



Set Text Guide: Accidental Death of an Anarchist

AS and A Level Drama and Theatre

Pearson Edexcel Level 3 Advanced GCE in Drama and Theatre (9DR0)

**Pearson Edexcel Level 3 Advanced Subsidiary GCE in
Drama and Theatre (9DR0)**

GCE Drama 2016: Accidental Death of an Anarchist

Contents

Summary	3
Characters	8
A word on the playwright	9
Social, cultural and historical context	10
Themes	11
Resources	12
Practical exploration activities	13

Summary

Act One

Scene 1

An ordinary office in Central Police HQ, Milan.

Bertozzo enters, accompanied by a constable. He directly addresses the audience. This immediately establishes the convention that the fourth wall can be broken, as it will be throughout. He explains that a few weeks ago an anarchist fell to his death from a window a few floors above this one. Due to the 'ambiguous' nature of the verdict – 'accidental' – there has been a public outcry and demonstrations. We see as an audience that he does not appear to be the most compassionate nor competent of policemen. This is a comedic theme that we see through the play, as Dario Fo mocks the corrupt nature of the establishment.

The Constable exits and returns with the Maniac, who has been brought in on a charge of impersonation. Bertozzo subverts the form in a meta way when he references the playwright, and bemoans that he is likely to be the butt of his jokes. Maniac toys with them, telling them of his qualifications as he pretends to be a professor of psychiatry. He is clearly much cleverer than them. He confuses them with pedantic inspection of the grammar on his visiting card. He has obviously been here before. He knows how to push their buttons, and is constantly looking for ways in which to infuriate them. As he seems to know his rights, they ask him whether he studies law as well. He says he would love to be a judge. This seems flippant here, but later becomes ironic as he does take on the role of a judge.

They go to handcuff him, fed up with his wild and eccentric ways. First, he pretends to have rabies, crawling around the office as a dog. Then, when approached, he bolts for the window and threatens to throw himself out. Here he demonstrates his lightning-fast bargaining and negotiating ability. This will prove to be extremely effective at the conclusion of the play. Next, he goes to throw himself down the stairs. They have had enough and send him away. Bertozzo and the Constable exit through another door, to go to a meeting they are now late for.

The Maniac re-enters and finds himself alone in the office. This is again a comedic example of the incompetence of the police, as a man brought in on a criminal charge now has free range of their office. He begins going through their files, and throwing the files of petty criminals out of the window. He is playing judge. He comes across the files of more serious criminals, such as diamond-smugglers and drug racketeers, and chooses not to throw them out. Here we see his understanding of justice.

The phone rings and the Maniac answers it. He has such a propensity for thinking on his feet that assuming a false persona on the spur of the moment is of no trouble to him. He establishes that it is Inspector Pissani, the officer suspected to have been involved in the incident with the anarchist falling from the window. When interrogated as to who he is, the Maniac encourages Pissani to play a guessing game, a clever way for him to assume the character of someone Pissani already thinks he sounds like. It is in this manner that he becomes Inspector Pietro Anghiari. He pretends Bertozzo is with him but is playing golf in the office and therefore indisposed to talk. He becomes the conduit for a fictional conversation between Pissani and Bertozzo, in which he allows Pissani to believe he is being mocked, to the point at which he threatens to hit Bertozzo. He hangs up.

He negotiates his way to a disguise himself as a judge, trying on items from his bags and using different voices. He checks with the audience each time as he tries the guises. Having settled on his costume, he replaces his beard as Bertozzo re-enters, is enraged to see him still there and demands he leaves. The Maniac explains he just came back for his papers, warns Bertozzo that Pissani is looking for him to hit him, then exits, wearing the inspector's coat.

The scene ends as Pissani enters and smacks Bertozzo in the face.

Scene 2

A similar office a few floors up. It is the office from which the anarchist fell. The window is open.

The Maniac is here, dressed as a magistrate. He places a bag with a hidden tape recorder under the desk. This is a powerful dramatic device, as it adds a level of tension exclusive to the audience for the remainder of the play, as they know, along with the Maniac, that any information about the incident is being recorded as evidence. This raises the stakes, as any discourse is no longer confidential to the room and has the potential to be heard universally.

