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

CHAPTER VI

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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 throughout 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 bourgeois 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 lazzis 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 (Arlechino), 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 fabultory 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 onlookers 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 got 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 squires, 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 *Hawaldar* 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 crated 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**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Dario Fo’s Theatrical devices/methods.</th>
<th>Safdar Hashmi’s Theatrical Devices/Methods</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Commedia dell’ Arte</td>
<td>Street Theatre</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Improvisations</td>
<td>Improvisations</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Performance in non-conventional venues like factory-gates, trade union rallies, circus tents, gymnasiums, campuses, town squares, workers clubs etc.</td>
<td>Performance is non-conventional venues like factory gates, trade union rallies, college and university campuses, market squares, bus stops etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Laughter is used extensively as a weapon for political protest.</td>
<td>Laughter is need as a weapon for political protest.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Topical issues are often dramatized.</td>
<td>Topical issues are mainly dramatized.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Direct political commentary and social criticism.</td>
<td>Direct political commentary and social criticism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Caricaturist presentation of historical and contemporary political figures.</td>
<td>Caricaturist presentation of historical and contemporary political figures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Extensive use of masks, puppets sketches, projections etc.</td>
<td>Occasionally masks are used to represent hypocrisy and inhumanity.</td>
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<td>9.</td>
<td>Revolutionary songs and slogans are widely used.</td>
<td>Revolutionary songs and slogans are frequently used.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Extended monologues.</td>
<td>Extended monologues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Audience is led to a political debate often at the end of the play.</td>
<td>Direct address to the audience amidst performance itself.</td>
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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 workers 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. Daring 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 probelmatized 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 bourgoise 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 playwrights 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 creating 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)*, 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 assignations 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 often 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 undoubted reveals surprisingly close affinities. Apart from the major thematic affinities described above, the agitprop plays of both these writes on and 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

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>The Theme is treated in Dario Fo's following plays.</th>
<th>The Theme is treated in Hashmi's following plays.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. <strong>Accidental Death of an Anarchist</strong> (1970)</td>
<td>2. <strong>From the Village to the City</strong> (1978)</td>
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<td>5. <strong>The People's War in Chile</strong> (1972)</td>
<td>5. <strong>It's Election Again</strong> (1980)</td>
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<td>2. Police brutality</td>
<td>1. <strong>The Seventh Commandment</strong>: <em>Thou Shalt Steal a Bit Less</em> (1964)</td>
<td>1. <strong>From the village to the City</strong> (1978)</td>
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<td>8. <strong>When the Thief Becomes the Police</strong> (1983)</td>
<td>8. <strong>When the Thief Becomes the Police</strong> (1983)</td>
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<td>3. The unholy nexus among politicians,</td>
<td>1. <strong>The Seventh Commandment</strong>: <em>Thou Shalt Steal a Bit Less</em></td>
<td>1. <strong>Killers</strong> (1978)</td>
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<td>2. <strong>Advance United</strong> (1979)</td>
<td>2. <strong>The Magician and his</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. United We Stand! All Together Now! Oops, Isn't that the Boss? (1971)</td>
<td>2. From the Village to the City (1978)</td>
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4. Dehumanizing working conditions in the factories

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<td>2. United We Stand! All Together Now! Oops, Isn't that the Boss? (1971)</td>
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5. Inflation/black marketing/adulteration

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<td>4. The People's War in Chile (1972)</td>
<td>4. Woman (1979)</td>
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6. Feudal exploitation, labour dignity

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<tr>
<th>1. Mvstero Buffo (1969)</th>
<th>1. From the Village to the City (1978)</th>
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7. Fascism/communalism

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<tr>
<td>4. People's War in Chile</td>
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2. Abduction of Brotherhood (1986)  
|----------------------|----|--------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Imperialism          | 9. | 1. Dump the Lady (1967)  
3. Grand Pantomime with Flags and Small and Middle-sized Puppets (1971)  
4. People's War in Chile (1972)  
2. The Danger of War (1982) |
| Anti-Communist pogrom/reactio nary tendencies in Communist Parties. | 10. | 1. Accidental Death of an Anarchist (1970)  
2. Grand Pantomime with Flags and Small and Middle-sized Puppets (1971)  
2. It's Election Again (1980)  
| Unemployment         | 11. | 1. Archangels Don't Play Pinball (1959)  
2. United We Stand! All Together Now! Oops, Isn't that the Boss? (1971)  
2. The King's Drum (1979)  
3. The Danger of War (1982)  
| Terrorism            | 12. | 1. Dump the Lady (1967)  
3. Grand Pantomime with Flags and Small and Middle-sized Puppets (1971)  
2. It's Election Again (1980)  
4. The Abduction of Brotherhood (1986) |
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.