useful Links



Dario Fo Websites:

Timeline: http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1997/fo-bio.html

Dario Fo links: <http://www.theatrelinks.com/dario-fo/>