Pissani and another Constable enter. The Constable is played by the same actor as the last, but has a moustache. This is directly referenced and made into a meta joke about the production not being able to afford another actor. Though this does serve a useful logistical function, it could also be taken as a comment on the constables, the lowest-ranking officers, as being the everyman, and merely footsoldiers in the corrupt game of the higher-ranking officials of the state.

Pissani is rubbing his hands, which Maniac picks up on and uses to belittle him. This is a great example of status, and leads to an excellent status game that you might use in rehearsal, which is listed in the 'Key scene work' section.

When Maniac recognises the Constable, there is another meta joke, in which he asks the stage manager to remind him not to appear in cheap productions again. He then goes on to convince them that he is indeed the judge. He sends the Constable to fetch the Superintendent, who subsequently storms in like a bull in a china shop, calling Maniac a 'dribbling cretin', before realising his assumed identity as the judge. Suddenly his manner changes to one of respect for the visitor, exposing his fickle nature. Maniac lures him into a false sense of security by taking him to one side and allowing him to believe that he is a fascist ally, as they sing an old fascist song together. On a status level, Maniac has cleverly allied himself with the most powerful man in the room, and is still of higher status than him, as the others all believe he has the power of the court over them.

Maniac sets the men to re-enacting the incident with the anarchist, saying that he will play the role of the anarchist himself. This now becomes a farcical situation, much like a play-within-a-play, the Maniac playing director and forcing the men to arrive at the truth of every moment as was written in their statement. He allows them to believe he is in cahoots with them, and is merely pressing them for better answers, as that is what the court will do. It is as though he is their lawyer vetting them for a court appearance.

They explain how they formed a trap for the anarchist, telling him that they had proof that he planted the bomb in the railway station. Maniac jokes that because the anarchist was a railway worker, naturally it was he who planted the bomb at the railway station, just as the bombs in the law courts must have been planted by a lawyer, and the one in the agricultural bank by a bank clerk or a cow. He continually mocks them as a tactic to assert authority over them. Aware that they are lying to cover their tracks, he exploits their desperation, both for his own and the audience's amusement. He grows more aggressive with his questioning, and coerces them into telling him their 'dirty tricks', acting as though he is on their side and understands that all cops do such things. They thank him.

The Constable announces that it was at this point that they employed the 'there's-a-phone-call-for-you-sir-it's-very-important' ploy. Pissani has not quite got to grips with the acting, and much comedy is drawn from his lack of understanding as to whether they are acting or in the know. The phone call, they decide, was the anarchist's friend in Rome who has confessed to planting a bomb. They stumble on the story, as it is evident they are making it up as they go along. They eventually get their story in such a mess, that they decide to bring out the second version: a rewriting of events. This farcical hypocrisy of justice is the playwright's comment on the licence the state takes to manipulate the truth in their favour.

The Maniac argues that this second version of the raptus is no longer believable. He urges them to throw themselves out of the window as they are doomed. They find this to be unfair, and the Superintendent suggests they come up with a third version. The Maniac grants them one final attempt at a cohesive story, so they set about piecing together the third version, as a chorus.

GCE Drama 2016: Accidental Death of an Anarchist

The Maniac encourages them to play trains, suggesting that they need to demonstrate a softer side. One senses that this is purely for his own amusement. He is toying with them as a cat does a mouse. He has them under his complete control, to such an extent that the act ends with them all singing a song at his command.

Act Two

Scene One

The same office, immediately following on from the end of Act One.

The men finish singing and seem to have enjoyed themselves. They conclude that due to their singing the suspect was serene at this point, with no hint of the raptus that came later.

