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 fist 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 devises 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 on 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, thought 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.