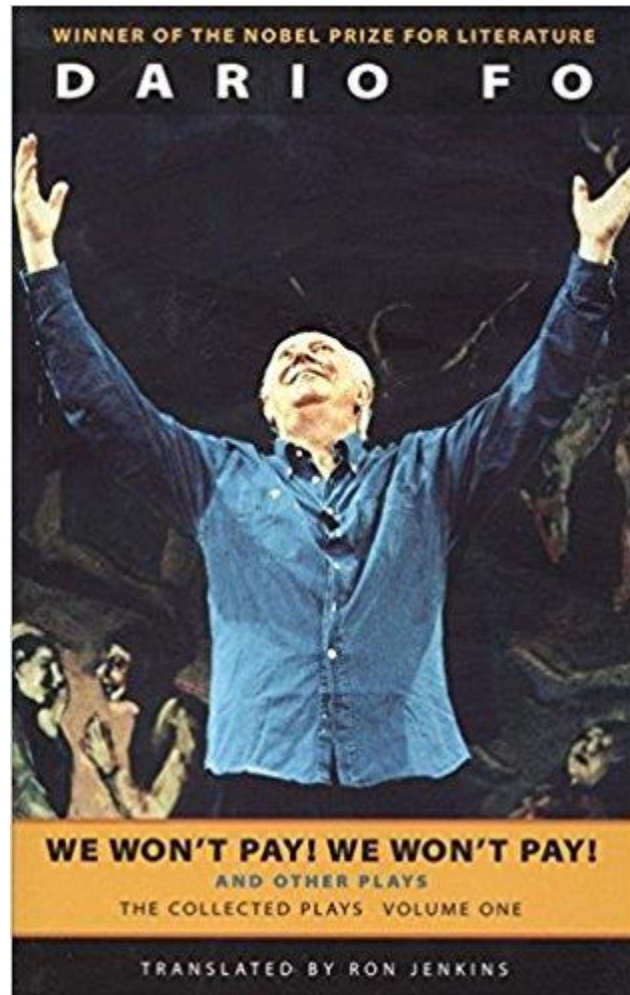


**Madness, Carnival and Civil Disobedience in Dario Fo's
*We Won't Pay! We Won't Pay!***

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Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.com/Wont-Pay-Other-Works-Collected/dp/1559361824>

Abstract

We Won't Pay! We Won't Pay! is a political farce by Dario Fo in which the story of two working class families, who fight inflation using the weapon of civil disobedience, is recounted while raising different socio-political questions. The topicality of the burning issues raised in the play assures a profound influence on contemporary audience. Fo's method of mining laughter from actual events provokes his audience into seeing their world from fresh perspectives. His

interrogation of exploitative capitalism, suppressive patriarchy, spiraling rate of unemployment, inconvenient intervention of religion in the individuals' private life, hijacking of revolutionary ideology by the parliamentary communist groups turn this play into a political manifesto just like the *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*. Fo's colourful use of farce, satire and buffoonery makes this play an example of agitation theatre with a difference. In this play, he incorporates carnivalesque theory of disorder and civil disobedience to bolster working class militancy. The carnivalesque imagery in the play may be a temporary reversal of quotidian behaviour but it carries in it the seeds for social revolution.

Introduction

The ruthless exploitation of labourers in factories is always a major thematic concern for Dario Fo. *We Won't Pay! We Won't Pay!* by Dario Fo highlights the plight of ordinary Italian workers during the economic crisis of 1970s. Fo portrays the tension between revolutionary ideology and parliamentary democracy through slapstick comedy. The aim of this chapter is to examine the carnivalesque elements of madness and civil disobedience in the play, and to demonstrate the continued relevance of traditional and popular forms for the politically committed theatre.

Fo deliberately patterned this play along the lines of farce and subversive slapstick. Unlike Agit-prop theatre¹, plays of Fo not only serve a functional propaganda, but the comic form is deliberately employed by him to serve a more serious purpose. He believes that comedy is a form of madness but it upholds the superiority of reason. The techniques of comedy are always directed towards the victory of reason in every discourse and in every story. Fo uses elements of absurdity, coincidence, black humour and the grotesque to question totalitarian structures of capitalism. The authority figure tries to cancel out reason and its dialectic. He wants to substitute a rigid sense of order. But in the comic's use of paradox there is always a slaughtering of the definitive rules of order. This changes the perspective about things so that contradictions can be seen. Rejecting the commonplace idea that comedy is a realm of irrationality, Fo argues that the disorder of comedy has a deeper purpose. The irrationality of the comic is only in respect to the irrationality of the rules. Irony is an irreplaceable dimension of reason. The moment one forgets how to use laughter, reason dies of suffocation.