The Maniac snaps them out of their blissful stupor, and demands they take the scene to midnight, the time at which he fell from the window. He tries to coax them into telling him that physical contact was made. (Remember he has the tape recorder under the desk this whole time, so he is essentially fishing for a confession throughout. This is an example of dramatic irony, as only Maniac and the audience are party to this information.) He garners that they were interrogating him, but they insist it was light-hearted and a bit of a joke. Maniac asks Pissani to tell them some jokes. He does. The stage direction simply says 'Tells jokes', which leaves it to the director and cast of each production to decide which jokes to insert. Dario Fo uses this device to make the play current to the audience of the day and place, on the assumption that if the play is being produced, its main theme of state corruption is relevant.

The Maniac jokes that all these years when he has assumed people were being beaten they must have simply been laughing and shrieking because they were having jokes told to them. He allows the policemen to join in this game, as they mime being tortured. Suddenly he turns on them and says that the anarchist must have got himself arrested just for a laugh and now he is laughing in his grave. They see the irony and are upset, as they thought the 'judge' was on their side. He promises not to make fun of them any more, but asks that they get serious and come to the point of his leap.

He enquires as to which of them helped him, as the window ledge is too high to reach on one's own. Each detail about the facts reveals more and more how ridiculous their stories are. He eventually discovers that the constable grabbed him by the foot, and that his shoe came off in his hand. The Maniac congratulates them for arriving at this conclusion, as the shoe is proof that they tried to save him as he jumped. He is leading them on, though. Just as they celebrate he performs a Columbo-like revelation, enquiring if the suspect was tripped, as he was found on the street with both shoes on. The men are beside themselves and in his panic, Pissani declares that he had two shoes on one foot. Things disintegrate as the men argue, panic-stricken by the fact that they are all doomed and bound for jail. In the chaos of the argument they reveal that he was in fact pushed. They all suddenly realise in an instant that they have revealed the incriminating truth. They freeze. The tension here is immense and is brilliantly cut by a phone ringing. The Maniac encourages them to answer it, adding that he hasn't heard a word. (He doesn't have to reveal himself yet, as he knows the confession is recorded.) The phone call informs them that Feletti, a journalist from a left-wing newspaper, is here to interview them. They know her as a 'viper'. Initially they usher the Maniac out of the office, fearing that if Feletti sees a magistrate in their office they will be compromised even further. However, things become even more farcical as they decide his skills and quick wit will be useful, so he exits to disguise himself as a forensics expert.

Feletti enters, and is bombarded with over-the-top pleasantries. They struggle to deal with her questioning on their own and are eager for their 'friend' to return in his guise as a forensics expert, presuming him to be on their side. When he enters, he is dressed ridiculously, with false leg, hand, moustache and wig. Feletti points out that there is a discrepancy in the time of the emergency call and them seeing him fall from the window, in that the call came a few minutes before. The superintendent argues ridiculously that they were showing foresight and that they sometimes call an ambulance on the off-chance. The Maniac saves them by proffering that they are Italians and that Italians often have their clocks set to differing times. She then argues that there is no evidence that he put his

hands out to stop the fall, to which the Maniac responds, why would he when he was committing suicide. This intellectual tennis match continues, as she asks how he would explain the bruising on the anarchist's neck. To everyone's surprise he explains that a frustrated officer struck him and that is when they called the ambulance. The officers took him over to the window to draw breath in the night air, and each thought they had hold of him, but accidentally he escaped their clutches and fell. This clever explanation floors them all.

At this point, Bertozzo comes in carrying a reproduction of the bomb. This provides a vehicle for much physical slapstick comedy as they are searching for the Maniac's eye that has fallen out, and the bomb is thrown around the stage. The Superintendent introduces Bertozzo to the Maniac, whom he presumes to be the judge, under the assumed name of Captain Marcantonio Pissani. Bertozzo goes to blow their cover as he declares that he knows that captain and that this isn't him. Pissani kicks him, which renews hostilities between the two after their earlier violence. In a classic farcical style, there are crossed wires as the Superintendent, Pissani and the Constable think Bertozzo believes him to be the Judge in disguise, whereas Bertozzo is the only one who recognises him as someone else.

