

**Cross-Continental Subversive Strategies:
Thematic and Methodological Affinities
in the Plays of
Dario Fo and Safdar Hashmi**

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By

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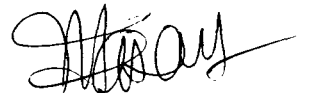
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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis entitled "**Cross-Continental Subversive Strategies: Thematic and Methodological Affinities in the Plays of Dario Fo and Safdar Hashmi**" submitted by V. Raghavan, for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English, is a record of bonafide research conducted by him under my supervision. The dissertation has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma or similar titles.




Dr. M. DASAN

DECLARATION

I declare that the thesis entitled "**Cross-Continental Subversive Strategies: Thematic and Methodological Affinities in the Plays of Dario Fo and Safdar Hashmi**" is a record of bonafide research that I conducted under the guidance and supervision of Dr. M. Dasan, Professor and Head, Department of Studies in English, Kannur University, Kerala. No part of the work has been submitted for the award of any degree, diploma or similar titles.

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INTRODUCTION

“Art is always anti-establishment. Art flourishes in the loopholes of the best society. All meaningful theatre then is always on the left. Why theatre alone? All activities in art and literature have to be anti-establishment to gain contemporary relevance. If, for instance, a regime of the left-wing gets established, then art and literature must move further left of the left. It must serve as a gadfly to society, always stimulating progress.” These words of the Indian theatre octogenarian, Habib Tanvir, are well-represented by the two twentieth century people’s theatre activists, the Italian Dario Fo and the Indian Safdar Hashmi. Their oppositional theatres always questioned the unjust socio-political status quo, inspiring the unprivileged masses to take up arms against their oppressors and exploiters.

It was the biographical similarities of these two agitprop dramatists, Dario Fo and Safdar Hashmi that prompted me to explore deeply into the themes and methods of their theatre of protest. Both were actors, playwrights, activists and declared socialists, to be more specific, Communists. Moreover, their actress-activist wives, Franca Rame and Moloyoshree, accompanied both of them respectively through out their theatrical and political activism. Fo had always been a target of the Italian establishment as well as the neo-fascists. He was arrested over hundred times while performing and was brutally assaulted by the fundamentalists many a time. His wife-cum-fellow activist, Franca Rame was kidnapped and raped by the neo-fascists.

Similarly, the Indian police, at many places, spoiled Safdar's street theatre attempts. Ultimately he had to lay down his life, amidst a street performance, for the causes he stood in his life. These similarities in their activist-artistic careers, prompted me to take up this study.

Both Fo and Safdar used to contest the ideological hegemony of capitalism through their agitprop performances and cultural activism. In this sense, the works of both these playwrights resemble the postcolonial resistance literature/theatre. The dominant motif of postcolonial drama is resistance against any kind of oppression and exploitation like imperialism, racism, patriarchy, etc. George Ryga and Drew Hayden Taylor in Canada, Amiri Baraka and Ed Bullins in America, Dereck Walcott and Allen Curnow in the West Indies, Sembene Ousman in Africa, Jack Davis and Kelvin Gilbert in Australia etc. could be considered as the postcolonial counterparts of the radical leftist dramatis like Fo and Safdar. Just like other postcolonial writers Fo and Safdar extensively made use of the postcolonial strategies of irony, parody, carnivalesque etc. This similarity is observed in their commitment to the marginalized sections of society also. Like the postcolonial theatres of dissent, Fo's and Safdar's plays are explicit, polemic and explosive. But most of the postcolonial dramatists limited their theatrical innovations to content and stick to the traditional structure of theatre. However, the agitprop theatre was radical both in form and content. So the researcher has tried to read the plays of Dario Fo and Safdar Hashmi in the light of agitprop

theatrical concerns and devices.

The first chapter of this dissertation, “Agitprop Theatre: A Survey”, provides a historical perspective on ‘agitprop theatre’ as a particular theatrical genre. I have tried to trace the genealogy of this category of political theatre. A short history on the origin and development of agitprop performance across the globe is provided. Apart from this, the major tenets and devices of this theatrical form is discussed. In this process, some of the major contemporary agitprop drama troupes from all over the world are mentioned. Lastly, I have tried to contextualize historically Dario Fo and Safdar Hashmi’s theatre of dissent in the twentieth century world of globalized corporate capitalism.

The second chapter, “Dario Fo: The Modern *Giullare*” is an effort to comprehend the theatre-scape of the Italian master comedian and political activist Dario Fo. Though Fo’s theatre was thematically quite contemporary, methodologically he owes much to the *Commedia dell’Arte*, the popular Middle Age European theatre form. So I felt it necessary to spend some pages on this particular theatre form, otherwise it would be difficult to comprehend Fo fully. The major theatrical devices as well as the type-characters of this middle age performance style is discussed, incorporating Dario Fo’s selective adaptation of this form.

Third chapter, “Motifs and Methods in Fo’s Theatre” provides a critical analysis of the selected plays of Fo. Here, the plays he wrote and performed during the “revolutionary period” are discussed in

detail. During this study, it was found that the play, Archangels Don't Play Pinball, which was firstly intended for a detailed study, actually belongs to his "bourgeois period". So only a short discussion of it is attempted at in this study. The plays discussed in detail are Mistero Buffo, Accidental Death of an Anarchist and Can't Pay? Won't Pay!. However, occasional references and comments on his other plays are also made throughout this study.

"Safdar Hashmi: Retrieving Theatre to the Masses", the fourth chapter, is an attempt to place Safdar Hashmi in the political and cultural milieu of the India of his times. His artistic concerns, ideological affiliations, and cultural activities are also discussed briefly. Safdar's plays were mostly performed in streets. He spent his whole life trying to provide aesthetic as well as ideological foundation to street theatre. So, I have tried to discuss the major conceptual and practical peculiarities of political street theatre, in this chapter.

Close critical analysis of the selected plays of Safdar is provided in the fifth chapter, titled, "Hashmi's Plays: A Strange Blend of Marxian Ideology and Gandhian Humanism." Here, a close scrutiny is attempted so that the thematic and methodological features of Safdar's plays are brought to light. No English translations of Safdar Hashmi's plays are available. So I had to translate them into English from Hindi. The English titles of his plays are my own translation. Safdar's plays: Machine, From the Village to the City, The King's Drum and Attack are discussed in detail. During the course of this study, I came to know that there is virtually no secondary material available

on the street plays of Safdar Hashmi. Only rare comments by his fellow actors could be found. The only book that provides some clues on Safdar's street theatre is The Right to Perform: Selected Writings of Safdar Hashmi. But with the help of available videos and photographs, I have tried to trace the thematic as well as methodological threads of his plays.

The last Chapter, "Cross Continental Subversive Strategies: Thematic and Methodological Affinities in the Plays of Dario Fo and Safdar Hashmi" is an attempt to compare and contrast the theatres of these activist-theatre personalities. In this process I have found out that, even though these two people's theatre activists belong to two different continents, the issues raised through their agitprop performances as well as their treatment of similar problems show surprising similarities. There was no personal, political, or professional link between these two. It is nothing but their common ideological affiliation that makes their theatre look similar, both thematically and methodologically.

I should say that this is not a pure performance study, though I have used many videos, clips and photographs to arrive at the conclusion. Moreover, the fifty-odd live theatre performances, that I watched during the course of this research, have helped me to form logical conclusions, whenever I could not find video materials as well as secondary materials for the plays discussed.

CHAPTER I

Agitprop Theatre: A Survey

By common consensus, the academic history of modern drama begins with the Norwegian playwright, Henrik Ibsen's 1877 naturalistic drama, The Pillars of Society. The term "naturalistic" was rather a stylistic labeling. It referred to the depiction of believable people living credible lives in familiar surroundings and speaking standard language (Pickering 4). Eschewing the concepts of philosophical indoctrinations through theatre performances, most of the earlier modern plays deal with the predicament of human beings caught up in a conflicting world of engulfing industrialization and institutionalized religions.

Drawing themes from contemporary lives, strictly speaking, modern playwrights discarded the obsessions with the concepts of transcendental significance as well as timeless appreciation of dramatic art, which were considered to be the essential parameters of "standard art". Along with the significant change in thematic concerns, this era also witnessed the emergence of a new profession that of a director whose job is to impose mainly artistic conception to the issues depicted by the playwright. The increasing prominence enjoyed by the director simultaneously foregrounded the importance of performance, pushing behind the importance of "text."

Technically too, modern drama introduced many novel practices. In the medieval period, the bare stage signified nowhere-so-

everywhere. With the induction of illustrated back-wall curtain in the modern period, the stations of dramatic occurrences were specified. Earlier dramatic performances were held in broad daylight, but with the induction of new electric stage-lights, the theatre people were encouraged to perform at night too. This had far reaching consequences as far as the audience was concerned. These changes altered the positioning, conditioning and attitude of the audience forever. During ancient Greek theatre and even in Elizabethan drama there used to be a stage the front part of which was projected up to the middle of the them, enabling the audience to watch the performance closely standing/sitting on all three sides.

By the time modern play had evolved, the audience was swept to one side, to the front of the Proscenium Arch. The mouth of proscenium signified transparent fourth wall of a room, through which audience could peep into. The once visible, noisy, grumbling, commenting, chaotic crowd was tamed and transformed into a silent, invisible and ordered audience by modern theatre. Even their right to enter and to go out the performance area at their own will was restricted. Thus the once intervening, feel-free spectators were transformed into a group of curious peeping Toms.

There were some positive transformations also. Intellectually, the theatre public, (consisting the playwright, producer, performer, spectators etc.) started to think about the aim of their whole exercise. They started discussing issues such as: What is the theatre for? Whom was it intended for? What should it deal with?, etc.

Theoretically speaking, it was these interrogations that brought out many of the revolutionary changes in the theatrical scenario. Later on, these three fundamental issues provided the basics of agitprop theatre.

Agitprop theatre is one of the most successful forms of applied theatre. Etymologically as well as genealogically agitprop theatre cannot get rid of its inherent political nature. Agitprop theatres are firstly and finally political theatres. They are not only simply political, but also extremely political. On the origin of this portmanteau term “agitprop”, Encyclopedia Britannica records:

Agitprop: abbreviated from Russian *agitatsiya propaganda* (agitation propaganda). This was a political strategy, in which the techniques of agitation and propaganda are used to influence and mobilize public opinion. Although the strategy is common, both the label and the obsession with it were specific to the Marxism practiced by communists in the Soviet Union. The term agit-prop originated as a shortened form of Agitation and Propaganda Section of the Central Committee Secretariat of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union. (149)

This department of the Central Committee of the Communist party was established in the early 1920s and was responsible for determining the content of all official information, overseeing political education in schools, watching overall forms of mass communication, and mobilizing public support for party

programmes. The word 'agitprop' is used in English to describe such departments and, by extension, any work especially in the theatre that aims to educate and indoctrinate the public.

Words like agitate, propaganda, indoctrinate, politicize, mobilize, educate, strategy etc, which are always inseparably identified with this term, openly declares its politics. To be more precise, agitprop theatre is a Left theatre, right from its inception. Not surprisingly, the theoretical premiers of this genre were Marxists. On this Marxian affiliation of agitprop theatre and on the two constituent words of the term "agitprop", Encyclopedia Britannica further explains that, the twin strategies of agitation and propaganda were originally elaborated by the Marxist theorist Gregory Plekhanov, who defined propaganda as the promulgation of a number of ideas to an individual or small group and agitation as the promulgation of a single idea to a large mass of people. Expanding on this notion in his pamphlet "What is to be Done?" (1902), Vladimir Lenin stated that the propagandist, whose primary medium is print, explains the causes of social inequities such as unemployment of hunger, while the agitator, whose primary medium is speech, seizes on the emotional aspect of these issues to arouse his audience to indignation of action (149).

The deliberate adaptation of this Marxist propaganda theory to theatrical performance gave birth to a new theatre genre – agitprop theatre. This adaptation itself was an artistic revolution, which rewrote the history of performing arts to a great extent. With

this artistic revolution, authors were replaced by collective authorship; boxlike proscenium stage with a transparent wall on one side was replaced by a circle in a city/village square or an open stage; darkened auditoria gave in to broad daylight; passive, curious, peeping Tom audience got transformed into a participating, intervening, interrogating crowd.

With this paradigm shift in theatre, the once state patronized or bourgeois artistic performance became a participatory mass culture. Economically too, low cost productions of agitprop theatrical performances facilitated in multiplying the quantity of performance thereby taking the art to a larger public. In brief, an overall simplification of theatrical performances was achieved with stunning effect. Supporters of elitist art are still contemptuous of agitprop theatres' simplicity. These critiques equate simplicity with absence of aesthetics.

In bourgeois proscenium theatre, the performance area, i.e. the stage was a sanctum sanctorum where it was sacrilegious for an audience to step in. The iconoclastic nature of agitprop theatre demolished the sacrosanctity of the acting area by giving the audience access to it freely. Dramatic structure too underwent modification in agitprop theatre. Though Modern theatre was avant-garde in theme, structurally it remained traditional especially in dividing the action into scenes and acts. But in agitprop theatre this compartmentalization of dramatic action and the audience disappeared. A shortened, holistic approach was accepted, where

the beginning is not far too different from the end. Most often, the absence of a logical culmination or denouement is the norm in agitprop theatre. The piece given by an agitprop theatre is an event, a chunk of ordinary day-to-day life.

Agitprop theatrical performance discards elaborate use of props, make ups, sophisticated sound and light effects which mark the performance of contemporary proscenium theatre. Agitpropists believe that the use of supplementary theatrical devises turn theatre into a mere spectacle, which in turn provides only entertainment. The conscious rejection of these supplementary devises and props makes agitprop theatrical performances more focused and goal oriented. Traditional proscenium theatre, largely, prioritized achieving aesthetic and artistic goals whereas agitprop theatre overtly prioritizes the achievement of definite political goals. Theatrical performances of aesthetic of artistic excellence can go for a high degree of sophistication and abstraction. For them the more sophisticated and abstract the performance, the more artistic or aesthetically appealing it is! Disclaiming these false notions of theatre, agitprop theatre simplifies the content and put more focus on the message. Unlike the mainstream theatre, it is not a theatre by an enlightened creator of an enlightened well-heeled audience. Its aim is to enlighten both the performer and the audience collectively. At the conclusion of agitprop-performance the isolated identities of the performer and the performed get integrates into a single unit call activists. Actors in agitprop theatre are more activists than artists.

A probe into the origin of agitprop theatre as a particular genre would take us far behind the post-revolutionary Russia. It was in post Das Capital Germany where overtly propagandistic plays emerged. According to Carol Poor, with the publication of Das Capital in 1867, several educative clubs for workers were started up for acquisition and increase of intellectual capital. The motto of those clubs was that once the workers educated themselves, the capitalists could no longer dare to offer them such exploitative wages. Poore traces the origin of agitprop performances;

But it all started quite simply. When the first volume of Karl Marx's Das Capital was published in 1867, Mr. J.B.V. Schweitzer studied it thoroughly and published the results in the newspaper *Social Demokrat*. In order to make the text's more difficult thoughts comprehensible to the newspaper readers, he used the form of a dialogue, or a disputation between two characters. This written debate, called "Schlingel", was not originally intended for the stage for live performance. Nevertheless, it began to be performed here and there as a piece in German workers clubs. Because some of the text was too lengthy or theoretical, Schweitzer published a version adapted for the stage. The piece nonetheless remained more a "Lesedrama" or proclamations, and was intended to be read rather than to be acted on stage.

With this kind of an unintentional intervention into the theatrical performance, the questions like, what is a play for? Who was it for? What should be its content started reverberating all over. Though we cannot strictly describe these late 19th century German productions based on Das Capital as agitprop theatre in the contemporary sense, they definitely showed one strong element in the agitprop devise, i.e. the propaganda part of it. The upstage delivery of Marx's ideological teachings was intended to propagate this theory and to indoctrinate the working class with the fact that the cause of their impoverishment did not lie within the working class itself, but within the exploitative capitalistic mode of production and distribution. This attempt to confront the workers with the relevancy of Marx's economic theory unknowingly sowed the seed for a latter theatrical revolution that would emerge by the 1920s.

Formally, the workers theatre was never novel. They adapted the prevailing theatrical forms with all its peculiarities. Nevertheless, thematically it was a tremendous shift from the status quo. This introduced an instructional theatre that was for the proletariat spectators. The producers of this propagandist pieces were also different from the norm. They were not dramatists by profession. Instead, they were trade union leaders. The performers too were not professional artists but trade union activists. Audience too was not drawn from the social elite, but from the working class.

Therefore, right from the initiation of this kind of stage demonstrations, the interests behind the production, articulation and

appreciation were a non-bourgeois social group, whose aim was clearly political. The long and argumentative debates were clearly not particularly entertaining. They were straightforward readings, lightly disguised with theatrical means. Their rhetoric and didactic literature were useful for purposes of agitation, but they included no action that could guarantee an entertaining play.

Between 1880 and 1900, theatre by workers for workers was popular with the workers themselves as an important tool for self-education. Nevertheless, the communist parties considered the various plays and recitals a waste of time, whilst the state authorities regarded them as highly dangerous agitation and therefore censored and banned the performances (Poore). The secret behind the popularity of with workers self-made theatre was nothing but the workers own realization that a theatre with bourgeois sentiment would only entertain, but would not enlighten. J.B.V.Schweitzer, Otto Walsler, Boreslav Strzelewicz were the arch figures of the workers theatre in the nineteenth century Germany.

It was in the post-revolutionary Russia only full-fledged agitprop theatre troupes were established. Ironically in its earlier stages in Russia, agitprop performances were promoted only to propagate the programmes and political ideology of the newly constituted proletarian government. Confrontation and clashes with the establishment was not even dreamed of the infancy of the agitprop theatre in Russia. Of its twin functions, it focused only on propaganda. Not surprisingly, most of the agitprop troupes were thoroughly professional, funded,

and patronized by the Soviet Communist Party. While the German workers theatre of the 1860s adopted the Proscenium stage for presentation, the Russian agitprop theatre practitioners invented a new form for their purpose. This new invention was street theatre. Though theatrical performances were there in the past also, it was in Russia only it took a new political dimension. It was here the flexible modes and methods of political street theatre were codified. Regarding the origin of agitprop street theatre, Safdar Hashmi says:

Street Theatre, as it is known today, can trace its direct lineage no further than the years immediately after the Russian Revolution in 1917. On the first anniversary of the October Revolution, Vsevolod Meyerhold produced poet Vladimir Mayakovsky's Mystery-Bouffe in which he combined the elements of circus clownery with revolutionary poetry and put it up in the city square for an audience of several thousands. Similar theatrical performance remained popular in various parts of the new worker's state for several years. This was the beginning of a new kind of agit-prop theatre, performed on the streets, at factory gates, markets, dockyards, playgrounds, barnyards and so on. Avowedly political in nature, this theatre sought its audience at their places of work or stay rather than attempting to bring them to the theatre hall.

(Right 6)

With this, another important phase in the evolution of agitprop theatre has completed: thematic, “productional” and receptive evolutions were taken place in the German Workers Theatre. Through the seizure of performance area from the omnipotent proscenium arch to the bare street, there comes an evolution of theatrical milieu. The content compelled to change the form, not vice versa.

It would amount to tautology if we speak about “political agitprop” theatre because “politics” is inseparably and inherently embedded in the term “agitprop”. Devoid of the political dimension agitprop theatre is impossible or incomplete. In a conventional sense a theatre is regarded as political in nature, when it consciously takes sides in political activities, for a particular political party of ideology, or for or against a particular government or a prominent political institution. “In a more modern sense a theatre may be regarded as political when it attempts to raise the political consciousness of the people and tries to change the beliefs and opinions of the audience by raising political questions or problems” (Mukhopadhyay xiii). In this sense even if a play does not support a particular political party or propagate a particular ideology, but still raises political issues by exploring certain social problems, it can be regarded as political.

Any political theatre that is intellectually dynamic, intentionally engaged, explicitly partisan, experimentally innovative, collectively conceived, emotionally sensitive, purportedly and positively agitative, ideologically oriented and revolutionary in aim can be defined as agitprop theatre. Intellectuality, intentionality, partisanship,

innovation, collectivity, sensitivity, agitative, ideological, and revolutionary are the general adjectives used to describe a typical agitprop drama.

After studying the political theatres of India since independence, Mukhopadhyay, an eminent critique of political theatre in India distinguishes between agitprop plays and propaganda plays:

Agit-prop theatre dramatizes contemporary issues to politicize their audience. Agitprop theatre is a synthesis of two types of plays. One is agitational plays, which concentrates on an immediate live issue, and the other is propaganda plays, which handle larger issues involving the whole of society, or a period of history or the sufferings of an entire class. Agit-prop preaches revolution and wants to overthrow the political power of the oppressors. (17)

People's theatre activists like Lou Furman agrees to the categorization of modern plays into "social drama" and "agitprop drama". According to him social action theatre or "social drama" is evolutionary in its approach to bringing changes in the society, whereas agitprop theatre is the only form that will make revolutionary change in the society (59). However there are purists like Arthur Miller who outrightly disagrees to this kind of classification. He accuses the left-wing playwrights for such an unnatural classification. He says that, "If one can look at the idea of 'social drama' from the Greek point for one moment, it will be clear that there can be only either a

genuinely social drama or, if it abdicates altogether, its true opposite, the antisocial and ultimately anti-dramatic drama” (672). This opinion seems to be rather conservative because agitprop theatre is a peculiar theatre form that is thoroughly militant and provocatively irritant. Even if social issues are addressed in conventional social play, its aim is not to bring a quick radical social change. To the maximum social plays can be said to be progressive and purposeful. They try to interpret the social issues but not to overthrow the social setup that is responsible for the particular social issue.

Studying the radical dramas of James Baldwin, Amiri Baraka and Ed Bullins, in Racial Consciousness in Black American Drama, Dasan commented that:

All writers express their vision of the world. But the oppressor and the oppressed, the White and the Black could not have the same vision of the world, for the experience of human beings also contributes in forming one’s vision of the world. Even the question of what is truth is answered not alike by the two races because their interests, beliefs, and cultures are not only different, but are often conflicting and opposing. (127)

This opinion as such can be adopted in agitprop theatre also, by a simple replacement of White/Black with Capitalists/Proletarian. Agitprop dramatists look at the world from the viewpoint of the oppressed and exploited working class. Hence their vision of the contemporary world inescapably varies from that of the mainstream

bourgeoisie dramatists. As a result the dramatists on the side of the exploited proletariat presents a world of conflicts which necessitates class struggle to ensure socio-political justice.

The task of agitprop theatre is to stimulate immediate action so as to bring a radical change in the political situation. With its techniques of focused sketch like situations, revolutionary songs and instigating choruses directed at the audience and with short loosely linking scenes in the dramaturgy, agitprop drama is a rehearsal for the non-stoppable revolution.

Instead of clinging to the proscenium arch and auditoria that inescapably brings in a barrier between the audience and the actors, most of the agitprop drama prefers the arena type performance space. This performance area ensures a comfortable feeling of intimacy, a sense of space, and a hospitable atmosphere to the performers as well as to the spectators. For agitpropists a drama can be performed at any time and at any place. This spatial liberation made arena theatres popular immediately in the years following the second World War (Gassner, *Producing* 542). But this freedom of the space as well as the engagement with the common people could slip into the production of thematically shallow and aesthetically inferior performance from the part of the inexperienced agitprop dramatists. According to Bertolt Brecht, the simplicity and commonality of the audience should not be misinterpreted, by the dramatists, as the audience's absence of aesthetic taste or their inability for proper comprehension. He advises the people's theatre practitioners in this connection:

I speak from experience when I say that one must never be frightened of putting bold and unaccustomed things before the proletariat, so long as they have to do with reality. There will always be educated persons, connoisseurs of the art, who will step in with a 'the people won't understand that'. But the people impatiently show them aside and come to terms directly with the artist. (*On Theatre* 111)

Rejecting romantic monumentalism, spiritual dilemma, psychological eccentricities and existential obsessions of mainstream playwrights, agitpropists try to build up the *Proletcult* (Proletarian Culture). They attempt at "public celebrations of the working class struggles, in which the boundary between labour and festival, between life and art, between spectator and art would be dissolved" (Brown John, *Oxford Illustrated* 385). Noel Greig, an actor-cum-activist of the British Red Ladder Theatre Company, speaks about this essential integrity and inseparability between the performers and spectators in agitprop theatre: "I don't want to get holy about this when I say, the actor is the *communicator* and the person in the audience is the *communicant*: there is an umbilical chord between two." (19)

Vladimir Meyerhold's *Mystery Buffe* (1918) is proclaimed to be the first soviet/proletarian play in the history of agitprop play. This turned out to be the trendsetter in the years to come. Proclaiming that the style of the actors as well as that of the author and producer should be complete and concrete in nature, Ervin Picastor was the

first to enter the political theatre in Germany, opening the *proletarisches theatre* (proletarian theatre) in a working class district of Berlin (Lumley 93). In the 1920s this new mode of theatre was adopted by Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht in Germany, and by Joan Littlewood through his Theatre of Action in England during the 1930s. In America Clifford Odets' vignette of working class exploitation Waiting for Lefty (1935), became a lasting agitprop classic. These classic productions with their minimal staging, crude caricature, sequence of short scenes, and topical immediacy made theatre a primary vehicle for left-wing performance (Brown John, *Oxford Illustrated* 395).

Rejecting the liberal humanist idea of "pure art" agitprop theatre turns dramatic performance into "a political pressure" (Kirby 132) because it believes that the idea of "pure art" as a compatible ideological legacy of the parasitic ruling class. This particular vision on the designated space of art in society is definitely inherited from the renowned Marxist thinkers like George Lucacs and Bertolt Brecht who believed that art and literature should show the people the reality of the contemporary society in all its contradictions (Ramanujam 128). Realism in all theatrical enterprises as well as concern for the exploited were the common concern for the agitpropists all over the world. In this sense, Carnicke says, in propagating people's theatre Meyerhold and Stanislavsky, who were the archetypal premiers of agitprop theatre, "seems to define antithetical poles of twentieth century attitude towards theatre: theatricalism and psychological realism." (366)

A glance at contemporary agitprop theatre shows its exciting variety in forms and themes. Therefore, it is illogical to talk of a single form of agitprop theatre. It is plural in form as well as in treatment. So the phrase 'agitprop theatres' seems to be more logical. The website Tonisant lists more than 30 theatrical forms and companies in America alone under the heading "Agitprop Theatre". This pretty long list includes: Resist Inc. of Boston; *Salaam Theatre* of South Asian League of artists in America; *Theatre Against War* (THAW), an international network of theatre activists against the American aggressive and imperial foreign policies; *The Diggers* based in San Francisco; *The Living Theatre* by Judith Malina and Julian Beck; *Workers Theatre* of New York, which is dedicated to play on the issues the working class confronts; *Guerilla Girls*; and so on.

Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* in Brazil, Grotovsky's *Poor Theatre*, Dario Fo and Franca Rame's *La Commune* in Italy, the British based *Theatre Workshop* by Joan Littlewood, the *Action Theatre*, and the *Red Ladder* by Noel Greig, the Indian street theatre groups like *Jana Natya Manch* (Janam) New Delhi, Prasanna's *Smudaya* in Karnataka, *Kerala Sasthra Sahitya Parishad* (KSSP), *Progamana Kala Sahitya Samgam* (PUKASA) and *Janayana*, *Thendikkoothu* by Ramachandaran Mokeri, *Drop Calicut*, *Manjumalaimakkal* by K.J.Baby in Kerala, *Indian People's Theatre Association* (IPTA) in Kolkatta, *Praja Natya Manjali* in Andhra Pradesh, Kuttak based *Sahas*, *Kalai Kuzu* in Chennai, *Mukhuta Kalamanch* in Guna-Madhya Pradesh, *Nishanth* in Gujarath, *Disha* and *Jagar* in

Mumbai etc. can be grouped together under the umbrella term agitprop theatres.

Agitprop theatre is an openly revolutionary and agitational form of theatre that is concerned with the day-to-day issues of the class struggle. There is always an interplay between the political ideas and artistic expression and a crusader's zeal in theatrical action in all forms of agitprop theatres. These performances have always showed an anarchic spirit in dealing with all the de-politicization of social life for the benefits of the elite and influential strata of the society. Agitpropists echo Ervin Piscato's words, "The important thing is always the aim: the best performance is the most effective propaganda (168). Transformation of dramatic performances into weapons of class struggle is the first and last motto of agitprop theatres. Sometimes these performances are described as "pamphlet theatre", or "docudrama" or "theatrical newsletters", or "propaganda plays", "guerilla theatre", "ambush theatre", "poster plays", "property-less theatre" etc.

The highly politicized and explicitly partisan propagandist theatre make the civil society realize their prime responsibilities in ensuring the fundamental rights of the deprived sections of the society. As a general norm agitprop theatre make a political point to stimulate debate or protest simultaneously encouraging the public expression of dissenting voices in the society. Even though the different agitprop performances use different techniques and modalities in giving voice to the suppressed, the following distinctively

common features could be noted in an agitprop theatrical performance:

- Most often the performances take place outdoors rather than in traditional specially built auditoria. It goes directly to the people.
- The troupes tour across cities, villages, countries rather than restricting the performance to a particular station.
- Elaborate theatrical props like distinct costumes to differentiate characters, sophisticated electronic accessories, detailed scenic sets, etc. are avoided.
- It is mainly physical theatre, where the actors have to make maximum use of the physical capability to convey the exact meaning to the audience.
- The play is collectively devised by the troupe itself.
- Consists of dramatization of reported events. The content is derived from non-dramatic sources.
- Seek to persuade the audience to adopt a particular attitude or stand to the represented events.
- Satirical caricaturing of politically incorrect figures and attitudes.
- Performances are shown free of cost, but often used to collect donations after the performance.
- Interactive in nature. Encourages open participation of the audience also. Spectators are encouraged to become 'spect-actors'.

- Performance is taken not as an end but a beginning of political action from the people.
- Spontaneous creation of the dramatic plot.
- Issues of topical interests are often dramatized.
- Comprehensive improvisation during the performance. Local issues, names of local people, places, etc. are easily incorporated.
- Acting is not differentiated from political action. Actors are termed as activists.
- The theatre group goes into communities where possible problems exist. They investigate problems that the community wants to solve. They create story based on the problems.
- They engage the audience and act out the solutions.

Agitprop plays often stir controversies in the political spectrum because they challenge the quiescent assumptions and cherished ideologies. Theatre semioticians like Keir Elam considered theatre as “complex of phenomena associated with the performer-audience transactions that is with the production and communication of meaning in the performance itself and with the system underlying it” (02). In its attack against the corrupt elements in the society the agitpropists have no time to dally with this kind of mere erudite conceptions of drama. With their revolutionary art and passionate performances, they smash the barriers between art and politics. They leave an inedible mark on the form of theatre itself,

pushing off its comfortable naturalistic pedestal into an experimental realm of radical confrontation, mixing ritual and spectacle. Most of the Indian agitprop performances, resisting the temptation to “hack back to traditions and the ethnic” (Deshapande G.P, *Modern Indian* xiv), question the authority of illegitimate political power anywhere and everywhere with stamina and commitment because they believe that:

In an impoverished state, where millions of people are denied the basic necessities of life -- food, water, electricity, accommodation, sanitation, fuel, the theatre cannot afford to be mere entertainment. The poverty and destitution of the masses demand a stringently political theatre -- a theatre that confronts the basic problems of the people and exposes the socio- economic injustices that are responsible for this problem.

(Barucha xii)

Agitpropists believe that dramatic performances should not be mere rituals. Frequent use of spectacles, sensationalization and sentimentalization in traditional theatre has resulted in losing its sharpness as a political weapon. Any ritualization, whether deliberate or natural, sucks away the politics behind these actions. Therefore many practitioners of people’s theatre felt the need for shifting the terrain of struggle to public demonstration, street fighting, street playing, in which the performers are always cast in the role of victims and the authority/police as visible subjugators.

In agitprop theatre although the script is collectively written and the actors are activist-amateurs, the relationship between performer and audience undergoes a radical change. The performances become an integral component of the direct action, by breaking the barrier between the performer and the performed. Even though there is no pretension of substitution direct action with theatrical action, the practitioners of agitprop theatre try their best at integrating protest and performance.

Agitprop is a kind of action theatre, which is more sharp and provocative than any other theatrical performances. It infiltrates in the premises of those who it opposes and performs right in front of them. This direct method has tremendous ramifications. It will be difficult to separate the performance and the protest. Street theatre took theatre to the places where people worked or stayed. Often, in this kind of theatre the platform of protest is right in the face of injustice or corruption, for example, at a factory gate where workers are fired at the will of the owner.

The un-pre-informed crowd, who can be a group of striking workers, at the place of performance, takes things for granted till the end of the performance, only to understand later on that they were participating in a dramatized protest. This unknowing participation of audience make them act out their given part in their natural temper. By questioning the authority, inspired by the "theatre agitators", audience becomes agitators. This type of direct live theatrical intervention bags in enough concrete achievements. Firstly, people's

sentiment on a particular issue is spontaneously elicited during the performance. The introvert audience is transformed into an extravert performer. The boundary line between the audience and the performer is absolutely erased.

The performance area is neither a stage nor a city circle, but sometimes, it is the whole premises. Through this novel method people can be alerted of the wide spread common issues like official corruption, unemployment, nepotism in the establishment etc. Agit prop theatre is a hijacking theatre. It hijacks the theatre to institutional premises, and hijacks audience and the representatives of the establishment to play a game of police-thief-play. The interceptive nature of action theatre invites provocations from the establishment that could be channelized for the reprisal of the grievances of the mass.

Another significant deviation is related to the concept of theatrical "texts" of "scripts". Traditional proscenium performances impeccably followed the written texts. Whereas for agitprop theatre, the 'scripts' were comparatively flexible that could be altered to suit to the locality or time. Many times, theatre scripts are nonexistent. Only a broad understanding between the performers is there regarding the theme of their theatrical action. Just a few guidelines exist. No written scripts at all most often. This enables the performers greater adaptations of momentary interruptions by the spectators. This flexibility in the performance text gives a lot of scope for the performers to improvise during the performance.

Many theorists of agitprop theatre hold the view that spontaneous improvisation is the soul of agitational theatre. On improvisation in drama Hodgson explains:

Improvisation trains people to think. It aims at the inculcation of clear mental habits and the training of the expression of these thoughts in a concise and orderly way. Because it places people in a human situation involving the other people, it calls for fairly quick thinking and at times for different levels of thought at one and the same time. Decisions have to be made by the individual in the situation, but because it is an experimental situation, he can learn by his errors or adjust to the utilization of his mistakes. (22-23)

Instantaneous adaptation of local feelings on a particular issue, quick and on the spot gesture or verbal response to audience-response to a particular piece of dramatic dialogue, apt voice modulation in moments of commotion among the audience, accurate repartee to an unexpected comment or action by a fellow performer, spontaneous adjustment to some unexpected occurrence during the performance etc. are the different dimensions of theatrical improvisation. These types of theatrical maneuverings are common features in agitprop drama.

In this theatre, it is only at the end of the performance spectators come to know that they are simultaneously watching and acting a play. By that time they might have contributed their 'acting'

share to the performance. Their embarrassment at the realization of the whole scenario leads the audience to achieve satisfaction for taking part in a social cause.

Agitprop theatre should be understood as a springboard to a wider critique of capitalism, consumerism or any other forms of suppression and exploitation. The unbridled march of marketism and the consequent mechanization of human psyche and activity has created deep psychological as well as sociological chasm which makes it greatly difficult even to provoke. To engage people actively in the process of resistance against global exploitation and suppression is the aim and politics of political action theatres. Their strategy includes critically looking at the past and present manifestation of covert capital and totalitarian interests that deliberately make human being only a responsible consumer devoid of critical thinking.

This short survey of agitprop theatrical forms reveals its alarming variety across the world. Social issues specific to the localities gave rise to different modes of protests, through theatrical performances. The plurality as well as the distinctive features of agitprop theatre cannot be understood merely as dispersed protests, but as an opening of multi-dimensional attack against corrupt authorities and unjust social setup.

Firstly agitprop theatrical forms declare that it is not for the economically elite class, but for the working class. These populous performances never take worried about popularity through the bourgeois media. However, after the initial negligence media ultimately

started giving appropriate exposure to the agitprop theatre.

Revolutionizing the actor-spectator relationship is a major programme of all agitprop theatre. Being activists, agitprop dramatists and performers cannot confine themselves to the specific frames of the “theatre world”. They activate the audience; and encourage contributory interventions amidst the dramatic performances. Ultimately in agitprop theatre the dramatic monologue is rehabilitated in to a more productive dialogue between the audience and the performers. Agitprop theatre, though didactic in a sense, never imposes upon the spectator, but they learn together by acting together.

Agitprop theatre is never without any criticisms. They are said to be incapable of penetrating into the deeper problems of individual dilemmas, especially psychological tribulations. This incapability makes their performance shallow, according to conventional academic arguments. But agitprop theorists like Boal has shown the world, through his Rainbow of Desires, that even psychological issues can also well be shown through agitprop mode, but only form a sociological perspective.

In another level, agitprop performances are said to be of mere topical importance pushing it into total oblivion very soon after some time. This lack of timelessness and universality is defended by its relentless commitment for social cause. It was this concern for the deprived section of the society and exposure of ruthless exploitation by the powerful makes the presence of agitprop theatre meaningful

amidst all denials by the apostles of aesthetic art. This commitment to the society brought Safdar Hashmi and Dario Fo together.

Though continentally apart, Fo's and Safdar's imaginative engagements and individual concerns show striking similarity in their crusade for the poor and against the oppressive establishments. Theatrically speaking, both adopted dissimilar methods of projecting similar issues. Safdar registered his protests by dissociating himself from the traditional theatrical forms. Meanwhile Dario Fo resisted not surrendering traditional proscenium performances to and for the elite only. Planting his foot firmly on the stage, he dragged it to the workers presence.

Fo's tireless efforts showed the world that agitpropism could be achieved in conventional stage too. Being an avant-garde artist he obliterated the reservations attached to traditional theatre. All his efforts were to erase the invisible line drawn between life and art. He was of the view that life cannot be detached from art and vice versa too. The development of modern political theatre shows a progression towards the aim of filling up dividing trenches between people and theatre. On the development of modern agitprop theatre the anonymous author, in *Do or Die* comments:

Avant-garde artists dreams of demolishing the barrier between life and art, and have indicated that this dream is a part of the revolutionary project. In one respect, the trajectory of political theatre in the twentieth century shows a progression towards precisely that aim. Agitprop

theatre began the process by reclaiming and redefining the theatrical. Agitprop took drama out of the private space of the theatre into more public space; way from the professional writers and actors toward amateurs and activists; away from a middle class audience to a more popular audience; away from depoliticized representations of bourgeois life and manners toward explicitly politicized representations of resistance; and away from a spectacularized, commodified form of theatre toward more every day, face-to-face interactive type of theatre.

CHAPTER II

Dario Fo: The Modern Giullare

The Belief in art for art's sake arises whenever the artists and people keenly interested in art are out of harmony with his social environment. (Plekhanov 21)

Dario Fo, along with his oppositional theatre, has always been an inseparable part of radical mass movements in Italy since the 1950s. He never tried to dissociate himself from the disturbing realities and burning issues in the society. Fo never had any tryst with existential crises or psychological dilemmas to keep his artistic self away from the social environment and to create an individualistic hallucinatory environment. He always readily plunged into political controversies and swam against the current. His individuality has always been determined by his society. His leftist socialist ideology taught him the realistic lesson that art is for people's sake. Therefore he never got alienated from the people.

Dario Fo is a permanent outsider of the establishment, Catholicism and reformist Communism. Through his alternative theatre Fo has been tirelessly targeting the three embodiments of state totalitarianism, religious eclecticism and parliamentary opportunism of revolutionary movements. One can briefly summarize that abuse of political power; religious eclecticism and reformist Communism were the targets of Fovian theatrical battle. A close thematic analysis of Fo's plays undoubtedly reveals these aspects.

