

## Farce forfeit

Michael Billington  
at the Cottesloe

**A** DISGUISE-loving manic achieves normality. He thereby exposes the insanity of the sensible. That is the thrust of Dario Fo's *Accidental Death Of An Anarchist*; and watching Tim Supple's production at the Cottesloe, it suddenly struck me that Fo is a pop Pirandello. He takes the classic reversal of the great Sicilian's  *Enrico V* and turns it into pungent political farce.

The occasion for this surprisingly durable play was the death of Giuseppe Pinelli: an anarchist Milanese railwayman who in 1969 was picked up by the police, accused of a bank bomb-explosion and who subsequently "fell" out of a fourth-floor window during interrogation. Writing shortly after the event, Fo audaciously showed a certified madman infiltrating Milan's police HQ, posing as a lawyer who has come to reopen the judicial enquiry into the anarchist's death and exposing the lies, contradictions and absurdities of the police evidence.

My chief memory of the original *Belt and Braces* production back in 1979 is of a breakneck farce with Alfred Molina as the protagonist looking like Tommy Cooper on speed: this new version by Alan Cumming and Tim Supple is far less funny but politically more potent.

It treats the play as moral satire rather than grotesque farce. It turns the Milanese fuzzi into corrupt boobies rather than Mañoso monsters. And it constantly heightens the play's local relevance with references to the Guildford Four and the Birmingham Six, with allusions

to the police's role in ransacking TV cutting-rooms and guarding nuclear bases and by showing, somewhat tendentiously, a portrait of James Anderton adorning the Milanese cop-shop. "It can happen here," we were told in the original production: the moral of this version is that it all too frequently does.

I have mixed feelings about the result. It highlights Fo's classicism: Gogol's *The Government Inspector* comes to mind as well as Pirandello. It builds to a pitch of delirium instead of starting with it. And it brings out the seriousness of Fo's argument that in social democracies like ours "Most people are happy for abuse to exist as long as they get a scandal now and again." Yet the quality that makes Fo uniquely powerful, the ability to wring wild laughter out of insidious corruption, is here deliberately muted: instead of guilty ecstasy we get careful point-scoring.

This is not to deny the genuine artistry of the young Scottish actor, Alan Cumming, as the Madman. He has the sharp, angular features of a sadistic cherub. His investigating lawyer is a mischievous Machiavel in a grey flannel-suit. And his penultimate disguise as a one-eyed, one-armed, one-legged police captain has a farouche singularity. He is a naturally fastidious comic actor and he is well supported by Trevor Cooper as a beefily nervous Super and by Lorcan Cranitch as a thuggish Inspector. Mr Supple also directs with scrupulous intelligence. But I felt I was seeing the collision of two rational worlds instead of a confrontation between individual sanity and State madness. This is Fo shrewdly updated but without his carnivalesque danger.

## Billington on Anarchist

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Sun, Jan 24, 2021