Feletti begins interrogating Bertozzo, who is useless at covering their tracks, and they squirm as he exposes holes in their story. The Maniac takes the bomb and begins to unscrew it. He explains that it could take a long time to dismantle, and asks whether it wouldn't be best to destroy the evidence rather than risk adding to the carnage. Again, he has saved them with his quick wits.

Feletti points out that they are consistently blaming the left for these bombings. The Maniac facetiously asks whether she thinks they should be going after the far-right paramilitary fascist organisations, who stand to gain by the outrages. The penny drops with Bertozzo as he realises who the Maniac is. The officers become embroiled in a scuffle as a result. Meanwhile, Feletti and the Maniac argue about what she as a journalist should do in the face of such a scandal. It is interesting that the Maniac does not appear to share her views, as one might initially assume. Though he clearly hates the fascist right, he is not in agreement with the communist left. He wants her to expose not just this as an isolated incident of wickedness, but the whole corrupt state. He wants revolution, not reform. As they have this debate, Bertozzo occasionally gets to the Maniac, his disguise gradually disappearing.

Eventually, Bertozzo grabs the Constable's revolver and backs everyone against the wall. He asks Feletti to handcuff the officers to the window frame, while apologising to his colleagues, though he insists it is necessary for him to expose the identity of the 'Captain'. He hands the Superintendent his psychiatric files, who begins to read in horror. The tension builds fantastically to the climax here, as the Maniac is fiddling with the bomb and proclaiming his world manifesto, reeling off scandal after scandal and real-life corruption. He goes off on such a tangent, even ahead of the year when the play is set, that this can be assumed to be the voice of the playwright. This culminates in him playing the tape of their voices from earlier, when they confessed that he was pushed. As the tape plays he removes his disguise completely and holds the bomb aloft. They are initially unafraid, but he informs them he has inserted a detonator and it is now live. He forces Bertozzo to join the others, which he does. He tells them he is going to make hundreds of copies of the tape, and that they won't be around to witness it as the bomb will go off in five minutes. The stakes are now as high as they can be, as we hurtle towards an explosive conclusion. Feletti pleads with him, saying that if he kills he is just as bad as them. He does not believe in a peaceful road to socialism however, he wants revolution. Feletti then says he will have to kill her too, unless he wants her to expose him, much to the delight of the officers. We know already how quick the Maniac is in negotiations, and he does not disappoint at the last. He throws Feletti the handcuffs, thus giving her the responsibility of letting the officers go or essentially condemning them to death. He leaves her with the choice of joining him as an accomplice in his extremist actions, or freeing the officers and writing the story with no evidence. She decides to make a bolt for it; the Maniac says goodbye to the officers and the bomb goes off.

There is then a spotlight on the Maniac, who makes a false exit. On returning, he directly addresses the audience, saying that the drama critics won't have it that the ultra-left

GCE Drama 2016: Accidental Death of an Anarchist

hooligan wins. He offers an alternative ending, and we see the version in which Feletti frees them. They thank her, then realise that she knows everything, handcuff her to the window frame and leave her for dead.

This conclusion leaves the Maniac smug in his closing statement, having proved that Feletti's peaceful approach has left her as the one who ends up dead.

Characters

Maniac

The protagonist. He is a fascinating character, quick-witted and smart, and can negotiate his way out of anything. He uses these skills to impersonate whoever he chooses. We learn through the play that he has extreme left-wing beliefs, and that he sees a violent revolution as the only way in which to oust the corrupt state.

Bertozzo

An inspector who is often the butt of the joke. He is abused verbally and physically throughout. He serves as an indicator for the audience of the violent treatment the anarchist will no doubt have been subjected to. He also provides much of the slapstick humour.

Pissani

The inspector who has given conflicting stories on what happened the night the anarchist died. He falls for the Maniac's disguise, and represents both the stupidity of the police, and also their hypocrisy.

Constables

Two constables, both played by the same actor, to make the point that the lower-ranking officers are all the same: 'yes-men' whose apathy allows corruption to happen.