The Italian establishment labeled him a “theatre anarchist”, the Catholic heavy weights denounced him a “blasphemous lout” and reformist communists ridiculed him as an exponent of “comic communism”. However, Fo never gave in to these giant walls that stand in the path of political transparency, individual freedom and revolutionary ideals.

The writings of Karl Marx, Mao Tsetung, Antonio Gramsci etc. provided Fo necessary ideological clarity and political orientation. On this early Marxist connection and anti-establishment elements in his theatre Fo openly declares that:

Mine has always been a revolt, a rebellion, against a hypocritical and deceitful order, which dates back to my experience as a student. As Marx says, ‘the ruling ideas in a society are the ideas of the ruling class’, and at that times it [The Christian Democratic Party of Italy] was only the ruling class, which expressed its culture. Therefore my class, the peasantry, was viewed as being a parasite that lived off that culture and aped some of its products.

(Behan, *Revolutionary* 7)

Later on the Marxist theatre personalities like Bertolt Brecht, Erwin Picastor and Vsevolod Meyerhold, perfected his theatrical insights. Medieval Commedia dell’Arte, the *giullare* and *fabulators* bestowed him with delivery methods and above all, his wife-cum-colleague Franca Rame supported and suffered with him all the consequent persecutions.

Dario Fo is an all-round theatrician. He is primarily not only a talented actor, but also a powerful author, an amazing director, stage designer, and a hilarious mime too. For Fo, theatre is not merely a venue or channel for expression of the vicissitudes of existential dilemmas or deeper psychological reverberations. For him theatre is a means and method for registering dissenting political statements. His theatre is definitely a theatre of the oppressed intending to arouse the audience's consciousness against the prevailing injustices and exploitations. Fo's theatre absorbs energy from the masses' survival issues; he modifies them theatrically and gives them back to the people in the shape of a political weapon to fight against the perpetrators of exploitation and injustice. Receiving the coveted Nobel Prize for Literature in 1997, he spoke on his ideological mission:

Our task as intellectuals, as persons who mount the pulpit or stage, and who most importantly, address to young people, our tasks is not just to teach them method, like how to use the arms, how to control breathing, how to use the stomach, the voice, the falsetto, the contra campo. It's not enough to teach a technique or style; we have to show them what is happening around us. They have to be able to tell their own story. A theatre, a literature that does not speak for its own time has no relevance. (*Nobel Lecture*)

When Bertolt Brecht dismantled the established, structured narrative stylistics of theatre through his epic theatre, it ultimately

proved to be a revolution in the structure of theatre. However in Fovian theatre, the revolution was in content. Disagreeing with all theoretical holy cows and sacrosanctity of the profession, he fearlessly and directly attacked the abuse of power, de-enlightening attitude of Christianity, hijacking of people's revolution by the parliamentary communists, dehumanizing and exploitative capitalism and so on. By directly referring to the living personalities, contemporary political figures and religious tycoons through his plays, Fo set a unique example of political and moral fortitude. His moral guts and political orientation were instrumental in changing the theatre and politicalscape of Europe, especially of Italy in the 1960s and 1970s. He believed that theatre ultimately had to be a weapon in the hands of the oppressed.

Dario Fo was born on 24 March 1926, at San Giano, in the province of Varese, Northern Italy, which was a hub of art right from the middle ages (Martindale 11). His father was a Railway worker-cum-par time actor and mother had a peasant background. He was brought up amidst the sons of Lombardian glassblowers, fishermen and smugglers to whom the young Fo would listen with intense curiosity for their tales of adventure, hypocrisies of the authority and exploitation by the bosses. Not only did Fo get the elementary lessons on story telling from them but was also politicized by their narratives.

Initially trained to be a professional architect in Milan, Fo's theatrical debut were in the *piccoli teatri* (small theatre) movements that performed improvised monologues in the 1950s. Right from the

very beginning of public appearances Fo has successfully managed to keep the image of a controversial figure. The scandalised authorities had to cancel the broadcast of his radio political programme *Cocorico* in RAI (Italian National Radio) as he used Biblical tales for political satire.

With Archangels Don't Play Pinball (1959), the Fo-Rame couple shot into national and international fame. They were invited to produce the popular TV programme *Conzonissima* (1962) but had to leave it unfinished as they refused to accept severe bowdlerization anymore. By now they had become national celebrities. They had amazing success rate in the mainstream bourgeoisie proscenium theatre with their productions like The Finger in the Eye (1953) in which they were accused of the communist enemy of civilization with red propaganda. Afterwards they produced He Had Two Guns (1960), a play about the collision between fascism and bourgeoisie, and Columbus (1963) depicting imperialistic mentalities of totalitarian states.

But soon, coupled with the emotional passivity of their bourgeois audience and their own proletarian concerns, Fo and Rame dissociated themselves from the traditional structures of official theatre. Fo had understood that bourgeoisie wouldn't mind criticism so far as it is raised inside the structure controlled by them. So it was necessary to disengage from that controlled theatrical circle. Their political consciousness made Fo and Rame realize that

...in order to feel at one with our political commitment, it was no longer enough to consider ourselves as democratic, left-wing artists full of sympathy for the working class and in general, for the exploited. Sympathy was no longer sufficient. The lesson came to us directly from the extraordinary struggles of the working people, from the new impulse that young people were giving in the schools to fight against authoritarianism and social injustice for the creation of a new culture and a new relationship with the exploited class. No longer could we act as intellectuals sitting comfortably within and above our own privileges, deigning in our goodness to deal with the predicament of the exploited. We had to place ourselves entirely at the service of the exploited, become their minstrels. Which meant going to work within the structure provided by the working class. (Intro. *Plays 2* xxii)

After their much considered departure from the mainstream theatre in 1968 they set up a new theatrical company, *Nuova Scena* (New Scene), and started working in collaboration with the workers Clubs (*Case del Popola*) affiliated to the Italian Communist Party (PCI). In its publicity brochure *Nuova Scena* declared its cultural policies as:

Theatre, like all other means of expression, has always belonged to the ruling class, which makes use of it as an instrument of ideological and political pressure. The

structures of theatre _ architecture and site of the buildings, performance time, ticket prices _ exclude popular audiences from while that theatre itself, in its choice of script and language, offers exclusively bourgeoisie-styled products, it speaks to the society which supports it. (Behan, *Revolutionary* 22-23)

The path breaking Mistero Buffo (1969) belongs to this period of engagement with the main stream Communist Party. Soon Fo got fed up with the inflexibility and adjustment policies of the official left, and in 1970 they formed a new theatre collective, *La Commune* (The Commune) and started identifying with the non-mainstream radical lefts. Even though they said adieu to the Italian Communist Party, Fo and his co-activists, in the words of Arturo Peragalli, maintained that, “theatre only has a use if it is connected on the one hand to the masses and their just demands, and on the other hand to the organized vanguard; in order to become one of the thousand vehicles, one of the thousand weapons in the process of a Socialist revolution” (Behan, *Revolutionary* 29). Fo’s more radical and politically provoking plays like the Accidental Death of an Anarchist (1970) and Can’t Pay? Won’t Pay! (1973) are the byproducts of his ultimate disengagement with the parliamentary Communists.

Dario Fo never claimed any type of political neutrality nor did he hide from public and spectators his political orientation towards the leftist ideology. This frank admittance of political partiality in

favor of the oppressed turned his theatre more disturbing and provoking. His is a direct theatre in support of the working class and against the oppressors. Fo has definitively unmasked the long established religious falsehoods and delivered credible judgments on the cunningness and complexities of the repressive state apparatuses in the light of the enlightening ideology, Marxism. Because of his un-compromising theatre he was arrested over a dozen times in Italy; made Rame subject to kidnapping, torture and rape; provoked Vatican to label his Mistero Buffo “the most blasphemous show in the history of television”; promoted the Italian Communist Party (PCI) call his play The Worker Knows 3000 words, The Boss Knows 1000 (1969) “crude, banal and sentimental” and forced the United State of America to bar his entry in the country in 1980 and 1984 in the pretext of protecting the country from the communist Fo.

Fo’s theatre is an exciting blend of tradition and modernity; seriousness and comedy; and ideology and anarchism. Structurally he is enormously traditional with no avant-garde obsessions with expressionism, surrealism, futurism, impressionism, montage, and so on, except a Jacques Copeaun (1879-194) admiration for *treteau nu* (naked stage). Nevertheless, thematically he is at par with the modern *avant gardes* with his high intellectual moral and political mission of giving vent to the feelings of the marginalized and exploited class. His theatrical incitements for political anarchism are firmly rooted in socialist revolutionary ideology. His themes

echo the saying, "Let's not start with good old things, let's start with bad new ones."

There are historical reasons for Fo's theatre being rude and disrespectful. As a method, largely, Fo imbibes, the performance tradition of the *giullare* (the jongleurs), the itinerant popular performers of the Middle Ages. The *giullare* were the medieval jesters who played irreverent, grotesque theatrical pieces at the country carnivals. Their performances were filled with sarcasm, sharp jibes at the landowners and the corrupt clergy. Using vulgar, popular and unpolished language they exposed the corruption and exploitation in the feudal society. They were the modern day counterparts of theatrical anarchists including Dario Fo. This theatre of protest in the pre-capitalist society provided Fo with a fresh tool for mockery and attack.

The sharpness of the *giullari* tongue and the bitterness of the prevailing social reality are reflected generally in Fo's plays. The *giullari* were unprotected by the law and anyone could finish those disturbing creatures with legal immunity (*Nobel Lecture*). In the Middle Ages the *giullari* wandered through the streets, cites of carnivals and religious festivals revealing their stories of deceit and exploitation by the feudal masters. Their performances had a political mission of warning people about the oppression. They would entertain and educate the mass with ironic remarks and slapstick performances in sophisticated invented dialect that could be understood by the people of a vast geographical area.

For his method of onstage delivery Dario is heavily indebted to the professional theatrical cycles of the Commedia dell'Arte. According to Stuart Hood, "the lineage of his [Fo's] writing and performance can be traced back to the Commedia dell'Arte of the Renaissance which established the cast of cunning servants, swaggering swordsmen, lecherous old men and star-crossed lovers with their masks and conventional costumes that held the stage for more than two hundred years." (Intro. *Plays 1 ix*)

Basically the Commedia dell'Arte performances were meant to entertain the court conclaves. They were bourgeois media of entertainment. But Dario Fo reinvented the techniques of slapstick comedy and sophisticated farce to suit his purpose. The elements of acrobatics, quick wit, quick change of character and situations, embedded criticism, and spontaneous onstage improvisation are the Commedia dell'Arte legacies that he applies in his theatre of protest.

Dario Fo's play texts are filled with unpolished popular dialectical expressions. This intentional 'de-civilization' exercise makes Fo's dialogue coarse and razor sharp. This whipping with a vulgar tongue aggravates the fury of the targeted people, i.e. the exploiters and oppressors. Fo's language is entirely zannian. Stuart Hood explains on the linguistic peculiarities of Fo's theatre:

These zanies — peasant clowns from the valley of Po developed a tradition of mime and the convention of *grammelot*: a mixture of dialect words and a language that was no language and yet one audience could latch on and understand and still do. (Intro. *Plays 1 ix*)

This combination of the giullari style, the Commedia dell'Arte tradition, the zannian slapstick and *grammelot* transforms Fo's theatre into a popular, rude and disrespectful one. Stuart Hood elaborates that Fo's theatrical mission is therefore one with a trajectory that takes him away from the formal scholarly dramas of the Renaissance courts just as it does from the bourgeois plays of the nineteenth century and the well-made plays of our own time. The art of comic acting, of working with masks, of mime and *grammelot* developed in order to create a modern popular theatre (xi).

Before elaborating the other thematic and methodological features of Fo's theatre, a brief description of the stylistic and thematic features of the Commedia dell'Arte theatre variety, on which Fo heavily indebted is necessary.

The Commedia dell'Arte

The Commedia dell'Arte, ("Comedy of Art" or "Comedy of the Profession") denotes a species of largely unwritten or improvised, professional drama that originated in Italy in the fourteenth century and flourished throughout Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Thanks to its local origin it is also known as the "Italian Comedy". This Renaissance theatrical nomenclature implies a peculiar manner of performance rather than the thematic content of the performance text. The first documented history of the Commedia dell'Arte began in 1545, in Padua, Italy with the signing of a professional contract binding on a group of men to travel about playing commedia for money (Borwn John, *Oxford Illustrated* 118). It

was the Commedia dell'Arte theatrical entertainment that introduced the professional actors into Europe.

The phrase "Commedia dell'Arte" doesn't suggest a single monolithic theatre variety. It is more or less an umbrella phrase that includes almost all the popular performance traditions of the Middle Ages. According M.A. Katritzky, an expert in medieval theatrical forms of Europe, the 16th century mountebank performances as well as the *comici* stage shows distantly fall within the sphere of the Commedia dell'Arte. Mountebanks, also known as "Charlatans" or "quack sellers" were commercial traveling showmen associated with the sale of quack medicines and other products. They had to impress the crowd invariably at carnivals and city squares to ensure a handsome business of selling their wares. For this, in the form of platform advertisement, they had to show their histrionic accomplishments to pull the crowd. In this way the medieval mountebank entertainments were an alternative form of recreations too. Katritzky elaborates:

Mountebanks and *comici* did not simply overlap through a superficial coincidence in their choice of costumes and stock characters. It is evident, that, in at least some cases, depiction of these costumes and types is their conjunction with the mountebanks was because they would stage full-length plays of the Commedia dell'Arte type. The Commedia dell'Arte was not the only point of contact in a cultural continuum in which the low farces, acrobatics, clowning and *lazzi* of the mountebanks

overlapped with the wide range of theatrical performance offered by the Commedia dell'Arte. (105)

So the Commedia dell'Arte is a fluid concept, which involved a wide variety of theatrical manifestations in the Renaissance Europe. Another bone of contention among theatrical historians is the "class" question of the Commedia dell'Arte. The Commedia dell'Arte performances were often described as a lower class alternative to private theatre of courts and academics (Brown John, *Oxford Illustrated* 126). Most of the traditional historians of theatre hold the view that the Medieval theatrical form was an alternative popular culture against the elite culture. It is rightly understood that the *commedia* performance was basically a popular entertainment phenomena during carnivals and religious festivities. However recent researches in the field reveals that the genre cannot be simply connected to "low culture" opposed to "high culture", but a combination of both literary and verbally transmitted materials. "Not only did the dell'Arte actors sing in the emerging early opera of the late 16th century, but they often performed fully scripted pastorals and tragedies as well as show cased their work before aristocratic audience at court as well as for plebian audience in piazza" (Erith 539-40).

Even though spontaneous onstage improvisation was the most important characteristics of the *commedia dell'Arte*; these gripping performance were never a result of moment's inspiration. On the contrary, the themes and subjects were carefully chosen,

the characters meticulously pre-determined and the situations in each scene were scrupulously defined. The main plot or general outline of each performance was called "Scenario" or "Canvas" which was finished to the maximum extent still leaving ample scope for each actor to heighten, vary and embellish at their ingenuity. The commedia dell'Arte performances, which basically were physical exhibitions of the artist's talents often called forth acrobatic feats, which could be attained by a thorough actor training.

Extensive Humour was the lingering tone of the whole performance. The individuality of the actors was dependent on their brilliance to bring in prompt repartees, constant surprises and shocking physical agility in each show. The highly sensitive and trivial nature of the performance assured flowing of tears and ringing of laughter intermittently. Perfect professionalism was required for the success of the performance that would ensure the actors their daily bread.

As said earlier, rather than to the psychological intricacies, the Commedia dell'Arte emphasized on the visual feature of their performance with marvelous acrobatics and traditional pieces of lazzi. The lazzi were both verbal and gesture eccentricities that could be inserted in between, or flexibly transplanted to another occasion, to ensure regular frequency laughter. The word is a linguistic transform of the Italian *lazzo* which means a joke or witticism. Lazzi is a dynamic term used to express

...situations, dialogues, gags, rhyme, rigmaroles which they [actors] could call up at a moment notice to give the impression of on-stage improvisation. This repertoire had been prepared and assimilated through the experience of an infinite number of performances, of different shows, of situations worked out directly on the audience, but the central fact was that the majority was the result of study and careful preparation. Every actor or actress learned by heart dozens of tirades on variety of topics corresponding to the parts he or she might have to play... for a women in love, expressing contempt, jealousy, spite, desire or despair, and each of them easily adopted upside down and stuck into the middle of a dialogue. (Fo, *Tricks* 8-9)

The *lazzi* were primarily injected in the vein of performance to heighten the comic aspects. Some of the *Lazzi* would seem grotesque, over stretched and vulgar. There were *lazzi* of tremendous farting, accidental pissing, fondling and wooing the maid, ringing yawns, mock-fight so on and so forth. The protagonists of these performances used to be zannies who would utter all unpleasant truths in public. According to Antonio Scuderi, zanni is an allegory of all oppressed and disenfranchised people” (55). It was this zannian role for Fo gives to most of his leading characters.

There is one more reason for the Commedia dell'Arte being a physical comedy. Half masks were mandatory for each character, except for female roles. Consequently there was little scope for facial

expressions of emotions. This resulted in the Commedia dell'Arte actors wearing half-masks used their bodies, gestures and attitude to render emotions, facial expressions were limited to the mouth, which was left uncovered. Even if it allowed the actors to make horrible faces, the half-masks inevitably reduced the display of facial expressions (Aliverti 132). Aggressive efforts to express emotions through the cunning manipulation of the physical movements and gestures were the compensation for the curtailment of facial expressions sought after by the actors.

The Commedia dell'Arte was basically a street performance, occasionally in courts too, that later profoundly influenced the French Pantomime and the English Harlequinade. The performers wandered throughout Europe on their makeshift stages adapting local topical issues and using a common dialect that could be followed by the people of a large geographical area. Conventionally each character of the Commedia dell'Arte was distinctively demarcated with separate designs of masks and costumes. Each character represented a type. In their mental make-up, the characters of the Elizabethan comedy of Humour resemble the Commedia dell' Art Characters.

Although there were numerous character types to represent a peculiar individual trait, there are about ten clearly distinguished, often-performed Commedia dell'Arte character types (Brown John, *Oxford Illustrated* 125-40). A brief description of these characters is attempted here.

The most popular of all *Commedia* characters was Pantalone or Pantaloon, the venomous villain figure who represents the darker side of male consciousness, a secret hero of the unenlightened male ego in the audience. Though old, he is a pure man of action with an undiminished physical virility implied by an always-erect phallus under his stockings. Being illiterate merchant from Vienna, he attained nobility with the power of his wallet. He is full of temper, fond of food and pretty women, but a butt of all jokes due to his inherent stupidity. He believes that everything can be sold or brought; but only to be ultimately deceived and deserted by his adventurous daughter and prodigal son. He is suggestive of winter with his lean frame and black dress with a woolen red skullcap and a pointed beard. He libidiously flirts with La Ruffiana (the whore), plots with La Captaine (The Captain), to whom he wishes to give his daughter in marriage, against Harlequin, who can be his zany (servant) and the beloved of Innamorata (Pantaloon's daughter). Pantalone is a parent and godfather whose wicked plans assure his ultimate downfall. Pantalone represents exploitation and evils in the society.

The real protagonist figure in the *Commedia dell'Arte* cast is Harlequin. Basically a zany, servant, this character is known by different names such as Arlechino, Arlequin, Tuffaldino, Polpettino, Frittellino. His is a dynamic and often bewildering personality oscillating from utter foolishness to sophisticated intelligence. He is the representative of the subservient, exploited commoner with his patched but colorful costumes with a conspicuous large red blemish

on his forehead suggesting his sufferings. He has a witty tongue to foil the plotting of his masters and a greedy mouth suggesting his insatiable hunger for food. He personifies an ever-hungry peasant. He has an anarchist kind of behaviour and tremendous physical agility that enables him to walk, run, jump, and summersault constantly on the stage. He just has a master over him, but no law above him. He is a hippie like figure with no money and hatred towards the exploiters. The Maniac in the Accidental Death of An Anarchist is an embodiment of this Harlequin spirit of causing bewilderment to retrieve the truths swept under the carpet. On the mentality and eccentricities of this commedia figure Fo, in an interview, elaborated:

Harlequin is really a wild animal without any sense of honour. One could say that Harlequin totally rejects this society but not because he has one in mind. He is simply, totally anti-social. He refuses to compromise in of basic human psychological needs -- eating, shitting, pissing, and making love. He goes ahead blithely destroying everything: honour, logic, common sense, good taste. (Mitchel 190)

Harlequin is an inveterate schemer always pitted against Pantalone. A clownish appearance wearing a savage looking gray mask and bearing two sticks lied together, which produced a huge noise on impact. This wielding of the parted sticks gave birth to the expression "slapstick." Though enjoys the affection of Innamorata, his lone interest is in Columbina, the maidservant.

The Captain (*Il Capitano*) is a middle aged Spanish speaking, bragging, boasting and a swashbuckling officer. A self-claiming veteran sailor is the Captain, who claims to have defeated the whole army of the Turks after an individual face-to-face dual with the Sultan. He always makes tall claims on his soldierly adventures but he would be the first to slip away at the mentioning of a possible hazard. He is always “dressed to kill” with a feathered cap, high boots, and jackets and with a sword in his belt. He loves to bully people inferior to him, but a coward inside. He often attempts to make advances towards lone maids only to be thoroughly thrashed by her Harlequin lover later on. Being boastful, he always carries bombastic names like Horribilioribilifax, Ralf Doister Roister, and Captain Metamora etc. He is looking forward to marry Innamorata, only after he father promises a handsome dowry.

Another common Commedia dell’Arte character, *Il Dottore* (The Doctor), is a reincarnation of academic pomposity and intellectual vacuum. He may appear in different roles of authority like lawyer, philosopher, astrologer etc. He is an absent minded fraud or quack shouting Latin at inappropriate occasions revealing his enormous pretension. Also called as *Dottore Balazzone* (Doctor of lies), he is arrogant and ignorant. He talks and talks teasing the current exaggerated beliefs in science and humanity. He claims to have educated in a university. This obese, who loves bottle and beauty cracks jokes about the opposite sex, only after confirming that none of them are around. He wears short trousers; a black felt cap and a

long beaked mask. He is always depicted carrying books to announce his authority being a member of every academy. He is a schemester colleague of Pantalone who has only contempt for the doctor.

The miserly crooked Pantalone is always blessed with his adventurous, innocent but not ignorant daughter Innamorata. She is all for love, lust and romance. This maiden always well advised by her cunning maid Columbina, who in her turn makes sure that Harlequin is not seen often by her mistress. Innamorata is known under different names such as Flavio, Leandro, Valerio, Isabella or Ardelia. Young and beautiful but smart enough to keep away from the ill-advised of La Ruffiana, a middle aged spinster with a shady past. Though no masks were worn by the female characters of the *Commedia dell'Arte*, their apparels undoubtedly proclaimed their class status.

With his philosophically balanced out-look on the success and failures in life, for Pulcinella there is no tension or despair. His dreamy, and his externally melancholic attitudes make him a representative of Neapolitan culture. His wining ideology and strategy is this neither positive nor negative approach to life. This indifferent attitude invites him numerous problems only to get out of them all in the end, as simply as how he got involved in them. Reciting poetry and quoting philosophy, he roams around his friends in simple, pure white clothes and a sugar loaf hat. He is a hunch back with a crooked nose and straggly hair and unsuccessfully chases women.

Giandino represents the peasantry in the Commedia dell'Arte characters. He is an honest peasant with strong inclination for wine, gastronomy and beautiful girls, but strictly faithful to his lover Giacometta. He has a happy, humorous way and wears a brown jacket with red borders and a tricon hat.

Even though the Commedia dell'Arte is largely an improvisational theatre with a preconceived scenario, all most all performances would rotate around some intricate, silly exaggerated affairs of day-to-day life. Russel James Brown economically and amply summarizes the basics of the Commedia dell'Arte plots as:

The plots in which the character meet were built of condensed and recombined structures from the repertoire developed in regular comedy, stories of crossed love, mistaken identity, disguises of sex and status, the run away wives and children, adventurous rescues, madness, apparent death, reunion of separated families, clowning, ingenious tricks, ridicule of jealous husbands and lustful old men, mocking of masters by servants, witty extortion, gulling and unlimited opportunities for mayhem, erotic play and coarseness.... (*Oxford Illustrated* 131)

With their double takes, slapstick references, quick changes, typical tirades and dialogues, verbal and gesture lazzi and comic entrances and exists the actors could make the performance entirely live and humorous throughout. Amidst all these apparent chaos they would ensure the natural unfolding of a story, its complications and

denouement in fixed duration and in a single place. They move to the next venue with another freely manipulated plot and eccentricities.

In spite of all the trivialities and non-seriousness, the Commedia dell'Arte performances were overtly and consistently subversive and anti establishmentarian. Their crude oversimplification of societal issues comprehensively raised uncomfortable questions and delivered apt and confronting answers. Their popular slapstick is an equally powerful counter narration to the erudite comedy that often minced its words in social criticism. As many of the Commedia Performances were ridiculously comic and provocative, the establishment often attempted to chase them off the provisional boundaries.

Looking from a linguistics point of view, the dialogues of the commedia were enormously rich, metaphorically superior with piled up diction in a grandiloquent and flowing style. Spoken in a generally comprehensible dialogue, the commedia language was sharp and emotional at the same time. It was filled with frequent repetitions and declamations that may look odd. But in their performance context these repetitions and other physical and linguistic nuances were absolutely necessary.

As Geoff Beale rightly noted, there are two primary functions in the language of Commedia dell'Arte: firstly, as a source of narrative, and secondly as a source of humour (174-77). The narrative plot is simplistic in response to the performance in outdoor locations, often on the street with its distracting background noise. An

overcomplicated plot cannot hold a transient audience. The simpler the plot, the easier would be the translation of messages. Generally actions are not reported but dramatized. To elicit humour from language they made use of repetition of words with their rhythm, occasional double intenders, important sounding gibberish etc. Since the comedy is often backed by physical action, or is derived from situation in trying to find example of language as source of humor the actors had to come to the conclusion that taking a single line out of the context of its physical emotional and character delivery generally reduces it unfunny and stilted.

Even though it was a Renaissance theoretical method, the Commedia dell'Arte techniques encouraged many masters of 20th century experimental theatres also. As it seemed the ideal antidote to the theatre of emotion and naturalistic play, Sevold Meyerhold's the Moscow Art Theatre made extensive use of the commedia dell'Arte physical acting techniques in the post revolutionary Russia in the late 1910s. Similarly the French theatre company, *Campaign des Copians*, founded by Jaques Copean in 1924 devoted considerable effort to adapt the Commedia dell'Arte acting methods. With Saint Denis' *Campaigne des Quinze*, a new form of Commedia dell'Arte reached the English-speaking world in 1929. The Russian dramatist Stanislavskay's 'Method of Physical Action' that focused on the presentation of physical action as the key to emotional portrayal is undoubtedly influenced by the Commedia dell'Arte (Anderson 167-69).

A more direct and all pervasive influence and experimentation of the Commedia theatrical tradition is found in the Italian master Dario Fo. He acknowledged that this Renaissance performance tradition was his single largest source of inspiration and admiration.

The commedia dell'Arte performers enjoyed great popularity throughout Italy in their time. The popular Commedia dell'Arte performers of the middle ages were Giovan Paolo Fabbri, Francesco and Isabella Andreini, Maphio Zanini Flamino Scala, Silvio Fiorillo and so on.

These non-institutional traditions emboldened Fo to “emulate the jesters of Middle Ages in scourging authority and upholding the dignity of the downtrodden” (*Nobel Press Release*). In emphasizing idealism, humanity and stimulating satire. Dario Fo’s plays scan be compared to that of Bernard Shaw’s problem plays. However Fovian theatre stands apart in its intelligent mix of the seriousness with the trivial, evoking laughter and anger simultaneously. His surprising blend of religious Gospels with contemporary issues, in *Mystero Buffo*, is a finest example these methodological features. He rightly understood the fatal potentialities of humour than any other 20th century playwrights. Gathering inspirations from circus acrobatics and carnival clowns, he uses slapstick comedy, puns, ridicule and parody to explore deep into the political hypocrisies of the authorities and religious dogmatism of Catholicism. His sharp, irreverent theatrical satires knew no holy cows. Fo personified in tutto Walter Valeri’s words: “When an actor-playwright serves as a spokes person

for social change, it becomes a necessity to temporarily transcend the state of subordination and question the dominant powers. Then theatre becomes a historical phenomenon and an expression of social development” (Scuderi 27). He rigorously and persistently challenged all centres of power with his grotesque farces. Acknowledging this feat of Fo the Nobel Committee commented that, “Fo’s strength is in the creation of texts that simultaneously amuse, engage and provide prospective.” (*Nobel Press Release*)

For employment of laughter as a tool Fo has his own reasons. He said, “When the theatre is comic grotesque, its above all then that you have to defend it because the theatre that makes people laugh is the theatre of human reasons.” (*Nobel Banquet Speech*)

In his classic work on drama, The Political Theatre, the German agitprop theatre theorist Erwin Piscator (1893-1966) said that “the important thing is always the aim: the best performance is the best propaganda” (168). Dario Fo had a crystal clear aim and he achieved this aim of propagating the tales of corruption, suppression and injustice, through his best propagandist performances. His uncompromising radical left wing ideology gave him a breadth to his vision of political theatre that is popular, agitational and instructive. His commitment to popular theatre is an extension of his political beliefs and engagements. This can be said vice versa too.

Fo’s exploration into the medieval popular performance practices has cultural dimensions too. With the emergence of mass media communication in the modern capitalistic society the popular

culture and performance traditions are pushed to the periphery by the dominant class. It was this lost cultural link Fo is striving to recapture and reactivate. In this sense his giullare is a representative of the people symbolizing an alternative culture alongside the officially recognized culture. According to Stuart Hood Fo is working on the Gramscian principle that one should know where one has come from before establishing the way forward (Intro. *Plays 1 3*). Though his agitprop theater is not only challenges the political and religious status quo but also is trying to recapture the lost threads of peoples' theatre. Fo identifies himself with the medieval giullare. Thus his theatre becomes peoples' theatre. To recapture people's theatrical tradition Dario Fo has distilled history books, diaries, letters, memories, medieval sketches and turned them into a "cinematic montage of physical action." (Jenkins, *1492 and All 12*)

Fo's plays are surprisingly receptive and suitable for adaptation to the local issues and concerns. Though Fo dealt with the Italian political and social issues, the basic themes are always the oppression of the working class. This feature of adaptability made him an international hero of the theatre world. Though his dissident plays he provided the word with some broad frameworks wherein local issues and concerns of the proletariat can be inserted and performed. In this sense Fovian plays have universality in their appeal and audience acceptance. The Nobel press release has lauded Fo's plays by mentioning that they are always open for creative additions and dislocations, continually encouraging the actors to improvise, which

means that the audience is activated in a remarkable way. His is an oeuvre of impressive artistic vitality and range (*Nobel Press Release*). On stage improvisations assured Fo a more active audience interaction and provided him the valuable feedback.

As Fo's theatre was deliberately purposeful, the audience is the nucleus of this theatre. Before the start of his performance Fo, usually would establish a rapport with them. Fo was of the opinion that theatre is a means of communication. If it is unable to put across the ideas, to the audience, it is an utter failure. Fo's theatrical performances were like a lecture to demonstrations to discussion events. He never left any stone unturned to communicate the ideas maximum to the audience. To ensure that he would attempt to numerous repetitions, oversimplifications, detailed explanations and so on. All these were done to help the audience in absorbing the socio-political content of his interactive theatre. He believed that, "the refusal to assist the audience to follow you is at heart an attitude of pure snobbishness practiced by imbeciles, it conceals an insuperable inability – an ability to communicate." (*Tricks* 135-6)

Fo never maintained any artistic aloofness from his audience. He always stressed on the need to educate the audience so as to help them understand and appreciate new and disturbing ideas and he used to embolden them to take part in the debate and concrete political action outside the theatre. The transparent "fourth wall" is identified by Fo as the main obstacle in the relation between audience and the play. The darkened auditoria and the separation between the

stage and stalls push the audience into passivity and make them exposed only to the emotional content of the play. Fo had his essential lessons from the Commedia dell'Arte players and the 17th century theatre genius Popquelin Moliere (1622-73), who had the proscenium pushed forward. However, critics like Sogliuzzo opine that the stagecraft of Fo's plays stem from a popular pre-commedia tradition for the following reasons.

Because of its extensive use of mimicry, masks and puppets, Fo's theatre is mistakenly characterized as stemming primarily from the *commedia*. But *commedia* satirized social stereotypes, whereas Fo's political satire comedy originated in the period between eleventh and twelfth centuries, the post-feudal stage when the Italian peninsula saw a burst of political freedom: jesters roamed the land with a repertoire of gags skills celebrating the end of feudalism, and ridiculing the remaining feudal overlords and the Church. (Farrell, *Harlequins* 79)

Fo's witty speeches, spontaneous improvisations, amazingly flexible physical activities had always kept this audience on the edge of their seats. To ensure better audience participation it was mandatory for to use the language of the people. As a political agenda, he always stressed using colloquial expressions in his theatre. The giullari and zannian tradition urged the dramatist to use a life like language in his theatre of protest. Linguistic sophistication in theatre was seen as an instrument of alienating people, especially the working

class from theatre. More over the popular language, idiomatic expressions abundant with may vulgar connotations and rough intonations were always an inseparable part of the commoner's life.

The intensity of this language lies not in sophistications, but in the stylistic modulations in accordance with situations. The medieval *giullari* wandered through different provinces, necessitating a working knowledge of the all the dialects. To communicate with these diverse linguistic communities they attempted at *grammelot*, an onomatopoeic flow of speech, consisting meaningless words but conveys the sense. For theatre communication Dario Fo reinvented and adopted the *grammelot*, as he believed that proper communication is important to elicit the desired goals. He never deviated from using abusive, vulgar vocabulary if it is necessary for accurate communication. On the linguistic features of Fo's the tricks of the trade Stuart Hood opinions that:

His special gift is the ability to communicate recondite matters with the elements of zany fantasy and wit. The vocabulary he employs is colloquial, relaxed slangy and anything but dictionary bond. His idioms are enriched and embellished by an inventive humour, which though a delight to the listener is the despair of the academicians, established jargon seems to inadequate or colourless. In the course of one sentence he can more dexterously from technical theatre jargon into the slang of the moment, before launching into some purely personal flight of fancy or into plain gibberish. (Intro. *Plays 1 2*)

Dario Fo' reorientation towards the Medieval theatrical tradition and popular language has a definite cultural politics. He is trying to review the forgotten marginalized popular culture and language. Even though the language is crude vulgar and common, it didn't prevent him from conveying a deep message -- the need to question and act against the anti-people establishment. His language is addressed to the-proletariat not to the "cultured".

Reviewing David L. Hirst's Dario Fo and Franca Rame (1990), Giovanni d'Angelo jumped to quick conclusion that "Dario Fo and Franca Rame is absolutely of no use to honest students of Italian literature" (*Dario* 450-51). He accused Fo as one of the theatrical figures most pampered and rewarded by an intellectual and political class subservient to Communism. Giovanni was irritated to the historical and religious, scurrility of Fo, who according to him acted against the concept of eternity, the spirit and God by waging an unreasonable rather than an irrational war thereby debunking the message of Christ, history and literature by turning them upside down. Giovanni's uncritical evaluation of for literacy merit was rebounded with the conferring of the prestigious Nobel Prize for literature on Fo.

Fo was never against the liberatory teachings of Jesus Christ. He identified Christ with the suffering, oppressed masses. All his uncompromising criticism was against the elitist nature of Christianity. Similarly he never debunked history. Instead he was trying to raise a historical consciousness among the mass by trying to

recapture the muffled, marginalized popular literature and performance traditions. Fo's arrogance and renunciation of all forms of oppression has to be understood in the contemporary scenario of religious persecutions and economic exploitations prevailing in the society. Fo's unrelenting proletarian concerns prompted people like Giovanni call him "a long time pawn of intellectual Communism."
(*World Lit.* 313)

Dario Fo is more of a performer than an author. But this cannot be a criterion for refusing him his deserving place in world of literature. Just like his performances. Fo's written plays are equally capturing. His literacy works signifies the struggle between the weak and the powerful. His legitimate literacy credential is upheld by the Swedish Academy and supported by critics like Ron Jenkins:

The Swedish academy's decision to honour a master of literature is a historic tribute to the theatre, which is still viewed by many as literature bastard child; it is also first time that the Nobel for the literary art has been awarded to an actor. This courageous and controversial choice indirectly expands the modern definition of literature to include the power of the spoken word. Fo is a physical comedian. His language is inseparable from the vocal rhythmic and muscular gestures that emerge from his lips. His syntax is impregnated with pratfalls, violence and sensuality, his phrasing ripples with the breath of an audience response." (*The Nobel Jester* 22-23)

A thematic analysis of Dario Fo's plays reveals his wide range and major political convictions. Nevertheless, for convenience sake, his thematic concerns can be broadly categorized into religious hypocrisy, exploitative capitalism, imperialism, reformist reactionary Communism, totalitarianism of the establishment, fraudulence of mass media and the suppression of female identity by the patriarchy.

For Dario Fo, the self-proclaimed atheist, religion in general and institutionalized Christianity in particular, is not a liberatory agent. He always poked fun at the inconvenient interventions of religion in individual's, private lives. He viewed that religion, just like feudalism and modern capitalism, is an instrument of control. By offering liberation after death, religions are not only protecting the exploiters but also prolongs the sufferings of the poor on the earth. In collaboration with the exploiters, it extinguishes the spirit of revolt in the oppressed by intimidating them about the perennial contamination of the soul.

He attacks religion in plays like Mistero Buffo (1969), The Pope and the Witch (1989), The Seventh Commandment: Thou Shall Steal a Bit Less (1964), The Emperor's Bible and the Peasant's Bible (1996), and Obscene Fables (1981). He never forgot to give frequent digs at the Pope. Pope for him was a symbol of religious hypocrisy and pompousness.

Real politic is another frequent theme in Dario Fo. The most celebrated of all Fo's plays; The Accidental Death of an Anarchist is a political manifesto cautioning people against the totalitarian

tendencies of the establishment. Instead of becoming a protective body, the establishment is accused here purposefully creating tension and put people under terror only to maintain the political status quo. Knock, Knock! Who's There? Police! (1972) is also an example of mobilization theatre against the state sponsored massacre.

Fo's ever-throbbing heart for the liberation of the working class dragged him to revolutionary communist ideals. Being a staunch admirer of the Chinese Revolutionary Mao Tsetung, Fo could not digest the compromising policies of the parliamentary Communists. Neither did he acknowledge the totalitarian regime of the Communists also. The worker knows 300 words. The Boss Knows 1000 - That's Why He's the Boss (1969), Chain Me Up and I'll Still Smash Everything (1969), United We Stand. All Together Now! Oops, Isn't That the Boss? (1971), and Letter from China (1989) are some of Fovian plays critical of the hijacking of socialist revolutionary ideology by the opportunist parliamentary Communists.

Fo's comedies were big machines to make people laugh even if one should sense an underlying gut feeling -- a working class derision of the rich and powerful. For this ridiculing he made full use of the potentiality of farce as a delivery method in his theatre. Farce was a powerful weapon in the theatrical repertoire of Dario Fo. In delivering the content of his plays to the common man he adopted farce as a method. He said that:

For me farces were a very important exercise in understanding how to write a theatrical text. I learned

how to take apart and reassemble the mechanisms of comedy, how to write directly for the stage without any literary diversion. And I also understood how old and useless things there were in so many theatrical texts, in the theatre of words. (Behan, *Revolutionary* 11)

Through his theatrical interventions Dario Fo rightly comments that, just like the feudal setup, capitalism is also inhuman and exploitative. Inflation, the dehumanizing working conditions in the factories, low payments, frequent lock-outs and the non-readiness of the political establishment to intervene in labour issues are the topical issues raised by Dario Fo in Can't Pay? Won't Pay! (1974) and Trumpets and Raspberries (1981) etc.

