

Anarchist is funny, but politics lost in laughs

Accidental Death of an Anarchist
Northern Light Theatre
runs til October 4

review by Rosa Jackson

Anarchists, it is announced at the beginning of the play *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* by Dario Fo, are frequently "obsessed with the urge to jump out of windows". The artistic director of the Northern Light Theatre, Jace van der Veen, also displays, at least figuratively, this desire. This is a style of theatre to which Edmonton audiences have rarely before been exposed, and in selecting this play he faced the risk of it crashing to the ground. However, under the direction of Arturo Corso, the play succeeds in capturing the audience's imagination.

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What makes this play different from those normally found in Edmonton theatres is its epic theatre style; that is, the actors do not pretend to be real characters. We never lose sight of the fact that they are actors portraying events. Therefore, the audience does not become caught up with their psychologies but only with the action which takes place on stage. For most of us, whether we are accustomed to Shakespearean drama or soap operas, our interest in watching actors lies in our tendency to empathize with their emotions. *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* challenges both the actors and the audience, and one must keep a very open mind in order to enjoy this production.

From the start, the play manages to captivate the audience visually. The sheer energy of the actors, bounding about the stage as they relate the tale of two police officers who are accused of being responsible for the suicide of a suspected anarchist in Italy, is enough to hold our attention, even if the story is unfamiliar to us and at times confusing. The first act is especially entertaining to watch, with its fast-paced action and slapstick humor.

But what makes the first act fascinating causes the second to seem repetitive and

even somewhat tedious towards the end. The script lends itself to much more than a few good laughs, with its underlying political message that "scandal is the manure of social democracy". Although there is an attempt made to emphasize this theme, the tone of the play is too light-hearted to allow it to really sink in. The audience is worn down by the constant jokes and antics of the actors, and in the second act especially it is tempting to overlook the dialogue and simply sit back and watch the physical action.

The people portrayed in this play are necessarily two-dimensional, as they are modelled after the stock characters in the Italian Commedia Dell'Arte form of drama. This makes their roles difficult to play, as the actors must not be concerned with motivations, as in realistic drama, but only with intentions. The most exceptional performance is provided by Ken Gallie, who plays the central character, The Fool. His role is by far the most complex and demanding, as The Fool is himself a compulsive actor — not to mention a psychopath. As the main focus of the play, The Fool mercilessly manipulates all who surround him and, ironically, exposes their hypocrisy and vices along with his own corruption. He makes a mockery of the entire Italian social system, from legal to religious hierarchies.

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The cast members work well together in maintaining the level of concentration required to deal with the constant physical and verbal assault with which they are faced. William Davidson, as Chief Bellati, and Raul Tome, as the Inspector from the Political Division, make a hilarious team as they are repeatedly outsmarted and thrown into a state of frenzy by The Fool. Tony Eyamie, who plays The Officer (Constable Pisani), provides much of the humor near the end of the play, when he attempts to expose the true character of The Fool to those who have not yet seen through him. Although Inspec-

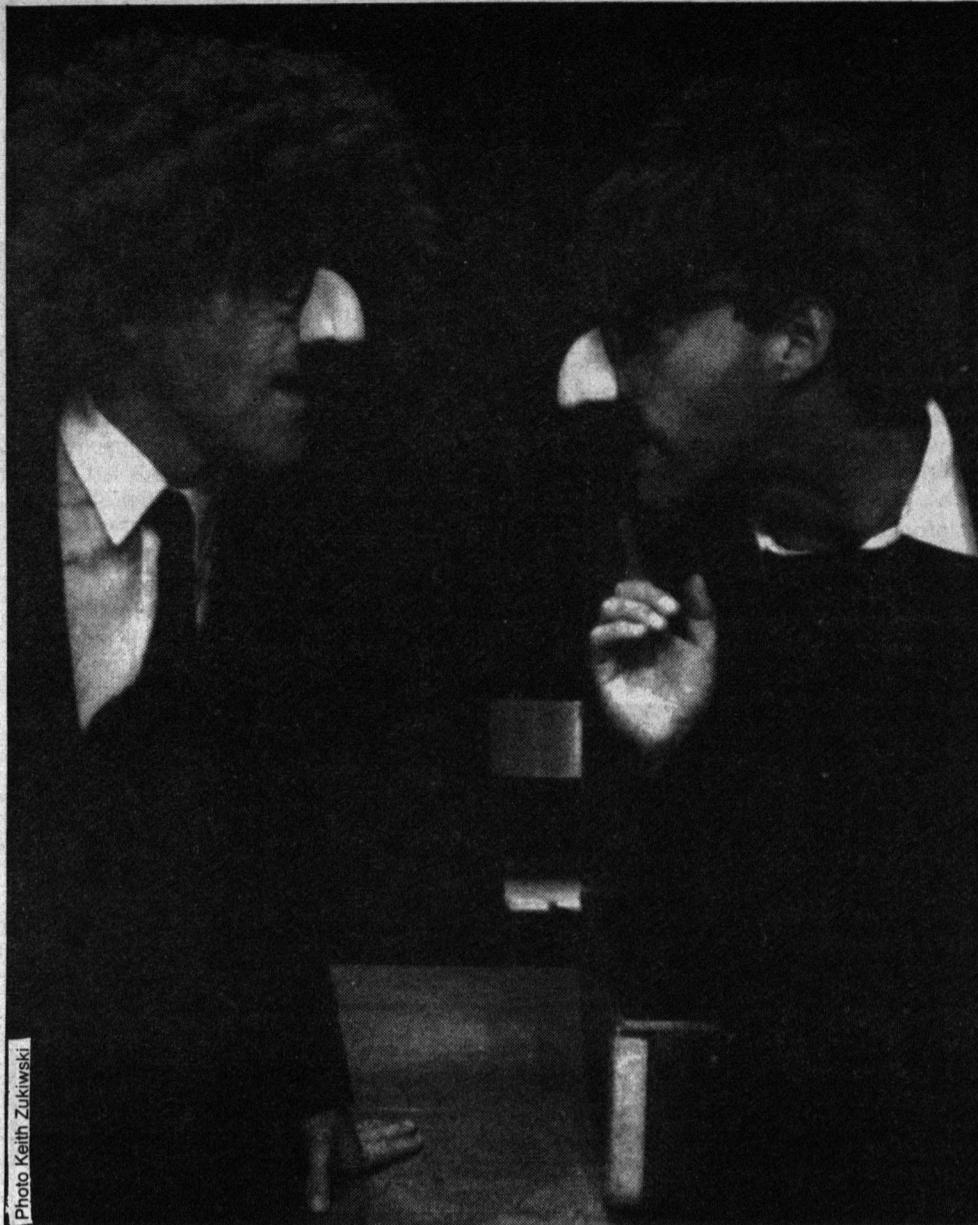


Photo: Keith Zukowski

Klutzes and fools mix in political comedy

tor Bertozzo, played by Arnie MacPherson, is quite ineffectual verbally, he nonetheless makes his presence known on stage as an amusing klutz. Catherine Clark, The Reporter, is a contrast to the other characters as she does not perform in an equally exaggerated and humorous manner, although her role in presenting the theme of the play is important.

Despite its inherent problems, this play contains moments of hilarity which in themselves make it worth seeing. If one is willing to see past the occasionally irritating humor to the serious subject matter broached by the play, *Accidental Death of An Anarchist* may be perceived as it is politically intended, as "a liberating burp".

Raul Tome: creating roles and opportunities

interview by Rosa Jackson

The cast of *Accidental Death of An Anarchist* are living proof that initiative and ambition pays off. Last October they were unemployed actors, all graduates of the University of Alberta's BFA Drama program. In order to

create work for themselves, they founded their own theatre group, the Tiger Hill Theatre Company. So successful was their effort to practise their art despite lack of funds or support that, in less than a year, they progressed from performing in a warehouse to

forming the cast of the Northern Light Theatre's latest production.

Raul Tome, who portrays the Inspector from the Political Division in *Accidental Death of An Anarchist*, discussed some of his experiences as an actor, especially in the light of his latest role.

"I guess I'm just an inherent clown," he said. "My grandfather was a Vaudeville star in Portugal, and it runs in the family."

Raul always enjoyed acting but did not decide to pursue it as a career until he entered university. Originally from Penticton, B.C., he studied Drama at Mount Royal College in Calgary before entering the BFA program at the University of Alberta. He said that the shortage of work available for actors did not worry him while he was attending school. "You don't really think about it until you're out there in the real world, and then you have to believe that you have the talent to get work."

Since graduating from the University of Alberta, Raul has performed as Pablo Gonzales in *A Streetcar Named Desire* for the Persephone Theatre in Saskatoon, and this summer made his film debut as Manuel in *The Gunfighters*. His roles as a member of the Tiger Hill Theatre Company included Lanx, in *Angel City*, and The Kid in *The Unseen Hand*, both of which were Sam Shepard plays.

"We chose Sam Shepard because it was alternative theatre," said Raul. "In the Tiger Hill group, we got to play roles which we otherwise wouldn't have had the opportunity to do."

The Northern Light Theatre became interested in the Tiger Hill Theatre Company's productions, and approached them to perform in *Accidental Death of An Anarchist*. Raul and the rest of the company are pleased with their roles in this play. "It's a play which any actor would be thrilled to get a part in,"

said Raul.

The actors had the advantage of working with the playwright, Dario Fo's, "right hand man" from Italy, Arturo Corso, who directed the play. Arturo worked with Dario Fo since 1963, and probably had a hand in writing the play," said Raul. "The play toured all over Italy and was sometimes performed to audiences of thousands, so it's very adaptable. It was extremely relevant to the political situation in Italy, because they all knew the story of the anarchist. We had to edit the script for Edmonton audiences because they didn't know the story, and some parts would have been hard to follow."

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Raul found that the greatest challenge which this play posed to him as an actor was "... to avoid playing a character. Arturo calls this style of acting 'epic theatre'," he said. "You're not trying to play someone else. You have to find the person's traits in yourself. It's also very difficult to keep up the high level of energy in the play. You're in constant fear, things are constantly happening to you."

The ability to do epic theatre, Raul said, is the most important skill which he has gained from this play. "I would love to do more of it," he said. But for the present, he will stick to his philosophy of taking one step at a time in his acting career. "The longer you stick it through, the more work you'll have," he claims. And to those actors who display such determination, such as the members of the Tiger Hill Theatre Company, success comes well-deserved.

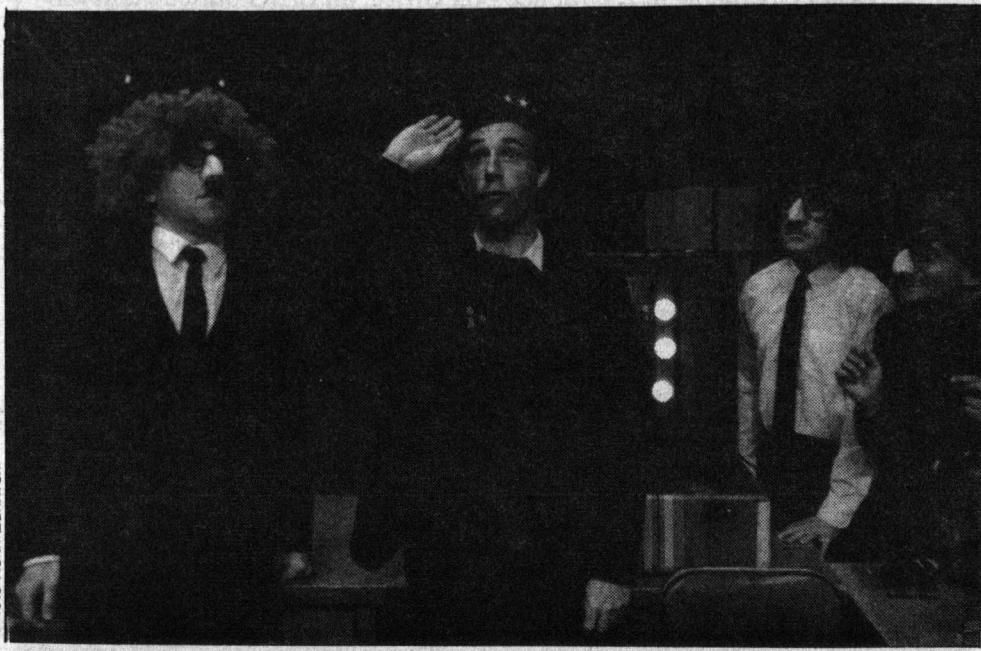


Photo: Keith Zukowski

A salut to slapstick satire, Italian style