Superintendent

The chief of police. He falls for the Maniac's story just as Pissani does. He is a hypocrite, and will go along with anything in order to save his own skin.

Feletti

A journalist who is the only real straight character in the play. She often represents the voice of reason, and poses the questions that the audience may have.

A word on the playwright

Dario Fo was born in Italy in 1926. His father was a railway worker, the same profession as the anarchist. His family were anti-fascists under the fascist dictator, Mussolini.

He formed a theatre company with his wife, Franca Rame, a talented actress. The plays were very political, and kicked against the censorship of the right-wing clerical Christian Democrat government of the 1950s.

He was smart, and found ways around the censorship, even managing to get onto television and perform a sketch satirising the state.

Fo and his wife became important political figures, as well as theatre makers. Their work was almost exclusively in response to the injustice they saw in society, as is the case with *Accidental Death of An Anarchist*.

He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1997.

Social, cultural and historical context

The play, written in 1970 by Dario Fo, is a direct response to the death of Giuseppe (Gino) Pinelli, who died in police custody when being questioned about a bombing he had no part in. Fo realised that much of what was said about the incident in the media was misinformation. He wanted to counter this and so wrote the play.

The event occurred 11 years before this English translation. The ten-year trial had just finished, and had ended in an unsatisfactory smokescreen, in which it was proved that fascists were to blame for the bomb – which killed 16 people, though it seemed the public were still unaware of this, attributing the massacre to left-wing groups due to the information provided by the mainstream media.

Most of the characters in the play are representative of actual people involved in the incident, or at least amalgamations of multiple players. The Maniac could be assumed to be Dario Fo, who played the part himself in the original production.

Themes

The key theme is **state corruption**. The play was written in direct response to this, and it is a feeling of injustice that drives the play forward. Dario Fo looks to expose the hypocrisy, lies and violence of the police, presumably in collusion with the government, around the death of the anarchist from the window at the police headquarters. He paints the superintendent – the highest-ranking official in the play – as a selfish coward who only has his own best interests in mind. All the police characters are stupid in one way or another, constantly outsmarted by the Maniac, and frantically scurrying to cover their messy tracks and ultimately guilty truths.

Another theme explored is **revolution**. Though both the Maniac and the journalist have a shared sense of injustice at the fascist regime, they both have different ideas about how to go about changing it. Feletti, the journalist, believes that exposing the truth is the way. The Maniac feels that more violent methods are required, believing that scandal merely satisfies the public and maintains the status quo.

There is also the question of **madness**. Is the Maniac truly mad? Or is he in fact the only sane character? He plays with his madness, often using it as a distraction, though he is apparently the most intelligent character, and is able to fool everyone in achieving his goals.

Resources

Recommended edition

Accidental Death of an Anarchist by Dario Fo. Methuen Drama Modern Classics. ISBN 978-0-413-15610-5

Further reading

Dario Fo: Revolutionary Theatre by Tom Behan ISBN-13: 978-0745313573

Dario Fo: People's Court Jester by Tony Mitchell ISBN: 041352910X

Online resources

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/oct/13/dario-fo-obituary>

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

Useful soundtracks to use in the classroom

Stornelli D'Estilio – Pietro Gori

Practical exploration activities

Actors

The following exercises are designed to help theatre makers practically explore some of the key characters, themes and ideas that are central to *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*. Some of the exercises may help actors to consider how key roles might be communicated and realised from 'page to stage'.

Off-text improvisation is a useful explorative technique to consider the 'before and after' life of the play. You might explore moments from the play that are alluded to but not seen, for example:

- The night the anarchist fell. What might have actually happened?
- How do the police officers come up with their initial story after the death happens?

Chorus work will help the actors to realise the rhythms needed to achieve the comedy of the farce. During the play, the officers share the telling of the story a line at a time. A good exercise might be to tell a story as a group in a circle, using only one word at a time. The aim is not to be clever individually, but to see if you can develop a rhythm so that the chorus operates as a whole.