Fo was not only satirical of the establishment alone. With the same vigour and gravity he lashes at the manipulative tendencies in journalism and mass media. Fo held the view that public opinion is manufactured and most often manipulated by the media in the service of the political establishment. His collaborative work Fit to be Tied (1954) and Grand Pantomime with Flags and Small and Middle-sized Puppets (1971) are examples of Fovian critique of the mass media. The 1991 productions, Peoples' War in Chile (1973), and Joan Padan Discovers the America unveil the imperialistic tendencies of the West, especially America. Dario Fo's collaborative work with Franco Rame brought out Women Alone and Other Plays (1977), which comprises plays that depict the problems, that women face in our society.

CHAPTER III

Motifs and Methods in Fo's Theatre

Mistero Buffo: The Gospels According to the Giullari

Dario Fo's Mistero Buffo (1969) consists of 12 non-sequential monologues delivered in the subversive style of itinerant medieval minstrels. Fo subversively retells the apocryphal Gospel stories from a peripheral point of view. In this process he demystifies and deconstructs the popular Christian legends thereby giving them a down-to-earth semantics, devoid of any estranging glorifications. Etymologically the title means an ironic "grotesque performance" (Fo, *Plays 1* 1) or a farcical religious representation. Fo explained his socio-political stance regarding Mistero Buffo:

I didn't want to conduct an archeological exercise with Mistero Buffo. Now what I and other comrades, with whom I conducted the research, were concerned about was the need to show that another culture exists. It is true that the ruling class culture exists, by this doesn't mean that there isn't valid culture you can work upon in order to re-appropriate it, to carry forward the idea of proletarian culture.... We must start from the production of an autonomous culture of the oppressed which is made up of criticism and struggle. (Behan, *Revolutionary* 97)

It was this cultural aim of establishing a proletarian counter-culture to the hegemonic mainstream culture that works as the

propeller in Dario Fo's theatrical initiatives. For this purpose it was a prerequisite to rewrite the already existing meta-narratives on religion and culture. By the radical re-reading of the ecclesiastical gospel stories Fo shows the world that Christian tradition is capable of reading from a peripheral point of view. Instead of choosing the Biblical heroes as protagonists, Fo assigns the onlookers like the drunkard, fool, madwoman, etc. the leading roles. This is a subversive technique in retelling the gospels in order to demystify and de-glorify the entire mainstream narrations.

The title of this group of vignettes, Mistero Buffo, is suggestive of the experimental Russian constructivist dramatist Vsevolod Meyerhold's (1874-1940) theatrical adaptation of Vladimir Mayakovsky's (1893-1930) poetic paean to the Russian Revolution, entitled Mystery Buffo, written and performed in 1918 with an alarming cast of 2,865 performers on stage (Brown John, *Oxford* 393). Meyerholdian theory of theatrical collectivism prompted Fo to adopt the technique of improvisation in general and Commedia dell'Arte in particular. However, so far as Dario Fo is concerned, the similarities end here only. Dario Fo's Mistero Buffo is a solo performance thoroughly and throughout.

Unlike his other plays, Dario Fo begins Mistero Buffo with a Shavian prologue and proceeds in a Pirandello like lecture-cum-demonstration method. In this subversive reading of the Scriptures by the marginalized, Fo follows two major traditions of the *giullare* and the *Commedia dell'Arte*. The *giullare* or *jongleurs* were itinerant

practitioners of alternative theatre in the Middle Ages who would turn up in town squares or carnival sites to tell the people the saga of their sufferings. As the 18th century Italian Scholar Muratory described, “the jongleur was born from the people, and from the people he took their anger in order to be able to give it back to them, meditated via the grotesque, through ‘reason’, in order that people should gain greater awareness of their own condition.” (Fo. *Plays.1.* 1)

The giullare or jongleurs who were the theatricians of the people represented a non-mainstream counter-culture by performing dramas that were both grotesque and sardonic. The language in these performances used to be highly connotative and the latent politics of these performances were subtly subversive. They employed unsophisticated, uncivilized language of vulgarity and slang in their scathing critiques of priestly hypocrisy and feudal exploitation.

Following the Commedia dell’Arte tradition, Fo makes use of masks, dialect (Mistero Buffo was written in the 15th century Padano/Lombardian dialect of Northern Italy) and *grammelot*, “which is an onomatopoeic device based on the use of sounds, where the real words make up roughly the 10 per cent of the whole and the rest is a montage of seemingly senseless voice which however, contrive to indicate the meaning of the situation” (Fo. *Tricks* 43). According to Dario Fo the comic mysteries were the spoken and dramatized newspaper of the people of middle ages through which the misdeeds and hypocrisy of the religious patrons as well as the corruption and exploitation by the rulers were exposed. Dario Fo skillfully continues

the subversive counter informative narrative methods of the jongleurs with the linguistic stylistic devices of the Commedia dell'Arte in his treatment of contemporary of social issues. In short, in Mistero Buffo, methodologically Dario Fo is traditional but thematically extremely contemporary. Fo is at his best in semantic inventiveness, stylistic improvisation, linguistic archaism and dialectism in Mistero Buffo.

In Mistero Buffo Fo explores the possibilities of a radical rereading of the Christian Gospel stories from the point of view of the unprivileged. In a way this is a subaltern counter reading of the ecclesiastical narrations. He advocates a kind of liberation theology that proclaims that the Gospel must no longer be distorted and turned into an ideology sanctioned by the Church and useful to a thin, excessively wealthy upper stratum alone, and it should be for liberation *from* an overall system of oppression and liberations *for* the self realization of the people, enabling them to determine for themselves their political economic or cultural destiny (Kung 62).

Fo's, the declared atheist's, fearless religious iconoclasm not only shakes the conventional believers, but also the Vatican centered Catholic religious establishment also. In terming Mistero Buffo, after its premiere broadcast by the Italian national television in 1977 as, "the most blasphemous show in the history of the television" (Michael). This view was expressed by the official Vatican newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano*. Another staunch supporter of Vatican, Franco Zeffirelli, said about this play: "Satire about the Church and the papacy's bad worldly deed is as legitimate as any form of satire, but it

is a different matter when it's extended to the subject of the gospels. I don't think it's right to elaborate the contents of the gospels in a satirical way" (Jenkins, *Artful* 118). This reaction of the religious super heads reveals their failure to acknowledge the possibility that Christian tradition is capable of being interpreted in a radical life affirming way.

Rejecting the notion of grand narratives for scriptural texts, Fo irreverently narrates the points of view of the poor and the disinherited. His protagonist in *'The Marriage at Cana'* is not the Archangel, whose is the official megaphone, but a drunkard who happened to be a eyewitness witness for the miracle. The story of the *Resurrection of Lazarus* is told from multiple points of view of various onlookers, including the one who's pocked had been picked amidst the miracle. Similarly a gambling fool is the protagonist of the monologue piece that describes the Last Supper.

Through a perfect combination of story telling, miming, monologues, dialogues and gestures Fo reworks on the medieval theatrical remains thereby turning them into a powerful contemporary political drama by timely insertion of fuming topical issues and social maladies. He seeks rewriting sacred issues of theology through parody, irony and farce to present the deep-rooted suppression of popular culture and language. With its intermittent allusions to Medieval Ages and sensitive portrayal of the sufferings of the working class, Fo's Mistero Buffo is a journey from past to the present then to past only to come again back to the present socio political scenario.

On this aspects of inseparability between past and present in Mistero Buffo Domemico Maceri elaborates.

His return to the Middle Ages is also an attempt to recover the vital sources of theatre in a prehistoric society before the mass media turned culture into merchandise in the hands of the rich and the powerful to control the working class. Applying the knowledge he gained as a result of his study, Fo creates a number of vignettes on topics with an ecclesiastical background to show not only the corruption and repression of the Church but also the political implications of its power. Stressing popular, comic, and irreverent elements of medieval mystery plays and religious cycles Fo attacks the repressiveness of Catholic church and the land owning class, using the language of the Italian peasants, whom he see as representative of peasants all over the world. (11)

By anchoring on popular traditions and dialect Fo reiterates that the non-mainstream cultural interpretations were deliberately deleted from history and academia by the ruling elites of Feudalism and Catholicism. He tries to recapture this layman's version of history and Gospels through Mistero Buffo. Religious eclecticism, feudal exploitation and human sufferings are the main themes of this play.

Fo's wicked and piercing social satire often amounts to shocking blasphemy and articulate subversion. He subverts to make the world more upright, he blasphemes to make the religion more religious. His

carnavalesque extremities are the by-products of the negligence suffered by the marginalized, his unapologetic blasphemous outrages are to attack the ceremonious, hierarchic, mystic Catholicism that looms large invisibly over the life of the whole Christendom. For Fo's audience he is the modern-day giullari and for Fo the contemporary downtrodden are the medieval peasants. This economic equation and class resemblance helps him to maintain an immediate rapport with his working class audience. He elaborates on their problems, with a comical twist, in their languages. This sort of emotional, linguistic and ideological closeness with the working class enables Fo to raise their political consciousness against the repressive, exploitative establishments, both of religion and politics.

Fo's class interpretations of several most sacred evangelical themes through the lens of social criticism makes Mistero Buffo wickedly funny and politically sharp, while highlighting the scopes of alterative narration of the Gospels. "He upholds the dignity of the down trodden" (*Nobel Press Release*) by providing an alternates perspective to the reading of the Gospels. He uses laughter and satire as weapons in lampooning Catholicism and scourging the authority. He takes up the point of view of the victims or the underprivileged in this reinterpretation of evangelical legends. On the other methodological and thematic specialties of Mistero Buffo, Ron Jenkins elaborates:

If there is a single work that embodies the essence of Fo's epic clown, it is Mistero Buffo, Fo's masterpiece. It

provides a key to understanding the extra ordinary techniques to animate the texts of his large cast plays.... Fo influences every story with the rhythmic drive of Jazz improvisation, the immediacy of newspaper headlines and the social scope of a historical novel. There is a Marxist slant but it is far subtler than the cartoon politics that are often found in the commercialized adaptations of Fo's plays in the US. (13-14)

Fo's politics, Jenkins adds, are skillfully embedded in the comic structure of his material. Instead of blatantly proclaiming his opposition to economic injustice Fo creates stories that create tension between freedom and oppression. He then orchestrates his comic climaxes so that they coincide with the victims liberation from servitude, so that laughter and the defeat of tyranny are simultaneously linked in the audience's mind.

Scratching people's consciousness and leaving a burning sensation in their hearts, Fo like a giullare, toured from town to town, factories to streets uttering unpleasantness openly. His radical rereading of the sacred texts begins with *The Flagellant's Laude*, one of the vignettes, which serves as a choric introduction to Mistero Buffo performances. The Flagellants' hymn remotely resembles T.S.Eliot's female chorus in Murder in the Cathedral. Whereas Eliot revitalizes Catholicism through the play, Fo dismantles the official version of the Gospel teachings.

Uttering masochistic implorations to the poor people to beat themselves, the Flagellants roam along the streets attracting people to the site of comic mystery performances. His laudatory verse is overflowing with references to Christ's sufferings and the deceits he experienced and the tales of exploitation of those who sweat and toil. His refrain, "Ahiiii, beat yourselves, Beat yourselves! Ahiiiiah!" is a conscientization call to remind people of their robbed status and thereby aims to urge them to take up arms in rebellion against the oppressors. He praises Jesus Christ for undergoing all the sufferings on behalf of the entire humanity. He curses the rulers, usurers and the exploiters of the farmers in medieval Feudal System. He cries aloud:

Ahiiii. Beat yourselves. Beat yourselves, Ahiiiiah!

And you rulers, you usurers,

You will suffer misfortune,

Enriching yourselves with ill-gotten gains. Beat yourselves!

For you have spat in the face of Christ,

You who have out squeezed, as a person would crush grapes,

The money of those who sweat and toil. (15)

Fo's giullare is not afraid to be frank in his provocation of the rulers. His identification of the exploited with Jesus Christ gives the giullare enough moral courage to sabotage the deceivers of Christ and exploiters of humanity. This subversive element in the medieval

theoretical exercise vividly explains the existence of a non-official counter-culture of the mass that was conveniently deleted from academic syllabi. Fo journeys back to the Middle Ages to unearth this dormant subversive counter culture. Thematically this brief hymn deals with the priestly deceit and feudal exploitation. Fo here uses the method of choric lamentation at the loss and suffering.

The Slaughter of Innocents deals with the Gospel related to the birth of Jesus Christ. While the ecclesiastical versions emphasize the celebrations that followed the infant Christ's birth, one of the medieval versions of the legend the on birth of Christ reiterates the bloody consequences such a birth had brought to general human beings. Here, Fo uses a magnificent statue of Madonna and the Child, as stage a prop, not for attracting the audience with the complexities in the operation of the devise. On the other hand he believed that "the statue could be present as something purely indicative and symbolic, and the player would have space to develop and emphasize the dramatic content of the human condition of desperation, hunger and pain (Fo, *Plays 1* 17).

The story of the birth of Jesus Christ is retold from the perspective of a mad woman who lost her baby in the baby hunt ordered by Herod, the king of Galilee, when he heard the prophecy of Jesus Christ's birth. The crazy woman, whose baby had been killed by the Roman soldiers, finds a lamb in a sheep pen, takes it in her arms and goes around telling everyone that it was her own baby. This make belief effort doesn't stop her form cursing the Eternal father for

bringing about a bloodbath by sending his son to the earth. Her outrageous blasphemy embodies common man's deep-rooted hatred towards the Father.

While people hold Jesus Christ as a representative of common man, the Eternal Father represents impositions, and is held responsible for introducing divisions among people, allocating privilege to certain groups of people and for handing out suffering, desperation, subjection humiliation and mortification to the rest (Fo, *Plays 1* 18). So God, for the medieval jongleurs, is an instrument of control and an embodiment of partiality. But Christ, for them, was one among them who tried and suffered at the hand of the authorities to bring them back people their lost spring. Fo identifies Christ with the people. He is a subject. But God is a control mechanism and an instrument of the rich to subjugate common man.

In this monologue on the story of Christ's birth, Dario Fo ponders on themes of war, providential design, motherhood and the cruelty of the establishment. For Fo, war is always a fully futile exercise that delivers prolonged agony and sufferings only. In the following scene from this vignette, Fo is trying to tell the world of the futility of war through a conversation between two soldiers on the plot of baby hunt in Galilee.

Soldier I: I joined up in order to kill enemies, to kill men.

Soldier II: And presumably send a few women tumbling in the hey as well, eh?

Soldier I: Yes, may be But only if they were enemy women. But he we are killing innocents.

Soldier II: What do you mean! Aren't people innocent in war too? What have those people ever done to you? Have they ever done anything to you, those poor souls whom you kill and maim, to the sound of your trumpets? (21)

The soldiers go for indiscriminate slaughter of babies in whole Galilee in their attempt to murder the Infant Christ. The poor woman's only baby was killed. This turns her crazy and shakes her belief in the concept of the benevolent God. She becomes a spokeswoman for all the deprived mothers. She spares no words in her blasphemy addressed to the Eternal Father:

God, awesome in your heartlessness.... You ordered this slaughter... you wanted this sacrifice in exchange for sending down your son a thousand babies killed for the sake of one of yours, a river of blood for a cup! You should have kept him with you, this son of yours, if he was going to cost us poor souls, such a mighty sacrifice. Ah but in the end you to will see what it means to die of heartbreak, the day when your son dies! In the end, you too will understand what a mighty and awesome affliction you have visited on mankind for all eternity. No father on earth, no mother, how wicked, could ever have had the heartlessness to impose such a thing on his own son. (23-24)

Fo's grieved mother in the play refuses to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ as it brought them irreparable losses only. Even the invincibility of god is questioned here by implying the pain of motherhood would not even spare the providence from curse.

The Morality Play of the Blind Man and the Cripple: While the official versions of the Gospels depict people flocking around Jesus Christ seeking an opportunity for getting miracled, Fo's protagonists, the Blind Man and the Cripple unsuccessfully try to avoid seeing Christ for the fear of getting miracled by him. This fourteenth century piece of a giullare theatrical performance is centered on the theme of dignity where refusal to be the subordinate of a master is considered to be the declaration of individual freedom. This vignette reinforces the idea that the concept of freedom is not a novel modern one. Interestingly enough self-respect and freedom were core themes of medieval popular performances, which the blind man reiterates here:

Dignity does not lie in straight legs, or eyes that see; dignity is not having an employer to subject you. True freedom is the freedom of not having bosses -- not only I should be free, but I should live I a world that is also free where others do not have bosses either. (*Plays 1 27*)

In an attempt to attain self-sufficiency the blind and the cripple join together, pool in and share each other's ability thereby becoming an independent whole. The lame riding on the blind's back, guide each other's echoes movements. Their interdependency and inseparability echoes Samuel Beckett's Puzzo and Lucky duo in Waiting for Godot.

Throughout this vignette, Jesus Christ is not shown, but he was being described by the cripple who, riding on the blind's back happens to see him. Christ was being tortured and led to the Calvary Hills for crucifixion. The very sight of Jesus Christ fills the blind's mind with shudder. He implores the blind to runaway from the place to avoid the great danger of getting miracled. He rightly foresees a potential threat in Christ's presence. Getting relieved of their fortunate infirmities means losing their way of living. Once they are cured of their handicaps, they could beg any longer and people would say them to go to work. To work means to toil under an exploitative master forfeiting their individual freedom of movement and expression. The sense of dignity in them prevents them accepting a master figure over their life so they try to run away as far as possible.

The Blind Man: Let's go. We must avoid meeting this saint... I'd rather die. Oh mother! Let's go... Let's go at the gallop. Grab hold of my ears and lead me as far away you can from this city! Well even leave Lombardy... well even go to France, or to some other place this Jesus, Son of God will never get to.... I know, we'll go to Rome! (31)

Their attempted departure to Rome, the Head Quarter of Catholicism is ironic enough. This dialogue is suggestive of Christ's aversion to the institutionalized religion. Fo humourously implies that Rome will be the last place to be visited by the Christ!

In spite of all efforts to flee the place, Christ's compassion removes the couple's infirmities. But this miracle leaves them in utter

desperation. Their infirmities had assured them of their individual freedom. Interestingly enough Christ's miracle makes them lament:

The Cripple: Oh poor me... Now I'll have to go and work for an employer, sweating blood in order to eat... oh most wretched of the wretches! I'm going to have to go and find me another saint who will do me the favour of making me a cripple once again.... (34)

For subversive presentation of the consequences of Christ's miracles conveys a deeper political message that a physically fit individual, being a mere means of production, under an exploitative social system has to be ready to be exploited (Domenico 13). So the best way to protect one's dignity and freedom is to remain as a handicap in an exploitative system.

Fo's retelling of *The Marriage at Cana* has been described as the most scandalous one by the conventional believers of Christianity. Fo's account of the *Marriage at Cana*, as narrated by a drunken guest, is "an affirmation of life and the need to enjoy it" (Hood xi). Fo reads Gospels from a peripheral point of view. Here a drunkard, who was present at the miracle of transforming water into wine by Christ, narrates the events from a Dionysian point of view. His account of the event is irreverent devoid of any glorifying aspects. Even though he was an eyewitness, an Archangel who appears at a public place, to give out the official version of the event, challenges the drunkard's eyewitness accounts. The Archangel's account of the event mystifies the whole episode and alienates the miracle from the people. The

drunkard presents the whole episode realistically where Jesus is presented as Bacchus, the god of happiness, of drunkenness; and even as a jolly boisterous kind of God.

For Fovian Jesus, as presented by the jongleurs of Middle Ages, life is a celebration, not a temporary abode waiting for rewards and punishments in the heavenly kingdom. The official Christianity considers people sinners and the whole religious rituals are oriented towards the exorcising of sins from people lives. It defies celebration, as there are always chances of slipping into sins. People are taught that they are on the earth to suffer; everybody cannot be rich; rebellion against exploration is sin; and so on. To receive all humiliations and dehumanizing treatments with humility is godly. Expressing anger at injustice amounts to sin thereby missing the chance to reach the heaven. But:

...when the drunkard tells the familiar tale, his emphasis is on the delight of the feast, the food and drink and other physical needs, and on the "tragedy" when the wine eventually turns into vinegar. For the drunkard the wine solves everything and would have even prevented the fall of mankind. (Maceri 11)

The drunkard chases away the authoritarian Archangel who tries to prevent him from speaking and even breathing. While the angle was trying to give the official, edited and modified version of the events at Cana in a boring polished elegant, aristocratic diction; the boisterous drunkard narrates the whole incident in a lively,

straightforward, strong rustic dialect in a colourful and comically exaggerating way. His whole focus is on the life like aspect of the event. In Folk tradition and culture wine plays an important part and the accidental turning of wine into vinegar is tragic enough. The jongleur drunkard reports the common talk at Cana before the arrival of Christ.

'Oh. Oh.... Ah the wine turned into vinegar! How terrible! I've heard it said that a rained - on bride is supposed to be a lucky bride, but being rained on by vinegar would make her the kind of bad luck you are want to keep away from.' (42)

To save the bride's family from the shame of not supplying wine in the wedding banquet, Jesus Christ not only did the miracle of turning water into wine, but he does the unexpected also. "Jesus got up on a table, and began pouring wine for everybody, Drink, good people, be happy, get drunk, don't save it till later, enjoy yourselves...!" and all of a sudden, he remembered his mother: "Oh holy mother! Oh Madonna! Mother, I forgot, excuse me! Here, here's a drop for you too, drink a bit yourself"(43). After narrating this incident, the Drunkard questions the official stand of Christianity on drinking.

And just imagine, there were still same damned rabble going round saying that wine is the creation of the devil, and that it's a sin, and that its an invention of the most diabolical order. But do you think if wine had really

between inventions of the devil, that Jesus would have given same to his mother to drink? To his very own mother? (44)

Thematically, the *Marriage at Cana* is a celebration of folk tradition of life full of wine, enjoyment and happiness. Heaven is made on this earth itself with eternal celebrations. Waiting for a life after death is to neglect the earthly happiness. Fo's subversion of turning Jesus Christ into a Bacchus is symbolic enough to emphasize the teaching of Christ to lead a life full of enjoyment on this earth itself.

The Birth of the Villeyn: The thematic origin of this vignette is a 12th century fresco of a jongleur. It tells us of the disturbing reasons behind the metamorphosis of a poor peasant into a jongleur. Along with the exposure of the land grabbers, this piece takes up the theme of dignity also. Fo inserts allusions to contemporary instances of exploitation into this medieval story. Throughout this vignette there is a tension between freedom and oppression and the innate desire for liberation from servitude. This is one of the most comical of all other vignettes in Mistero Buffo. For making this more entertaining than explicitly political, Fo has his own reasons:

I am not [here] interested in politics as I am in justice. What I hope to do is to involve the audience in a sense of moral indignation against injustice, not with the theatrical equivalent of political pamphlets, but with entertainments that have a sense of religion. (Jenkins, *Artful* 112)

The villeyyn was not born as an artist of the people. Rather he was made a megaphone of the people with a single agenda of cautioning his countrymen by propagating tales of exploitation of the working class. Before he became a jongleur, he had been a hardworking peasant, and that it was Christ who changed him to a jongleur. A landowner, who raped the peasant's wife in front of him and his children, grabbed the poor peasant's small piece of land. Unable to undergo the trauma of shame his wife committed suicide. Later the children died of distress. The peasant was going to end his life when Christ arrived at his hut. Listening to his story Christ advises him:

You should not remain here struck to your land. You should move around the country, and when people throw stones at you, you should tell them, and help them to understand, and deflate the great bladder of a landlord. You should deflate him with the sharpness of your tongue, and drain him of all his poison and his stinking bile. You must crush these nobles, these priests, and those who surround them notaries, lawyers, etc. (53)

Being a humble illiterate peasant he did not have enough intelligence and power of speech. Cherish provides him both and prescribes him the modus operandi of his future propaganda. In this way the jongleur performance of the 12th century can be rightly called a crude gait prop theatre.

Precisely, it was this advice of Jesus Christ that is taken up by Dario Fo. Just like a jongleur of the middle ages, Fo uses laughter as a sharp weapon to deflate and destroy the exploiters. The jongleur was not only a comedian, but also a propagator of seeds of dissent among the mass. His sojourns were political campaign for a radical change in the social structure. His revolutionary speech, "these rules must be broken, they must be crushed"(54) signifies a clarion call for the proletarian revolution. "Christ turns the peasant into a giullare and instructs him to spread the message of his oppressions. Thus the mission is not religious but a political one and Christ brings not a message of peace but of a sword.

The Birth of the Villeyn reveals another treacherous aspect of providential design. On the landowner's complaint of getting tired of labouring, God approaches Adam for another rib, which the latter out rightly refuses. Then God makes an ass pregnant with air, which after nine months gives out a tremendous fart giving birth to a villeyn. This lowly origin signified his eternal doom. Then an Archangel comes down and declares the protocol to the master of the villeyn.

By order of God, you from this moment, will be the boss, the grater one, and he the villeyn, the lesser one. Now it is written and laid down that this villeyn shall live on bread and row onions, broad beans and boiled beans and spittle. (56)

Through this powerful vignette Fo shows how the powerful control the poor with their biased narration of creation aimed at

maintaining the class equation and thwarting attempts of rebellion in future. The villeyyn is presented as vulgar and repelling creature right from his birth. This deliberate derogative, under the guise of religious instructions are to blackmail and to exploit his labour at the maximum. Whenever the villeyyn, under the pressure of insufferable living conditions, starts rebelling, the priests mediate with master and villeyyn with constructed stories of soul and the sure possibility of ultimate salvation of the villeyyn once he undergoes all the sufferings. The religion, represented through the priest, tells the rebellious villeyyn:

No! Stop! Do you want to ruin yourself? You have suffered all your life, and now, shortly, you are going to die. You have the possibility of going to heaven now, because Jesus Christ told you that since you are the last among men you should enter into the kingdom of heaven..... And now you want to ruin everything? Think what you are doing, don't get rebellious! And wait for after-life. (63)

Fo shows that religion is a tool for blackmail in the hands of the corrupt clergy and exploitative landowners. They nip the seeds of rebellion in the bud using the stories of soul and heaven. This vignette is a pungent satire on the abuse of religion by the clergy and the landed gentry. Fo urges workers all over the world to break open the shackles of religious beliefs and refuse to accept the exploiter's versions of the social conditions. The underlying theme of this

vigorous vignette is that religion is never a means of salvation but an instrument for maintaining the status quo that is in favour of the rich.

The Resurrection of Lazarus narrates the episode of Christ's miracle from the different points of view of the bystanders. Fo refuses to attach any mystical elements to this story of resurrection. Even Christ, the epicenter of the incident is never shown at all. It is like a live commentary from the spectators themselves. Instead of showing Christ's great deed, Fo focuses on the activities and comments of the mercenary, the gatekeeper, the vender of chairs, the sardine seller, and through the lamentation of the man whose pocket had been conveniently picked amidst the holy deed.

Fo's spectators at Lazarus revivification flinch back at the repulsive sight of Lazarus rising with a decayed body full of maggots. They do mind the offensive stink. Fo's intention is to demystify the supernatural descriptions attached to this Gospel story. The principle theme of this piece is a satire of everything that passes for the moments of mystery. This is achieved by playing out an event that, among people, passes for a miracle. Fo says that "the satire is aimed at the miracle mongers, the magicians, the conjurors religions including Catholicism" (*Plays I* 64). Fo maintains that the origin all miracle stories is God's love and sympathy for the mankind. But institutionalized religions supernaturalize the events to glorify them.

A ticket was required to go to the resurrection site. No standing on the cemetery walls was allowed for a free view of the miracle. Ladies and others who may swoon at the sight of revivification can get

a chair rented for just two pence! People could enjoy “tasty sardines” while watching the miracle. Close proximity to the tomb is purely on first-come-first serve basis not according to your height. Even atheists are allowed to watch the spectacle. Beware of pickpockets!! Betting on the success of miracle is not prohibited.

This type of radical subversive retelling of the Gospel stories give them a fresh down-to-earth meaning. The scene is lively with all its disturbances. Fo refuses to give a meticulously orchestrated aura to the entire incident. The people’s response is material and naturalistic, not a pious, choric expression of wonder followed by a hymn in praise of god as often seen in the official versions of the Gospel stories. Fo employs the method of demystification in all his rereading of the scriptures. The live, short, spontaneous responses from the spectators reveal this:

‘Well done, Jesus!’

‘I’ve won the bet. Let’s have the money, Hey, don’t mess about..’

‘Don’t mess about...’

‘My purse ! They’ve stolen my purse! Stop, thief!’

‘Jesus, well done!’

‘Stop, thief!’

‘Well done, Jesus! Well done Jesus..!’

‘Stop, thief!’ (70)

Boniface VIII, another vignette, fearlessly exposes the avarice, pompousness and cruelty of the Papacy as an institution. Through

this provocative piece Fo tries to drive home the point that the internationalized Christianity is no longer Christly. Just like the other historical repressive systems like Feudalism and Capitalism, Catholicism has also become an instrument of control and oppression in the hands of the corrupt clergy. Pope Boniface VIII, who had reduced the church to a whore, mercilessly muffles dissenting voices. Boniface tamed the dissenters like the Franciscan monk, Jacopone da Todi, of the Poor Brotherhood by chaining him in his own excrement for five years (*Plays 1 71*). The pope used to sit on the monk Segalello da Parma, of the Sackcloth Order, who demanded that the dignity of the church should be founded on the dignity of the poor (*Plays 1 72*). Pope Boniface had gone up to the extent of organizing an orgy on Good Friday, 1301 including bishops, cardinals and prostitutes to ridicule the critics and the reaffirm his superior authority in matters related to religion.

By portraying the most notorious, scandalous, merciless Pope Boniface, Fo reiterates that institutionalized religions have always been instruments of control. The dissociation between Christ's teachings and the church signifies the hijacking of religion by the elite. The poverty and sufferings of Jesus Christ is pitted against the affluence and luxury of the Church heads. Consequently the Church becomes a malady and Christ becomes a remedy. In Fo's estimation To save Christ, it becomes necessary to demolish the church. Fo was never against Jesus Christ. All his attacks were directed against the abuses of religion by the institutionalized Catholicism. The pontiffs of

Christianity are portrayed as betrayers of Christ. So Pope Boniface VIII of medieval ages is a symbol of the deterioration of the church. He could not even recognize Christ when he says:

Who is that? Who...? Who's that with the cross? Jesus?
Ah, Christ! Jesus Christ, Look, look what a terrible state he is in! Now I see why they call him 'poor Christ'... Good heavens... Look at the state of him. Damn! Let's get moving! I don't like looking at things like this. (82)

But to make an impression among people, Boniface unsuccessfully tries to appease Christ by temporarily leaving his pompous ornaments and apparels. He even rejects charges of cruelty towards monks by saying:

Jesus, Jesus, look into my eyes. I love you and I have always had nothing but good feelings for the monks....

(He turns to the imaginary CLERIC)

Go and get me a monk, quickly

(To Christ)

I love them

(To the Cleric)

Where then you supposed to go and find monks?

Go to the prison! It's full of them! (83)

The off stage Christ refuses to accept his hypocrisy and gives him a kick. This reveals the real mentality of Boniface VIII.

Christ! Kicking me?! My, Boniface! The Prince! Ah, right! Rabble....! Ne'er-do-well! I tell you, if your father gets to

hear of this... Wretch! Donkey of all donkeys! Listen, I don't mind telling you that it will give me great pleasure to see you nailed up; and this very day I'm going to get myself drink! I am going dancing... dancing! And I'm going with whores!!! Because I, I am Boniface... I am a plume! Cloak, mitre staff, rings... and every thing! Look how they glisten... Rabble! I, I am Boniface ! Sing ! (84)

The megalomania of the ecclesiastical heavy weights, pompous lifestyle of the clergy, cruelty towards the poor men of other congregations and exploitation of the poor in the name of religion are the major themes of Boniface VIII.

In general discourses Marxism and religion occur oxymoronically. By bringing together the seemingly dichotomic religion and the philosophy of dialectical materialism, Fo undertakes a mission that most of the Marxists reject or avoid. But the keen social observer in Fo could not neglect the influence of religion in the lives of common people. Meanwhile he had to integrate these opposite worldviews too. Fo explains this unique mission in Mistero Buffo as:

Speaking of religion, as did the jesters, I wanted to speak about politics, while also making a play out of it. I came to religious theatre almost as a polemical reaction to the comrades I was working with, who considering superficially, branded the people's religious problems as a distortion with no cultural or political significance. The people's relationship with the divine, with their own

religion, with the religiosity of things is a problem which, regrettably Marxists have never understood and have dodged. (Farrell, *Harlequins* 90)

Accidental Death of An Anarchist: Tearful Laughter

*Nolimus aut velimus, omnibus
gentibus, justitiam et veritatem.*

(“Whether they want it or not, I shall impose truth and justice”)

Pope Saint Gregory (Fo, *Accidental* 200)

Dario Fo’s Accidental Death of an Anarchist is a typical agitprop play that intentionally unveils unpleasant truths about the repressive measures of the authoritarian Italian state apparatuses. It exposes the state sponsored strategy of manufacturing terror to maintain the power *status quo* in the wake of popular unrest. Fo resolutely interrogates the men-in-power for their unconstitutional and immoral suppression of popular protests. This propagandist play vividly demystifies the apparently incomprehensible political maneuverings of a manipulative regime that frequently attempts to selective manslaughter to cover up their devastating failures on socio-economic fronts.

Accidental Death of an Anarchist is the most disturbing of Fo’s theatrical repertoire that provoked centres of power in Italy in an unprecedented scale. By all yardsticks of political theatre, this is a typical documentary drama that deftly and directly summarizes the tumultuous socio-political situation prevailed in Italy in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This play can rightly be called a skillful theatrical

rendition of a particular period in Italian history. Without any artistic pretensions this embarrassing theatrical intervention deliberately claims many resemblances to real events and persons in naming the sufferers and those who inflicted the suffering. Basically this play is not designed to be an entertainment piece, but is conceived by the author as a sharp political ammunition that would trigger and intensify a once-suppressed political agitation against the rulers.

Devoid of its rampant verbosity and biting humour, Accidental Death of an Anarchist is a dramatic documentation of a series of political occurrences in Italy. For a comfortable devouring of bitter realities, Fo sprinkles flakes of humour here and there without risking the loss of its ideological sharpness. The play is highly matter of fact, inflammatory in content, controversial in execution and piercing in its effect. In spite of its specific topicality and locale, the concerns Fo expresses here are of undoubtedly universal in appeal and transcendental in significance till the repressive state machinery acts hand in glove with exploitative capitalist interests. It is this aspect of universality that ensured a worldwide appeal on the play.

When society regenerates, art rejuvenates itself; when exploitation becomes rampant, protests become more direct. Drama, being an inseparable component of human life, becomes more direct and elevates itself to the level of a documentary, informing people what is happening around. On this automatic elevation of dramatic art to the status of documentary Raymond Williams notes:

Drama is always so central an element of the life of a society that a change in its methods cannot be isolated from much wider changes, while people's feelings essentially are shut up in rooms the drama will stay them... While society is generalized and separated from the life of the individual drama pursues contemporary reality, not as a human need, but as a general report, as in the rise of documentary as method. (187)

Accidental Death of an Anarchist becomes a documentary out of a historical necessity when the Italian political establishment alienated itself from the people. In such confrontational circumstances, art works, especially drama, immediately cease to be an instrument of entertainment. Fo's play critically analyses the political phenomena which surfaced in the form of anti-people measures by the establishment. Confidently and valiantly proclaiming to be anti-establishmentarian, many times the dialogues in the play acquire the register of journalistic reporting. Before going into this documentary aspect of Fovian play, a brief look at the socio-political events of the day of Italy would be helpful.

Dario Fo's theatrical reconstruction of the concrete incidents that culminated in the death of Giuseppe Pinelli, a railway worker, accused to be an anarchist, virtually demystifies the state strategy of continually maintaining tension in order to suppress the dissenting voices. A historical conceptualization of the play is absolutely necessary for a better understanding and critical appreciation of the play.

In the grass root level, Italy was undergoing a political transition throughout the second half of 1960s. In no time, capitalist monopolists and the imperial agents headed by the CIA and neo-fascists rightly understood this undercurrent of Italy's stealthy slides towards the possibility of a socialist revolution. This important undercurrent surfaced now and then in the form of massive labour strikes in the factories of the monopolies, vibrant student movements in campuses and a general public mood in favour of a radical change in the political set up of the country.

After prolonged massive general strikes amidst innumerable difficulties, the trade unions in Italy achieved an overwhelming victory by getting the Labour Charter signed on 11 December 1969. This new *Magna Carta* of the labourers signified a successful culmination of a series of labour strikes, which was known as *Autono Caldo* or "Hot Autumn" (Fo, *Plays 1 211*). This collective movement was also known as *Lotte Operale* or "Workers Revolt". The forcefully attained Labour Charted was a consolidation of demands put forward by about 1.5 million striking industrial labourers wholeheartedly supported by the students with a fresh revolutionary consciousness.

Describing the politically volatile situation, Tom Behan reports the opinion of Giovanni Malagodi, the then leader of Labour Party, who expressed his disgust at the workers' protest movement as:

Milan is living through hours of disorder provided by violent and seditious minorities who use creating obstructions and generating tension and fear. Milan's

schools are picketed by extremists, who are stopping classes from taking pace. Leaflets are being distributed which openly defy the law, inciting violence and insulting democratic institutions. Small marches are continually criss-crossing the city and it seems that the only goal is to paralyse public life even further. The authorities appear to be dormant during such a grave situation, while a climate of fear is spreading among public opinion. (*Revolutionary* 65)

The conservative leader's remarks epitomises the social democrats' impatience and irritation at the agitative politics of the left. Malagodi was unintentionally expressing the fear of the authority, by this statement, in the midst of public protest. He was actually rejecting and devaluating the protesting public; by calling them a "violent and seditious minority". When the students supported the cause of the agitating workers by boycotting their classes *en mass*, the political right termed it as "picketing" of the schools. Actually "a climate of fear" was not spreading among the public opinion but among representatives of a repressive establishment.

As elsewhere in the globe, in its ultimate effect the consolidation of labour force in Italy posed a great threat to the global imperialism. In the fight against the rising proletarian revolutionary tendencies, the neo-fascists as well as their imperialist big brother the United State of America decided to act together. It was their dire need to de-popularise the emerging mass movement. Consequently, the agents of

American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Italian Social Movement (MSI), the neo-fascist legacy of erstwhile Nazi Party along with the Italian Military spies infiltrated into various small anarchist and communist groups. Fo documents this historical fact dramatically:

Maniac: And let's not forget that our railway man was well aware that the anarchist groups in Rome was Choc-a-bloc with spies and police informers... I believe he himself had said as much to the dancer: 'The police and fascists are using you as a way of creating a climate of social disorder. Your group is full if paid provocateurs... who seem to be able to do what they like with you... and the Left is going to carry the can for all this....'(159)

It felt being in his anarchist group in Rome, as me know, there are always more plain-clothes police than were real anarchists. (165)

All the infiltrators were given every possible logistic and political support by the secret service wing of the Italian military establishment. This concentrated plots of the CIA, the MSI and the Italian Military carefully executed a sabotage of the popular uprising by carrying out a series of bomb blasts in public places throughout Italy in the 1960s and 70s. All these bomb outrages were tactically credited in the account of fake insurrectionist, anarchist communist groups like ORAI (Organizzazione Rivoluzionaria Anarchica Insurrezionalista), CAFA (Cooperativa Artigiana Fuoco e Affini), PNC (Proletarian Nuclei for Communism), and so on. Within a short span of

less than one year 173 bombs were blasted in the different parts of the country (*Plays I* 193).

Immediately after each blast, following a meticulously planned propaganda exercise, the corporate media headed by the FIAT run *La Stampa* and the MSI would step into the scene trumpeting the involvement of communists, anarchists, and other radical outfits in the serial blasts. This unholy axis of fascists and corporate monopolies assured the maintenance of a "Strategy of Tension" (Hood, *Intro. Plays I* xi). Under the pretext of terror the state could clamp down on all dissenting anti-establishment movements in the country. About this cunning political tactics, that followed after each state massacre, later on Dario Fo wrote:

What we are witnessing is an incredible repetition of what happened back then. In the face of the growth of a deeply peaceful world protest movement, the system replies by trying to drag it into a spiral of violence. Therefore we get bombs. And people look for excuses to beat up and arrest demonstrators hoping that some young people will engage in violent confrontations. And to make sure that this happens you can bet your bottom dollar that agents provocateurs are already at work. (*Beware 2*)

Through the Accidental Death of an Anarchist Dario Fo attempts to register a plain political statement that in order to maintain the *status quo*, the state gets into the shoes of the anarchists and deliberately creates utter disorder in public life. All these are done

to cover up its failures in checking economic instability and assuring protection for the workers. As Javed Mallik rightly noted, Fo's political farces embodies a new radical movement in drama which regarded theatre as "a place where the oppressed classes in society are made conscious of the injustices, and their predicament, to intervene actively in life" (68). By undertaking this political and cultural mission, Fo rigorously maintains that each acts of brutality of the state is a reflection of its internal instability. This vulnerability of authoritarian state is a persistent theme in Dario Fo's plays.

Accidental Death of an Anarchist dramatizes the consequences of a bomb explosion in the *Banca Nazionale dell'Agricoltura* (National Bank of Agriculture), at Piazza Fontanna in Milan in the midnight of 12 December, 1969. Sixteen people were killed and another hundred were injured in this bomb outrage. On the same day another unexploded bomb was retrieved from the premises of Bank of Commerce in Milan. A third bomb was detected and deactivated at the monument of the unknown soldier in Milan.

Soon after the Piazza Fontana explosion, pamphlets were distributed throughout the state by the Italian Socialist Movement (MSI), accusing the anarchists and announcing the arrival of red terror. Ignoring the persistent disclaimers by the anarchists and the New-Leftists, the Italian police started a communist, socialist-anarchist witch-hunt. The police and judiciary took the bomb attacks as a screen to subside and finish the unwanted, troublesome, oppositional, insurrectionist, revolutionary elements in the country.

The anarchists' accusations of the involvement of fascist organization in the bomb blasts were unheeded to.

The next day Giuseppe Pinelli, a Milanese railway worker was arrested, taken to police HQ in Milan and falsely accused of planting the bomb and homicide at the Milan Bank. The police found another scapegoat in Pietro Valpreda, a choreographer by profession for the second bombing attempt. On the fourth day in police custody Pinelli mysteriously 'fell' from the fourth floor window of the police interrogation room in the presence of six policemen.

The custodial death of the anarchist invited a spate of protest demonstrations in the streets and criticizing articles in the press. Adriano Sofri the charismatic leader and editor of the radical left publication *Lotta Continua* (On with the struggle), accused Luigi Calabresi (the Inspector in Sports Jacket in Accidental Death of an Anarchist), the interrogation officer of pushing Pinelli to death. Sofri's focused media propaganda and the consequent political campaign made Pinelli a martyr and compelled the authorities to charge sheet Calabresi.

Passing shivers through the spines of the representatives of the deaf authoritarian political establishment, Calabresi was assassinated in front of his house on a fine morning in May 1972. Consequent interrogations revealed that Pinelli and Valpreda were innocent and exonerated, but only after undergoing twenty-two years of judicial custody! Justifying the stand taken by Sofri and other Left-wingers, on July 1st 2001 the Italian police convicted Carlo Maria Maggi and

Giancarlo Rognoni, both former heads of the neo-fascist group *Ordine Nuovo* (New Order) for ordering the massacre at Piazza Fontana and Delio Zorzi for carrying it out. By then Valpreda had spent 22 horrible years in Italian prison! This is the brief political background of the play.

Though the disclaimers and accusations of the left-wingers were unheard by the authorities and corporate media in 1969, in 2001 Frances Kennedy of *The Independent* had to indict the Italian establishment for all the murkiest massacres of late 1960s and early 1970s. He wrote, after the 2001 Italian Supreme Court judgment.

Piazza Fontana has become a byword for cover-ups, attempt to put investigation off the trail and the involvement of foreign secret service. The Piazza Fontana was a first sign of the '*Strategia Della Tensione*' (Strategy of Tension) that led to the terrorist years... the strategy emerged from the fears that Italy, with its strong Moscow-funded communist party and trade unions might be the "soft underbelly of western Europe". Elements within the government and the secret services cultivated rightwing extremists, providing arms and later protection. Scattered acts of violence were to be blamed on the Left, to create public fear and pave the way for a state of emergency and authoritarian rule. (10)

This view had already been expressed by Dario Fo in his play, *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, as far back as 1970 when he spoke

through his Maniac mouthpiece.

Maniac: ...it wouldn't be very hard to discover that the main intention behind the massacre of innocent people in the bank bombing had been to bury the trade union struggles of the Hot Autumn and to create a climate of Tension so that the average citizen would be so disgusted and angry at the level of political violence and subversion that they would start calling for the intervention of a strong state! (*Accidental* 194)

This belated admittance by the media of the state's involvement in manufacturing terror vindicates the stand held by the leftwing agitators of the time. So does it justify the necessity of Fovian type uncompromising and iconoclastic theatre.

Reviewing Accidental Death of An Anarchist Lance Morrow identified Fo's preoccupation with the theme of state massacre that in its deeper reaches Fo's maniac comedy is a splendid thesis on the mentality and mechanics of official tyranny. Fo is examining something more sinister than Watergate ever was. Fo is thinking of "a dark, sanctioned thuggery – the kind that kills – and of an endless manipulation of the record, the facts of the past dissolving and reforming themselves into new shapes like the cloud that Hamlet and Polonius discovered. Certain psychological and moral circumstances, Fo knows, bring about an irrevocable extinction of truth" (70).

In Accidental Death of an Anarchist Fo undertakes a systematic deconstruction of the official accounts on the death of Giuseppe

Pinelli. This demolition of the state perpetrated falsehood is achieved by an imaginative reconstruction of the events that happened in the interrogation room of Police Head Quarters in Milan. Fo's tool in this fight against falsehood is the Maniac. This methodically mad fool behaves like "Karl Marx in masquerade" (Morrow 71). His every clownish action is constructed in such a way as to "oppose or contradict every dramatic action that could be constructive of social, political or psychological stability and order" (Wing 145). Using this technique of reconstruction Fo achieves his goal of putting across the quintessential and presumably most dangerous idea of raising hell up and down the people's mind, waving torches and screaming anarchy.

The Maniac is Fo's mouthpiece in the play. He resembles a Shakespearian Fool in his eccentricities and mannerisms. He could provide logical and etymological explanation of his psychological affliction as "histrionomania"(127) or 'the actors' syndrome'. He has an obsession with dreaming characters and acting them out. In his '*theatre varite*' his co-actors and audience are the real people. And he always acts out (for others it is impersonation!) the role of figures of authority.

Fo's assignment of the lead role to a Maniac is highly symbolic. This act of the author is an example of deliberate theatrical subversion. In a world where an individual's importance is only in accordance with his power to purchase; in a world where political events are shrouded in mystification; where everything is manipulative; a person of normal mindset could not comprehend this

topsy-turvy system. Only a schizophrenic would be able to make out the system. This is a subversion of the normality. Using such an intelligent, hysteric, humorous and quick-witted Maniac, Fo thoroughly interrogates the whole repressive murderous government. The Maniac angrily outbursts at the silliness, stupidity and procedural irregularities of the Italian police as:



Maniac: ...First you arrest an innocent citizen more or less at random, and then you abuse your power by detaining him beyond the legal limit, then you go and traumatize the poor man by telling him that he's been going round planting bombs on railways: then you more or less deliberately terrorize him that he is going to loose his job; then you tell him that his card playing alibi has collapsed. (150)

The official version of the tragic death of Pinelli claimed that he threw himself out of the window out of a sudden 'raptus'. Fo, like others, refused to accept the official version. If at all the anarchist really threw himself out, Fo's dramatic intervention questions the police resorting to psychological terrorization of the victim that put him in a traumatic state. The whole responsibility lies on the shoulder of the state if anything happens in such a mental state. Fo makes it clear that the state cannot evade responsibility of the death of the railway worker. He makes this point clear by putting the blame on the government through the police Superintendent, who is the representative of the state.

Maniac: You see, you see, Superintendent amazing, he effect of 'raptus'! And whose fault would you say it was?

Superintendent: Those bastards in the government.. Who else?... First they give a free hand... 'Lets' have a bit of repression, create a climate of subversion, the threat of social disorder.' (155)

Fo makes use of subversive humour throughout the play to refute the claims of the police. After infiltrating into the Milan Police Head Quarters, the Maniac impersonates Professor Marco Maria Malipiero, First counsel to the High Court, Rome and makes the bunch of stupid men-in-uniform believe that he was there to reopen the case of the accidental death. During the course of his interaction the Maniac convinces them that he was trying to save them by inventing a more convincing report on the anarchist's death.

To ridicule the law and order system Fo uses subversive humour. His ironic statements on the police-people relationship aptly convey the intended message to the audience. To dilute the allegation of psychological torture by the police, the Inspector in Sports Jacket reiterated that he and his men were interrogating the culprit jokingly. He said that even the accused enjoyed his short stay in their station. Then the Maniac ironically comments:

Maniac: ...You have no idea how many completely innocent parties move heaven and earth just to get themselves arrested and brought to this station! You think they are anarchists, communists, autonomists,

trade unionists... No, the truth is they're all just poor, sick maniac depressives, hypochondriacs, gloomy people who disguise themselves as revolutionaries just so's they can be interrogated by you... and at last have a good damn laugh! Get a bit of enjoyment, for once in their lives.

(168)

Through these types of ironic and subversive methods Fo implies the brutality of police interrogative methods. Wielding this technique of paradox, Fo thoroughly dismantles the official version of the events leading to the anarchists' death and simultaneously tries to put together the lost threads of reality hidden amidst the loopholes of the fabricated official narration. The inconsistencies and discrepancies of the report are targeted by Fo to tell the people the reality. "This is an example of great theatre in which the wild inventiveness of the writing blends harmoniously with the aim of counter-information" (Quadri).

Quadri is right in his opinion that with a rapidly mounting pace and entertainment, the false and conflicting versions of the outrageous police report is laid bare by Fo to consolidate public opinion against the authorities. Meanwhile, as an activist he never disassociated from the day-to-day struggles of the working class. He always remained a people's theatre personality "contributing to the working class movement by being present in it, changing with it and its struggles and real needs" (Mitchel, *People's* 99).

Fo intentionally mixes the unmixable aspects of seriousness and

buffoonery in this play. This mingling of the grave with the jovial is one of the many methods used by Fo. But his intellectuality is always conscious of the risk of excessive buffoonery at the cost of its thematic seriousness. He moralises while wildly tickling us. His mouthpiece in the play, the Maniac is “mad but not stupid” (205). Fo has a clear pre-conceived idea in creating a comic farce out of a tragic event.

Fo swims against the stream by achieving a total reversal of making the other characters and the audiences follow the mad guide in their mission of finding out the truth. When the whole system is abnormal, Fo’s Maniac maintains envious normality by ensuring calculative steps to whip the callousness of the regime. On this technique of reversal of generating anger through laughter Fo said:

We realized that indignation is really a means of catharsis, liberation and letting off steam... The play was conceived in a grotesque style to avoid any dramatic catharsis. If we had created a dramatic play instead of comic grotesque and satirical play, we would have created another liberatory catharsis. But this play doesn’t allow you this outlet, because when you laugh, the sediment of anger stays inside you, and cant get out. It’s no wonder dictatorial government always forbid laughter and satire first, rather than drama. (Meldolesi 178-79)

Fovian iconoclasms don’t stop with the police and the legislative arms of the establishment alone. He, with equal vehemence, attacks the holy cows of modern government, namely, the judiciary. The

unshakable impartiality generally attached to judiciary is a virtual mirage, according to Fo. Just like any other wings of the repressive state apparatuses, judiciary is also an accomplice to the injustice done.

The degeneration of judicial machinery is among one of the persistent themes in Fo. In this theatrical retaliation against the state sponsored terror regime, Fo fearlessly expresses his dissent and accuses the judiciary collaborating with the oppressors.

Superintendent: I'm really grateful to you... It is really good to know that the judiciary is a policeman's best friend!!!

Maniac: You might even say 'collaborator'....(159)

Fo not only ridicules the absence of impartiality in the judiciary, he even questions the logic behind engaging over aged men in the process of delivering justice which requires a sharp, analytic and intelligent exercise of the mind. In a system where workers are fired when they turn 50 or 60, over the assumption of not fit for work physically and mentally, it is ironic enough that gerontions are getting promoted to the higher ranks of judiciary at this stage. Fovian subversive humour doesn't spare the gerontocratic judiciary also:

Maniac: ...best job in the world. First of all they hardly ever retire... For a judge it is quite the opposite, the more ancient and idio...(*He corrects himself*)... syncretic they are the higher they get promoted, the classier they get! And these characters have the power to wreck a persons

life or save it, and as how they went they hand out life sentences like somebody saying: 'My be it'll rain tomorrow ...' Fifty for you; thirty for you... only twenty for you, because I like your face! (131)

As far as Dario Fo is concerned, the establishment is not the sole entity responsible for the persisting decay in our social life, but the deplorable passivity of the mass on things happening around them are also responsible. People's social indigestion and indignation at the establishment don't get translated into a political agitation. This political impotency as well as withdrawing to their respective protective cocoons emboldens the authority.

By hitting at this peoples' political passivity, Fo aims to shake them up from their destructive insensitivity to socio-political occurrences. Politicization of the mass can be identified as one of the themes of Fovian agitprop theatre. He provokes them politically by inflicting biting satire sandwiched in humour. Fo identifies that even if the atrocities of the authority agitate people at times, soon their anger gets vanished with a liberatory burp; after every scandal comes up. For the people, its enough to have scandals. Fo's Maniac attacks the people of their political passivity as:

Maniac: They [the authorities] never tried to hush up these scandals. And they are right not to. The way people can let off steam, get angry, shudder at the thought of it...' what do these politicians think they are? 'Scumbag generals!' 'Murderers!' And they get more

or more angry, and thin burrrp! A little liberatory burp to relieve their social indigestion.

Superintendent:That would be like saying that scandal is the fertilizer of social democracy! (202)

Dario Fo's 1968 disengagement with the bourgeois mainstream theatre has to be understood as the culmination of his understanding of Marxian ideology that encouraged him to act for the proletariat. Since then Fo's theatrical endeavors were streamlined to mobilize the working class behind revolutionary organizations. He conceived his theatre to be a throw away theatre, which won't go down in bourgeoisie theatre, and is useful like a newspaper article, debate of political action (Mitchel, *People's* 101). His proletarian concerns not only replaced his theatre to the streets, workshops, factories, school gates, etc., it also provided him fresh materials to attack the imperialistic interests of the exploitative capitalism.

Exploitation of the working class by the monopolies is a recurrent thematic concern in Dario Fo. By depicting the pitiable conditions of working class, Fo exposes the crocodile tears of social democracy that offers, "reforms by bucketful" (196). It drowns the proletariat with promises of reforms that would never come. Actually these promises of reforms are a check dam to prevent the workers energy and anger flowing towards revolutionary movements. Fo depicts the deplorable condition of the working class in factories. Fo's Maniac protagonist questions the Journalist:

Maniac: Do you live in the real world miss Feletti? Instead of going off to Maxico, Cambodia and Vietnam, one day why don't you try visiting Marghera, Piombino, Rho or Sesto san Giovanni? Do you have any idea of what condition a worker is in, these days, by the time he gets his pension? (And from the latest government statistics it appears that fewer and fewer of them actually do!) They're squeezed dry, worn to a frazzle. Hardly an ounce of life in them. (183)

Fo touches on the 'commodification' of life under capitalism where not only the labourers are exploited to the maximum both physically and psychologically, but also an individual's value is determined by his power to purchase from the market. On the basis of his purchasing power citizens are categorized into "Class I, Class II, Class III" and so on (182). Fo's critique of capitalism is more relevant in today's world of privatisation and globalisation where maximum profit is achieved by minimum engagement of labourers.

Fo deliberately leaves the play open ended ensuring the freedom of its adaptation by directors across the world. Technically speaking, Fo's deliberate refusal to give a definite ending to the play comes out of his desire to provide the world a wider framework of an agitprop play – wherein local issues and concerns of the deprived class could be fit in and performed to satisfy the local audience. This aspect of open-endedness in dramatic structure makes the play easy to adapt local political issues. Fo's play remains extremely relevant in the back

drop of post-September 9/11 “war on terror” followed by indiscriminate prosecution of the suspected elements in the society.

Laughter is a precise and powerful political weapon for Dario Fo. Even after the play, laughter remains as an irritant that could provoke revolutionary thought and action. Fo’s method of elevating laughter to the status of a propagandist strategy is to ridicule and denounce the miscarriage of justice system. His radical Marxian ideology provides him enough courage and material for fearlessly provoking the gigantic repressive state machinery. He purposefully mixes the grave with the trivial as a method for evoking laughter and inciting insurrection against the authority. On Fo’s deliberate selection this dramatic mode Sarah Hemming observes:

Accidental Death of an Anarchist combines caustic satire with broad slapstick and it also contains a cracking central part in the shape of the so-called Maniac whose apparently innocent enquiries reveal the extent of police duplicity. The impact of the piece depends in the tension between its farcical style and its disturbing contents. But while the farce is so precisely engineered that it can still reduce an audience to tears of laughter. (13)

Fo’s raisonneur, the Maniac reins the course of this “brilliant and savagely funny piece” (Hemming 13). In this vigorous out-spoken dramatic piece, Fo humorously attacks corruption and the deceit by the establishment. Fo’s juxtaposition of contrasting theme and style leaves the audience shudder with horror instead of wriggling with

laughter in the end. They burst out tears only to sweat with anger later on.

Fo's *Maniac* in effect becomes a propagandist repeatedly telling people to think again and again. In this brilliant theatrical exercise in political correctness, Fo simultaneously elicits laughter and assures the arousal of political, social and historical consciousness among his audience. His deeper commitment to the proletarian ideology coupled with a comprehensive understanding of the intricacies of state response to peoples' protest movements turns the play into a true agitprop. Through this farcical retelling of a particular instance of state sponsored massacre, Fo explains the mass the complexities that underlie in seemingly comprehensible political phenomena.

Fo, as a dramatic method, abstains himself from philosophizing concrete political realities. He calls a spade a spade. Had he attempted abstract philosophization of the politics behind the death of Pinelli, the play would have ended up in academic circles only. Fo's farcialization of a tragic incident had an extraordinary and immediate effect among his audience. Their perplexing passivity towards the political happenings around them is shaken forever. For this purpose he deliberately make use of extensive farcical style throughout the play. Fo believed that theatre must be a vast mechanism that makes people laugh at what they see on stage, avoiding the liberating catharsis that can result form watching the drama enacted. A riotously funny, satirical, grotesque show doesn't permit you that liberation; when you laugh the sediment of anger stays inside you;

laughter doesn't allow you to be purged (Hirst, 1989. 27).

The initial enthusiasm and jovial mood of the audience is finally and tactfully transformed into a suffocating wrath at the corrupt authorities. Fo having achieved his political aim of shacking the prevailing criminal apathy and indifference among the people, leaves them in a state of repressed anger at the authoritarian brutalities. This is the political aim of his method of "combination of slapstick humour and biting social commentary" (*Time* 1).

In Accidental Death of an Anarchist, Fo employs the method of subversion. He inverts the tragic content into a farce designed to prevent the therapeutic catharsis that would still leave the audience in their fatal passivity. Fo identifies the antidote to catharsis. Humour is the best provocative tool as far as Fo's theatre is concerned. He skillfully applies the unfailing logicity of the Maniac to obliterate the illogicality of official cover-ups related to the death of the anarchist. The bastion of authority is infiltrated into, by Fo's Trojan horse, the Maniac, to demolish the concept of the invulnerability of authorities' power fortresses.

Thematically speaking, Fo's black farce, The Accidental Death of an Anarchist is a political manifesto of the suppressed. He exposes the political intentions of state sponsored terrorist outrage to bridle the rising socialist revolutionary tendencies in Italy. Fo tells the world, with all ideological clarity, that the unholy nexus of corporate monopolies, fascist organizations and the political establishment become instrumental in suppressing the libratory dreams of the

proletariat. The brutal exploitation of labourers in factories is another thematic concern for Fo. Finally, Fo's Accidental Death of an Anarchist is a vindication of the Leftist ideology in the liberation of the downtrodden.

Can't Pay? Won't Pay!: Incitement for Market Disobedience

In the early 1970s Italy was undergoing a severe economic depression. To overcome this, instead of inventing correctional administrative measures, the Italian government sought to offer a free hand to the industrialists in labour related affairs. Consequently, industrial corporatism started imposing stringent regulatory measures on labourers. This included massive cuts in labour ratio, lowering of production expenditure to the maximum, sacking of labourers *en mass*, reduction in work-days, increasing productivity using minimum time and labour, speeding-up of work-lines, raising price rates and so on (Fo, *The Comedy* 67-68). Even after the successful working class struggles of late 1960s, which culminated in getting the Labour Charter, signed in 1961, the plight of the working class in Italy remained worse.

The "Hot Autumn" struggles were a consolidated protest movement of the working class wholeheartedly supported by the students and the liberal intellectuals of the country. But this unity and momentum could not be maintained for long. The economic depression worsened the already hard lives of the working class. As a part of *Laissez faire* policy, the government declined to interfere in the matters regarding pricing mechanism, lengthening of working hours,

reduction in labour strength, etc. When the government and corporate industrialists acted hand in glove, the prices of essential commodities and services soared up to an unprecedented height. Natasha Williams has described the economic uncertainties and instabilities of this period as:

A major recession was taking place by mid 1974 and the prices of essential foodstuffs such as pasta, sugar and milk increased by 50 percent. A few days later the state announced that the main electricity would be cut for thirty minutes everyday, despite the fact that nighttime temperatures were already at zero degree. As a result of all these socio-political events, monthly inflation statistics spiraled out of control as interest rates rose to levels unseen in Europe since the Economic Depression of the thirties. This continued raises in the prices of basic commodities played greater havoc with the lives of people surviving on fixed salaries, than had a decade of terrorism. For even at the height of violence and anarchy, it was possible for ordinary people to continue with their daily routine, but now rampant inflation posed a threat of different kind. (177)

The workers, who were the ultimate sufferers of this economic instability, looked forward for the intervention of trade unions for the improvement of their conditions. However, instead of inciting agitation, the trade union bureaucracy offered simplistic explanations

for the whole affairs, and often they played adjustment games with the exploitative managements and the inefficient establishment. Moreover, Enrico Berlinguer, the leader of Italian Communist Party (PCI) advised the party cadres to lead a peaceful austere life in the national interest as “more austere society can be, and must be, a more equal, better ordered and more just society, which is really more democratic and free, and definitely more humane” (Natasha 177). These simplistic explanations and political mediations were not convincing to the working class. This led to widespread dissatisfaction and incredulity towards the Communist Party of Italy (PCI) and the trade unions controlled by it.

In protest against the trade union bureaucracy, the factory workers started forming independent Factory Councils signifying a major political shift where the major trade unions started losing their clutch on newly politically conscious working class. This new-Left questioned the revisionist tendencies of the PCI. In turn the parliamentary Communist Party derogatively labeled the extreme left organizations as ‘Maoists’ and political ‘louts’.

The basic theme of Can't Pay? Won't Pay! is the frustration and spontaneous rebellion of the people against the rising cost of living and essential services. But on a broader political perspective the evils and absurdities of capitalism the more compelling and unifying topic of Can't Pay? Won't Pay! (Behan, *Megaphone* 259). The civil society had no other scope but to act unanimously against the uncontrolled price hikes. The people on their own started to refuse to pay the hiked

prices of commodities in the market.

This protest movement, *autoridizione* or “self-reduction” began with the non-payment of enhanced prices and bus and train fares in 1974 (Natasha 176). The insensitivity of the trade union bureaucracy headed by the PCI at the rising rate of unemployment, spiraling prices of essential commodities and services and regular layoffs and closures in factories compelled people to initiate a self-planned protest movement. People started paying what they felt a decent price or sometimes no payment at all! This people-led civil disobedience movement against inflation and exploitation was termed as “proletarian expropriation” by the leaders of conservative political parties and the corporate media. A sensitive artist could not dissociate himself from such a boiling political climate of his country. Dario Fo’s intuitive theatrical genius came out with the play Can’t Pay? Won’t Pay! in support of the peoples’ protest movement.

The play, Fo said, “deals with solidarity among people ground down by profiteering, with the struggle against the arbitrary hiking up of prices, and it also pillories selfishness and idiocy” (Fo, *Tricks* 158) of the mainstream revolutionary parties. As the play had an unfailing contemporary flavour and fervor when The Commune performed the play in Pauda, in 1974, an unbelievable audience of 4,500 thronged at an occupied factory with 2,000 being left outside for lack of room!

Tom Behan illustrates further on the success of Fo’s theatre repertoire dedicated for the working class as follows:

The late 1960s and of the early 1970s – the Era of Collective Action – as described by Paul Ginsberg in his History of Contemporary Italy, were the years in which Dario wrote and performed some of his most enduring and influential plays like Accidental Death of an Anarchist, Mistero Buffo, and Can't Pay? Won't Pay! This was the first time one of Fo's plays (Grand Pantomime with Flags and Small and Middle-sized Puppets) where contemporary class struggle, and the nature of the class society were central themes. Another of the central themes of the play, used reputedly over the coming years was working conditions, a theme very close to the heart of many workers in the audience. (*Megaphone* 251-2)

Unable to put up with the rigidities and deception of the Communist Party, Fo had already said adieu with mainstream left-wing politics leaving *Nouva Scene* and formed a new group, *La Commune* (The Commune). Great artists are the most sensitive lots; they inescapably are an integral component in the mass political movements of their era. Political developments within the civil society propel artistic talents. Fo, being an activist artist, always maintained a close collaboration with the organized and unorganized worker's movements in Italy. Can't Pay? Won't Pay! is a direct outcome of Fo's intimate engagement with radical working class movements. "Behind this satiric presentation is another more fundamental economic and political reality: that the intelligent man is being driven through

unemployment into a profession he despises; and that the unthinking police an ally of the bosses in their oppression of the worker.” (Hirst, 1989. 58)

Can't Pay? Won't Pay! is an effort at consolidation of the working class to encourage them to express their bitterness at the exploitative capitalism and inflatory pricing. In building up this resistance theatre, Fo acknowledges his interrelations with the workers that helped him to make the play sharper and politically agitative. He speaks on the genealogy of Can't Pay? Won't Pay!:

Although the material composition of the text is to be attributed to me alone, from the reading of the first draft to actual performance, the script was discussed many times. And not just with the collective [The Commune] alone, but above all with both groups of workers and the political vanguards of several Milan factories, who intervened in great numbers during the meeting to revise the script. And following these debates we realized there were gaps in the text that certain scenes had to be constructed differently. The comrades' really constructive criticism convinced us to change and rewrite all of the concluding section. (Behan, *Revolutionary* 29-30)

The setting of Can't Pay? Won't Pay! is Milan where many groups of non-indoctrinated apolitical housewives shed all timidity and barge into departmental stores, take what they need, paying only what they could afford. This rebellion of the politically less conscious

women against inflating pressures gather much relevancy when their politically conscious husbands, including communists are reluctant to act being 'responsible citizens'. Fo's female protagonist, Antonia is actively involved in this anti-establishment civil disobedience movement while her communist, afraid-to-act husband, disapproves all such movements as extremist outrages.

Antonia, as the curtain unfurls, is seen staggering into her apartment room burdened with many plastic bags overflowing with foodstuffs. She is being helped to carry the bags by Margherita, who in turn is very anxious to know how Antonia could afford a massive shopping amidst the suffocating inflation. Antonia unsuccessfully tries to convince her by fabricating stories about winning a lottery, heavy discounts and even a secret help by her rich lover. Finally she tells Margherita about the raw in the supermarket where the women finally decided to non-payment by declaring: "We've had enough. From now on we decide the prices. We'll only pay a fair prize and no more. And (if) you don't like it, we'll knick the stuff." (5)

The play is an imaginary embodiment of the acts of collective reaffirmation of citizens' rights and resistance by the deprived class. Fovian political intuition foretells the necessary outcome of peoples' anger. Alberto Blandi, reporter to *La Stampa* is quoted making this comment after watching Can't Pay? Won't Pay!:

[It] Deals with the very vital and current issue of civil disobedience, in the form of battle against increase in market and services prices, new instances of which are

continually being reported in the newspapers. But what is outstanding about it is that Fo, with the sensibility and awareness that make him one of the most extraordinary figures in Italian theatre, has imagined these episodes before they actually happened. Then reality began to imitate art. (1974)

In the following scenes, the women's desperate attempt to hide the loot from their principled husbands, incidents of cross-dressing, phantom pregnancies, labour pains, premature deliveries, improvisational dialogues, absurd movements and interactions take place. "All these bizarre incidents are grounded in the notion of *festa*, which not only stokes its arcical energies, but determines its comic outcome. The fundamental action of the play can thus be defined as getting pregnant with the revolution through the irresponsible carnival of spontaneous action" (Walsh 214). Fo attempts at grotesque humour, spontaneous wit and unexpected entries and exists even through widows to make the play a hyperactive one with an unimaginable pace. On the thematic thread of Cant't Pay? Won't Pay! Fo explained:

As in old Neapolitan and Venetian farces...here the starting point, the fundamental impetuous is hunger. The initial, instinctive solution in which everyone takes care of himself in resolving the atavistic problem of appetite develops into a need to work collectively, to get organized and fight together. (Mitchel, *People's* 131)

On hearing the arrival of her communist shop-steward husband Giovanni, Antonia conceals things here and there, including a bagful of groceries down Margherita's coat, making her 'pregnant' all of a sudden. In her attempts to convince Giovanni of Margherita's hidden pregnancy, Antonia echoes feminists in her description of the fate of women in patriarchy. She bursts herself out:

Antonia: Typical, it is down to us. Run the house, do the washing, have the babies and book the beds...You give us the pay packets, 'You'll have to manage with that,' insist on your conjugal rights, god forbid you should go without that, then we get pregnant, surprise, surprise, surprise, 'well, go on the pill', and not a thought for the poor woman who's a Catholic who has double feature might mares, starring the Pope looming up and warning her: 'You're smug, you know, you should bear children. (26)

Fovian concern with the exploitation of women in patriarchal capitalist system is echoed clearly when Giovanni agrees to says that "we exploit them as surely as we are exploited by our boss!!" (35). The 'women-question' has always made Fo to incorporate feminist arguments wherever he gets an opportunity. His co-authored anthology of feminist plays, a Women Alone & Other Plays (Ranc) elaborates problems women face in the patriarchal society.

Some times 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. Fo's comic genius not only allows his caricatured 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. Holding the batten of law in his hand he defies the law of the country and delivers an erudite speech on the need of revolution to suspicious Giovanni, who has been a standing member of the communist party for twenty years. Holding a Little Red Book the Sergeant tries to politicize the timid communist:

Sergeant: Oh yeah, Have you? What if the law is purely for the benefit of the rich? Eh?

Giovanni: Then you have got your democratic procedure, Laws can be reformed, you know?

Sergeant: Oh really? Reform? Reform? Don't make me laugh. We've been hearing that for 30 years. Reforms. No mate. If people want change they'll have to do it for themselves. They'll have to wet the shackles of capitalism and iron fists of oppression with the boiling blood of Karl Marx. 'Where the broom does not reach, the dirt will not vanish itself. (21)

Fo's technique of subversion in interchanging the mentalities of the communist and the Sergeant, a tool for state oppression, is to ridicule the parliamentary communists who, instead of propelling a revolution, wait for evolutionary socialism through reforms. This degeneration of radical communist socialist idea into Fabian socialist

concept was of the reasons of Fo's dissociation with the CPI in 1968. According to Fo in pursuit of parliamentary communism, the PCI has scarified the radical ideology of revolutionary communism. Fo transforms Giovanni, the communist into an obedient dog of the establishment, while his wife exhibits more revolutionary zeal than the official communists.

After the Sergeant's ceremonious departure quoting Mao, "A revolution is not a tea party nor is it doing embroidery" (22), Antonia comes back with Margherita only to find that an Inspector who came again for a second round search in their apartment room. On Antonia's dictation, Margherita pretends to be in labour pain to escape a physical frisk check.

In spite of protests from the women the Inspector in turn makes the matter bad to worse. He takes Margherita to a maternity clinic in an ambulance, only to show the benevolent nature of his carabinieri. He suggests a "baby transplant" to avoid the risk of baby death in premature delivery. The implausible twists and turns in the events are major sources of pure laughter. Amidst this laughter Fo misses no opportunities for making fun of the authorities. His satire on the over-surveillance of the citizens by the establishment is expressed through his female protagonists. She questions the logicity of the police searching houses while there is a whole world of exploitation lying out there in the society, especially in workplaces. The police and the government do not address all these injustices. This argument is expressed through the female protagonist who talks

to the police officer who was at their apartment in search of the stolen goods from the market.

Antonia: In our case sweating eight houses a day on the assembly line, like animals, and in your case making sure we behave and – most of all – pay the right price for everything. You don't ever check for example, that the bosses keep their promises, pay what they have agreed, that they don't kill us with piecework, or by speeding up the line, or screw us with their three-day weeks, that they comply with the safety regulations and pay the proper compensation, that they don't just up the prices, chuck us out in the streets or starve us to death. (28)

The ruthless exploitation of labourers in the factories is always a major thematic concern for Fo. While the exploitative capitalism is interested in accumulating their profits, the government refuses to control them. But whenever the capitalist interests are at stake, the establishment unfailingly wields its arms of oppression against the working class. Fo always questions the immunity to exploit and governmental non-intervention enjoyed by the industrial capitalism, through his plays.

Even though Can't Pay? Won't Pay! is largely a conventional farce, it is equally a political commentary and a criticism of Catholicism. This play is a perfect combination of heavy political message and slapstick comedy. The comic incidents at times reach the extremes of lunacy. This is a pointedly political work that highlights

the plight of ordinary Italian workers during the economic crisis of 1970s (Davis 187). In this provocative political play a tension between revolutionary ideology and parliamentary democracy is generated.

As already pointed out, 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, According to Fo. Can't Pay? Won't Pay! depicts the deliberate abstention of the communist party from expressing solidarity with the civil disobedience movements. Giovanni, who often offers philosophical and political explanations to justify his non-participation in the movement, represents the reactionary mainstream communist party in Italy. His, and his party's stand is on and often questioned by Luigi, Giovanni's colleague. Luigi, as shown below, often exposes the non-active mode of the PCI amidst the mounting discomfiture among the working class:

Luigi: Who organized these women today? Not the unions. The women rioted because they can't take anymore. See these hands? They want what's theirs. But your union leaders and your precious party tie them behind your backs. And that's then the army take over. Not when you are on the offensive, but when you are being led up to the garden. (52)

Through this play Fo deliberately provokes the communist leadership and trade union bureaucrats, who instead of grabbing the opportunity by inflaming peoples anger at the capitalist exploitative social set up, disapproves their spontaneous protest movements. The official line said that the striking people were “layabouts, these louts, ultra-leftists [and they] play right into the hands of the ruling class.”(13) It is rightly said that 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 John, *Oxford* 522). Fovian satire provocatively addresses contemporary Italian communist as “reformist git” (44). “Fo believes that satire and invention 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.

Significantly the main upholder of law and order is a communist shop steward, who disapproves his wife’s rebellion against the rising cost of living... The communist party was too inflexible to cop up with the new faces in politics: young people, women and workers rebelling against the old industrial and political structure. (Intro. *Women Alone* xii-xiv)

Dario Fo, with Can’t Pay? Won’t Pay! incites people to be hyperactive rather than becoming submissive to the system as well as

to any enslaving political party. In its deeper reaches this play is a “splendid theater on the mentality and mechanism” (Morrow 70) of voluntary insurrection of desperate people against the exploitation as well as the merely moralizing trade union bureaucracy. Fo contemplates on the necessary realignment in the concept of responsible citizen and irresponsible state machinery. Fo consistently exposes the marginalization of mass interests by the political elites, and ponders on the necessity of the emergence of a resisting community. This idea is expressed through Luigi when he says:

Luigi: ...What's quite clear is that it's no good working people waiting for the government to do something, the union's intervention and a good word from your party. We have to stop expecting a white paper from the government and a strongly worded declaration of intent from the union every time we want to turn around and have a piss! If we don't do things for ourselves then no one will. (37)

Dario Fo always scorns the role of religion on the improvement common man's lot. He strongly argued that even religions that promise post-death salvation are of no use in this world of exploration. This view is expressed by Antonia when she tells:

Antonia: Most people are descent underneath. Not everybody, of course. But people like us, working people having a job making ends meet. People like that are on our side, as long as you show them you won't let the boss kick in your teeth, that you are prepared to fight for your

rights, and don't want for St. Peter leave his pearly gates and come down and do it all for you! (45)

To be precise, Can't Pay? Wait Pay! is a polarization theatre that aims at educating the mass politically as "Fo believes in the importance of knowing oneself, which allows the self's authenticity and then enables one to be the master of one's destiny." (Marceri 9)

The inconvenient intervention of religions in individual's private lives is another persistent theme in Fovian alternative theatre. Being a staunch atheist by practice Fo cannot but question the logicity of religion in contemporary life. Here he criticizes the Vatican policy on abortion and on the use of contraceptives unmindful of the sufferings of the womenfolk in exploitative industrial capitalism. Not only does Fo's female protagonist Antonia reject Vatican's dictums on contraceptives, but also she questions the prevailing discrimination against women in the church hierarchy:

Margherita: How can you drag the Pope into this business?

Antonia: Well, he is always dragging us into his business, isn't he? "Do this, do that, all you woops keep of my grass'. Why can't women be priests? You can be a good priest Margherita. You are a good listener. (45)

Fo's criticism on Catholicism is not to reinstate and internalize it by carrying out a cleansing mission. However, through his theatrical images Fo tries to question the very existence of religion. For Fo, just like the exploitative capitalism, Catholicism is also an instrument of

control and suppression of the individual. If Sophocles' theatre reiterated the inescapability of Fate in individual's life, Fovian theatre is a counter-demonstration of the inescapability of class struggle in the present day world of explorative capitalism. Fo held the view that not only does capitalism squeeze the last drop of blood from the workers; it also destroys the future of the children of the proletariat also. These lines declare this concern of Fo.

Antonio: ...our kids chocked on the scrap heap, a whole generation of them without the hope of getting a job. The fight lying waste and who is standing up to them. Him and his party. Like a dead haddock. I've enough of it. (78)

Can't Pay? Won't pay! is a typical agitation theater where different socio-political questions are raised using methods of farce, satire and even excessive buffoonery. Fo's genius at subversion is displayed here again. The topicality of the burning issues raised in the play assures a profound influence on contemporary audience. Fo's interrogation of exploitative capitalism, suppressive patriarchy, spiraling rate of unemployment, inconvenient intervention of religion in individuals' private lives, hijacking of revolutionary ideology by the parliamentary communist groups etc., turn this play a political manifesto in all sense, just like the Accidental Death of an Anarchist is.

Archangels Don't Play Pinball: Rehearsal for Becoming Political

Archangels Don't Play Pinball belongs to the second period in Fo's career as a dramatist. This period is called the bourgeoisie period

(1959-1968) by critics. Explicit political intention is missing in this phase. Throughout this period Fo was developing his own peculiar brand of “explosive satire, which found its voice more and more in the grotesque expression of the domination and exploitation of the proletariat by the ruling class, and in its reference to popular culture” (Montgomery, 206). This is a quick moving expressionist farce, where confusing bedroom situations and pompous bureaucratic hierarchy are in the firing line of Fo’s sharp satirical tongue. Fo, the future radical’s favourite issues of class struggle and exploitation of the working class is conspicuously absent in this carnivalesque dramatic piece.

Natasha Williams traces the thematic origin of this grotesque piece. In late 1950s the pinball machines had caused much excitement throughout Italy. The pinball machine, like Hollywood films and Coco Cola, deemed to be a part of the new Americanized pop culture. Consequently it caused much alarms in the religious pulpits and boardrooms so much that the interior ministry proposed to ban it altogether (65). Fo takes up this topical issue and enlarges it including contemporary television evangelists, current politicians and the entire Italian officialdom. For the first time, Fo’s later archetype model of theatre protagonist, the giullare appears in this play in the form of the leading character of this play, Stretch.

Stretch is a member of a group of unemployed young Milanese petty criminals. His gang mates play a trick on him by marrying him off to a fake Albanian beauty, who is actually a prostitute, in a mock

marriage ceremony. Stretch then tries to get his identity papers in order so that he can draw a disability pension, only to find that he has been registered as a hunting dog in the official record _ a bureaucratic error. This error could only be rectified by going to a kennel, and posing as a dog (Emery, *Website*). Archangels Don't Play Pinball follows Stretch's attempts to extricate himself from the desperate demi-monde of pranks and petty crime, get his papers in order, and find an identity for himself. This includes impersonating as a politician whose trousers he steals on a train, and re-encountering the prostitute, who is now posing as the politician's wife. At the end, he discovers everything has been a dream, although not manipulated as he thought by the archangels in a game of human pinball.

Fo's carnivalesque spirit makes him bold to present a live dog on the stage as well as attempting to *deus ex machina* during the performance of Archangels Don't Play Pinball. This is a powerful drama where Fo plays with free mingling of the contemporary with the historical and the allegorical. "As this play is a collector's item...though it is not explicitly political...instead of satirizing actual cases of terrorism of police corruption, Archangels offers a generalized farcical world of haves and nave-nots (Wardle). As the present researcher focuses on the radically political plays of Dario Fo, a detailed analysis of this play is not undertaken here.

A comparative analysis on the thematic and methodological analysis of selected plays of Dario Fo is given under in the form of a table.

Table-II

Thematic and Methodological Analysis of Dario Fo's Plays

| No. | Plays (Year) | Major Themes | Theatrical Devices (Methods) |
|------------|---|---|---|
| 1. | <u>Archangels Don't Play Pinball</u> (1959) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bureaucratic inefficiency, procedural formalities, and corruption. • Immorality of politicians. • Polesiation of wealth. • Nepotism, the world of haves and have-nots. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commedia dell'Arte method, Zanny wits, acrobatics. • Subversive delivery. • Extended monologues. • Songs • Absurd, carnivalesque. • Dens ex machina • Expressionistic farce. • The giullari tradition. |
| 2. | <u>The Seventh Commandment : Thou Shall Steal a Bit Less</u> (1964) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Police brutality on workers. • Over taxation, inflation. • Corruption in politics and bureaucracy. • Attack on Catholicism, media. • Industrial monopoly. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Docudrama. • Farcical, comic and didactic. • Carnivalesque. |
| 3. | <u>Dump the Lady</u> (1967) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Satire on American imperialism. • Anti-war | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commedia dell'Arte clownish show. • Episodic plot. • Symbolic, didactic. • Farcical, grotesque. |
| 4. | <u>Grand Pantomime with Flags and Small and Middle sized Puppets</u> (1968) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anti - Fascist ideology. • Capitalistic exploitation. • Unholy nexus of corrupt politicians, religion, industrialists and police. • Suppression of common people. • Revisionist tendencies in the | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Puppetry and Sicilian masks. • Morality type characterization. • Personification of fascism, imperialism and communism. • Allegorical tone. • Songs, music. • Commedia dell'Arte method. • Episodic plot. |

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|----|---|--|--|
| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • communist party. • American imperialism. • Right-wing terrorism. | |
| 5. | <u>Mystero Buffo</u> (1969) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feudal exploitation of the peasantry. • Hippocratic Catholicism with its pompous irrelevant priests and ecclesiastical rituals. • Libratory message in Christ's teachings. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commedia dell'Arte Method, clownish giullari. • Direct address to the audience. • Grammelot. • Episodic plots. • Improvisations. • Illustrations, sketches and projection. • Story telling method. • Extended monologues addressed to audience. • Counternarration • Shawian prologues. |
| 6. | <u>Accidental Death of an Anarchist</u> (1970) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State sponsored terrorism and massacres. • Official cover-ups of truth. • Unholy nexus of politicians fascists, police and judiciary. • Pubic complacency at injustice and corruption. • State totalitarianism and police brutality. • Raising people' consciousness. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commedia dell'Arte. • Improvisational dialogues with irony. • Grotesque and farcical treatment. • Carnavalesque • Counterinformative • Shawian prologues. • Extended monologues. • Acrobatics and buffoonery. |
| 7. | <u>United We Stand ! Altogether Now ! Oops, Isn't That the Boss?</u> (1971) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exhaustive exploitation of labourers in industrial capitalism. • Workers struggles. • Unholy nexus of politicians, industrialists, fascists and police. • Political conscientization of the working class. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commedia dell'Arte style. • Flash back technique. • Subversive presentation. • Revolutionary songs. • Didactic. |

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|-----|--|---|--|
| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exploitation of women. | |
| 8. | <u>Fedayin</u> (1971) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Palestinian issue. • Communalism, terrorism. • Police brutality. • Sectarianism. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Montage techniques. • Masks, slides and songs. • Docu-dramatic. |
| 9. | <u>Knock! Knock! Who's There? Police!</u> (1972) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Police brutality and official cover-ups. • Suppression of the working class. • State massacres • Sectarian and revisionist tendencies in the communist party. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rehearsed reading • Docu-dramatic. • Grotesque, comic. • Didactic with songs and music. • Grammelot • Counterinformative. |
| 10. | <u>The People War in Chile</u> (1972) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Imperialism. • Fascism • Peoples protests. • Feudal and capitalistic exploitation of the proletariat. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Montage of monologues, songs and sketches. • Abstract, morality drama. • Improvisational, commedia dell'Arte. • Audience debate at the end. |
| 11. | <u>Can't Pay? Won't Pay!</u> (1974) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Black marketing, inflation. • Exploitative industrial capitalism. • Police brutality. • Impoverization of the proletariat. • Reformist tendencies in the Communist Party. • Bureaucratic tradeunionism. • Importance of spontaneous civil disobedience. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commedia dell'Arte antics and buffoonery. • Improvisational dialogues. • Comic grotesque situations. • Revolutionary songs,. • Direct involvement of the audience. |
| 12. | <u>Female Parts</u> (with Franca-Rame) (1977) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The oppression and exploitation of women in patriarchy. • Ultimate triumph of female sexuality. • Critique on the institution of family. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Series of monologues. • Comic/grotesque/Satiric. • Mime, story telling techniques. • Improvisations. |

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| 13. | <u>Trumpets and Raspberries</u> (1981) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exploitative industrial capitalism. • Unholy nexus of industrialists, politicians, judiciary and the police. • Hypocrisy of the media. • Anti-communist pogrom. • Right-wing terrorism. • Police Brutality. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commedia dell'Arte physical comedy, mistaken identity. • Counter-informatory. • Grotesque, comic farce. |
| 14. | <u>The Pope and the Witch</u> (1989) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attack on institutionalized religion. • Religious moralizing, anti-prohibitionist . • Right-wing terrorism. • Hypocrisy and Pompousness of the ecclesiastical order. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Surrealistic, impressionistic presentation. • Abstract • Caricaturist. • Didactic. |
| 15. | <u>John Padan Discovers America</u> (1991) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Religions Inquisition. • Racism and Slavery. • Politicization of the aboriginals. • Imperialism. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commedia dell'Arte counter-narrative. • Jongleur narrative, giullarisque clowning. • Acrobatics, caricaturist. • Improvisational dialogues. • Episodic plot. |

CHAPTER IV

Safdar Hashmi: Retrieving Theatre to the Masses

Man, being a social animal, is continually exposed to different trends and influences in his society, consciously or unconsciously. These so called trends and influences are nothing but the manifestation of both dominant and dormant ideologies in a particular society. The inescapable exposure to different ideologies results in the social construction of individual subjectivity. Therefore the claims of ideological or political neutrality in artistic or political interactions of any human being are simply deceptive. Being neutral in a socio-political or literacy issue means a subservient relationship with the dominant ideology.

In theatre too, the apolitical claims in textual engagements are nothing but a conning concealment of the submission to the hegemonic ideology of the establishment. In the same way, being a dissident in a society means becoming a spokesman of the marginalized voices. Taking an oppositional posture is a way of questioning the dominant ideology of the time. Oppositional drama rigorously questions the exploitative class dynamics, which is taken for granted as a natural phenomenon.

Safdar Hashmi's oppositional theatre aimed at dismantling the caste, class, and gender-ridden establishment, thereby explored a way for the establishment of a society that is free of any biases. In this struggle, he had theatre as his weapon. Safdar was a theatre activist

with a political purpose, a communist with an aesthetic bend of mind, and an artist who took his theatre to the people. In 1973, 19-year-old Safdar co-founded the Jana Natya Manch, a militant political theatre of protest. "Through its rousing, visionary street plays, the group sought to address issues of class and gender and religious sectarianism. Against the bourgeois conception of art as an individualist aesthetic pursuit, he pitted his version of the people's collectivist view of art" (Gopalakrishnan 46). His commitment for giving vent to the aspirations of the toiling mass gave his performance and writing a sense of urgency and the need to act purposefully. In this fight for justice and against exploitations and discriminations, he, along with his medium, marched towards the left camp.

Safdar Hashmi was an ardent follower of 'street theatre'. A brief look at the specialties of street theatre as a particular genre would be appropriate before elaborating the theatre stylistics of Safdar Hashmi.

Street Theatre

This theatrical form, evolved in the post-revolutionary Russia, proclaims absolute break away from the proscenium theatre. Not only the place of dramatic action is altered, but also the entire concept of theatrical conception, production and presentation are revolutionized here. Street theatre is basically and essentially political. Street theatre theorists discard the notion of a non-political street theatre. Once the street performance is devoid of its politics, only the show remains. This type of de-politicized street show is categorized under the subheading 'social theatre'. Social theatre is used to propagate the

concepts like hygiene, family planning, AIDS awareness, etc. This type of pseudo-theatrical cannot be considered agitprop. Whereas street theatre is radically political and highly aggressive in its *modus operandi*, Social theatre is persuasive in nature. Rejecting the notion of street theatre without politics, Safdar Hashmi, the icon of street theatre movement in India clarifies:

Any play performed in a street corner cannot be passed off as street theatre. The logic perhaps was that any drama performed in the open, not actually on the street corner, can be passed off as street theatre. Now such a definition will not do. It will be as ridiculous as calling any play in which the hero dies at the end a tragedy....Similarly, characterizing traditional plays [performed in the open] as 'street theatre is mis-defining them on the one hand, and street theatre on the other....Street theatre became inevitable when the workers began organizing themselves into unions in the mid-nineteenth century. Its arrival became immanent with the emergence of political demonstration in the late nineteenth and twentieth century. As such it is a twentieth century phenomenon, born out of the specific needs of the modern world. (Right 7-8)

It is a militant political theatre of protest, basically. Its function is to make the people agitate and to mobilize them behind organizations that fight for their causes. In this sense, its ideological

tradition is about 150 years old. Its formal tradition does not go back more than 70 or 80 years. So there is no question of a traditional street theatre, Safdar added.

The Red Ladder, Unity Theatre Movement, and 7:84 in UK; The Living Theatre, Theatre of the Oppressed, THAW (Theatre Against War), and Action Theatre in America; Janam, Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad, Janayana, Samudaya, Himachan Gyan Vigyan Samiti, and Disha in India; Resist Inc. in Portugal; Buddies and Bad Times Theatre in Canada etc. are some of the active street theatre groups across the world.

The essential drive for attempting street theatrics is the political desire for a theatre that expressed the suppressed voice of the mass. Street theatre is always a politically committed theatre that ultimately attempts at propagating socialist ideas and exposing the capitalistic exploitation and imperialistic tendencies of the establishment. It stands for the deprived majority, the working class.

Street theatre activists always go in search of its audience. They take their performances to factory gates, schools, university campuses, slums, trade union meeting, prison premises, etc. The spectacular spontaneity in adopting burning topical issues keeps the interest of the masses in street theatre rather than its artistic excellences exhibited. Often street theatre group arrives at a place unannounced and unpublicized. This surprise encounter, dealing with the burning issue of time always offers a fresh performance to the audience. The extreme unofficiality in the preparation, everyday

costumes, simple, locally used musical instruments etc. give the audience a feeling of closeness with the performance. Even though the main issue dealt with in the street theatre is not locale or contemporary, skilful incorporations of the current political developments keep the performance alive. Often names of persons or locales mentioned in the performance vary from place to place. This flexibility in simple matters help the street theatre activists strike a cord with the local audience.

Lon Furman, who studied street theatre, political theatre and social theatres in India, agrees to the inherent difference between social theatre and street theatre. Social theatre is intended for social actions like the removal of illiteracy, up keep of civil hygiene etc. However, the orientation of street theatre is purely political. In turn the form of street theatre itself acquires a unique identity that is totally different from proscenium production. Thanks to its artificiality and technical sophistication, many argue that street theatre is shallow theatre where in-depth depiction is impossible. Street theatre theorists like Furman rejects this notion on the ground that such a view originated from an essential misunderstanding of the genre. On the politics and uniqueness of street theatre Furman explains:

Street theatre must be political by definition, because it is only this form that will make change in the society.... It is no wonder that the quality of street theatre plays does not meet the standards of typical proscenium theatre productions. On the other hand, this form is not intended

to meet traditional theatre standards. The street theatre actor has skills and purposes different from a staged production. The two should not be compared without qualifications. (60)

However pointing to some of the shortcomings of street theatre he opines that both the absence of aesthetic aspects as well as fully developed characters often makes it an utterly boring activity. A little addition of aesthetics as well as entertainment would make it more effective according to Furman. He added that very little is done from a motivation perspective in street theatre. What limited motivational acting and direction occur in street theatre is very stereotypical in form. Each character should find reasons for his actions; motives unique to him (61). He suggested that street theatre groups must begin to develop plays that allow for individuation. Such plays would help to bring the art of "theatre" into the streets.

Different from Western street theatre performances, Furman is in full praise of Indian street theatre for its excellent success in achieving an instant rapport with the audience in the initial stages of performance. This uniqueness makes Indian street theatre highly interactive.

All street theatre practitioners unite in proclaiming the unique identity of street theatre. They refuse to accept the version that street theatre is a miniature proscenium production on the streets. The visible crudity and simplicity of street theatre performances along with the totally different theatrical devices used separates both traditional

proscenium productions and street theatre miles apart. The very purpose behind the existence of street theatre is different from that of proscenium theatre. On the formal, thematic and theatrical aspects of street theatre Prabir Purkayasta has the following comments:

In the perception of many people, street theatre is only a crude and simpler form of theatre, in which the content-the need for mobilizing people-is the focus. In this view, street theatre is a device for propaganda and the artistic equivalent of the pamphlet. The other view of the street theatre is that it is an independent art form and should not be abused for propaganda; like art it must be 'true' to itself. Both these views see a formal split between the form and the content. In the former, the form is a compromise made to the content; in the second, the content of street theatre is incidental. (65)

Just like all art forms, modern proscenium theatre also basically belongs to the people. But the huge cost of production, and elite patronization etc. gradually hijacked modern proscenium theatre from the mass. It simply became financially non-viable for the ordinary working class. Following the natural norm, 'as the audience so the play is', proscenium theatre started depicting the grand philosophical concerns and ideological clashes of the elite. Street theatre is an effort to locating theatre back to the people.

According to Prabir Purkayasta it is this problem [exclusion of working class] of theatre that street theatre attempts to address.

Street theatre is not the only one that seeks to address this; basement theatre, amateur groups, etc. are all attempts to locate theatre back to the people. However street theatre is the only one that attempts to break out of the problem of the stage and carry the dramaturgic space without using the stage. In the street, the first problem is one of creating the separation [between the audience and the performers] without using the stage. The second is that the spectator, even if separated by this artificial space that street theatre creates, is still a part of the same space. And, at the end of the play the dramaturgic space of the actors must fuse with the everyday space of the spectators; the spectator is now a part of the play. The separation and this fusion of the two spaces generate the artistic tension for street theatre (65).

In the final analysis, the following theatrical specialties could be attributed to street theatre.

- Relocation of the traditional place of performance by deliberately taking theater to the places where people work or stay.
- Spontaneous creative response through politicizing and performing the seemingly incompressible social phenomena.
- Collective effort in the conception and production by conduction workshops, group discussions etc. Ultimately the play is evolved not written.
- Rejection of traditional theatrical props, make-ups, sound-light, verbosity, stage decoration, etc.
- Assert the unique identity of street theatre, dissociating totally

form traditional stage performances.

- Maintain that the form street theatre itself is evolved thanks to its content; content precedes form.
- Instead of philosophical predicament of the well-heeled, day-to-day survival issues of the common man is accepted as theme.
- Often arrives the site uninvited and performs unannounced.
- Overtly political, that too a leftist politics.
- No fixity or sameness in two different performance of the same play. *Modus operandi* varies in accordance to place and time.
- Total flexibility enables spontaneous incorporation of current political occurrences in the performances.
- No claims of transcendental relevance or timeless appeal. Purely topical and local.
- Names of characters and places are often changed, roles are interchanged among performers and even interchange of gender is quite common.
- Aims at sensitizing the audience by critically analyzing the seemingly incomprehensible socio-political phenomena.
- Basically interactive and interceptive rather than explanatory. Involve the audience throughout the performance and encourages them to join the play towards the end.

Safdar did not shy away from the fact that he was a partisan both in politics and in arts. His partnership did not in any way diminish the aesthetic excellence of his performance. "As in the case

of Brecht, it is this commitment to revolutionary politics that gave the unequalled excellence of his performance its shining halo” (Pillai 31). It is this unwavering political commitment and determination, directly expressed through his plays that brought Safdar’s early martyrdom at an young age of 34. He was fatally assaulted on 1st January 1989, at Jhandapur, in the industrial town of Shahibabad, 15 kms. away from Delhi, while performing the street play Hallabol (Attack) in support of the striking factory workers. He passed away on 2nd January 1989 leaving behind a rich legacy of street theatre for the posterity to find inspiration for political action through theatre.

Safdar, along with his actor-activist wife Moloyoshree, was a founder member of *Janam* (Jan Natya Manch) and the main driving force behind it. He was a brilliant theatrician and a practitioner of political theatre, especially street theatre. As a versatile personality, he was an actor, playwright, political activist, theatre director, lyricist and an organizer. The inseparability of his artistic creativity and political ideology turned his name synonymous with the progressive cultural movement in India and with street theatre (Ganguly i). Hashmi started his artistic career proscenium theatre with plays like, *Bharat Bhagya Vidhata (The Makers of India’s Fortune)* in 1973, Bakri (Goat) in 1974, Ab Raja Ki Bari Hai (Now It’s the King’s Turn), 1978 etc.

For Safdar Hashmi theatre was one of the many means of political struggle with an ultimate aim of liberating the down trodden from economic exploitation and caste class discrimination. In this

struggle against exploitation and discrimination, he never tried to alienate the proscenium theatre from the street theatre. Instead he viewed both as powerful weapons, even though he largely practiced the street theatre. "Safdar deliberately and assiduously practiced both the so called proscenium theatre and the street theatre and believed that they mutually supported each other" (Tanvir, *Memorial Lectures* 3). In his attempt to combine both the theatrical forms, he contributed greatly to the growth of street theatre movement in India as well as to the growth of a democratic culture. Safdar believed that whatever be the form, theatre ultimately belonged to the people. According to him it is not the form but the content of theatrical performance that decides its ideological or political partisanship. Rejecting the misconception that street theatre is basically a rebellion against the prosecution theatre, Safdar clarified:

In our view it is absurd to speak of a contradiction between proscenium and street theatres. Both belong equally to the people. Yes, there is a contradiction between the proscenium theatre which has been appropriated by the escapists, the naturalists and the revivalists and the street theatre which stands with the people. Just there is a contradiction between reactionary proscenium theatre and progressive proscenium theatre, or between democratic street theatre and reformist and *sarkari* street theatre. (13-14)

According to Safdar whether drama is performed in squares,

rectangular or circular spaces, so long it expresses the sentiments of the oppressed people, it is people's theatre, whatever be the form he believed that the themes of plays have to keep a close touch with popular mass movements, have to interrogate anti-people political policies of the establishment, they have to defend the right to protest, and should register the dissenting voices. But due to its innate weaknesses such as huge financial investment, comparative immobility and incapability to immediately respond to topical issues, turns proscenium theatrical productions unapproachable to the masses.

The amazing spontaneously of theatrical reaction to a topical event ensures the street theatre an emotional proximity of the people as the themes are related to their everyday lives. To achieve this people's interest, Safdar says, street plays have to be bold, and direct. This aspect of urgency in execution, spatial mobility and monetary viability are both the limitation as well as the advantage of street theatre. Street theatre activists cannot afford a big time gap for a conceptualization of the topical event, and confine their performance to specialized fully equipped auditoria or afford huge monetary investment. But the burning topical issues and people's discomfort at the misdeeds of the rulers necessitate the existence of street theatre. On these features of street theatre, in The Right to Perform, Safdar says:

In order to keep it alive and involved in the day to day peoples movement it cant afford to wait for relevant script

to be written by professional and celebrated dramatists. Involvement of culture with peoples movement requires immediate analysis of the current political and socio-economic developments and preparing a new play on that within a day or two, if not in a couple of hours. This leaves no scope for professionals and celebrities to come into picture. (17)

This promptness of theatrical action and topicality of themes has brought into the criticism that street theatre is aesthetically inferior as well as thematically shallow. It is argued that the spontaneous theatrical intervention does not leave any scope for a deeper penetration of the issues and themes handled with. But a reality check of this argument reveals that it sprang from a theatrical method of street theatre, namely, the simplification of the plot. The intended audience in street theatre is the general public who, largely, would be semi-literate or illiterate. This fact necessitates in presenting the issues in a general comprehensive way without attempting at complicate abstraction.

However, these simplification efforts need not undermine the relevance of the theme. This has got one more side also. Most of the proscenium productions are about 2-3 hours' duration. This ample time length provides the practitioners of proscenium theatre with enough scope to present the theme in question in a dynamic way with enough illustrations and enhancement techniques. This is possible because they have a fixed audience for all the three hours. Meanwhile,

in street theatre the performers have to deal with an almost floating or fleeting crowd in a street corner or bust stop. They cannot hold the audience for more than, say, 30 minutes. This non-fixity from the part of the audience is a compelling factor that requires direct, open and intense presentation of the issues at hand.

Similarly, the argument that there is an absolute absence of aesthesis in street theatre is also unreal. To enhance the aesthetic appeal of street theatre performance Safdar has tried to bring in a combination of musical language, rhythmic movements and suggestive gestures in his plays. As an actor-cum-political activist he attempted at politicization and aestheticisation of performances. To elaborate more, reiterating the belief that both the proscenium and street theatre belong to the people he attempted to politicization of proscenium theatre as well as to aestheticise street theatre performances. As an artist in action he could not but help to bring in aesthetic elements to his performance. Meanwhile the activist in him told him to be political in his artistic endeavors. In short, Safdar combined both politics and aesthetics in his plays.

While accepting the progressive relevance of committed proscenium theatre, Safdar had strong reservations against the bourgeoisie entertainment theatre. As Habib Tanvir noted above, Hashmi believed that there could be interplay between the committed prosecution theatre and street theatre. But with the bourgeoisie theatre of mere entertainment the street theatre can hardly establish any dialogue. It is not a question of ideology alone, but a matter of

aesthetics as well.

In proscenium and street theatre, not only the production approaches differ but also the acting. The actors' critical delineation of characters in the social context is missing in bourgeoisie theatres. Even when such plays have some social values, it gives no scope for a critical analysis. Safdar Hashmi, who was steeped in political awareness and deeply in love with theatre identified that the street theatre is the most suitable form for his political expression (Tanvir, *Memorial Lectures* 3). He discards the appropriation attempts of street theatre by the developmental agencies and the political right. He is of the opinion that because of its inherent leftist political leanings, the appropriation exercises would be futile. Hashmi believed that by its very definition street theatre has to be ideologically deep rooted and politically leftwing. Speaking on the politics of Safdar Hashmi's theatre, the eminent theatre director Habib Tanvir added:

Street theatre is a theatre of protest, which must always be on the left. It has to be always anti-establishment. All meaningful theatre is always on the left. Why theatre alone? All activities in art and literature have to be antiestablishment to gain contemporary relevance. If, for instance reign of the left wing gets established, then art and literature must move further left of the left. It must serve as a gadfly to society, always stimulating progress... So theatre by birth a leftist movement can only align itself with the proscenium theatre of the left, to the exclusion of

the bourgeoisie theatre. (*Memorial Lectures 2*)

Safdar Hashmi's committed theatre had no time for mere entertainment. It had to present aspects of reality imbued with humanistic values and to deal with disturbing or inconvenient socio-political questions. So Safdar took theatre to the people, with the vision of a creative genius, endowed with the zeal, energy and determination of a farsighted organizer and theater visionary. His concept of theatre had "a strange blend of Marxian and Gandhian Philosophies" (Tanvir, *Memorial Lectures 3*). He "was the embodiment of those communist values which shaped his craft – that of cultural activist and street theatre artist" (Prasad, *Safdar*). In his politics of liberation of the mass from exploitation he embraced Marxian ideology and in his deep humane concern he resembled the Gandhian thought.

Without any claims of political mentality, Safdar took his theatre to the venues of trade union strikes, students protest demonstrations and other places of mass mobilizations. His political aim was to inform, educate and help mobilization the common man towards democratic movements. In other words, he told them the need for urgent political action and showed them the platforms of pro-people political organizations. A students convention against communism, authoritarianism and unemployment; a demonstration against cutting down labour ratio, a propagating meeting for some working class rally; strikes and lockouts; literary seminars or even the victory celebrations of trade unions would be the right opportunity for a performance by Janam (Safdar, *Right* 169). With great artistic skill,

Safdar Hashmi, ensured that his plays leave gaps for entertainment, but not at the risk of losing the sharpness of their political message.

Through the subversive presentation of reality, often going for exaggerations Safdar made people laugh throughout his plays. He believed that laughter is a weapon and laughing at political heavy weights becomes a political weapon. Instead of blunting the sharpness of this political message, laughter made it more politically fatal. On the use of laughter as a apolitical weapon in his plays Hashmi explains

...laughter in our kind of plays becomes a weapon. It helps to reinforce the people's revolution against the state structures and its upholders. Many people think that laughter is an indication of casual or non-serious involvement in the play. But I think that laughter is a weapon in the hands of the people with which they destroy an image which is hatred. (Safdar, *Right* 169)

On the aesthetics and aim of political street theatre Safdar Hashmi had a clear perception in contrast with the approach prevalent among other street theatre activists. Baring some exceptions, the general assumption on street theatre was that if one could get the political message across to the audience, it was sufficient. Performance skills and other aesthetic enhancements were looked upon as unnecessary embellishment. Safdar resisted this approach and emphasized the need to have theatrical abilities in every departments of political street theatre. He saw street theatre as a

significant theatrical form and strove to explore its dimensions and reach. This was typical of his attitude to whatever he took up. He was never superficial (Qamar 269). In his excessively consistent efforts to develop a peculiar aesthetics for street theatre, to give the forms its own individual competency, he never compromised on the subject of content.

For Safdar, providing some spectacular theatrical images alone would not serve the purpose. His fundamental disagreement with Badal Sircar's theatre is related to this subject of form and content. Bluntly expressing his non-appreciation of Badal Sircar's excessive obsession with form, sacrificing the content, Safdar said:

.... Through his practice and innumerable workshops and through the multiple effect of his students and the group he has worked with, for a large number of cultural workers he has very effectively pushed into the background the very question of content and foregrounded the form as is that is all there is to theatre. It is more important for the adherents of Badal Sircar to do theatre in a certain way than to do theatre for a particular cause. They have made a kind of merit out of doing theatre only with one's body as sole source. It is a mere display of technique. It's a spectacle and nothing more... As far as content is concerned it is anarchic from the world go. It is cynicism embodied. (*Right* 145)

Augusto Boal, the Brazilian theatre activist, who conceptualized the “Theatre of the oppressed” or “Forum Theatre” gave the theatre community the unique technique of drawing theatre from the arena to the middle of the audience. His unique experimentation in involving the audience in the play was to explore various options for the issues raised through the performance. He transformed theatre into discussion forum converting the passive spectators into an aggressive “spect-actors” who would actively watch the performance and unknowingly “act” in the performance by their critical interventions amidst the performance.

One of the major criticisms against Safdar Hashmi’s street theatre was its inability to involve the actors in the performance. Even though Safdar depicted the existential grievances of the working class, it is a fact that his audience remained outsiders around the performance circle, passionately watching and comprehending the dramatization of their real life problems. But Safdar had his own view on this. He was not for the emotional manipulation of the audience. Rather he believed that, during the performance a critical relation has to be established between the audience and actors. This critical relationship has to come from the rational understanding of the issues raised through theatre, not through any emotional manipulations. For his audience he presented a problem and depicted it analytically, leaving them to react to the problems critically. For him theatre was not for the Cathartic effect, but for the analysis of the political issues from the perspective of the exploited. On the relation between

audience and theatre he said:

I am temperamentally opposed to any kind of theatre, cinema or act that manipulates the consciousness of the people or which gives them an experience by proxy. It is like taking someone by his collar and shaking him until he accepts your viewpoint. In that sense I'm more a Brechtian. I would rather appeal to the people with reasonable arguments and make them reflect about what is going on. (*Right* 147)

From these arguments it has to be presumed that he preferred presentation rather than didacticism in his theatre. But definitely his theatre was a conscientization effort, not by any melodramatic or sensationalizing methods. In this aspect he always observed a high sense of propriety in achieving his political aims by rational arguments. At the same time he was always sensitive to the need for revolutionary political plays to attract audience by matching the caliber other plays, in terms of theatre craft, not by using frequent sensational methods. He believed that only then would revolutionary forms would acquire the position and influence of art forms and sensationalization and sentimentalization would turn theatre into a shallow pool where the absence of thematic abyss would be conspicuous.

The tremendous revolutionary influence of Pablo Narinda and Bertolt Brecht was, in Safdar's view, based on their impeccable credentials as practitioners of their art with emotional and logical

propriety (Qamar 257). Safdar assiduously observed this property of techniques in his plays. Even though he widely used music, songs, and linguistic manipulations of words in his plays, all those were done with a definite aim in mind, not just to spice up his performance. On the methodological peculiarities of *Janam's* street plays, comments Habib Tanvir:

Janam's creations were entirely dictated by the times, the late seventies. They were out to catch a fleeting crowd in the street. They would attract them by their drum or shouting in chorus above the street noise repeating and echoing single syllable words, to draw their attention to the story about to begin. They developed the choreograph of the arena theatre on their own without the benefits of arena theatre examples, out of sheer necessity to be seen clearly by the audience sitting all round them. They used music, song and poetry not only for providing entertainment but also for furthering their theme in poetic form and riveting the onlookers. (*Memorial Lectures 5*)

With his deep rooted ideological stability and inexhaustible physical energy he undertook the socio-cultural mission of liberating the mass from ignorance and exploitation. His short but dedicated stunt with the literacy mission made it a mass movement throughout India. The title song written by Safdar for the programme is one of the most popular songs heard in our country even today. It urges the toiling mass to rise up to learn as a precondition for their liberation.

He told them that ignorance is the most fertile ground for exploitation.

The song titled "*Learn to Read and Write*" goes like this:

Learn to read and write, Oh the toiling mass,
Learn to read and write all those who starve and die.
Identify the ABCs,
Learn to read the words.
Learn to fight by making weapons
Out of A E I O U.
Oh, those who make roads and build hoses,
If you want to decide your fate yourself,
Learn to Read and Write.
Learn to Fight forging weapons
Out of AEIOU. (*Safdar: Individuality* 69)

This kind of commitment to the overall development of the working class prompted him to explore the possibility of achieving a *prolitcult* in our society. Ashok Mitra observed that,

The *prolitcult* Hashmi had in mind must render itself into agitprop. The entertainers of the mass culture assembled were committed to entertain but themselves. But as they entertain themselves, they also create further awareness about the class situation. Mass theatre is a pulsating experience, but let there be no mistaking, it is a preparation for the inevitable class war. (19)

Ashok Mitra elaborates that the culture Safdar committed to propagate seeks to obliterate the distinctions between the leader and

the led. Such is the purport of mass theatre; the individual recedes into the background and the collective entity, constitutes the mass advances into the limelight. The mass culture Safdar was committed to is, of course, rooted in the assumption that activism today is creation tomorrow. Hashmi's total dedication to the cause of the working class meant that he had to endeavour to declass himself.

Safdar's aim was to organize a *mohalla* (street) based cultural uprising targeted to lift the consciousness of the exploited multitude through participatory programmes. The raising of social awareness was to be harnessed to create the milieu for participatory entertainment, while the later was to be honed as weapons for class battle (Mitra 20). With this larger aim of creating a *prolitcult* Safdar built his dramatic structure with the basic ingredients of people's problems. In this process of mobilizing the culture of the masses in the cause of the masses, Safdar held the view that a neutral political positioning is out of the question. One has to be thoroughly partisan in identifying the class enemy. It is this effort to mobilize society's down trodden through the modality of mass theatre brought him a martyr's death from the class enemy.

Safdar waver tried to build up an individual aura around him. This belief in the *prolitcult* and active participation in mass political movements taught him not to seek any individualistic gains. He was for a work style of collaboration and collectivity. Strictly speaking most of the plays now considered to be written by Safdar Hashmi are collaborative creations. But his contribution in this collaboration

would be the highest. "Far from asserting his individuality, he tried to negate it completely while immersing himself in the pleasure of creating a good play" (Tanvir, in Qamar 253). On this culture of collaboration and collectivity in Janam, Safdar Hashmi's wife and co-actor Moloyoshree Hashmi recalls:

.... In our group even direction became a collective activity. From the creation of script for its performance, there was a feeling of shared responsibility and effort. Everyone was involved, although Safdar's creativity was of a high order and formed the basis on which our activity progressed at such a furious pace. (Qamar 247)

Hashmi's political affiliation and ideological commitment were never a hindrance in his path of achieving artistic excellence while sticking to definite political aims. According to his mother, Qamar Hashmi, (261) there were two dominant strands in his life – the commitment to the street theatre movement, and the deepening relationship with the party. These preoccupations were gradually exhibiting not only their influence in fashioning Safdar's personality and his life, but also the significant impact of Safdar's contribution to the history and development of street theatre movement.

The activist in Hashmi discarded the 'traditionalization' or 'Indianization' of theatre by adapting forms from folk theatre traditions alone. He believed that this mere appropriation of folk theatre forms, folk music, the *Ramlila* or *Raslila*, or the *Nautangi* theatrical forms alone would not help the contemporary Indian theatre to achieve the

so called 'Indianness'. For Safdar Hashmi acquiring Indianness lies only in the theatre's deep concern with the contemporary lives of the people of India.

Studying the activist theatres of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Safdar Hashmi Lopamudra Basu observed that for Safdar theatre was the primary terrain of artistic and activist expression who believed that the Indian mainstream theatre was out of touch with the crucial issues confronting the masses. It was with a view towards expanding the range of his audience that he decided to take his plays to the streets of working class neighbourhoods. Safdar took up cudgels on behalf of the marginalized sections of Indian society and the disposed , using his pen to write stirring prose that immediately made an impact on current consciousness. His success was due to his adaptation of the traditional sensibilities and folk songs, while introducing modern ideas and revolutionary thoughts that challenged the status quo. Basu further explains:

In examining Ngugi's and Safdar's careers in activist theatre, it is interesting to note that both saw the similarities between present attempts at state censorship and colonial models...In terms of their artistic choices, both playwrights infused their performances with songs, the diverse musical sources often representing a cultural syncretism defying religious and ethnic absolutisms. For both Ngugi and Hashmi, the end of their active involvement in theatre marked a spatial reconfiguration of their original theatre projects. (Basu, *Samar*)

The rampant stark poverty; glaring social and economic disparities; the bureaucratic corruption; the feudal and industrial exploitation; the systematic communization of civil life, prevailing imperialistic attitude; dehumanizing working conditions in factories and fields etc. are the contemporary realities of India as far as Safdar was concerned. He believed that brushing all these social realities under concept and going for the glorification of the ancient myths and folk culture would not constitute Indianness. Mere adaptation of traditional devices, masks, songs and cultural rites in theatre would not make the theatre Indian (*Right* 90-91). True Indianness in theatre can be achieved only when we take up the developmental and social issues for scrutiny, examination and analysis. The superficial ornaments could not be accepted for the nationalistic spirit in theatre. Moreover, Safdar reiterated that, there is a lurking danger in blind adaptation of traditional folk forms and rites in contemporary theatre. This may prove to be disastrous rather than reformist. He elaborates on the risk of blind adaptation of traditional forms in contemporary theatre as:

All of us feel the need to work in the forms, which are familiar to our people, and which our people have been using in expressing their own hopes for centuries. But the problem is that if you work with the traditional form along comes the traditional content also with superstition, backwardness, obscurantism and the promotion of feudal structures and sometimes, pre-feudal formations. You

cannot perform a surgical operation on a traditional form and take out the content because the two are very much intermingled. (*Right* 140)

Safdar Hashmi believed that in the attempt at adapting traditional theatrical forms in the contemporary theatre “the Indian main stream theatre was out of touch with the issues confronting the masses. It was with this view towards expanding the range of his audience, he took his plays to the streets of working class neighbourhoods” (Basu, *Samar*). Theatrical forms are evolved out of historical necessities. When the society moves on, the issues of theatrical performance would go on changing. The new content in a particular historical era may require a new form for artistic expressions. New thematic concerns cannot be apathy fit into an old form. So largely, Safdar believed that, it is the content that decides the form, not vice versa. He believed that the implements and devices of artistic expression are created by the dramatists’ creative views of life, not the other way around. That was why he openly opined that, “the theatre did not begin with the proscenium nor has its evolution reached the final stage with it” (*Right* 15). This concept was affirmed by Habib Tanvir when he said that “Forms are often demanded by their times. Street theatre form could not possibly have evolved during the forties, for the time demanded quite some other approaches to political campaign.” (*Memorial Lectures* 5)

Born on 12 April 1954 in Delhi, Safdar Hashmi did his M.A. in English Literature from the prestigious St. Stephens College, Delhi.

During his college days he was an active member of the Student Federation of India and the Indian Peoples Theatre Association. His theatrical debut started with a short skit on the Vietnam war, The Nixon-Kessinger in June 1972. In the 1960s and 1970s, while he was a 1st year student of BA India was going through sweeping changes in the political front. The Communist Party of India was split after a decade of debate over the post-independence political strategy and programmes. One section of the Communist Party held the view that with the achievement of political independence from the Britain there has was nothing politically new except the fact that the power passed from the imperialist bourgeoisie to the local feudal bourgeoisie. So no co-operation with this power center was possible. Another faction argued for co-operation with the Indian National Congress as it represented the indigenous people. Ultimately the party was split in 1964. Prior to this the party had a very strong hold in an around Delhi.

In his political affiliation with a mainstream communist party, during his college days Safdar was in touch with some of the radical student wing leaders, even if it was for a short period. In 1971, fascinated by Brecht and Picastor he translated the play Other into Hindi. Kimlesh and Dekhete Lena (Look before You Buy) were the two most significant plays performed during his early year in the IPTA. But soon the IPTA was appropriated by the CPI, throwing Safdar Hashmi and his pals from their office at Connaught Place.

In April 1973, along with Kajal, Rakesh and others Safdar

Hashmi formed *Janam* (the acronym for Jana Natya Munch -- People's Theatre Front). The first play performed by *Janam* was an adaptation of Irwin Shaw's Bury the Dead. In the early days of *Janam* they performed the plays like Remesh Upadhaya's Mritynatithi (Messenger of Death) in 1973, Bharat Bhagya Vidhata (Makers of India's Fortune) and Bakri (Goat) in 1975. All these short plays were adaptations with some thematic alteration and induction of some more contemporary questions to the original plays.

The declaration of State Emergency in 1975 was another significant event in the life of Safdar. He describes the new political development in the country as, "on June 12, 1975 something happened that shook the entire country. The high court in Allahabad passed the judgment that Indira Gandhi had used unfair means to win her election and that she should vacate her in Parliament and that she should consequently also resign as the Prime Minister" (*Right* 156). But she refused and appealed to the Supreme Court, which 13 days later announced that she had not used any unfair means. The next day she declared a state of emergency and arrested all opposition leaders.

Between the 13 days period of Allahabad High Court judgment and the declaration of Emergency, Safdar Hashmi and his troop prepared a small skit called Kursi, Kursi, Kursi! (Chair, Chair, Chair!). It was a farce on Indira Gandhi's refusal to resign. A previously elected king was shown sitting on the chair and a new king is elected. The former gets up from the chair, but the chair too rises up with him. The

theme of this political street skit was the refusal to budge to democracy and the obsession of the incumbent to stick to power. During Emergency *Janam* had gone into exile.

When Emergency was lifted it came out with an originally Bengali play, written by Utpal Dutt, titled Now It's the King's Turn (1977), it was a direct attack on the emergency repressive measures like the state censorship of newspapers. There is an interesting dialogue in the play between the king and his political secretary-cum-manager, who is a ardent admirer of Adolph Hitler and he always keeps a copy of Mein Kamph with him:

Manager: What are you reading? There is nothing in the newspaper! Everything is censored. The pages are blank!

King: Never mind, it's habit, you know. I have to read the newspaper, so I have to look at it for half an hour. (*Right* 158)

Janam's plays were always based on burning topical issues. In 1978 there was a Hindu - Muslim riot in Aligarh. *Janam* prepared a play based on the report of an enquiry team that visited Aligarh soon after the riots. It was found out by the fact-finding team that the reason behind the fresh rounds of riot had nothing to do with religions. It was instigated by the commercial interests of lock making factory owners. They wanted to crate a schism between the Hindus and Muslims who were jointly involved in traditional domestic lock making industry. *Janam* took the play Killers (1975) to Aligarh and showed the people the real reason for the riots. Another spontaneous

theatrical intervention of *Janam* was seen in 1979 when the Delhi Transport Corporation doubled its fares conveniently just before three consecutive public holidays. Within hours *Janam* went to the streets of Delhi with the play DTC's Fraudulence forcing the authorities to slash down the hiked fares to the minimum. Aurat (Woman) in 1979; Teen Crore (30 Million) on unemployment; Price Hike (1980) on inflation; and Wake up! O, Brave (1984) on the anti-Sikh pogrom were the other popular plays of *Janam*.

The major thematic and methodological features of Safdar Hashmi's street plays are given under in a tabular form.

Thematic and Methodological Analysis of Safdar Hashmi's Plays.

| No. | Plays (Year) | Major Themes | Theatrical Devices (Methods) |
|------------|---|--|--|
| 1. | <u>Machine</u> (1978) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exhaustive labour exploitation in industrial capitalism. • Dehumanizing working conditions in factories • Brutal suppression of labour movements • Arousal of political consciousness among labourers. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Street theatre method. • Employment of Narrator to introduce, explain and to educate. • Rhyming lines, dialectical language, motivating slogans, extended monologues addressed to the audience and choric revolutionary songs. • Abstract in style. |
| 2. | <u>From the Village to the City</u> (1978) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impoverishment of agricultural sector, and penury of peasantry. • Feudal extortion and exploitation. • Polarization of wealth, political power and monopolization of industries. • Exhaustive exploitation of the industrial labourers. • Brutal suppression of workers movements by the | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employment of Narrator to link episodic scenes. • Rhyming lines, dialectical language, motivating slogans, extended monologues, choric revolutionary songs. • Manipulation of National Anthem and other popular songs. • Episodic plot. |

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| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • police. • Widespread unemployment among educated youth. • Bureaucratic corruption and nepotism in plutocracy. • Inhuman working conditions in the factories. • Inflation • Depoliticisation efforts of the establishment to contain widespread dissents. • Middle class complacency. • The need for united struggle against injustices and exploitation. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct address to the audience. |
| 3. | <u>Killers</u> (1978) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communalism and communal riots. • The unholy nexus among politicians, industrialists and the police. • Destruction of domestic industries by big industrialists. • A critique on the partisan bourgeoisie media. • Promotion of secularism. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elaborate declamatory speech and extended monologues. • Employment of Narrator as a connecting link between different scenes. • Choric songs with revolutionary messages, short rhyming sentences. |
| 4 | <u>The King's Drum</u> (1979) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Widespread unemployment among educated youth thanks to a meaningless non-vocational education. • Corruption and nepotism in the bureaucracy and academic institutions. • Polarization of wealth and power. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The employment of Narrator to introduce, to lead and to explain dramatic action. • Ironic/farcical. • Direct address to the audience. • Rhyming lines, and choric songs. • Extended used of masks to suggest hypocrisy and inhumanity of the elite. |
| 5. | <u>DTC's Fraudulence</u> (1979) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demolition of public utility services on the recommendations of international funding agencies. • Inflation and the sufferings of the common man. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Declamatory speeches. • Farcical • Processions and choric songs. • Improvisation |

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| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Police brutality to suppress public protests. • Engulfing of public enterprises by private monopolies with the connivance of bureaucracy. | |
| 6. | <u>Woman</u> (1979) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender discrimination on woman in patriarchal society. • Sexual exploitation of the female. • Hardships of a female proletariat. • Denial of equal opportunity for education. • Police brutality on labourers. • Inflation and unemployment . • Capitalistic exploitation of labourers. • Domestic violence on women. • Class impact on women's condition. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Soliloquy. • Flashback technique. • Narrative. • Extended monologues with rhyming lines and songs. |
| 7. | <u>Advance United</u> (1979) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unholy nexus of industrialists, traders, politicians and police. • Police brutality on striking labourers. • Need for a joint struggle of peasants and workers. • Inflation/black-marketing. • A critique on the government policy of non-interference. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extended monologues. • Slogan shouting and revolutionary songs. • In different but sequential scenes. |
| 8. | <u>It's Election Again</u> (1980) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Atrocities of the internal emergency regime. • State totalitarianism. • Suppression of media, freedom of expression, labour struggles etc. • Anti-communist pogrom. • Unholy nexus of politicians, police and industrial monopolies to suppress labour unrests. • Demolition of slums in the name of public hygiene and development. • Compulsory sterilization. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The story telling tradition where the children quizzes the grandpa. • Journey as a metaphor to revisit history. • Omniscient, detached point of view. • Slogans, songs and processions. • Flashback technique. • Improvisation. |

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| 9. | <u>The Magician and His Disciple</u> (1980) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inflation, black marketing. • Unholy nexus of politicians, traders and police. • Living human gods. • The criminal passivity of general public at social injustices. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Magician's method of unraveling reality. • Personification of inanimate objects. • Acrobatics, songs, dances. |
| 10. | <u>The Police Conduct</u> (1981) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sexual assault on woman by the police. • Politician, industrialists and police nexus. • Criminalization of politics. • Exploitation of labourers. • Police atrocities, judicial incompetency. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Episodic scenes. • Direct presentation • Songs, music. |
| 11. | <u>Black Law</u> (1981) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anti-labour legislations. • Unholy nexus of politicians, industrialists and police. • Police brutality on labour strikes. • Exploitation of industrial labourers. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the form of temple visit and prayer. • Modeled on antique royal declarations. • Ritualistic style. • Dialogues in the form of mantras and prayers. |
| 12. | <u>The Danger of War</u> (1982) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • American imperialism based on militarism. • Inflation, unemployment. • Arms proliferation. • War hazards. • Pseudo-patriotism to cover-up. • Political incapability. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chorus. • Songs, Rhyming lines. • Personification of war mongers. • Improvisation. |
| 13. | <u>When the Thief Becomes the Police</u> (1983) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unholy nexus of politicians, industrialists and police. • Legal immunity given to the wealthy. • Inflation, adulteration and black marketing. • Oppression of the labour strikes. • Political corruption and routine farcical elections. • Need for joint struggle of peasants, workers and youth against injustices and corruption. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Story-telling method. • Flash back technique. • Songs and dances. • Masks to suggest hypocrisy, brutality and inhumanity. |
| 14. | <u>Wake Up, O Brave !</u> (1984) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communalism, regionalism. • Impoverishment of peasants. • Unemployment among the | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personification of the Punjab and religions. • Characters are types. • Didactic |

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| | | youth. • Need for secularism and national integration. | |
| 15. | <u>The Abduction of Brotherhood</u> (1986) | • Communalism, terrorism. • Poverty of the masses. • American intelligence interferences and game plans. • Arms proliferation. • Need for secularism. | • The street magician's technique. • Question-answer style. • The metaphor of journey to places of different incidents. • Personification of religions. • Acrobatics. • Songs, rhyming language. • Improvisation. |
| 16. | <u>Attack</u> (1988) | • State totalitarianism • Censorship, freedom of expression. • Industrial exploitation. • Sectarian tendencies in trade unions. • The working women's issues. • The need for labour unity. | • Employment of narrator for introduction, explanation and expansion of the plot. • Processions, slogans and choric revolutionary songs. • Rhyming lines. • Dialectical language. • Improvisation. |

CHAPTER V

Hashmi's Plays: A Perfect Blend of Marxian Ideology and Humanism

Machine: A Polyphonic Metaphor

Like other agitprop street plays of *Janam*, Machine was born out of a topical labour issue that shook Delhi as well as the whole country in the last months of the 1970s. The 18 month long internal Emergency had crushed and muffled all kinds of dissenting voices from the civil society. Opposition leaders were either put in prison or gone underground. No trade union activities were allowed in factories and the existing trade unions were totally destroyed by the aggressive emergency regime. Safdar Hashmi's *Janam* had performed a farcical skit titled Kursi, Kursi, Kursi! (Chair, Chair, Chair) on Indira Gandhi's refusal to accept the judicial verdict of Allahabad high court in June 1995 directing her to resign from the post of the Prime Minister.

However, during the Emergency *Janam* was totally inactive and unorganized as most members were on self-declared exile here and there. Though Safdar Hashmi was not overtly political in the early days of his theatre activities, his now mature political perspective and commitment along with the resentment over the atrocities of Emergency establishment in 1976 drawn him towards the Communist Party of India (Marxist), where he was an active member till his death in 1989 (Qamar 176). It can be said that from now on, in his theatre, a definite political goat was sought after. *Janam's* plays started to

become more and more politically focused, even though they didn't perform in any party platforms except at trade union venues.

The eventual political defeat of the emergency regime in March 1977 brought back democratic activities in all fields, especially on trade union fronts. Intensive efforts were being made to rebuild trade union structures in factories. However the big industrialists and factories owners were still resistive as they were not ready to do away with the Emergency gifts of brutal suppression of labourers, on the spot firing on people suspected to be union activists, extension of working time and the complete immunity the owners enjoyed from government interference in labour issues.

Even after the new Janata Party Government came to power, the industrialists were not ready to part with the comfortable emergency legacies. The refusal of the new the new government to involve the police in labour issues, prompted the mill and factory owners to set up private armies in the label of security guards. These guards were provided not only with lathies but sophisticated guns also. Reports of labour thrashing and high handedness by these security guards became a regular occurrence in Delhi and other industrial towns also.

The once well-organized trade union movements were still in a state of disarray after the shocks of emergency brutalities. The suffocating political atmosphere had scatted all their cadres and destroyed the whole network. Now they were trying hard to retrieve their clout in the factories. For that they were badly in need of a cheap, effective means of communication to reach to the working

class. The trade union leaders were looking expectantly at activist artists for help. But the prohibitively expensive nature of proscenium productions compelled the activist artists to search for a new mass media that would be less inexpensive, mobile, portable and equally effective (Safdar, *Right* 160). Such an enquiry landed Safdar and his colleagues in experimentation with the street theatre. In the look out for such a cheap, flexible and effective theatre form, they were aiming at providing an effective agitation and propaganda media for the survival of the democratic culture in the society. So the activists of *Janam* felt for a theatre that is direct with no pretensions of class neutrality.

On his return to Delhi, after a short stint of teaching career in the English departments of Garwal and Jammu Universities, Safdar Hashmi attempted to re-organize *Janam* after a period of 18 month's inactivity. As they could not afford and expect any financial assistance from the slowly convalescing trade unions, it became imperative for *Janam* to search for cheaper means for artistic expression of their political ideology. Having decided to try at the street theatre model, they didn't have an imitable archetype in front of them. Hence the search for play texts suitable for street theatre began. When all efforts were in vain, *Janam* decided to write their own scripts for performance with a little diffidence.

Even though the activists had enough exposure with the proscenium productions, to develop a practical form and aesthetic for the political street theatre was a formidable challenge in front of them.

Their very conception of agitprop street theatre was very rudimentary. But the political and financial pressure motivated them to ponder upon. About the required contents in the play, they didn't have any doubt, as they thought that the theme should be pro-proletariat and against the exploitative industrial capitalism. They felt that to express this new content a new form was required. In this way the content followed the form in *Janam's* agitprop street theatre interventions since 1978.

Giving a mortal blow to the emergency establishment, with all enthusiasm, people had voted in a new government at the center. But within a short span of time this new political set up also proved to be anti-worker and anti-peasantry. With its escapist, partisan policy of *laissez faire*, the new government also declined to intervene in industrial disputes between the managements and the unions. Labourers' attempts to seek solutions to improve the dehumanizing working conditions in the factories went into deaf ears. Labour strikes were handled with iron fists by the security guards of the factory owners. In one of such incidents, the labourers of Herig India, a chemical factory in the outskirts of Delhi, were on strike when the defiant management repeatedly turned down their two simple requests.

Most of the labourers used to come to the factory for work from 15-20 kilometers away on their bicycles. They demanded a bicycle stand in the premises of the factory. In addition, they requested the management to set up a canteen in the factory complex so that they

could have a cup of tea and could heat up their stale bread at lunch. When both these two simple humanitarian demands were out rightly and rejected by the management, the labourers began a strike at the factory gates. Consequently, the security guards fired at the striking workers on simple provocation, killing 6 workers (Safdar, *Right* 159). This brutality was not at all different from the Emergency atrocities. This outrageous behaviour of the management put the labourers agitating all over Delhi. Joginder Sharma, the then Secretary of CPI (M)'s Delhi State unit, with a suggestion of writing a play, narrated this episode to Hashmi and his colleagues (Qamar 245). Safdar and his comrades' class-consciousness and their identification with the sufferings of the working class ignited their artistic brilliance and promptly they decided to dramatize the incident.

One more political occurrence accelerated the proposed project. The new Janata government, that came to power riding on the the wave of anger against emergency exigencies had also started taking anti labour measures. One such measure was the Janata Government's decision to reintroduce the new Industrial Relations Bill, in an attempt to clamping the intensifying political activities and industrial disturbances. This new bill was something that would affect the future of the whole trade union movements in the country. Hashmi wrote on the proposed Bill:

The Janata Government tried to introduce a new Industrial Relations Bill, similar to the one the Congress (I) Government had previously tried to introduce but had

been unable to because of the combined resistance of the people. Now a similar anti-people bill had been designed. The gist of it was that a lot of power was given to the local governments to summarily deal with the trade unions and giving them powers of preventive arrests. Many of the democratic rights of the workers were taken away. Consultive Structures were broken down and industrial talks obliterated. Labour Dispute Tribunals were removed. We tried to relate the new bill and the chemical factory incident. (*Right* 160)

Janam's first full-fledged street play, Machine, was born out of these socio-political occurrence in the last month of 1978. The play was first performed on 19th November 1978, in Talkatora Stadium, Delhi, to an audience of 7,000 trade union delegates assembled to stream line the protests against the proposed Industrial Relations Bill. It was only after persistent requests from the activists of *Janam*; the union leaders gave permission to perform the play at the end of the union session.

The leaders could not see what a street play has to do with a serious trade union session. They refused even to make a formal announcement on the play. When the delegates stood up to leave the place after the day's business, six people in black and blue robes rushed in to the arena and started making all the fuss. The end of the play enthralled the confused delegates. The incredible success of the premier performance of the play propelled the delegates to think about

its political potentialities and consequently an invitation was given to the performers to perform the same play at the Boat Club, Delhi where a trade union protest rally was planned next day. Hashmi describes the incredible success of their first typical street play as:

The next day we performed at the Boat Club for about 1,60,000 workers. So you see, our street theatre began very gloriously. Naturally, it was a source of strength to us. A lot of people tape-recorded the play. We performed on a 20 feet high rostrum. You can imagine that 1,60,000 people stretched for about half a kilometer. It was hard to see, but there were lots of mikes. But it really charged the audience. We were mobbed after the performance. Most of the newspapers carried photographs of the play than of the speeches, which was something the trade union leaders did not like too much. A month after the rally we started getting reports from all round the country that people were performing Machine there. (*Right 162*)

Machine created a sensation all over India especially with the urban factory workers. The workers easily identified the image of a machine with all its implications in their life. The play begins like this:

(Audience on all four sides. Circular acting area in the middle. Five actors, with quick rhythmic steps imitating sounds of a machine, move into the center circle, get together in the form of a big machine. The different parts of the machine shakes, moves in particular ways and starts

emitting particular sounds. Having run for a while, the machine comes into a rhythmic halt) (118)

The machine is a metaphor of the whole industrial set up of India. It's a polyphonic metaphor that comprises different significance to different onlookers. To an ordinary audience, it is just an equipment, inanimate and insensitive. For a factoring labourer it is a metaphor of the exploitative industrial capitalism where his role is neglected. For a factory owner the machine is a metaphor of gold mine where from he can extract maximum profit with minimum expenditure.

The three major components of the machine: the labourer, the owner and the guard signifies the interpersonal relations in a capitalistic society. The labourer is always exploited, still with little stake in the whole system. The owner, with his almighty capital power squeezes the labourers to yield more profit. The third component, the guard, is a parasite between the labourer and the owner. His existence is symbolic of the application of rules and regulations to protect capital interests denying any democratic rights to the workers. His muscle power is the power of the establishment. The guard is policing the industry for its "smooth" run.

Taking clues from the classical Indian theatrical forms, Safdar Hashmi employs a Narrator for introduction, elaboration and presentation. Habib Tanvir's account of Machine as "an abstract, didactic play about the exploited working class"(*Memorial Lectures* 4) cannot be fully substantiate. Generally speaking, in no way it seems

to be a totally mystifying abstract play. Of course, Safdar Hashmi animates an inanimate object with the actors' body. But this simple featuring or tabloid effect does not reach to the scale and incomprehensibility of the modern avant-garde experimental theatre.

Safdar Hashmi by building a theatrical image of a machine in front of the audience, instantly and successfully familiarizes the context to his audience leaving no chance for any symbolic obscurity. The image of a machine is an inseparable part, especially in the life of the urban working class. Just a jerking sound or synecdochic presentation of a part of the machine would be enough for the working class to recognize and it relate it to their individual and collective experiences.

The didacticism that is attributed to this play cannot be accurate because, Safdar Hashmi rarely attempts to preach to his audience. He simply describes the inhuman exploitation at work place, with all oppressions and helplessness. The Narrator, the month piece of the author, provides links to different episodic actions. In brief, it can be assumed that this play is an illustration of the irreversible determination of the exploited working class to carry on with their struggles amidst all difficulties and against all odds.

The smooth running machine is suggestive of a cordial relationship between the means of production, i.e. the capital and the labour. But Safdar Hashmi's machine starts developing operational problems right from the beginning, indicating the existence of internal tensions. The narrator begins with explaining the different capabilities

of the machine, its origin and the need of a harmonious coexistence among different components. He focuses on the necessity of togetherness between the owner and the labourer, and if these components are not working together, it is the end of life's rhythm. Afterwards, one component disintegrates itself from the machine, and narrates his hardships. He is the labourer:

Actor 1: (*Gives a push to the Narrator, who loses his balance and falls down*) 'Together, together', what kind of togetherness is this? Who gives the support? How can this togetherness be achieved? I always get jest kicks! Whose kicks? Everyone's,... kicks from the house owner, kicks of the mill owner, the shop keeper, from the milkman and from the police! I have broken down with these tortures. I forget to tell you who the wretched am I? I'm the labourer, a part of the machine, a useful thing... but a wretched thing. I work at the machine, do the works of the master... and after that... nothing! If I demand my wages, then it's problematic.... If, I don't, again it's difficult. If I demand leave, then firing, if bonus is demanded. ...thrashing!! 'Together... together'... together.... Together.' (199)

This pretty lengthy monologue of the labourer vividly describes his pitiful condition both inside and outside the factory. It speaks a lot about his social inferiority, economic exploitation, physical oppression and financial insecurity. He is the most unprivileged and neglected

means of production.

Followed by the Labourer's speech, Hashmi presents the owner, whose position is sharply in contrast with that of the worker. The paradoxes that are abundant in his speech provide good times for laughter and entertainment. The working class audience laughs at his descriptions with suppressed fumes of anger. While the labourer is fed up with the call for togetherness and support, the factory owner emphasizes them for his own reasons. He comes out of the machine and delivers a lengthy sermon:

Actor 2: O my customers don't you know me?.... I'm the owner of this factory, who leads a very hard life. I invest money in business, bribe the ministers, instigate the police, buy the judges, intimidates the workers and runs this machine... then orders some bottles of whisky from London. Don't be angry with me, my souls,...my eyes,... my life. For you I will open a library, two hospitals and three cemeteries! And if I have your blessings, even I would ensure your burials too .. Just allow me to raise the prices, ...and contest the next election... then I will show you that heaven is made on the earth. I will ensure that children all sold by their fathers, and sisters by brothers. Now what shall I tell you? This is my life.. to sell everything... to earn the maximum.... This whole world is for selling. So we have to be together... together.... together. (120)

The security guard is the representative of the repressive state machinery that always, stands with capital and power. He describes himself:

Actor 3: Together... together.... If a bottle of liquor is given and a wink from the master... I won't think, If I kill a man or a pig. See this crooked moustache, this broad chest... I live on these. If I get a simple sign, I will make mince meat of you. I am called the security officer! Beware of me. I'm the servant of the owner, but for you, ... I'm the Lord. I'm a devil for the strikers. It's on my support this factory is running. If anyone dares to complain injustice, ...listen that's the end of him. Even if that's a child or woman, ... no mercy is there in my heart. My business is to keep everyone scared. If anyone frets, I'll give him kicks...! Together ... together.... (120-121)

While the owner parades before the audience in different incarnations of authority like the feudal lord, the politician etc., the narrator goes on commenting about the accumulation of wealth by a few. The poor are always subjugated. The prevailing tension at last brings about the disintegration of the machine. Finally the workers come out and declare collectively:

Actor 1: (*Comes off the machine*) This machine won't run. I've lost my patience. Ultimately I'm also a human being.

Actor 4: (*Comes out*) The issue is very simple, they can't make a cycle stand, ... bastards.

Actor 5: We came from 5-6 miles away.

Actor 4: And Rajsingh comes from 18 miles away. And they want to park the trucks in the canteen too. They cannot put up a simple stove there. The bread that we bring in the morning become stale by lunch time... just to heat it up and just for a cup of tea after lunch. (122)

In spite of all the intimidations by the owner and the security guard, the workers go for a strike, try to retaliate the physical assault by the guard. The owner calls for the military and gives gun to the security guard, who fires at the workers, killing all of them. The play concludes with a final invocation song by the narrator.

Narrator: Shoot down more and more, fire again and again...,

Bring down the rain of bullets.

But remember these flames can't be put down,

This wild fire will spread wider and wider...,

These drumbeats of revolution will keep growing.

Who can stop this? Who can stop these workers? Who can? Who can? (124)

This 12-minute play is a fine “imaginative blend of philosophy, politics and poetry. The actual and the ideal, the real and the imagined, converge in the dramatic representation” (Qamar 245). Methodologically, Safdar Hashmi adapts the Brechtian episodic plot structure but with a unifying link, the Narrator. Hashmi doesn't resort to a direct call for political action, but describes the situations that

make strike inevitable. This theatrical intervention about a contemporary labour strike provides a moral reinforcement to the strikers encouraging them to stick to their cause. The final rounding up of the oppressors by the insurrected labourers, suggests the ultimate victory of the former.

Structurally, the play is episodic in nature with long introductory monologues by each of the components of the machine. The sentences are short, simple, and direct with end-rhymes. This rhyme scheme gives the monologues a poetic touch and force.

Initially this play presents the socio-economic conditions of the various means of production, then compare and contrast them, finally to emphasize that it is the proletariat who are the most discriminated lot. Safdar politically tries to attach the exploited lot with democratic organizations for a better, broader and unified assault on exploitative capitalism. Inflation, suppression, inhuman working conditions, lack of basic amenities in the factories and prolonged working hours are the basic thematic concerns of Machine.

From the Village to the City: Omnipresence of Exploitation.

What a messy mess is this!
That the lock is in the key;
And the house is in the room.
The stable is in the cow; and,
The mouth is in the teeth.
The plate is in the meal;
And the head is over the cap.

And the goggles behind the eyes!

(Safdar, *Poems* 18)

Safdar Hashmi wrote these lines, quoted above, mainly for children. It depicts a world of topsy-turvy. Everything is turned upside down. The reality is distorted and the normal is made abnormal. Similarly, in From the Village to the City (1978), Safdar Hashmi presents a world where the toilers are trampled upon by the lazy; the workers are ignored by the masters; and the studious sidelined by the influential stupidest. The earlier play of *Janam*, Machine, was set in an urban industrial background, and intended for the urban industrial workers. So in appeal and scope it was limited to a certain section of the society, i.e., the industrial labourers.

However, in From the Village to the City, Safdar erases the city-village boundary thereby giving the theme and setting a pan-Indian appeal. The saga of suffering is extended from the urban industrial labourers to the rural impoverished peasantry and to the unemployed educated youth. This thematic progress from the first play to the second street play is reflected in methods too. While the previous one was comparatively abstract in structure and form, From the Village to the City moves closer towards a well-made play in its concrete and direct method.

This 20-minute play is divided into three short scenes: village where a peasant is grabbed off his small land, the site of a labour strike where the labourers are brutally suppressed by the police, and a factory premises where different interests are expressed and

counter-argued. By this theatrical fusion of apparently dissimilar city and rural life, the playwright wanted to drive home the political philosophy that exploitation of the proletariat is universal irrespective of feudalism or industrial capitalism.

The migration of the uprooted peasant Kalua, the exhaustively exploited industrial Labourer in strike, and citywards movement of the educated unemployed Youth represent the progression of a society from an agriculture based rural life to an industry based urban life. The storyline of the play is extended to the service sector also. Kalua is more a representative of the past; the labourer embodies the present situation; while the educated unemployed youth signifies a grim future that awaits the next generations.

In From the Village to the City the theatrical devices of demonstration and narration are combined through the common link, the Narrator. The introductory song vividly encapsulates the biting realities of injustice, exploitation and suppression of the poor. The refrain_

How can you close your eyes at these?

How can these evils be crushed?

How can these evils be crushed? (125)

_is intended to provoke the audience to shed their criminal passivity at the injustices and exploitation and to go for political agitation. The Narrator is the mouthpiece of the author who at times dissociates himself from the action as well as intervenes the action for more clarification, if required. The use of Narrator compensates the lack of

stage properties to indicate the shifting of scenes and passing of time. This method provides more clarity to the action in street theatre. Another element, the songs, helps the street theatre activists to summarise the political issues in limited words, when a street performance cannot be prolonged for more than half an hour.

Thematically, From the Village to the City is an indepth theatrical analysis of the economic reasons and social consequences of rural impoverishment due to rapid industrialization that totally neglected the agriculture based rural life. The remains of subjugating feudalism capitalizes on the penury of rural peasantry and grabs their small holdings driving the peasant away from his familiar surroundings. This uprooted peasant ultimately migrates to the city. The fate of the peasantry is presented in the form of a soliloquy. Kalua, the protagonist, reflects on his condition :

Farmer(Kalua): It's draught; if it doesn't rain,
If it does, the whole village is in flood.
Now, do your farming;
Sow your seeds.
Here the spring is hostile;
And the autumn, your foe. (134)

The hostility of nature as well as the feudal appropriation of the peasant's smallholdings forces him to seek his fortunes in the industrialized cities. But things always look greener on the other side. He realizes soon that the intrinsic world of exploitation and suffering of the proletariat is same everywhere in spite of the external glory of

the cities. Amidst a worker's protest site, Kalua meets his urban counterpart, the Mazdoor (Labourer) who is beaten up thoroughly by the police for attempting to strike. He narrates his condition to Kalua:

Mazdoor:My dear, none understands the other.

We do this slavery right from the morning,

Completed three shifts production in one shift,

Still there are grumbling. The manager

Says, 'If you want to do the job, do it

Properly, otherwise go to hell'. They

Pay only for 8 hours, but make us work

For 10 hours. You can't even cry being hungry...

They give 200 rupees after getting signature for Rs.300.

(133-34)

By the amalgamation of these two different stories of suffering and exploitation, Safdar Hashmi politically problematizes the phenomena of urban migration, the feudal appropriation of peasants' holdings and the exploitation of industrial workers. Through this play Safdar intends a theatrical intervention into the land reform and industrial policies of the government. The low-paid, over exhausted industrial labourers are equated the starving peasants. When it moves from the villages to the city, only the designation of the exploited and the exploiter get changed. If it is the landlord in the village, in the city the factory owner heads the reign of exploitation with the support of the police.

Safdar Hashmi used theatre as a medium of communication, to propagate his political ideology by depicting the rampant exploitation

of the working class. In From the Village to the City, he unearths the untold facts of peasant impoverishment that leads to migration to the cities. The appropriation of small tenants' holdings by the feudal lords is a contemporary reality in India where meaningful and thorough land reforms has not been implemented yet. So this play is a dramatization of contemporary reality. This is "a realistic play with well-defined characters and divided scenes" (Safdar *Right* 163), where Safdar is more direct in his political pronouncements.

From the Village to the City is a political play in the sense that it raises political questions and demands peasants' rights on agricultural land, labour rights in the factories, and the need to streamline higher education by vocationalising it. In addition to these, Safdar unveils the real world of impoverished rural peasantry, exploitation of the industrial labourers and the sufferings of the unemployed educated youth.

From the Village to the City is a perfect example of straight intentional theatre where a crusade against exploitation and injustice is sought after. The dramatic tension is generated between different class interests expressed by the representatives of different class. Conflicts between the proletariat and the capitalists; between the peasants and the feudal lords; and between the unemployed educated youth and the contemporary educational system are depicted here vividly. During the course of dramatic action different characters put forth their demands that were the central issues raised in the play.

Factory Owner: Those who demand bonus...

Assistant: ... are enemies of the country.

Kalua: Those who sow...

All (Except the Factory

Owner and Assistant): ... will reap.

Owner: Those who demand land...

Assistant: ... are the enemies of the country.

Student: Education should be...

All (Except the Factory

Owner and Assistant): ... vocationalized.

Owner: All the students...

Assistant: ... keep away from politics. (138)

Safdar Hashmi, with this dialogue quoted above, hits at the de-politicization efforts by the establishment to contain the student struggles, as well as the complacency of the lower middle class government servants in this short play. According to Safdar the criminal apathy and self-satisfied nature of the lower grade salaried class, has to be demolished for intensifying the class struggle. The narrator invites the Babu (The Clerk), who speaks highly about the colourful and easygoing urban life, to a village to show him the reality. By rational arguments, the narrator politicises him.

Hashmi always believed that it is the sectarian tendencies among the proletariat that always pose great threat in the class struggle (*Right* 71). By educating the exploited classes, the author intends to build up a mass resistance against exploitation and injustices of all sorts. The plot of this play suggests a successful

attempt to unify all the working class.

From the Village to the City is presented in three episodic scenes where the common links between the scenes are the Narrator as well as the peasant, Kalua. The scenes shift from city to village and from village to city again. In the opening scene, the clerk questions the Narrator when the former signs about the universal and poverty of the people around him. The clerk comments that, "all these are the foolishness of the agitators..... and what a pleasant sights are these"(126-127). In order to shake his complacency and ignorance about what is going on around him, the Narrator leads him to a village. In this second episode, Kalua, the peasant is shown reflecting on his misfortunes. His crop is lost in the hostile climate, and his lone bull is dead. He is with no money and seed for the second sowing. Then Mahajan, the moneylender and Chaudhari, the landlord arrive there. Kalua expresses his inability to settle financial commitment to Mahajan. Mahajan and Chaudhari tell Kalua about the futility of sticking to his barren land and persuade him to sell it to Chaudhari. When Kalua rejects the proposal, he is threatened of evacuation from both his farm and house. In spite of Kalua's protests, the landlord appropriates the land. Kalua could only lament, "But what about me? Where shall I go? Where shall I stay? My land, ... my farm...."(132)

Kalua migrates to the city, only to see that the labourers are brutally suppressed by the police. The Mazdoor who had just been beaten up by the police, tells Kalua the stories of his exploitation in the factory. In another scene a youth is seen expressing his anger over

unemployment and nepotism. The third scene is set in a place where the various interests of the peasant, the labourer, the owner and the unemployed youth are in clash with one another. The owner lays down his own argument. Finally, the peasant (now an industrial labourer), the Mazdoor and the Youth unite together in the fight against exploitation and injustice.

A structural map, given below, would be helpful in illustrating the interpersonal relationships of the characters and the final march of the exploited to the trade unions for a more strong and unified protest movement.

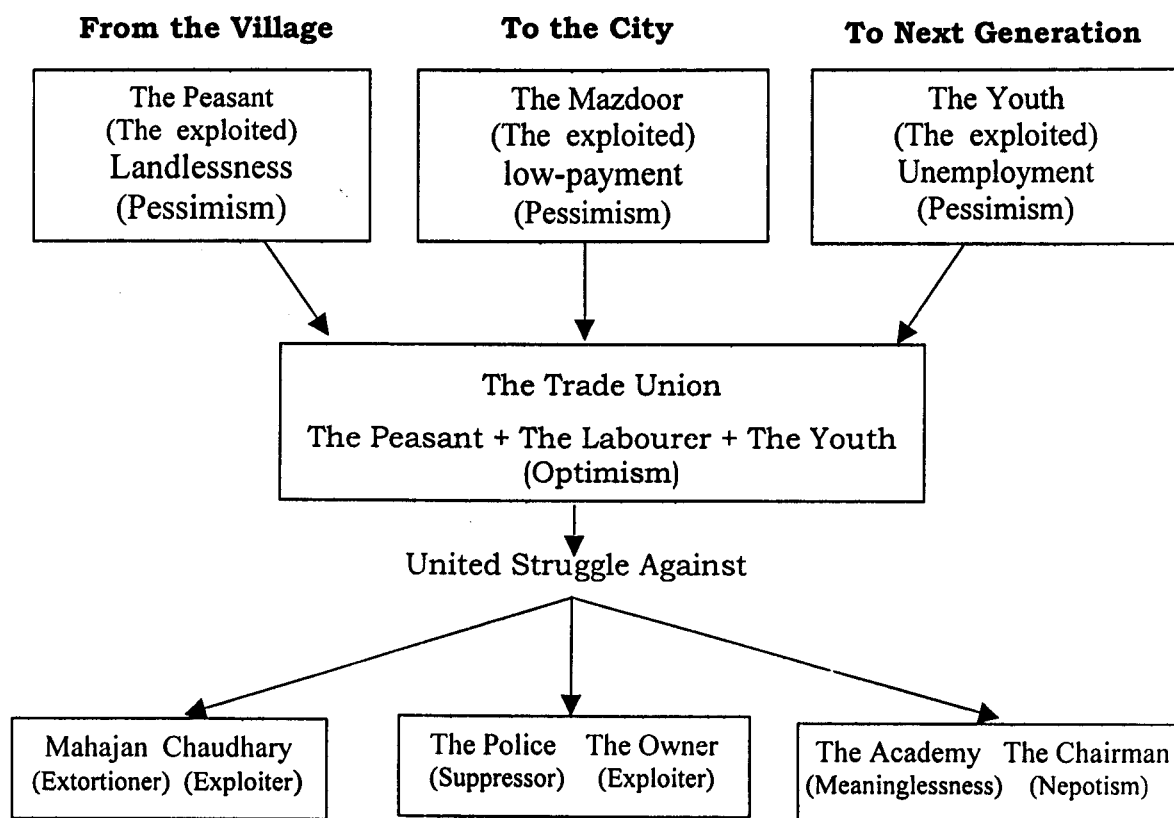


Fig.: Dramatic Structure of From the Village to the City.

From the Village to the City is a direct political statement on the need to build up a united front of struggle against exploitation and

oppression. The playwright intends that only a collective mobilization could tame the exploiters. In this process the author exposes the hypocrisies of the feudal landlords with their frequent references to spirituality, and the factory owner with his frequent pseudo-patriotic statements.

When the society moves from feudalism to capitalism, no qualitative changes is seen in the condition of the proletariat, it rather exposes the inherent anti-worker policies that underlie in feudalism and capitalism. The feudal village as well as the industrial town offers no comfort to the working class. The landless farmer, the exploited labourer and the unemployed youth are the realities of contemporary India, where a fresh struggle has to be fought united.

Street theatre, with its lack of stage properties and distinctive costumes has to indicate different scenes and characters through cunning manipulations available things, of collective postures, simple and accurate indications. In From the Village to the City, the characters are distinguished clearly with the different styles in the use of a common shawl. The farmer Kalua is shown wearing a turban carelessly with a shawl; the worker just keeps his shawl carelessly round his neck; the landlord and the owner is indicated by a carefully folded shawl put over their shoulders, and the policeman imposes his identify by binding the shawl tightly round his head. This one of the methods of characterization, which is frequently employed in street theatre.

Similarly, distinctive characterization is achieved by some linguistic manipulations also. Each character has a distinctive

register, tone and accent. Kalua, the farmer, with his penury and illiteracy speaks in a colloquial, prayer-like, reflective and inhibitive tone. His words evoke sympathy and describe his helplessness at the injustices. His illiteracy and ignorance does not give him even the thought of protest. Kalua's urban counterparts, the labourer is less illiterate. He speaks in a low tone with a suffocative anger and utter helplessness at the exploitation. He knows that he is being exploited and who is exploiting him. But he is forced to stick to his job, as there is no other way of life in front of him. In contrast to this, the owner and the landlord speak in a literacy language with an overwhelmingly aggressive and commanding tone. They are imperative in their speech. Deceptive, cunning and evading is their language. They try to divert the issues through trivializations and some unfit quotations from some poems. The unemployed educated youth is an angry young man whose language is full of inflammatory and accusative references. He speaks straight and in a provocative manner.

The clerk, who is the representative of the inferior bureaucracy, has his own style of language. His words are low pitched, submissive and scared. He is reluctant to take the first step in agitation but only follows the others far behind the processions. The assistant never has his individuality in language also. He simply repeats his master's words at times. The Narrator's language is goal oriented. He describes, points and explains the events in a persuasive, rational language.

From the Village to the City is an example of investigative theatre where the causes behind urban migration, industrial

exploitation and unemployment are probed. This is an example of political theatre where the feudal economic exploitation and extortion of the peasantry is interrogated, linking it to the scene of exploitation in urban industrial system. Kalua's journey from his village to the city is a symbolic one. It suggests the growing industrialization at the cost of agriculture sector. Ideologically his movement from his village to the city is a journey from ignorance to self-knowledge when he joins the trade unions in protests against the injustices and exploitation.

The extensive use of choric song and drumbeats are another characteristics of this play. The songs are composed of simple but effective phrases with rhyming lines. For example, the narrator in a short, simple, but effective song describes the condition of Kalua, after his ejection from his village:

Grabbed is his land, everything is gone,
Gone is the only support to life.
In vain was the sympathy of his palls,
As his ruin is brought by all. (132)

Songs are employed in this play to introduce a scene, to explain a situation, to describe a predicament and to incite the audience into agitation politics. In comparison to the first play of *Janam, Machine*, an active involvement of the audience is ensured in From the Village to the City. Characters emerging from the audience as well as disappearing in the audience after their roles help to achieve this. In other words, the audience is given the impression that the actors were

not separated from them but a part of them. The Narrator often addresses the audience directly as if in a political speech:

Narrator: (*To the audience*) This is the story of every family. Unemployment, inflation, starvation, after that arbitrary wage cut down, compulsory deposits, non-payment of bonus. The union office is filled with complaints. There is not a single labourer who is not harassed by the boss. Regarding bonus, right from the owner to the labour commissioner, they speak in the same language... 'Discussions are gong on, wait a little while more,... same solution will be found.' (135)

The methodological as well as thematic analysis of From the Village to City reveals that it is an example of a very effective and direct political street theatre. The simple, effective and rhyming language, the relevant songs, the timely intervention of the Narrator, etc., make the episodic scenes a sequential a part of a larger dramatic structure. Here, Safdar Hashmi touches upon various topical issues like unemployment, inflation, wage cuts along with the two major themes: the feudal extortion and appropriation of peasants' land; and the inhuman exploitation of industrial labourers.

The King's Drum: Demolishing The Bastions of Power

Irrespective of generic classifications, artistic productions ultimately reveal the artist's worldview. His ideological affiliations and theoretical obsessions will find their places in his art, albeit unconsciously or unintentionally. A committed artist claims no

political neutrality as he has a declared objective in his articulations of socio-political issues. Committed literature and art cannot be confined into any specific formalistic distinctions _ it is distinguished by a greater realism and by the author's attitude to life.

Commitment in literature and art is an engaged view of writing where the author takes, mainly, contemporary socio-political issues for rigorous analysis and a purposeful presentation. To achieve this the author has to have a clear political perspective that can be achieved only through regular, continuous engagement with the day-to-day socio-political developments that affect people around him. Such a committed artist has to indulge in these affairs to absorb the inner dimensions and, simultaneously he has to detach himself artistically. This artistic detachment and political commitment gives him a perspective that would be expressed for the benefit of his fellowmen.

So a committed artist is giving back to his people what he got from his close engagement with them. On this reciprocity of artist and his society, Max Adreth emphasizes:

There is a reciprocal and fruitful exchange between this creative activity and his life as a man of action. The latter provides him with rich materials for his art; as he mixed with people, he shares their difficulties and learns about their feelings. In return his words can help his fellowmen to understand themselves. (449)

Safdar Hashmi's ideological perspectives and political commitment provided him greater insights into the contemporary socio-political issues, enabling him to decode these for providing a better understanding of the masses. His theatre was not mainly for the academically enlightened, but for the deprived sections of the society whose ignorance fails them even to understand clearly understand that they are being exploited in almost all fronts. For this Safdar's theatre had to be less philosophical and melodramatic but more clear and direct. He couldn't sugarcoat the bitter pills as this sophistication would fail him to his target. He had to be directly political. And he was. He couldn't and didn't hide his politics from his theatre as he had the same view as his collaborator and mentor G.P. Deshpande said:

And let there be no mistaking this. There is no such a thing as politics of theatre outside theatre. Politics of theatre has to be *within* the theatre. Only then does theatre become political theatre....It is not as though you become political when you take a political slogan and dramatize it. This is in fact not political at all, what is political is when the form itself undergoes a change because of certain political understanding and position.

(71)

Safdar Hashmi's political understanding prompted him to take theatre to the people like Lalu Ram (*Right* 16), a textile worker who had never been to theatre before. The theatre went to him instead.

This descending form the alienating proscenium theatre to the absorbing street theatre defined Safdar's politics. Safdar always rejected the frequent criticism that political theatre can't be profound in its appeal and aesthetic in performance. According to him all theatres can't be adjudged with the same yardstick. Street theatre has to be evolved and appreciated in accordance with their topicality of the events described and with a different aesthetic standards (*Right 14*).

The King's Drum (1979) dramatizes the contemporary social reality of India with a widespread unemployment among the educated youth in the 1970s. Even now the problem raised in the play remains largely unresolved. There were about 30 million registered unemployed youth in India, according to the then government estimate (*Right 167*). *Janam* had performed a short play Teen Crore (Three Crores) on this contemporary issue. The play, The King's Drum, is an elaboration of this previous play.

As usual in his theatre, Safdar presents the problem theatrically with scientific analysis to dig out the root cause of the malice. He rejects the familiar notion that unemployment is a natural result of overpopulation, as no elite and influential youth faces this problem. On the contrary, the underprivileged are the lone sufferers of every policy drawbacks of our country. Safdar felt that it was necessary to expose the meanings and the internal mechanisms of this socio-cultural phenomenon. Rameshwar Dayal, the protagonist of the play, is just a specimen for the dramatist for a microscopic enquiry into the problem. Through Rameshwar Safdar puts the society at trial. With a

clinical accuracy the author digs deep into the reasons behind the protagonist's predicament and finally exposes the whole elite-centered political system in front of the public for their better and clear perception.

The actions of the play revolves around Rameshwar Dayal, an educated unemployed youth from a poor family. His bitter experiences in a society where everything is appropriated and controlled by the wealthy and the influential constituted the major theme of the play. Rameshwar's unpleasant trysts with different centers of power proved dramatic tensions, and push the action forward. The protagonist's interactions with the other main characters expose the whole contemporary socio-political set ups that are thoroughly corrupt and shamelessly nepotistic.

In the corridors of power and influence Rameshwar is a permanent outsider who is not left with even a chance to express his anger at injustices and favouritism. During the course of dramatic action, the audience identify themselves with the protagonist who is a representative of the educated unemployed Indian youth. The rhetorical questions raised by the Narrator have tremendous impact on the audience so as to prompt them for political agitation against corruption and injustice.

The King's Drum starts with a demon dance and a demon song. The demons symbolises the elite and the influential. They sing of their aggressive clouts in all spheres of the society and they dare the general public to breach their fortresses of power and influence. Their

song goes like this:

First: Money is my holy cow; Education, a bull of my home.

I'm the protector of factories; Parliament, my concubine.

Second: My business is of millions, being a wholesale trader. I always keep a close watch on the share market.

Third: Wheat, rice, corn, groundnut and pulses; Sugarcane, sugar, mustard...all are my rights.

Fourth: Courts, offices, law, justice all my kingdoms. Never will I pardon anyone.

Fifth: Bureaucracy, judiciary, technology...everything Has been put under my command.

Now, if you dare, take this sharp sword. (140)

The demons are symbolic of the illegal accumulation and appropriation of wealth, the education system, the agriculture, the judiciary, the legislature, the technology and so on. The unholy alliance of these usurpers had made it difficult for the common man to reach to the establishment. This monopolization of industries, agriculture and other public institutions is a contemporary Indian reality. In the face of these the unprivileged like Rameshwar Dayal is totally helpless. The deprived class is not given their deserving space and opportunity in the public spheres.

This is one of the very few plays where Safdar makes use of masks a theatre prop. The masks suggest hypocrisy and the absence of ordinary human emotions and sympathy. The elitist appropriation

of all social spheres and services denies the common man's sons entry in all most all domains of the society. Politically, through this play Safdar asks the neglected youth to demolish the seemingly impregnable fortresses of power and influence through political agitation and campaign.

Rameshwar Dayal's all attempts to break into the formidable bastions of power and wealth is severely retaliated by the influential and the wealthy. Here the playwright introduces the unfortunate educated unemployed poor youth.

Rameshwar: I am Rameshwar Dayal.

Narrator: An unfortunate unemployed. Son of a poor man, the only support to his parents.

Rameshwar: I went to school, attended college and studied day and night...

Narrator: Beating the dust of the streets;

Knocking at the doors;

Writing application;

Making requests. (141)

In this play too, Safdar Hashmi employs the tradition of the classical *Sutradar* (Narrator) to introduce and explain the main characters and situations. The Narrator links together the disconnected parts of dramatic action. After presenting Rameshwar, the narrator leads the audience some years backwards. During the subsequent flashbacks the biography of Rameshwar Dayal is dramatized.

Even though the major theme of the play is the growing unemployment phenomenon in India, largely, this play is a sharp critique of all most all Indian public institutions. The audience is firstly led to a primary school where the preliminaries of subjugation and mental enslavements begin. Instead of kindling children's inquisitive thirst and sense of social justice they are being taught to be submissive and silent at instances of injustices. Safdar parodies the National Anthem of India for this farcical presentation. The children are told at schools to:

Don't speak the truth..., keep quiet..., keep quiet.

My lad, don't speak the truth, keep quiet,

Keep quiet..., bear it...bear it...bear it.

Come on...beat the king's drum. (142)

These early childhood instructions to be quiet and to bear every injustice is given to maintain the status quo in the society and to extinguish the flames of anger right from the beginning. By the presentation of this scene at school, Safdar Hashmi suggests that the ideological state apparatus like the formal educational system always try to maintain and keep the existing class relations and the existing class hegemony. Formal education here becomes a method of propagating the prevailing dominant ideology in the society.

In the second flash back during the play, Rameshwar Dayal is seen in a college where the irrelevancy of the subjects taught is more conspicuous. The higher education system, where it is expected to teach life-skills for an individual, is imparting just bookish

information. The repetitive exercises in memorization leaves no scope for authentic analytical knowledge or creative inquiry. In the college, the protagonist is taught science, politics, history, literature and philosophy without connecting them to the children's familiar circumstances. Here the hero of the play begins to think properly and, in a way, subversively and that transformation of the mind makes him a questioning angry young man later on.

Rameshwar: What would be the use of these things that are being taught here? I don't know. But I would like to know how some students, without attending classes, and without studying anything get passed. And I would like to know why father, even after working overtime, is not able to pay my fees in time. (144)

His attempts to interrogating injustices and irregularities put the authorities on back foot. Instead of giving him any satisfactory reply they accuse him of politicizing the college campus. The corrupt authorities attack him in unison:

Librarian: Your mind is infested.

Principal: You have fallen into the trap of the politicians.

Dean: This is a seat of learning, not a debating table.

Head: You are trying to tie this temple of learning in the stable of politics. (146)

The politicization of the college and university campuses has always given nightmares to corrupt authorities and irregular practitioners in the establishment. The clipping of student and youth

energy in the bud, by trying to keep them off politics, is always practiced by the organs of the establishment. Through the mentioning of this accusation of politicization by the authorities, Safdar indirectly suggests that it is through a thorough politicization of all walks of life the injustices in society can be rightly met with. Safdar was thoroughly political in his works and life. He, through his political theatre, says that people have to be rightly and thoroughly political in all socio-economic engagements in their lives.

Rameshwar Dayal's dreams bloom again after he becomes a graduate. But those were also short-lived ones. The frequent responses of, "no vacancy" (148), and "get out of here" (153) leaves him with a broken spirit and an isolated youth. The play ends with a mock-epic style verse that makes fun of India's tall claims:

India is the star of the world,
And the favourite of foreign aids!
Of all places, India is the best, and
All of us are the bubbles in this beautiful garden! (154)

The King's Drum is a theatrical trial of our contemporary society where the shattered dreams of the educated unemployed youth lead them to the wilderness of pessimism and socio-political hibernation. Safdar Hashmi ironically and comically treats the tall claims of India as a great nation while 30 million unemployed youth wander along the streets. The absurdities and futilities of bookish higher education and the hypocrisies of the elitist-driven democracy is laid bare in this play, exposing the class prejudices of the contemporary plutocratic political

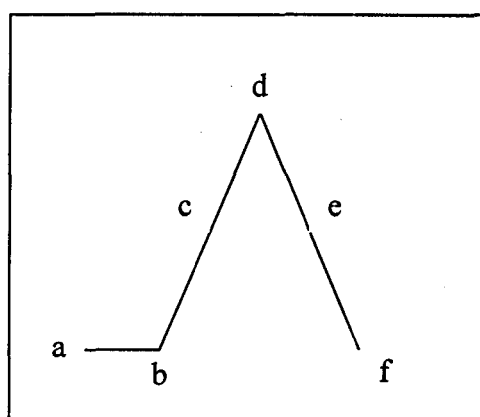
establishment. Education is deemed to be a liberating force, or an agency of empowerment and a guarantor of decent life. But in contemporary India, where every thing is hijacked by the elite, it becomes a tormenting burden to the unprivileged who ultimately break down psychologically and socially.

Unlike Safdar's other plays, The King's Drum is open ended. The author does not attempt at achieving a definite conclusion, but just portrays the life of an educated unemployed poor youth who is a scapegoat in this class driven society. In that sense this plays is an effort to raise the consciousness of the audience against the prevailing injustices and irregularities in our society. Like Rameshwar, many young men have been turned into "a heap of broken dreams" (154). Safdar Hashmi realistically dramatizes the predicament of an educated unemployed Indian youth, prompting the audience to reflect on the root causes of the youth's fall. The repeatedly asked question, "Who is responsible for this?" (141-154) leaves powerful political ramifications.

The dramatist employs the methods of subversion, irony and flashbacks in this agitprop performance piece. The helplessness of the Rameshwar Dayal is contrasted with the aggressive demons. The former represents the unprivileged strata of the society, while the latter represent the cunning consolidation of all wealth and power by a few. The protagonist's recurrent interrogations of the biased authorities have subversive capability that has to be translated to political agitation. This angry young man's finger points towards a society that is grounded on corrupt practices and nepotism in the

place of sincerity and hard work. The playwright's ironic and farcical manipulations of the lines of India's national anthem and other popular songs expose the tall talks of a society where the deprived are trampled upon by the various arms of the establishment.

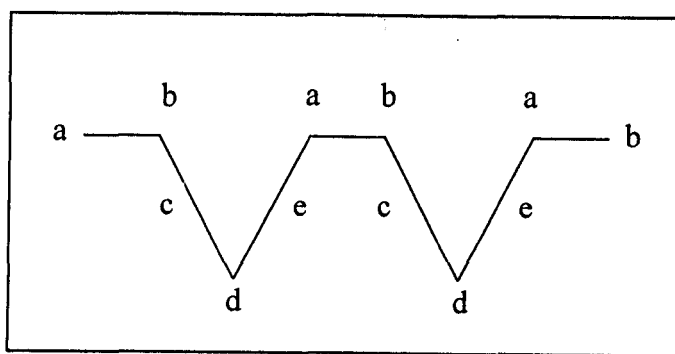
Presented episodically, The King's Drum offers no complication of denouement. The pyramid of dramatic action of this play reveals just the opposite of the classical one of dramatic action suggested by Gustav Freytag.



- a) Initial incidents
- b) Rising action/Growth/Complication
- c) Climax/Crisis/Turning Point
- d) Falling Action / Resolution / Denouement
- e) Conclusion or Catastrophe

Fig.: The Pyramidal structure of Dramatic Plot (Hudson 201).

But the actions of The King's Drum neither move to any particular complication nor do they end anywhere. The play just goes on as it was in the beginning. This peculiarity of this play provides an anti-pyramidal dramatic structure that can be represented as below:



- a) Exposition
- b) Initial incidence
- c) Flashback
- d) Anti-climax
- e) Back to exposition
- f) Exposition
- g) Initial incidence
- h) Flashback
- i) Anti-climax
- j) Back to exposition

Fig.: The plot structure of The King's Drum

Instead of moving up towards a definite complication, here the dramatic actions shows a frequent falling down into structural abysses, only to come back again to the initial situations.

Attack!: On the Need to be Offensive

The first requisite of people's theatre is that it must be a recreation....Theatre ought to be the source of energy, this is the second requisite...Theatre ought to be a guiding light to the intelligence. Joy, intelligence, energy are the fundamental requisites of people's theatre. (Rolland 28-29)

Romain Rolland was an ardent defender of the utilitarian theory of art, who believed that a combination of joy, intelligence and energy would make people's theatre more effective. According to him theatre should not be an instrument of inquisitional torture to the audience and it should not depend upon sensationalism and melodrama that would leave the audience depressed and discouraged. Theatre has to be thought-propellant, exhaling and refreshing.

Safdar Hashmi's street plays never deviate into mere sentimentalism and never they become a boring political declamation. A combination of political purpose, didactic elements and wide entertainment possibilities make his theatre distinctive and effective. With convincing arguments and realistic portrayal he enlightens the working class about their own condition. The humorous presentation techniques easily drive home his intended message to the audience.

Hallabol (Attack) is a modified version of *Janam's* previous street play titled Chakkajam (Stop the Wheels), a theatrical expression of solidarity to the striking industrial labourers, who were on a seven days strike in response to a call given by the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) in November 1989 (*Nukkad* 2002 67). The five point demand of this historic strike were: a) fix a minimum wage of Rs. 1050; b) release of a daily Dearness Allowance of Rs.2; c) stopping of contractual labour policy in the factories; d) equal wage for equal work; and e) build baby-homes in factory premises. The earlier play was a campaign piece designed to boost the morale of the striking workers. After the end of the strike, *Janam* modified the earlier play into a more elaborate street play in December 1989.

The primary ideological focus on the play is to raise the consciousness of the working class on the need to continue their struggles beyond the temporary gains. The play tells them that only an insistent and intermittent struggle could bring them their deserving rights in a profit based capitalistic society. Attack warns the working class about the reactionary tendencies among them and the sectarian interests that would ultimately weaken the unity of the toiling mass and would help the exploiters subjugate the workers more efficiently. Safdar Hashmi, in Attack, also touches the need for gender unity in political protest.

Though thematically a simple one, structurally Attack is comparatively more complex than all other street plays of Safdar Hashmi. This play is an example of Safdar's gradually developing

dramatic workmanship where he goes for some meta-theatrical techniques. Unlike other street plays of *Janam* discussed earlier, *Attack* has a sub-plot that is finally linked to the main plot excellently and indistinguishably. More importantly, this play is the most direct and specifically declaring his political affiliations by glorifying a particular trade union and waving its flag frequently during the performances.

In the earlier plays, Safdar Hashmi's political references were rather general, but, in Attack, he asks the people join a particular trade union outfit. So this play signifies Safdar's growing political consciousness and affirmation of his frank partisanship. Attack is a clarion call for direct, insistent, and widespread political protest against exploitation. The play starts with a choric song that inspires the working class for a long struggle and expresses their irreversible power of determination in the face of suppression.

Struggle is our answer to every injustices and exploitations.

Now this is only a collision, the war lies ahead.

We've seen and will see again, how mighty you are.

We've seen and will see again, how big are your jails. (97)

The plot deals with the effort of *Janam's* attempt to perform a street play at a factory gate. The police constable stops them playing a political street play with slogans and red flags. He threatens the performers by saying, "Is this how a drama is played? With shouting slogans, waving red flags and holding posters!! Off the place, quickly,

otherwise, I'll put everyone in the lockup"(97). In spite of all the convincing arguments, the constable is defiant not to allow any politics in the play. Finally he gives permission to play a non-political play without any slogans and flags. Whenever the names of the trade union or the word "strike", or "comrade" is mentioned he immediately intervenes.

Constable: Look, ...hey....What's going on? Do the drama...drama, this slogan shoutings won't do.

Narrator: But Sir, in our drama, these things will be there.

Constable: They may be there in our drama, ...but these won't be possible in my area. The strict order has come right from the time of the seven days' strike. Our SHO's order is to put those people, who utter the word, 'CITU', immediately behind the bars. Their demands will be heard only later on. (98)

The frequent interventions of street plays by the police were the order of the days during the 1970s, especially before and during the Emergency. The establishment always rightly understood the immense political potency street plays. Safdar Hashmi was always sharply critical of this prevention and censorship of artistic expression. He analyses the ideological implications of such highhandedness of the establishment as:

The police does not disrupt the quack who sells spurious medicines, it does not prevent the *bandarwala* from

showing his tricks, nor the snake charmer and what have you. On the other hand it exploits these people by taking cuts from their daily earnings. The police object to street theatre not because it holds up traffic, which it does not do in any case, but because it is political in nature. It suppresses it, it attacks it because it takes up topical political issues and analyses them scientifically for its audience. The police in suppressing street theatre act as an arm of the state, which is becoming increasingly intolerant of dissent and protest. (*Right 5*)

The police, in all Safdar Hashmi's plays, is a symbol of intolerance and oppression by the state machinery. This depiction of the police is rather realistic in Indian context than caricaturist. The lowly and libidinal behaviour of the head constable in Attack serves to be dig at the ignorance and servile attitude of our law-enforcement system.

When denied permission to perform a play about the on-going labour strike, the actors, in the play-within-the-play, on the suggestion of the head constable, performs the story of an industrial workers who is in love. The narrator directly addresses the audience to inform them of the frequent change in the play due to the police intervention.

Narrator: (*To the audience*) Well, my brothers and sisters, we are again making some changes in the play. These changes are thanks to the kindness of our Hawaldar sir.
(*To the actors*) Come on, ... let's start again. (101)

The love-tale of the protagonist Jogi, an industrial worker, provides enough humorous moments to the play. After the repeated demands from his beloved, Jogi gathers some courage and goes to her father with a marriage proposal, only to meet with heavy thrashes with broom. The parents were not ready to give their daughter to an industrial worker whose fixed wage was Rs. 562 in a month. Jogi hesitantly reveals his designation to her parents.

Father: Stop beating about the bush. Tell me what do you do?

Jogi: I'm working in a factory.

Mother: What's your job? Are you a Manager?

Jogi: Yes, ...no, ... just below him.

Father: Supervisor?

Jogi: No, ...just below.

Mother: Depot in-charge?

Jogi: Just a little more below!

Father: Accountant?

Jogi: No just a little more below.

Both Father & Mother: And below ? What...?... Are you worker?

Jogi: Yes, machine man. (103)

Low-wages, uncertain job and inhuman working conditions in factories made the workers even not suitable for a decent marriage. The psychological inferiority of the labourer is a social phenomenon of the contemporary industrial capitalism in India. Attack explains the

real conditions of the labourers in Delhi:

Father: My daughter, you don't know anything about the condition of Delhi's workers?

Mother: Today there is job,.. and tomorrow there is no job.

Father: This factory is closed today, tomorrow, the other one.

Mother: Live in dirty slums. No electricity, no water.

Father: Suffer the threats of goons and criminals.

Mother: Everyday, the assault of police.

Father: And spend your Nights in Tihar jail. (104)

Attack can be called a right agitprop play that encourages the proletariat to stick to the struggle setting aside all reactionary tendencies, sectarian feelings and gender biases. This is a theatrical call for the unity of all working class that reminds them of the enemy, the exploiters who always look for chances to make breaches in the labour unity.

In a patriarchal society, the women are always dominated over by their male counter parts. Among working class too, their demands are looked down upon by the male co-workers. While males in the ranks and files of the trade union movement ignore the demands of the female workers, the unity of the protest movement gets challenged. Parvati, a female worker in Attack, is assertive of her demands, primarily as a working-mother. Initially, her concerns about the safety of her boy were not shared by the male workers.

One day, as her husband had got a day's job somewhere and there was no one at home to look after the baby. Parvati went to the factory taking her baby. But she was not permitted to enter the factory with her little baby, by the security guard. When she complained to the union, the union leaders expressed their helplessness. Then union leader Rampal and Parvati engage in a verbal debate:

Rampal: What can the Union do in this matter ?

Parvati: Why can't it? There should be some facility in the mill to keep the children safe. This was also one of the demands of our strike.

Rampal: Look, Parvati, we are on strike with the big demands like Rs. 1050 wage, Rs. 2 DA, against the contractual system, etc. Now the owner is scared. He has to relent, if we just strengthen our struggle a little more. The small issues like this will weaken our fight.

Parvati: Small issue ? This is not a small issue, Rampal. This is the question of my job.... One of the CITU's demands was the construction of a baby home. That's why all women came along. Isn't it? With the women, has the strike become weak? Don't be a maniac. (112-13)

This is a mature street play by Safdar Hashmi where he displays more skill in craftsmanship. The lengthy monologues of the Narrator in the previous plays is replaced here with shot focused dialogues between characters. Without much interventions and interpretations by the narrator, the actions in the drama stands linked together. The

action continuously progresses towards a logical conclusion.

Unlike the other plays here rhetorical questions are very rarely used. To gain maximum impact, the playwright attempts to multiple repetitions (like Rs. 562 to denote a laborers poor condition) and frequent references to the low wages of the labourers during the dramatic action. Similarly songs are extensively used to describe the condition of labourers as well as to encourage the staking labourers in the audience to keep on with their struggle. The songs are very effective and political with revolutionary messages. An example of such a song in Attack is given below:

Like various tunes mingle into a single note...

Like little flames combines into a fire...

Just like the light is spread from lamp to lamp...

Let's put together our sacrifices,

To move forward in unity...

To move forward in unity. (116)

CHAPTER VI

Cross Continental Subversive Strategies: Thematic and Methodological Affinities in the Plays of Dario Fo and Safdar Hashmi

Social commitment and purposeful artistic creativity coexist, support and reinforce one another in the agitprop plays of Dario Fo and Safdar Hashmi, the duo who took theatre to the sites of proletarian struggles in Italy and India, respectively. Both of these people's theatre practitioners believed that theater as a cultural practice should not be for mere entertainment or intellectual exercise, but it has to be restructured into a supplementary weapon in the path of socialist revolution. In their focused theatres, the institution, or the specific cultural practice, of theatre was neither an end in itself nor a venue for nostalgic retrospections of things past. Instead they provided strategic flashes of insights into the struggle against exploitative industrial capitalism, repressive ideological state apparatuses, subjugating patriarchy, reformative and reactionary tendencies in revolutionary organizations and so on.

Even though these two twentieth century writers belong to different continents of Europe and Asia, the commonality in their ideological mind set has brought in surprising thematic as well as methodological affinities to their theatrical interventions in the topical socio political issues. Of course, regarding artistic perfection, intellectual conception and world wide appreciation, the Italian master

comedian Dario Fo is far superior to Safdar Hashmi who was assassinated at the very beginning of his artistic activism. Nevertheless, a deeper critical analysis of their political theatres undoubtedly shows many commonly shared thematic obsessions and theatrical devices.

Both Dario Fo and Safdar Hashmi were born in families with socialist sympathies, a legacy that these actor activists proudly nourished through out their careers. This familiar orientation towards a particular ideology had never been a stumbling block in their thriving into excellent theatrical theorists and social activists with a political mission. Dario Fo's father, Felce Fo, was a railway station master, amateur actor and a socialist, while Safdar Hashmi's father Haneef Hashmi was a furniture merchant with leftist leanings. This common lower middle class biographical similarity and political environment would be helpful in understanding the play writers' political psyche that got translated through their oppositional theatres. As these artist activists were born politicized, the inseparability of their political commitment and artistic vision has to be acknowledged for a comprehensive understanding and critical appreciation of these dramatists' artistic engagements and modalities.

The theatrical agitpropism of Dario Fo and Safdar Hashmi begins with their critical understanding of the politics of the performance space itself. For both, the concept, 'theatre' is an integrated whole that cannot be compartmentalized into ideology, theme, method, performance place, political purpose and the like. The

re-plantation of Dario Fo's theatre, since 1968, from the bourgeoisie proscenium theatre to worker's clubs, abandoned factories and trade union rallies was a culmination of his growing concept of the politics of performance itself. Until 1968 the Fo couple were successfully engaging the bourgeoisie audience that too with plays lampooning centers of authority and expressing sympathy for the working class. But the paradox was that their plays, lashing at injustice and exploitation, were enjoyed mainly by the complacent middle class and light spirited sections of the establishment. This ideological paradox stood in the way of their direct communication with the working class. So a shift in performance space was an ideological necessity for Dario Fo. This commitment for the conscientization of the proletariat made it immanent for Fo to descent the proscenium pulpit and offers his theatrical accomplishments to the service of exploited in a space that would be accessible as well as affordable for them. On the politics of this displacement or re-plantation of their performance space Franca Rame opined:

In order to feel at one with our political commitments, it was no longer enough to consider ourselves as democratic left wing artists full of sympathy for the working class and, in general, for the exploited. Sympathy was no longer sufficient. The lesson came to us directly from the extraordinary struggle of the working people, from the new impulse that young people were giving in schools to fight against authoritarianism and social injustice and for the

creation of a new culture and a new relationship with the exploited classes. No longer could we act as intellectuals, sitting comfortably within and above our own privileged, deigning in our goodness to deal with the predicament of the exploited. We had to place ourselves entirely at the service of the exploited, become their minstrels, which meant going to work within the structure provided by the working class. That's why we immediately thought of the workers clubs. (Intro. *Plays 2* xxii)

The curtailing fixity of performance location; the darkened auditoria; a passive, comfortable and claustromaniac audience are suggestive of the complacency and dissociation of the urban intellectual bourgeoisie who would neither mind criticism nor could ever be propelled into political agitation. Boldly proclaiming his ideological conformity that art for people's sake, Dario Fo not only dissociated himself from bourgeoisie theatre to become the minstrel of the proletariat but also made his theatre mobile to traverse unconventional theatrical venues wherever he could locate the toiling masses. Similarly, Safdar Hashmi, after a very brief engagement with proscenium theatre, took to street theatre to spread the seeds of protest among the workers and other deprived sections of the Indian polity. Abandoning the lucrative and prospective teaching profession in the universities, he, along with his theatre of dissent went to factory gates, trade union rallies, election campaigns, bus stops, street corners and college and university campuses.

Even though both Dario Fo and Safdar Hashmi made their theatre mobile and accessible to the working class, a conceptual difference is identified in their reasons to part with the mainstream traditional proscenium theatre houses. If it was the ideological enlightenment that prompted Dario Fo to disengage his theatrical activities from the bourgeoisie mainstream proscenium theater for a popular off-proscenium experiment, as far as Safdar Hashmi is concerned, it was more a historical and economic compulsion. Safdar Hashmi's dissociation from the proscenium theatre has more to do with the contemporary political atmosphere that existed in India immediately after the notorious imposition of internal Emergency in the mid 1970's.

The mainstream leftist trade unions of the country, that were virtually disintegrated thanks to political arrests of leaders and suspension of labour rights and strikes, were desperately looking for a mass communication medium to reorganize their collapsed links and networks among the workers. However they couldn't afford or provide any substantial economic support for such a medium. It was this political necessity and economic limitation that compelled actor-activists like Safdar Hashmi to experiment with a new political propaganda device that has to be cheap, mobile and effective. More over the post-emergency India required spontaneous reactions to topical socio economic issues, to prevent the progenitors and propagators of repressive emergency establishment coming back to power again. Hashmi's and his colleagues' desperate enquiries for

such a mass medium landed them, ultimately, in the experimentation with street theatre since 1978. Till his death in 1989, he remained to be the most popular and dynamic advocate of street theatre in India.

Unlike Dario Fo, Safdar Hashmi didn't hold any exclusivist policy regarding the proscenium theatre as such. Dario Fo's differences with the proscenium theatre were related to one of its major component, the upper middle class audience. Fo realized that playing in front of them was of little relevance in transforming the society. He was right in his assumption. Apart from this, as a structure for theatrical performance, Fo had nothing against the proscenium arch. His performance contents had always remained the same – anti-establishmentarian and pro-working class. He dissociated himself from the proscenium arch to move closer to the working class whom he could weaponise with his agitation theatre.

On the contrary, Safdar Hashmi believed that all theatre forms belong to people, and it is not the form but the content of theatrical performance that decides the class prejudice and affiliation. However, just like Dario Fo, Safdar was politically against the 'bourgeoisie proscenium theatre'. He expresses his view on the duality and ideological difference between proscenium theatre and other forms of political theatre as:

In our view, it is absurd to speak of a contradiction between proscenium and street theatre. Both belong equally to the people. Yes, there is certainly a contradiction between the proscenium theatre, which has

been appropriated by the escapists, the anarchists and the revivalists and the street theatre, which stands with the people. Just as there is a contradiction between reactionary proscenium theatre and progressive proscenium theatre, or between democratic street theatre and the reformist and Sarkari Street Theatre. (*Right* 14)

One of the major methodological affinities that is identified in the political plays of Dario Fo and Safdar Hashmi is their adaptation of laughter as a political weapon. This weaponisation of laughter originated from their analysis of their audience's mindset as well as from the accurate understanding of the sharp potentiality of this particular human reflex. By making the audience laugh at the eccentricities and follies of authorities, these playwrights transformed their audience to a receptive mode to swallow bitter political realities that surrounded them. Both of these committed artists rejected the popular critical notion that farcical and comical presentation of unpleasant truth is trivialization of the serious subjects.

"Comedy", according to Fo, "can be an incentive to political action, a weapon against the falsehoods and bloated platitudes of the high and mighty" (Liner). He made extensive use of physical comedy with vulgar, gestures, grotesque postures, and the Commedia dell'Arte theatrical device of *lazzi* to make his audience laugh sporadically. The *lazzis* were a bit of well-rehearsed verbal or physical action, or a joke or witticism. The *lazzis* were an integral part of Dario Fo's improvisational theatre. For the purpose of eliciting laughter, many of

Fo's protagonists were designed to resemble the Commedia dell'Arte best known character Harlequin (Arlecchino), a comic servant who is cleverly stupid, energetically lazy and intelligently clownish. With his amazing physical agility, astonishing acrobatics and intelligently funny interceptions he could ensure a continuous frequency of laughter from the audience. The methodically mad Maniac in the Accidental Death of an Anarchist; the swinging drunkard in *Marriage at Cana*; the quick-witted Antonia in Can't Pay? Want' Pay!; and the Thief in The Virtuous Burglar are the modern day incarnations of the medieval jesters who steal the show in Dario Fo's performances. Fo's deliberate emulation of the jesters of the middle ages is rooted in his belief that, "When you laugh, the sediment of anger stays inside you, it can't get out. It is no wonder dictatorial governments always forbid laughter and satire first, rather than drama." (Ed Emeri, Website)

Farce was both a medium and a weapon for Dario Fo with which he made the complacent audience accept unpleasant ideas otherwise they would reject. Every tale of exploitation and injustice is transformed purposefully into grotesque farce to enhance its dramatic appeal as well as to sharpen its biting teeth. Fo says, "...for me these farces were a very important exercise in undertaking how to write a theatrical text. I learned how to take part and reassemble the mechanisms of comedy, how to write directly for the stage without any literary diversion" (Behan, *Revolutionary* 11). He pooled together the farcical aspects of the Commedia dell'Arte of the Renaissance Europe, the rich oral traditions of his native place Lago Maggoire, and radical

socialist thought in his political farces.

To make his farces more biting and itching he used laughter as a weapon against the conservative political establishment, elitist institutionalized Catholicism, exploitative capitalism, dangerously ambitious imperialism, and against the reformatory fall of revolutionary organizations. It was this intention of giving a sharper cutting edge to his agitprop theatre, in Accidental Death of an Anarchist, he transformed the tragic death of a railway worker in police custody into a comic grotesque farce that would first make people laugh and then immensely angry at the murderous establishment.

Safdar Hashmi too rightly understood the fatal potentialities of laughter in theatre as a weapon against the misdeeds of the rulers as well as an incentive for people's agitation. He too discarded the critical opinion that turning serious subjects into a laughing affair would lead to triviality and non-seriousness from the side of the audience. His street plays like Attack, Black Law, Abduction of Brotherhood, and The King's Drum are conceived with intermittent comic interludes amidst serious theater. On this mingling of laughter in serious subject matter Safdar has his own justifiable explanation:

Laughter in our kind of plays becomes a weapon. It helps to reinforce the people's revolution against the state structure and its upholders. Many people think that laughter is an indication of casual or non-serious involvement in the play. But I think that laughter is a

weapon in the hands of the people with which they destroy an image which is hated. (*Right* 169)

A surprising similarity that is observed in these two playwrights is that objects of their ridicule are the figures of establishment like the police, the religious heads, and other exploiters like the industrialists, traders and feudal landlords. Both Dario Fo's and Safdar Hashmi's distorted and caricaturist depictions of the figures of authority yielded spontaneous laughter from their working class audience. Exaggeration of personal traits, linguistic eccentricities, ridiculous physical postures and movements of these butts of laughter give ample chances to their socially inferior subjects; servants and workers to laugh at them.

Dario Fo elicits laughter with more sophisticated theatrical devices like *lazzis*, grotesque physical movements and complicated verbal nuances etc. Whereas in Safdar's theatre laughter mainly comes out of verbal deliveries, chasing scenes and ironic dialogues etc.

In addition to this, the helpless situations their protagonists are caught in provide a good amount of laughter to the audience. For example the frenzied efforts of Margerita and Antonio to hide their shoplifts from their husbands in Can't Pay? Won't Pay!, the infidels husbands' and wives' effort to convince the thief about their accidental meeting in the same apartment room, in The Virtuous Burglar etc. provide enough situational comedy in Dario Fo. Similarly, the chasing of their daughter's worker-lover by her parents in Attack; the

Anglicized Hindi dialogues of the American agent in The Abduction of Brotherhood; the paradoxical dialogues of the Queen in It's Election Again; etc. are perfect examples of situational comedy in Safdar Hashmi. The deliberate and extensive use of laughter by these dramatists turns their agitprop theatre, simultaneously, into a purposeful combination of political campaign, ideological education and mass entertainment.

In the adaptation and modification of traditional theatrical methods and devices to present contemporary socio political issues, the political theatres of Safdar Hashmi and Dario Fo exhibit some common peculiarities. In the case of Fo, he consciously revised and updated the ancient dramatic traditions like *fabultery* or the act of story telling, the subversive theatrical traditions of the *Giullare* or the medieval strolling players and the performance devices of the Renaissance *Commedia dell'Arte* of Italy and Europe.

The majority of the gospel stories in Fo's Mistero Buffo are retold in a subversive manner in the *Giullare* tradition emphasizing the existence of peripheral counter narratives as an alternative to the official mainstream grand narratives of the Biblical gospel stories. The Blind and the Cripple in the *Morality Play*; the Drunkard who chases away the Archangel, to tell his eye witness account of the Christ's miracle in *The Marriage at Cana*; the Jongleur who tells the tales of his exploitation by the landlord and the priests; the irreverent on lookers in the *Resurrection of Lazarus*; the Fool who seduces the Death and tries to save Christ from the cross are the embodiment of

the ancient *Giullare*, the itinerant performers. The Maniac in Accidental Death of an Anarchist and Antonia in Can't Pay? Won't Pay! are the modern day theatrical incarnations of the Renaissance *Commedia dell'Arte* character Harlequin (*Arlechino*) with a bewildering physical agility, subversive humour and defeating intelligence, yet acting insanely or eccentrically.

Even though Safdar Hashmi disclaims the extensive use of any traditional Indian theatrical methods or devices in his political street theatre, a critical look at his theatre will reveal that he has evidently and extensively made use of the classical Indian theatrical device like the Narrator, the performance techniques of the street magician, the monkey charmer, the story telling features of the grandmas etc. in his theatre.

According to Safdar if people are not coming to the theatre, the theatre must get the people. Gathering inspirations from the itinerant Indian traditional forms like *Nautanki* and *Jatra* which were always on the move going to places where large numbers congregate (Safdar, *Right* 34). It was this tradition of mobile theatre that he adapted in his street theatre performances that went to city squares, street corners bus stops and the like. He extensively made use of the classical Indian theatre device the *Sutradar* (Narrator) in his major plays like Machine, From the Village to the City, Attack, and The King's Drum.

Hashmi's Narrator is an on looker of the events that are depicted in his political plays. During performances the Narrator intervenes to elaborate and acts as a commentator as well as a link

between episodic plots. Safdar's narrator is the mouthpiece of the playwright who incites the people for rigorous political agitation as a remedy for their exploitations and sufferings.

The traditional grandmas' story telling method is used by Safdar in It's Election Again, where the grandchildren quizzes the grandpa in between the narration thereby broadening the scope of the story to contemporary issues. Using journey as a metaphor, the grandpa's historical tales provides the playwright an occasion to revisit the atrocities of Emergency regime.

Another popular theatrical method Safdar Hashmi made use of in his theatre is the performance model of the street magician and his disciple where after some initial street acrobatics by the disciple to attract the crowd, the master questions the disciple to tell the truth about what is going on in the society. This technique is used in the plays like *The Abduction of Brotherhood* and *The Blow of Inflation*.

However, no exclusive or consistent adaptation of any traditional performance method could be observed, by this investigator, in Safdar Hashmi's political street theatre. This is found in contrast to Dario Fo who consistently used the Renaissance Commedia dell'Arte performance methods in his political farces.

Dario Fo always rejected any kind of obscurantist intellectuality that prevents the maximum comprehensibility of theatrical messages and experience to the audience. He held the view that the refusal to assist the audience to follow the actor or performance is an attitude of pure snobbishness practiced by imbeciles and this act is a cunning

concealment of the insuperable inability of the theatre practitioners to communicate properly (Fo, *Tricks* 135-36).

To ensure maximum comprehensibility to the audience Fo, as a general practice, took pains to put up a prologue to most of his plays and would explain the play texts well in advance to theatrical performances. Safdar Hashmi too insisted that only when the characters speak the language of the audience, theatre could be communicative and popular. Sham realism, total lack of pretensions and constant references to recent socio-political occurrences would create a total experience in theatre according to Safdar (*Right* 33).

Another common practice observed in the plays of these two agitpropists is their frequent direct address to the audience during performances. This practice would make the audience feel more comfortable and involved in the performance. A scene from Dario Fo's *The Resurrection of Lazarus*, given below, is a fine example for deliberate attempt to involve the audience in the performance.

'Is this holy man coming or is he not?' (*Turning anxiously*)
'He's not coming?' (*Directly to the audience*) 'Do any of you
....? It is you I am talking to'. You are being transformed
into acting spectators. 'Do any of you happen to know
where he lives? Couldn't one of you run along and fetch
him, because we are all here waiting.' The suggestion is
that you in your turn are all ready to watch the miracle.
'We can't hang about here all day; we are busy people,
aren't we? If you fix a time for these miracles, you have

got to stick to it!' (*Looks round about, leaving out over the footlights*) 'No sign of him?' (*Tricks 100*)

Safdar Hashmi also used the same theatrical method of direct address to the audience, mainly through his Narrator who would hang around during the entire performance, explaining and introducing the main concerns of the play to audience so as to assure maximum communication. An example for this type Narrator's rapport with the audience, from Safdar's Attack is given below.

Narrator: (*To the audience*) So, my brothers and sisters, again we are making some more changes in the play. This is thanks to the kindness of our *Hawaladar* Sir. (*To the actors*) Come on friends, start again. (101)

Another interactive method used by Dario Fo is establishment of a post – performance debate or discussion with the audience on the issues raised in the play. This discussion would go on for hours during which Fo would descend the stage and mingle with the people. To ensure maximum audience participation, Fo would not only address them directly amidst performance but would at time engage them physically too. In an interesting scene in Can't Pay? Won't Pay! , the audience are seen being handed over the sacks containing stolen goods, by Giovanni and Lugi, to hide them from the approaching police party.

At the end of Can't Pay? Won't Pay! the audience are seen voluntarily reciting the concluding revolutionary song, along with the performers. Similarly in Safdar Hashmi's street plays like *Attack* end

with a slogan-shouting cum-revolutionary song recitation where the entire audience too participates. Through the theatrical method of involving the audience physically and mentally, the boundary invisible boundary that separate the entities of performers and audience finally get vanished and the entire groups became a single entity and a single slogan reiterating their determination to fight injustice and exploitation. Here actors become activists and spectators became "spect-actors."

Being true agitpropists-cum-political activists, Dario Fo and Safdar Hashmi could not withdraw themselves from the pressing contemporary socio-political developments and seek shelter in the protective armour of existential dilemmas and spiritual bewilderments. Indeed, both of them boldly confronted the exploitative, unjust, and authoritarian socio-political system through their timely and effective theatrical interventions in Italy and India respectively.

The plays of Safdar and Fo are conceived to be a perfect combination of political conscientization effort and a social reform movement through art, emphasizing the utilitarian purpose of performing arts, especially theatre. Dario Fo was always disturbed by the criminal passivity and political ignorance of people, especially the youth. He believed that complacency, ignorance and the widespread absent mindedness on the part of the young people has been conferred upon them by those who are in charge to educate and inform them, including teachers and educators. So, Fo deliberately

turned his theatre into a venue for political education by saying that:

Our task as intellectuals, as persons who mount the pulpit or stage and who, most importantly, address to young people, is not just to teach them method, like how to use the arms, how to control breathing, how to use the stomach, the voice, the falsetto the contra campo. It is not enough to teach a technique or a style: we have to show them what is happening around us. They have to be able to tell their own story. A theatre a literature, an artistic expression that does not speak for its own time has no relevance. (*Nobel Lecture 1997*)

Theatre for Dario Fo was an instrument of cultural revolution and conscious raiser and “a tool for the decolonisation of the mind, will and imagination” (Farrel 69). His liberation ideology for the proletariat is based on the emancipation theory of Karl Marx and the cultural concept of his own country fellow, the noted Marxist, Antonio Gramsci. His actress-wife Franca Rame clarified beyond any scope for doubt that the function of their theatre is to try to provoke self awareness in the audience, a consciousness of what is going on around them, and to provide, in a sense a mirror of society (Intro. *Mirror* vii).

Fo's non-mainstream political theatre not only acts as an eye-opener to the prevailing injustice and exploitation in capitalistic society, but also places these maladies in a wider historical and cultural frame for a better comprehensive and analytical

understanding of their political dynamics. His plays not only interpreted the world of exploitation and abuses but also tried to change it provoking post-performance political agitation. Theatre for him was only one of the many avenues for political pronouncements where he provokingly challenged the defiant authorities, sacrosanct religious beliefs, and hypocritical political entities. The thorough obliteration of political and social *status quo* and hierarchy was a necessity to transform his theatre into “a historical phenomenon and an expression of social development” (Valeri 27). Thanks to his penetrating insights into the political developments of his country and their after effects designed against the working class, Fo has been rightly called “the most sensitive barometer” (Hirst 160) of political Italy.

Safdar Hashmi’s mobilization theatre never offered any short cuts or readymade solutions for the liberation of the deprived masses. Instead he would present a contemporary socio-economic political problem before his working class audience and would analyze them from a working class point of view. His never-concluding street theatre was rightly a conscientization effort wherein the layer of mystery of the inner political dynamics of social issues is tore apart and is relevated to the hitherto ill-informed audience. His political street theatre deftly attacked the perpetrators of injustice and exploitation, laid bare the hidden dominant ideology of capitalism and the regressive postures of religious fundamentalism.

The search for class enemies and communal bigots is an integral component of Safdar's political theatre where he proclaimed that class neutrality in any social behaviour is impossible. On the politicization theatrical activities of Safdar Hashmi Ashok Mitra observed:

This was Safdar Hashmi's agenda: mobilizing the culture of masses in the cause of the masses. A neutral, non-antagonistic stand in a so-called social cause was out of the question. It was a dangerous pursuit, since it cut athwart the interests of particular social groups. Inevitably, Hashmi created enemies, who decided that the most effective way to deal with him was to render him silent forever. This perceived short cut to resolution of class question betrayed the state of culture distinguishing the enemy. Hashmi's murder was a class decision reflecting the class culture of the dominant classes in society. (20)

Their commonly shared distrust of the mass media and misleading official interpretation of the socio-political incidents prompted Dario Fo and Safdar Hashmi to put their theatres in the counter-informative mode where the sidelined realities are dragged to the centre.

Fo's Accidental Death of an Anarchist unveils the shameless nexus between rightwing extremists, police, political establishment and judiciary acting in unison to put down the growing civil dissent.

The Maniac's sharp wit and analytical accomplishment deflate the claims of political neutrality as well as judicial impartiality while dealing with working class uprisings. Correspondingly, Safdar Hashmi's Killers depicts the orchestrated religious riots where the interests of the industrialists were found to be the root cause of communal tension in Aligarh. To ensure the destruction of domestic industry and thereby brisk business, the industrialists incite the communal passions of the public and create divisions among them.

Natasha William's analysis, "Fo's theatre simultaneously defends subordinate people while defying dominant ideology" and "Fo's drama of dissent expresses a defiance with anything thrust upon man by power hungry authorities" (03) could be applied to Hashmi's theatre too.

To state briefly, the major methodological affinities discovered in the political agitprop theatres of Dario Fo and Safdar Hashmi are: a revolutionary understanding of the politics of performance space and consequent dissociation from the traditional venues; utilization of the potentiality of laughter as a weapon for political protest; adaptation, innovation and modification of traditional performance forms with fuming contemporary socio political issues; turning theatre as an interactive session with maximum audience oriented devices like direct addresses to the audience and sometimes making them participate in the dramatic action; and translating theatre in to a conscientization effort or conscious raiser. The other main methodological affinities observed in the theatres of these two are

given below in the form of a table.

**A Comparative Chart of Methodological
Affinities in the Plays of Dario Fo and Safdar Hashmi**

| Sl. No. | Dario Fo's Theatrical devices/methods. | Safdar Hashmi's Theatrical Devices/Methods |
|----------------|--|---|
| 1. | Commedia dell' Arte | Street Theatre |
| 2. | Improvisations | Improvisations |
| 3. | Performance in non-conventional venues like factory-gates, trade union rallies, circus tents, gymnasiums, campuses, town squares, workers clubs etc. | Performance is non-conventional venues like factory gates, trade union rallies, college and university campuses, market squares, bus stops etc. |
| 4. | Laughter is used extensively as a weapon for political protest. | Laughter is need as a weapon for political protest. |
| 5. | Topical issues are often dramatized. | Topical issues are mainly dramatized. |
| 6. | Direct political commentary and social criticism. | Direct political commentary and social criticism. |
| 7. | Caricaturist presentation of historical and contemporary political figures. | Caricaturist presentation of historical and contemporary political figures. |
| 8. | Extensive use of masks, puppets sketches, projections etc. | Occasionally masks are used to represent hypocrisy and inhumanity. |
| 9. | Revolutionary songs and slogans are widely used. | Revolutionary songs and slogans are frequently used. |
| 10. | Extended monologues. | Extended monologues. |
| 11. | Audience is led to a political debate often at the end of the play. | Direct address to the audience amidst performance itself. |

| | | |
|-----|--|---|
| 12. | Story telling methods are sometimes used. | Story telling method is used many times. |
| 13. | Many plays are counter-narratives to the official version. Subversive narration. | Counter-narrative technique is used to expose exploitation. Subversive narration. |
| 14. | Shavian model prologues are used to explain the dramatic themes. | The theatrical devices narrator explains the thematic concerns. |
| 15. | Dialectic, informal diction and language, 'grammelot'. | Colloquial, day-to-day language is used. |
| 16. | Acrobatics and buffoonery | Acrobatics and buffoonery. |
| 17. | Farcical, grotesque and ironic treatment of the subject. | Farcical, serious and ironic treatment of the subject. |
| 18. | Absurd, carnivalesque approach. | Realistic, purposeful approach. |
| 19. | Covertly didactic, and aims at political conscientization. | Covertly didactic, persuasive and aims at political conscientization. |

Thematically too, the agitprop theatres of Dario Fo and Safdar Hashmi show surprising similarities despite the absence of any direct cultural or geographical or political connectivity these two dramatists. It must be their affiliation to a common ideology that has brought in similar issues in their theatres of political intervention. More over their individual and political sympathy and close organizational engagement with the proletariat necessitated them to take up contemporary livelihood issues, concerning the working class, as themes of their political theatres. A Marxist predilection towards the working class guided them to the interpretation of contemporary

socio-political issues in proletarian, peripheral, as well as empirical points of views.

Issues like exploitative industrial capitalism; Right wing religious terrorism; undemocratic and corrupt policies of Christian Democratic Party, the unholy nexus of retrogressive political parties and militancy/intelligence agencies against revolutionary organizations; uncalled for intervention of Catholic institutions in private and public matters; Neo-Nazi fascism and the American imperialism etc. are the main themes of Dario Fo's satirist-political theatre. In the theatrical execution of these themes Fo, rather than sticking to a particular theatrical form, experimented with various approaches like the combination of popular and high culture, amalgamation of oral tradition and history, and the combination of colloquial and standard speech etc. His theatre is a rightful combination of traditional crude mime and highly sophisticated modern avant-garde theatre and the ultra modernist Brechtian anti-naturalism. Fovian theatre is a perfect satire machine that occupies the whole conceptual spans in the range of both medieval fabulatory tradition and the modern street theatre with a non-compromising theatrical ideological base and political commitment.

Safdar Hashimi, as a political theatre personality, has to be contextualized in the Indian socio-cultural environment of the 1970s and the 1980s. Existence of wide spread labour exploitation in the factories all over India; the enormity of the phenomena of the migration of the rural peasantry to industrial towns, because of the

impoverishment of agriculture sector; alarming and constant increase of unemployment among the educated youth; the most cruel and suppressive emergency regime; the Congress Party dominated by the landlords; ever sensitive and volatile Hindi-Muslim religious engagements; American imperialism; ruthless landlordism and the need for land reforms; the political elite's savour for war, amidst the wide spread poverty, for unbridled profiteering; politically sanctioned black marketism creating fake scarcity; the middle classes' criminal indifference to socio-political issues; the unholy nexus among the politicians, bureaucrats, police and industrialists in suppressing issues of public dissent; discrimination of women in a male dominated society etc. were the major thematic concerns in Safdar Hashmi's theatre of protest.

One of the dominant and recurrent themes in the propagandist plays of Dario Fo and Safdar Hashmi is the exhaustive exploitation of laborers under industrial capitalism that enjoyed absolute liberty for unregulated profiteering and governmental non-intervention in industrial disputes. As Fo and Safdar were closely associated with the trade union activities in their respective countries, their close personal and political relationship with the workers enabled them to portray the agony of the workers with gripping effect.

Safdar Hashmi's first full-fledged street play, Machine, is a metaphoric presentation of the unharmonious industrial relationship that existed in the factories of India in the 1970s. The initial jerky running of the machine and its ultimate break down suggests the

outbreak of the suppressed voices of the workers. Machine was based on a real incident of labour strike that was muffled with brute physical force in which 6 works were shot dead at a factory gate in the suburbs Delhi in 1975. That incident was both an incitement for political insurrection and an opportunity for the theatrical rendition of contemporary political issues. The machine is the personified form of industries where a reconciliatory existence and mutual support is required among the different modes of production like labour, capital, state and the owners. Any monopolistic tendencies or negligence of any essential component could bring in a breach in the system. Here, continuous negligence of labour rights by the owner, inhuman working conditions in the factories, low payment and overtime work etc. compel the workers to break away from the system and go for strike.

If Machine was an abstract presentation of the exploitative capitalism, From the Village to the City provides a concrete depiction of the plight of industrial workers in India. In this play a Labourer describes his horrible plight in the factories as:

Labourer: My dear, her no one understands the other. We do this slavery right from the morning. Completed three shifts' production in one. Still there are grumbling. The Manager says. 'If you want to be in the job, do it properly, otherwise go to hell'. They pay only for eight hours but make us work for 10 hours. You can't even cry being hungry... They give 200 rupees, after getting our

signatures against three hundred rupees. (*From Village*.
134)

Not surprisingly enough, Fo's *Maniac* expresses similar concerns in *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* when he says:

Maniac: Do you live in the real world, Miss Feletti? Instead of going off to Mexico, Cambodia and Vietnam, one day why don't you try visiting Marghera, Piombino, Rho or Sesto san Giovanni? Do you have any idea what condition a worker is in these days, by the time he gets his pension? ... They are squeezed dry, worn to a frazzle. Hardly an ounce of life in them. (183)

Capitalistic greed, labour unrest in factories, pro-capitalist connivance of the bourgeoisie political set up etc. are often mentioned in almost all plays of communist Hashmi and socialist Fo. During the Mass media backed propaganda against labour movements, these play rights transformed their agitation plays into very effective counter-information sources in their countries. Not only did they try to interpret the existing labour issues in factories, but they problematized them into wider political questions. Afterwards they interpreted those issues with the help of the Marxian tool of social analysis and tried to bring in a radical change in the society. Their plays are weapons of mass protest intended to revolutionize the existing bourgeois society. Their plays are both modes and tools of ideological mobilization of the masses. These radical dramatists in many other plays have touched upon many similar issues also.

There is hardly any play by Safdar Hashimi or Dario Fo without a reference to police/intelligence brutality on revolutionaries or striking workers. These two plays wrights were very sensitive to this issue of undemocratic and illegal suppression of dissenting voices in the society by the most misused state apparatuses. Political establishments of post-Nazi and post World War II Italy and the Emergency regime of the late 1970s in India are thoroughly criticized by Dario Fo and Safdar Hashimi respectively. Police high handedness was never a mere reported incident in the life of these two oppositional dramatists. But those were horrifying direct personal experiences in their actors-cum-activists times in Italy and India. Hashmi's group's performances were defiant assertion of "the right to perform" and they always kept their revolutionary spirit alive amidst all intimidations by the fists of the establishment.

Safdar Hashimi rightly analyses the politics behind the intentional disruptions of dramatic performances by the police as:

The police object to street theatre not because it holds up traffic, which it does not in any case, but because it is political in nature. It suppresses it, attacks it because it takes up topical issues and analyses them scientifically for its audiences. The police in suppressing street theatre acts as the arm of the state which is becoming increasingly intolerant of dissent and protest. (*Right 5*)

Safdar believed that it is because of the sharpness of the political questions raised in plays the police deal with them as if they

are dealing with a political demonstration or assembly. Because of its political impact and the commitment of the artists, the authorities always looked upon political plays with suspicion and utmost precaution. Of the 17 plays analyzed by the researcher, 09 plays by Safdar have extensively depicted the police brutality on striking workers, or the protesting public, political demonstrators, poor peasants, women artists, or the protesting students. In all these cases the police act for cause of the industrialists, the government, the landlords, the goons, etc.

One of Hashmi's most popular plays, Attack, depicts the police's attempts to disrupt the performance of a street play by intimidation and on the directives of the incumbent political set up. The police constable in the play tries to chase away the artists who were assembled in a street corner to perform a street play in support of the striking factory workers:

Policeman: Stop! Stop! ...I am telling you to shut up. *(All become silent. The narrator is still singing unaware of the police. The policeman follows him)*

Policeman: Hey, didn't you hear, what was I telling? Look, hey, revolutionary, be silent. You won't budge with that *(Waves the lathi)*. Hey man, what's going on here?

Narrator: Performing a drama.

Police: Dirraammaa! Bloody, Do you think we are Stupid? Is a drama done like this? *(Raising and Waiving hands in the air)*. Shouting slogans, holding red flags,

displaying posters. Off, this place quickly. Otherwise, I'll put everyone in the lock up. (97)

Safdar's other street plays like Black Law, Police Conduct, Its Election Again etc. extensively deal with issues and incidents of police atrocities.

If Safdar Hashmi dealt with the theme of the police brutality in a general manner, Fo's Accidental Death of an Anarchist is a deeper exploration of the politics of state oppression. The play is exclusively based on the theme of state massacre, official suppression of information and maintenance of mystery by the authorities to create terror in the public's psyche. Fo himself said that this play thoroughly exposes the indigestible fact that in order to maintain the political status quo, in the midst of intensive public protest for a change in the present political set up, the state itself is capable of organizing a massacre as well as the mourning of it (Post-Script. *Accidental* 207).

This subversive theatrical intervention mocks the hypocrisies and the organized blatant lies maintained by the constitutional organs of the state. It deals with the inhuman and unethical methods of social democracy and its crocodile tears as well as the immediate indignation of a passive mass that find relief in a little burp in the form of a social scandal and forget the incidents of state outrage very soon. The anarchist railway man, the protagonist, Giuseppe Pinnelli fell to his death from the window of the fourth-floor interrogation room of the head quarters of Milan Police. This episode is widely believed to be a choreographed accident by the police who are entrusted to protect the law and order in the country. Dario Fo's protagonist, the

Maniac revisits the site, reconstructs the reported events leading to the death and deconstructs the official version, telling the people the possible truth. This play is an indictment on the atrocities of the right-lenient government of Italy headed by the Christian Democratic Party and the exoneration of the political stands of the left-wing parties of Italy during the late 1960s. The events depicted in the play always oscillate between fiction and fact, where actual reading of the reports on the death of the workman and dramatic interpretation of these reports intertwine inextricably throughout.

Here is an example from the play when the journalist quizzes the police Superintendent quoting from the real report of the incident submitted by the Milan police in the trial court:

Journalist: ...there is no sign of the cassette tape that recorded the precise time of the phone call that range for the ambulance... a phone call which came from here, at the Central Police Headquarters and which, according to the people at the ambulance station, occurred two minutes before midnight. At the same time, the journalist, who were present at the scene all stated that the fall happened at precisely three minutes past midnight.... In other words, the ambulance was called five minutes before the anarchist went out of the window. Could you explain this various discrepancy? (179)

The dialogues in the play, like the one quoted above, are delivered in a purposeful counter-informative mode so that they

consistently expose the involvement of the Italian state in the political massacre during the late 1960s.

Police brutality is a persistent theme in Fo. Plays like Can't pay? Won't pay!, Knock! Knock! Who's There? Police!, Mistero Buffo etc. deal with this issue. Safdar Hashmi and Dario Fo share the same ideological viewpoint that in a capitalistic society the state, the industrialists, the police and the landlords are in an unholy alliance to crush people's revolutionary movements across the globe. This was a common phenomena in Fo's Italy and Safdar's India and accordingly these wrights play tried to unveil the seemingly incomprehensible class politics behind each incidents of police brutality on striking workers and protesting activists.

Perhaps, immediately after the issue of inhuman exploitation of industrial capitalism, the most obsessive theme in Safdar Hashmi's plays is the rising religious fundamentalism in the country. Just like a historian, he rightly conceptualized the communal flare-ups in Independent India and realized that it was the vested interests of the industrialists and politicians often act as the propellers. Employing tremendous blows to Indian secular socio-cultural fabric, many a time communal riots have occurred at various times in Bhivandi, Kanpur, Meerut, Ahmedabad, Muradabad, etc. Safdar Hashmi's Killers is a docudrama based on the report of a fact finding mission on the 1978 Aligarh Hindu-Muslim riots. The media, the police and the political spectrum tried to brush the issue under the carpet by oversimplifying them as a result of traditional enmity between two major religious

groups of the locality. But an on the spot study by an independent agency revealed that the riots were orchestrated by the owners of lock making factories of Aligarh, in order to destroy the still thriving, century-old cottage lock manufacturing industry. The superior quality and the cheap prize tag of cottage-manufactured locks could successfully prevent the penetration of made factory locks in the market. (The city Aligarh has been famous for its unique traditional locks). The excellent traditional locks were the products by of combined, well-coordinated efforts of the Muslim and Hindu cottage based industries.

If the Muslims were excellent in the molding work, the Hindus were unparalleled in the fitting work. This combined expertise could check any factory-made pieces. Very soon the factory owners realized that, “till there is Aligarh’s lock in the market, our industry cannot flourish” (Killers 3). So in order to establish their market they realized that they had to destroy the traditional cottage industry; in order to destroy the cottage industry, they had to destroy the labour relations of the locality; and ultimately it meant to destroy the communal harmony of the area that was the backbone of the cottage industry. So the industrialists and the fanatics incited the labourers of domestic lock industry. An example of this incitement is described in the play:

Industrialist: Move forward in the name of Islamic Values.

Gupta: We have to fight, if we want to protect our religion, Harikishan.

Industrialist: Rafeek, you will be loved by Allah.

Gupta: Harikishan, forward in the name of God.

Industrialist: Two swords cannot lie in a single sheath.

Gupta: No two religion in one country.

Industrialist: Kill! Rafeek.

Gupta: Finish them! Harikishan. (*Killers 13*)

Another play, by Safdar, that exclusively deals with communalism is The Abduction of Brotherhood. Here the nefarious American imperialism is depicted as inciting communal passions among the multi-religious Indians with external funding.

All the three Villains: (*Falling on their knees*) Thank you sir, thank you! If you help us, we will alter the map of India. We have everything: the dedication to work, clear idea and ideology; but only the deficiency of money. Please provide some aid to us (*They separate*).

Villain 1: Then we will provide each Hindu a *trishul*.

Villain 2: Every Muslim will be given a dagger.

Villain 3: Stun gun will be there in the hands of all Sikhs. (167)

If Safdar's obsessive concern was with religious fundamentalism in a multi-religious Indian scenario, Dario Fo's main contention was the threat of the rising rightwing fascism of Neo-Nazis in Italy. His Accidental Death of an Anarchist exposes the unholy alliance among the Christian Democratic Party, the Italian Military and intelligence agencies and the rightwing extremists. Acting in unison, they carry

out a series of bomb blasts in the country as a part of the 'Strategy of Tension', then they accuse the left anarchists for the massacre. The Maniac in the play reads out the confession of the dead anarchist.

Maniac: The police and fascist are using you us a way of crating a climate of social disorder. You group is full of paid provocateurs ... who are seem to be able to do what they like with you.... and the left is going to carry the can for all this.... (159)

The journalist in the play substantiates the civil society's indictment of the state in the bloodbath:

Journalist: *(To the inspector in Sports Jackets)*.... And I suppose nobody told you either that out of a total of 173 bomb attacks that have happened in the last year and a bit, at the rate of twelve a month, one every three days out of 173 attacks, as I was saying *(She reads from a report)*I, at least 102 have been proved to have been organized by fascist organizations, aided or abetted by the police, with the explicit intention of putting the blame of left-wing political groups. (193)

Fo's Trumpets and Raspberries unearths the politics behind the Massacre of Berscia by the rightwing extremists as well as the Fani operation of another fascist group in which scores of people were dead. Just like in Safdar's plays, Dario Fo also depicts the political set up, especially the police, as always supporting the acts of communal disorder among the citizens. This is done to safeguard the interests of

the industrialists and the political status quo, according to both the playwrights. The last monologue in Fo's play People's War in Chile is a blow in the face of fascists around the globe.

All forms of the establishment were in the firing line of Safdar Hashmi and Dario Fo. Along with this targeted assignments both would take up social issues and political events to target the audience too. This was done to mock the public's criminal indifference and apathy towards the incidents happening around them.

Just like the unjust political system in a capitalist country, the passive people were also responsible for the perpetration of injustice and exploitation in the world, opined Fo and Hashimi. Fo's attack on the public passivity was more direct, frank and fierce. In Accidental Death of an Anarchist, he ridicules the political general public's attitude to general socio-political events as :

Maniac: They never tried to hush up the scandals and they are right not to. That way, the people can let off steam, get angry, shudder at the thought of it... 'Murderers' And they get more and more angry and then burp! A little liberatory burp to relieve their social indigestion. (202)

Safdar Hashmi also attacked the general public's complacent attitude that accelerates injustice and exploitation as well as encourages more the people at authority to go on with their plan of discriminating the public on various levels. His merciless tirade on public apathy on communal riots goes like this:

Master: Hey, if we depend on this government, our country will go to the dogs. It will be broken up into pieces. *(To the audience)* Even now these people are silent!

Disciple: Master, don't talk about these people. They will only stand like this watching the comic show. Their brotherhood will be kidnapped; trishul will be distributed in the streets. The slogans of jihad and Khalistan will continue and these people will never talk against them. You are simply wasting your energy, talking to this useless lot. *(Abduction 171)*

Along with his actress-cum-activist wife, Dario Fo passionately pursued issues related to women with an intention of changing the society's attitude towards the second sex. Their female oriented plays, especially Woman Alone and Other Plays, aim at a change in male consciousness. The plays in the volume draw on everyday problems that women face within the society: at work, in the office, and within the family. Franca Rame declared that, "the most important thing, the crucial thing I would wish to see, that I would demand, is respect for women everywhere at home, in the street, in the family and in bed" (Intro. *Women Alone* xv). In the postmodern era of second wave feminism or post-feminism, these plays expose the duplicities of patriarchal society as well as the double standards of heterosexual males regarding their declared right for 'exploration' outside while women are forbidden the right to the same.

Old Story by Fo and Rame is a sharp indictment on the male notion of female consciousness and assertion of the uniqueness of female sexuality, which is yet to be understood by the male. In a daring monologue, the Woman in this play speaks out to her 'insisting' husband:

.... I said I like making love, but I'm not a bloody pin ball machine.... just slap 50p in the slot and all the light start flashing and zing, zing.... bang, bang wham !! And if you feel like it give it a bit of a whack! I'm not a pinball machine! If you give me a wacky, may tilt light comes on, get it? If a woman doesn't fall flat on her back, skirt up, knickers down, legs wide open and willing the minutes you snap your fingers, she's a neurotic bitch; a middle class prude carrying on like a vestal virgin all because of her repressed reactionary imperialist-capitalist-Masonic-Austro-Hungarian-Church - ridden up-bringing! Smart arse, aren't I? And smart women are just Ball-breakers, aren't they? You'd much rather have a bimbo with no brain and a sexy giggle. (50-51)

Fo's women characters always objected to the general perception of women as mere sex objects, just as the Workerwoman in Safdar Hashmi's play Woman did. The male dominated society creates stereotypes of women, which is far from reality. In the male made portraits of women, only the elite, fair, and beautiful women could find their places. The worker women with a dark skin due to over exposure

to the sun, whose hands are rough with manual labour, couldn't find mentioned in the history created and perpetuated by men. The poverty stricken, starving mother of many children is excluded in the account books of history and literature. Hashmi's worker Woman flares up with anger and suffocation:

Actress 5: Women, for describing whose greatness you don't have a single word in your dictionary. Your vocabulary just describes about the woman whose hands are neat and clean, whose body is soft, fair and delicate and whose hair is fragrant.

Actress 6: I'm the woman whose hands have been made painful and damaged by the sharpness of sickle; a woman whose body has been broken due to your shameful, back breaking deeds; with a skin that resembles the glittering of a desert; a woman from whose hair only the stink of factory smoke comes out.... (*Woman 2-3*)

The thematic analysis of the agitprop plays of Dario Fo and Safdar Hashmi undoubtedly reveals surprisingly close affinities. Apart from the major thematic affinities described above, the agitprop plays of both these writers often touch on the issues like the feudal exploitation of the peasantry, dignity of the laborers and workers, imperialism, anti-communist pogrom and propaganda across the globe by capitalists, reactionary tendencies in communist parties, unemployment, black-marketing, bureaucratic corruption and political nepotism, hypocrisies of institutionalized religions and so on

and so forth. A tabular representation of the major thematic affinities in these two playwrights is given below:

A Comparative Chart of Thematic

Affinities in the plays of Dario Fo and Safdar Hashmi

| | Theme | The Theme is treated in Dario Fo's following plays. | The Theme is treated in Hashmi's following plays |
|----|--|---|---|
| 1. | Exhaustive exploitation of labourers in industrial capitalism. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <u>The Seventh Commandment : Thou Shalt Steal a Bit Less</u> (1964) 2. <u>Accidental Death of an Anarchist</u> (1970) 3. <u>Grand Pantomime with Flags and Small and Middle-sized Puppets</u> (1971) 4. <u>United we stand ! All Together Now ! Oops, Isn't that the Boss?</u> (1971) 5. <u>The People's War in Chile</u> (1972) 6. <u>Can't Pay ? Won't Pay!</u> (1974) 7. <u>Trumpets and Raspberries</u> (1981) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <u>Machine</u> (1978) 2. <u>From the Village to the City</u> (1978) 3. <u>Woman</u> (1979) 4. <u>Advance United</u> (1979) 5. <u>It's Election Again</u> (1980) 6. <u>Black Law</u> (1981) 7. <u>When the Thief Becomes the Police</u> (1983) 8. <u>Attack</u> (1988) |
| 2. | Police brutality | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <u>The Seventh Commandment : Thou Shalt Steal a Bit Less</u> (1964) 2. <u>Mystero Buffo</u> (1969) 3. <u>Accidental Death of an Anarchist</u> (1970) 4. <u>Grand Pantomime with Flags and Small and Middle-sized Puppets</u> (1971) 5. <u>Fedayin</u> (1971) 6. <u>Knock! Knock! Who's There? Police!</u> (1972) 7. <u>Can't Pay? Won't Pay!</u> (1974) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <u>From the village to the City</u> (1978) 2. <u>DTC's Fraudulence</u> (1979) 3. <u>Woman</u> (1979) 4. <u>Advance United</u> (1979) 5. <u>It's Election Again</u> (1980) 6. <u>Police Conduct</u> (1981) 7. <u>Black Law</u> (1981) 8. <u>When the Thief Becomes the Police</u> (1983) |
| 3. | The unholy nexus among politicians, | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <u>The Seventh Commandment: Thou Shalt Steal a Bit Less</u> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <u>Killers</u> (1978) 2. <u>Advance United</u> (1979) 3. <u>The Magician and his</u> |

| | | | |
|----|--|---|--|
| | industrialists, police and fascists. | <p>(1964)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. <u>Accidental Death of an Anarchist</u> (1970) 3. <u>Grand Pantomime with Flags and Small and Middle-Sized Puppets</u> (1971) 4. <u>United we stand ! All Together Now ! Oops, Isn't that the Boss?</u> (1971) 5. <u>Knock! Knock! Who's There? Police!</u> (1972) 6. <u>Can't Pay? Won't Pay!</u> (1974) 7. <u>Trumpets and Raspberries</u> (1981) | <p><u>Disciple</u> (1980)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. <u>The Police Conduct</u> (1981) 5. <u>Black Law</u> (1981) 6. <u>When the Thief Becomes the Police</u> (1983) |
| 4. | Dehumanizing working conditions in the factories | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <u>Mystero Buffo</u> (1969) 2. <u>United We Stand! All Together Now! Oops, Isn't that the Boss?</u> (1971) 3. <u>Can't Pay? Won't Pay!</u> (1974) 4. <u>Trumpets and Raspberries</u> (1981) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <u>Machine</u> (1978) 2. <u>From the Village to the City</u> (1978) 3. <u>Woman</u> (1979) 4. <u>Advance United</u> (1979) 5. <u>It's Election Again</u> (1980) 6. <u>Black Law</u> (1981) 7. <u>Attack</u> (1988) |
| 5. | Inflation/black marketing/adulteration | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <u>The Seventh Commandment : Thou Shalt Steal a Bit Less</u> (1964) 2. <u>Can't Pay? Won't Pay!</u> (1974) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <u>Machine</u> (1978) 2. <u>From the Village to the City</u> (1978) 3. <u>DTC's Fraudulence</u> (1979) 4. <u>Woman</u> (1979) 5. <u>Advance United</u> (1979) 6. <u>It's Election Again</u> (1980) 7. <u>The Magician and His Disciple</u> (1980) 8. <u>The Danger of War</u> (1982) 9. <u>When the Thief Becomes the Police</u> (1983) 10. <u>Attack</u> (1988) |
| 6. | Feudal exploitation, labour dignity | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <u>Mystero Buffo</u> (1969) 2. <u>The People's War in Chile</u> (1972) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <u>From the Village to the City</u> (1978) 2. <u>Wake Up O Brave</u> (1984) |
| 7. | Fascism/communalism | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <u>Accidental Death of an Anarchist</u> (1970) 2. <u>Grand Pantomime with Flags and Small and Middle-Sized Puppets</u> (1971) 3. <u>Fedayin</u> (1971) 4. <u>People's War in Chile</u> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <u>Killers</u> (1973) 2. <u>Wake Up O Brave!</u> (1984) 3. <u>The Abduction of Brotherhood</u> (1986) |

| | | | |
|-----|--|---|---|
| | | (1972) 5. <u>Trumpets and Raspberries</u> (1981) 6. <u>John Padan Discovers America</u> (1991) | |
| 8. | People's complacency | 1. <u>Mystero Buffo</u> (1969) 2. <u>Accidental Death of an Anarchist</u> (1970) 3. <u>Can't Pay? Won't Pay!</u> (1974) | 1. <u>From the Village to the City</u> (1978) 2. <u>Abduction of Brotherhood</u> (1986) 3. <u>Attack</u> (1988) |
| 9. | Imperialism | 1. <u>Dump the Lady</u> (1967) 2. <u>Accidental Death of an Anarchist</u> (1970) 3. <u>Grand Pantomime with Flags and Small and Middle-sized Puppets</u> (1971) 4. <u>People's War in Chile</u> (1972) 5. <u>John Padan Discovers America</u> (1991) | 1. <u>DTC's Fraudulence</u> (1979) 2. <u>The Danger of War</u> (1982) |
| 10. | Anti-Communist pogrom/reactiory tendencies in Communist Parties. | 1. <u>Accidental Death of an Anarchist</u> (1970) 2. <u>Grand Pantomime with Flags and Small and Middle-sized Puppets</u> (1971) 3. <u>Knock! Knock! Who's There? Police!</u> (1972) 4. <u>Can't Pay? Won't Pay!</u> (1974) 5. <u>Trumpets and Raspberries</u> (1981) | 1. <u>Advance United</u> (1979) 2. <u>It's Election Again</u> (1980) 3. <u>Black Law</u> (1981) 4. <u>Attack</u> (1988) |
| 11. | Unemployment | 1. <u>Archangels Don't Play Pinball</u> (1959) 2. <u>United We Stand ! All Together Now ! Oops, Isn't that the Boss?</u> (1971) 3. <u>Can't Pay? Won't Pay!</u> (1974) | 1. <u>From the Village to the City</u> (1978) 2. <u>The King's Drum</u> (1979) 3. <u>The Danger of War</u> (1982) 4. <u>Wake Up, O Brave!</u> (1984) |
| 12. | Terrorism | 1. <u>Dump the Lady</u> (1967) 2. <u>Accidental Death of an Anarchist</u> (1970) 3. <u>Grand Pantomime with Flags and Small and Middle-sized Puppets</u> (1971) 4. <u>Fedayin</u> (1971) | 1. <u>Killers</u> (1978) 2. <u>It's Election Again</u> (1980) 3. <u>Wake Up O Brave</u> (1984) 4. <u>The Abduction of Brotherhood</u> (1986) |

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| | | 5. <u>People's War in Chile</u> (1972) | |
| | | 6. <u>Trumpets and Raspberries</u> 1981) | |

A close reading of the agitprop plays of Dario Fo and Safdar Hashmi shows great methodological and thematic affinities, despite both belong to two different continents, in championing the causes of the working class in their respective countries. The Italian master Dario Fo and the Indian legendary martyr Safdar Hashmi, without any personal or organizational contacts, shared, unconsciously, the concern for the working class. Their individual affiliation to the common ideology of socialism moulded their mindscape which in turn made their heartscape look alike a for a closes observer. The dramatic interventions of this actor-cum-activist-cum- author duo helped in agitating the toiling mass in Italy and India in the three decades of the 1960s, 70s and 80s. This study also cements the notion that it is the ideological outlook and social surroundings that moulds the individual's psyche as well as their artistic subjectivities, not vice versa.

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