Theories of Comedy

¹On the origin of this portmanteau term 'agitprop', *Encyclopedia Britannica* records: Agitprop, abbreviated from Russian 'agitatsiya', political strategy in which the techniques of agitation and propaganda are used to influence and mobilize public opinion. In agitprop theatre this compartmentalization of dramatic action and the audience disappeared. Most often, the absence of a logical culmination or denouement is the norm in agitprop theatre. Agitprop theatrical performance discards elaborate use of props, make ups, sophisticated sound and light effects which mark the performance of contemporary proscenium theatre. Supporters of Agitprop believe that the use of supplementary theatrical devices turn theatre into a mere spectacle, which in turn provides only entertainment.

Many theorists of comedy have stressed the way that the comic involves incongruity, Henry Bergson, for example, believes that the comic is anything which is incongruous with our basic assumptions about human existence and the human body. He suggests that everything comic tends to contradict our assumption that all human beings are flexible and unique. In Brechtian terms of epic theatre², Fo makes the familiar strange, presenting situations in a context that forces a re-examination of what was once taken for granted. In context of epic theatre, JL Styan notes that acting is intended to be entirely natural.

Roland Barthes has also pointed out that ‘the verisimilitude of epic acting has its meaning in the objective meaning of the play, and not, as in naturalist dramaturgy, in the truth inherent in the actor, the actor’s reference point was always to be the meaning of the play.

Brecht’s method is therefore diametrically opposed to that of Stanislavsky and the drama of realistic illusion. Brecht’s stage strips of its theatrical magic and the audience refuse the state of emotional and empathetic trance, a degrading condition he associates with what he calls the Aristotelian theatre. The idea of distancing lay at the very centre of Brecht’s theory. As early as 1920, Brecht wrote a note that ‘humour is a sense of distance.’ Like Brecht, Fo also believes that theatre should induce distancing effect and the performance should be truly objective (142).

Fo’s Conception of Comedy

Fo’s conception of comedy is similar to the Rabelasian principles articulated by Mikhail Bakhtin in which laughter possesses an “indissoluble and essential relation to freedom” (Bakhtin 89). Influenced by Italian carnival the play deals with civil disobedience and working-class resistance. In carnival, the world is turned upside down and the situations are re-imagined from new perspectives. Martin Walsh maintains that carnival is unavoidably part of Fo’s chosen milieu, as he is both a student of popular forms and an artistic spokesman for the urban proletariat. Fo’s deep involvement with Italian popular culture is well known. He finds a perfectly developed ‘class consciousness’ in the giullari, the medieval itinerant entertainers. Engenio Battisti believes that medieval giullari, with their uncertain social status, and their itinerant life wandering between court and village square, contributed to the intermingling of the most diverse cultural stratifications (Bettella 53).

Discussion

²Epic theatreform of didactic drama presenting a series of loosely connected scenes that avoid illusion and often interrupt the story line to address the audience directly with analysis, argument, or documentation. Epic theatre is now most often associated with the dramatic theory and practice evolved by the playwright-director Bertolt Brecht in Germany from the 1920s onward. Brecht’s perspective was Marxian, and his intention was to appeal to his audience’s intellect in presenting moral problems and reflecting contemporary social realities on the stage.

The plot of the play highlights the ‘autoriduzione’ practiced by Antonia and Margherita, as well as the instinctive militancy of a young southern worker named Luigi. The drama starts with a group of housewives including Antonia refusing to pay the high prices for goods in a supermarket. When the manager threatens them by calling the police they trick him by pushing him and pretending as if he punched a pregnant woman in the belly. The women not only use their presence of mind to scare the manager but they use their bodies in a ritual for liberation. At first, they plan to pay less but later on as the consumer revolt become more and more serious they determine to pay nothing.

On her way home, Antonia meets her friend Margherita and comes up with a ridiculous idea, hiding some of the things she takes from the supermarket under the bed and some under Margherita’s coat for her to take home. At the moment, Antonia’s husband, Giovanni, comes home anxious due to the news of the brigandage.

To conceal the truth from Giovanni, Antonia has no choice but to lie to him that Margherita is pregnant. Later, a sergeant searches the goods and starts house by house search. When he arrives at Giovanni and Antonia’s house, he complains to Giovanni about the government. Although Giovanni does not agree with him, his complaints have some impact on Giovanni. Giovanni finds some local workers refuse to pay for the meals at the restaurant. More and more similar riots are happening here and there. Later, they even find almost everyone in the neighbourhood, young and old, male and female, is pregnant with a super big belly.

The ‘Autoriduzione’ Movement in Italy

Dario Fo in the play was inspired by a consumer revolt in which people refused to pay inflated prices. At that time, in southern Italy, people from the working class carried out this kind of mass civil disobedience. Italy was experiencing a serious economic crisis in the mid-1970s. Soaring prices and high unemployment rate made it difficult for the working class to survive. Thus, in this play, Fo let people of the lower classes, such as housewives and factory workers, rise up to fight for their own rights of survival. Following the working-class militancy which exploded in 1969, and then continued at a very high level for several years, many employers were forced to grant significant wage increase.

Another characteristic of those years of working-class rebellion was defiance of the law, both within factories and outside them in everyday life. One of the first examples of what became known as ‘autoriduzione’ (self-reduction) took place in the Pirelli factory in Milan in August 1968, with workers dropping production speeds by 10 per cent. During the 1969 ‘Hot Autumn’ there were cases of ‘autoriduzione’ in which production speeds were lowered by up to 45 per cent. Among all the new methods of struggle which were emerging at that time, ‘autoriduzione’ really captured some workers’ imagination. It engendered a sense of solidarity among the masses (Behan 84).

The very fact that workers took such action meant that the authority of factory owners, and management as a whole, was severely weakened. Indeed, management was often subjected to intensive questioning, and blatant absenteeism was also widespread. In these circumstances, Fo argued that the classic response, strikes, were ineffective to a certain extent. These were the

circumstances, in which the ‘autoriduzione’ movement of consumers as opposed to workers, also the central theme of the play, began. In the language of historian Paul Ginsborg:

In August 1974, groups of workers at FIAT *Rivalta* refused to pay the 25–50 per cent increase demanded by the private bus companies which took them to work. Instead, they offered to pay at the old season-ticket rate. The local metalworkers’ union quickly organized the protest and elected ‘bus delegates’ who collected the season-ticket money at the old rate and sent it to the bus companies. The example of the FIAT workers was then taken up throughout Turin and Piedmont. ‘Autoreduction’ also spread from transport to electricity. (qtd. in Behan 86)

Centered on the ‘Autoriduzione’

Fo’s play, *We Won’t Pay? We Won’t Pay!* emerged from this period and is centered on the ‘autoriduzione’ of a group of working-class housewives. This entailed the refusal to pay the artificially high price increase established by supermarkets, or occasionally, as featured in this play, to reduce the price to zero by not paying at all. These ‘autoriduzioni’ were therefore a working-class response to a scheme to claw back the real wage increases which had been granted in previous years. This tendency was most prevalent in the northern working-class cities of Turin and Milan, but also in Rome. However, there was also another maneuver on the part of employers. Firms declared that they were experiencing an economic crisis and lay off workers indefinitely. They then received most of their wages through a state-funding system (ibid 86).

Relevance of the Comic Form

The play represents a perfect matching of content (the ‘Autoreduzione’ movement) and form (carnavalesque farce-comedy). Farce derives from the Latin *farciare*, ‘to stuff’, since entertaining comic bits are stuffed into more serious matter. Fo reverses this convention. He stuffs serious political points, Luigi’s remarks on the alienation of labour, for example, into farce, with an equally pleasing grotesque effect (Walsh 222).

The carnival identity of the comic elements in the medieval mystery plays is not recognized by scholars of medieval drama. Scholars of medieval literature separate comic from serious genres, so that comic elements in a serious work are seen either as an aesthetic flaw incompatible with the work’s overall purpose, or as a mere sugar coating covering the work’s kernel of meaning.

The traditional view, while admiring the spirit of the ‘coarse comic scenes and episodes’ invariably dismisses them as antithetical to the original dramatic purpose and religious content. Thus they are severed from the dramatic texture and stigmatized as concessions to the vulgar taste of the spectators that does not deserve any serious critical attention (Simeonova 70)

Demystifying Potential of Carnavalesque Laughter

The laughter of the carnival in literature bears the marks of philosophy as well. According to this Renaissance conception, laughter has a deep philosophical meaning, it is one of the essential forms of the truth concerning the world as a whole. The world is seen anew, no less profoundly than from the serious standpoint. Therefore, laughter which poses universal

problems is just as admissible in great literature as seriousness. Certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter. It represents the liberating, regenerating and festive side of human spirit (Pikli 7).

In the play, Fo indicates the political subversiveness attributed to the carnival's comic confrontation of authoritative discourses, also noted by Mikita Hoy, suggesting that carnival laughter liberates a subject oppressed through ideological conventions (Matthews 27). Martin Walsh asserts that mass revolution in the play is treated as a carnival, intertwining the themes of food and sexual fertility. In his introduction to the book *Dionysus in Literature*, Branimir M. Rieger deliberates on the relationship of Dionysus with irrational behaviour. Poets were thought in classical times to be divinely inspired or irrational, driven by forces beyond their control.

Dionysus is the god in Greek mythology and literature who induces madness, passion and frenzy. His influence and cults posed an alternative which threatened the more rational and severe apollonian aspects of Greek thought. Plato, too, differentiated between clinical insanity and the creative insanity or Dionysian frenzy of seers and poets. But in classical and later periods the clinically insane were considered criminals, outcasts, vagabonds or outlaws (2).

As a creative writer, Dario Fo uses the motif of madness to strip the false verbal and ideological husk created by exploitative institutions. He uses the irrationality of the carnival as an antidote in waging a war of liberation against the oppressive capitalism.

Theme of Liberation and the Trope of 'Body'

The body becomes subject of crude humour in the play. Martin Walsh notes that an overarching, carnivalesque effect in Fo's play is the persistent association of pregnancy with this talisman of the festive food. The 'Hidden Pregnancy' is in fact a common motif in contemporary urban folklore, but the connection between instant pregnancy and looted food was established earlier in Antonia's narrative. Margherita continues screaming hysterically when one of the troops begins searching the foodstuffs near the bed where Antonia has hidden the foodstuffs:

Antonia: Pain, a lot of pain.....she is in labor.
Giovanni: She is five months premature!

Ritual of Liberation

The body of Margherita works in a ritual of liberation. In a carnivalesque fashion all rules of procreation are subverted and women become pregnant with rice and tin cans. The double meaning of the full belly is responsible for the major series of comic moments in Act I. Margherita, in labour, has a packet of olives break on her as she is jostled back and forth by Antonia and the Policeman. This incident becomes her 'breaking of water,' sending Giovanni into a panic and depositing several olives on the floor. Left alone in the flat, Giovanni muses on the waters of life:

Wow, look at all this water! But, what a weird odour, like vinegar ... yea, like brine, sure! I never knew that ... that before we're born we spend nine months in brine. Hey look, what's this? (32)

The city is filling up with false bellies and carnival grotesques. The Policeman demands a search of their suspicious bellies, and Antonia can counter only with an equally fantastic reason for the spectacle, the Feast of the Patron Saint 'Eulalia dal Pancione' (Eulalia of the Belly). A neighbourhood cult is created on the instant in which all the local women honour the saint by going around in false bellies for three days. The Policeman does not believe this 'beautiful tradition' and forces the women to open up. They launch into the malediction of Saint Eulalia³, and upon uncovering, chicory, red lettuce and cabbages fall over the stage.

Civil Disobedience

Written in 1974 in response to a genuinely grass-roots movement, the self-reduction of prices, the play is a classic example of 'spontaneous action,' the wellspring of revolution as well as the bane of established 'revolutionary' parties. What is more disturbing for Fo is not the brutalities of the government and the ruthless exploitation by the capitalists but the criminal indifference shown by the communist party towards the genuine protest movements. The reactionary stand taken by the trade union bureaucrats is simply a deplorable duplicity of a communist Party.

A remarkable play depicting affirmation of the power of people who seem to have no power, *We Won't Pay? We Won't Pay!* depicts the deliberate abstention of the communist party from expressing solidarity with the civil disobedience movements. Civil disobedience is a symbolic or ritualistic violation of the law, rather than a rejection of the system as a whole. Significantly, the main upholder of law and order is a communist shop steward, Giovanni who disapproves his wife's rebellion against the rising cost of living. Giovanni, who is a man of integrity, would rather die than steal.

Giovanni

Fo created Giovanni to make fun of those who obey the government blindly. Giovanni offers philosophical and political explanations to justify his non-participation in the movement. He represents the reactionary mainstream communist party in Italy. His and his party's stand is often questioned by Luigi, Giovanni's colleague. Luigi often exposes the non-active mode of the PCI⁴ amidst the mounting discomfiture among the working class. Through this play Fo deliberately provokes the communist leadership and trade union bureaucrats, who instead of

³A Spanish Christian virgin martyr, Eulalia of Merida died on January 10, 303 CE in the persecution of Emperor Diocletian. Eulalia, a thirteen year old strong-willed girl devoted to Christ, ran away from home and her concerned parents to castigate the persecuting magistrate who had her tortured and killed. Upon her death, her soul exited through her mouth in the form of a white dove, and her body was protected with a covering of snow.

⁴The party was originally founded in January 1921 as the Italian Communist Party (Partito Comunista Italiano; PCI) by dissidents of the extreme left wing of the Italian Socialist Party (Partito Socialista Italiano). During the 1920s and 30s, the PCI established strong links with the government of the Soviet Union. The party adopted a reform-oriented communism that rejected violence, and it was able to win power and govern successfully at the local level, especially in central Italy. In 1991, the party changed its name and broke from much of its communist past, dissident communists formed the more-orthodox Communist Refoundation Party (Partito Della Rifondazione Comunista), and thousands left the party.

grabbing the opportunity by inflaming peoples' anger at the capitalist exploitative social set up, disapproves their spontaneous protest movements. When Luigi talks about his disgust for the monotonous and difficult life at the factory with its meager salary, Giovanni comforts him by saying that their condition is now better as compared to the past:

Giovanni: Well, let's not get carried away. It's not exactly a life of shit, is it...we're better off than we used to be. We've got a house, may be a little run down, but it has what we need...of course some of us have to work overtime (36)

Popular Farce

Fo's popular and urgent farces were written and performed to express outrage at the ways of a capitalist society and to provoke strong reactions (Brown 522). Fo believes that satire and subversion is the best way of combating tyranny and although he is a man of the Left, he has not always pleased the communist Party (McCarthy 17). Stuart Hood elaborates on the Fovian attack on the historical failure of the communist party of Italy to understand the new generation and the contemporary political undercurrents.

Technique of Subversion

The degeneration of radical communist/socialist idea into a Fabian socialist concept was one of the reasons of Fo's dissociation with the PCI in 1968. In the play, he uses the character of the sergeant as a mouthpiece to voice his opinions regarding the inefficiency of policemen. Sometime after Antonia's departure to Margherita's house under the pretext of borrowing something for dinner, a Sergeant jumps into Giovanni's room through the window, on the search for the stolen goods from the supermarket. He laments the fact that policemen cannot use mind of their own and are just a plaything in the hands of corrupt establishment.

Caricatures

Fo's comic genius not only allows his caricaturized representative of the authority an unexpected entrance through unusual places, his subversive sense presents the Sergeant as an ardent supporter of Maoist style of revolution. Fo's satire on the establishment is expressed through his female protagonists. Antonia questions the logicity of the police searching houses while there is a whole world of exploitation lying out there in factories and other workplaces. Fo's tirade against exploitative capitalism is expressed through the character of Antonia who talks to the police officer at their apartment in search of the stolen goods from the market. Industrial capitalism enjoys the immunity to exploit workers because of governmental non-intervention.

Motif of Madness

Underneath the fun and frolic, the play is replete with elements of absurdity, coincidence, black humour to heighten the carnivalesque outburst. Madness and grotesque become recurrent motifs in the play. Beneath the mad behaviour of characters there is real hunger and the shadow of a genuine national tragedy. Fo uses these elements of reality as a stepping stone for uninhabited lunacy. *We Won't Pay! We Won't Pay!* also deals with death. So silly are Antonia and Margherita that they give Trooper hydrogen, which does not revive him but causes his belly to swell. This makes them believe that they have killed a policeman. Antonia confuses the

oxygen tank with the hydrogen, and the last thing we see on the stage is the policeman's belly visibly rising. Antonia exclaims at this new miracle, "what a belly! I made a policeman pregnant!" (50) The tragic effect is further intensified when Giovanni hopefully inquiring about dinner, little knowing that kilos of groceries are secreted around him, is reduced to a dog surviving on the packaged detritus of a consumer society.

To Conclude

Thus we may say that the play stresses on the most essential tool, the human body and experiments with form with more emphasis on dramatic, stylized movements that communicates more effectively than words, thereby becoming a participatory ritual, a living experimental communication between the performer and the spectator. Humour in this play is employed as a voice of reason and integrity. Irrationality of humour is used to engage the audience in dialogue and also to satirize the monopoly of political, economic and religious institutions. Since humour is subversive, its use in the play becomes a valuable cultural expression when it reveals social inequality in a way that provokes laughter, demonstrating that it can be both serious and seriously funny. Drama is an act of the imagination and in the play; the madness of the 'comic' makes it an act of creativity, survival, resistance and social change. In this way, Fo's genius at subversion is displayed here again.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 18:4 April 2018

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