Hot-seating is a valuable and exciting method to develop characterisation. It helps actors to 'flesh out' their understanding of the characters. Using their imagination and the information provided in the given circumstances will allow the actors to consider the voice, attitude and physicality of the character they are exploring.

A more theatrical way to explore hot-seating might be to combine this exercise with an off-text improvisation. For example, following on from the examples above, after we have watched a scene play out, we could immediately interview the character and ask them probing questions to discover thoughts the actor may not have considered. For example, we could ask the Superintendent whether he feels any remorse for what happened.

Exploring accent and dialect can also help actors to consider character choices. There is a clear decision to be made as to whether characters should have Italian accents or not. If they don't, are there any moments when they could have?

Non-verbal communication is often a highly effective way to explore character, subtext, tension and silence. How does each character behave in moments of silence? For example, you might see how different characters behave when they are alone in the office. How does this differ, if it does, from how they behave when they are with other characters?

Key scene work / alternative viewpoints

Another useful exercise to consider involves **staging and rehearsing a key scene with a particular focus** and then trying it in an alternative style. For example, the Maniac often imposes his status over the other characters by belittling them with mockery. The actors might explore status in conjunction with the director. The director calls out numbers from 1 to 20 for the actors in the space: 1 is the lowest status, that of a slug, if you will; 20 is the highest status, the king, perhaps. By playing this game we can begin to discover how bodies in space can signify status, and this might give us a good indication of how to stage certain pivotal moments in the play, where status plays a crucial role.

Designers

The following exercises and ideas are designed to help theatre makers explore some of the opportunities, themes and ideas that are central to *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*. Some of the suggestions may help designers to consider how key aspects of the play might be communicated and realised and from 'page to stage'.

It might be useful to set up a **production meeting and pitch** for your student designers, as this will help them to consider the play as a whole and root their practical ideas in aims and intentions. Remember that audience impact is key, and that setting up small groups of

potential theatre makers might help students to consider the text in a holistic way. For example, a group could consist of a set, costume, sound and lighting designer. Smaller groups simply take on more than one area of responsibility. It is important that each designer questions the aims and intentions of the others, so that each member of the production team is able to think in a holistic and collaborative way. The design 'pitch' could then be offered to the teacher (producer). This is a useful discussion exercise that also lends itself to research, images and presentations. It can work at the start of a scheme of work to initiate ideas/contextualise themes and key moments, or at the end of a scheme of work as a way of ensuring all aspects of production are considered. It would also make an excellent 'active' revision session in time for the exam. TIP – each member of the production team should justify their ideas with key moments from the play.

Creating a model box of a potential set design is a useful exercise and can be as simple or as elaborate as required. It is often useful for students to see how each scene will be played in a potential space, and by creating a model box they will be able to refer more easily to their ideas in a specific space. *Accidental Death* takes place all in one place, the police headquarters, though the room changes once. It is stated that the offices are similar, and so the model box would potentially help the designer figure out how this might be achieved.

Exploring different music and sound effects for key scenes is another effective way of considering how design can play an important role in the development of a key idea or theme. This could take the form of Italian music from the 1950s, for example. Or it might be that we hear sound from the street below through the open window. This ambient background noise can often help to establish the scene for an audience.

How can lighting help to create shadow and suspense? Have a **look at previous productions and lighting designs** to see how other theatre makers have used lighting to create impact. If you don't have access to lighting, you might want to consider the effect of torches or candles. (Safety first!) Again, though the play is set in one place, how might the light change the space, both literally in terms of the time of day, but also metaphorically as the climax of the play approaches.

Another useful exercise that helps to build the world of the play and develop ideas for performance is **sourcing and designing potential costumes**. Research is key, and will help students who are initially daunted about the thought of 'designing'. They don't have to be great artists to create great designs. The main thing is that they approach the design of the production in a holistic way. Is their costume design expressionistic, representational, or more naturalistic? What is their aim and intention? Does their costume design root the production and performance in a particular time period or style? A costume designer could have some real fun coming up with the different disguises the Maniac has in his bags. Might they not only be comedic, but also add extra political significance to the piece?

edexcel 



ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON