The Distinguishing Features of Dario Fo’s *We Won’t Pay! We Won’t Pay!*

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Dario Fo is a successful actor and playwright in the twentieth century. His won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1997. At his early age, he moved to Milan to study art. There, he made his first appearance on stage. Then he founded a solo radio series when he met his wife. Later they together established a production company and Dario Fo wrote a lot of plays during those years. He had many famous plays. Among them, *We Won’t Pay! We Won’t Pay!* had its debut in Milan in 1974. Since then, it has been performed in more than thirty countries. Even in Taiwan it has been performed by several universities and theaters. Why has it been so popular for over thirty years?

In the following sections, we will discuss its distinguishing features, including black humor, absurdity, social realism, satire and coincidence. Through the discussion, the attraction of Dario Fo’s work will be revealed.

II • Thesis

1. Summary

By virtue of inflation, the working class meets a difficult financial crisis. At first, to solve the problem, Antonia plunders the supermarket with other housewives. They take the things they want, paying less or even paying nothing. On her way home, she meets her friend, Magherita, and Antonia comes up with a ridiculous idea—hiding some of the things she takes from the supermarket under the bed and some under Magherita’s coat for her to take home. At the moment, Antonia’s husband, Giovanni, comes home anxiously due to the news of the brigandage. To conceal the truth from Giovanni, Antonia has no choice but to lie to him that
Magherita is pregnant. Later, a sergeant searches the goods and the suspects house by house. When he arrives at Giovanni and Antonia’s house, his complaints to Giovanni about the government. Although Giovanni does not agree with him, his complaints have some impact on Giovanni. Because of the impact, Giovanni starts to think whether the government is always right. After that, he, like his wife Antonia, steals goods with Magherita’s husband, Luigi, and becomes a “crazy person” in his words. Due to a series of coincidences, they escape from a trooper’s chase and tells the truth to Antonia that they both take things without paying. After all the chaos, Antonia finally realized "…when people stand up for themselves, they can always find a way to make things happen." (Barnet et al. 1124)

2. Distinguishing features

“We Won’t Pay We Won’t Pay” is considered Fo’s most comic and entertaining work in terms of its complicated plot and its fusion of contemporary political points and farce. The following are some of its special qualities that make it popular in different countries at different times.

2.1 Black humor

Black humor is a combination of comedy and satire in which topics related to domestic violence, death, insanity, fear, etc. are taken seriously in a humorous or satirical manner. This is one of the trademark of Dario Fo's works.

The drama starts with a group of housewives refusing to pay the high prices for goods. At first, they planned to pay less but later on the consumers revolt became more and more serious and then they determined to pay nothing. Another example of domestic violence is
Giovanni finds some local workers refuse to pay for the meals at the restaurant. More and more similar riots are happening here and there.

To cover up her robbery, Antonia asked Margherita to pretend that she was pregnant. She applied one lie to cover another lie to convince her husband and the sergeant. For example, how can Margherita get pregnant since she take pills? How can she be in labor for being pregnant for only five months? These all bring humor and add color to the drama.

"We Won't Pay! We Won't Pay!" also deals with death. First, Trooper accidentally bumps into his head and passes out. So silly are Antonia and Margherita that they give Trooper hydrogen, which does not revive him but causes his belly to swell. This makes them believe that they have killed a police. Besides, Gravedigger leaves an empty casket at Luigi's place, which in turn is used to hide the stuff Giovanni and Luigi steals.

Black humor made up of domestic violence and death is the most special quality of the drama.

2.2 Absurdity

Absurdity is also a form of humor, which is based on the impossibility of the situations and nonsense logic to bring surreal humor to the drama. The incidents which happen in the drama are too dramatic to be real. With absurdity, the audience can easily find comical points in it.

Examples of absurdity are many. One of them is that when Antonia asks Margherita to hide the foods in her coat, she agrees this strange request. Later, they even find almost
everyone in the neighborhood, young and old, male and female, is pregnant with a super big belly. This is quite impossible in the real situation. Also, Giovanni buys their story and believes that Margherita is five-month pregnant and is in labor. What is even more ridiculous is that Luigi, Margherita’s husband, believes his wife’s belly swells within a day.

What’s more, in Act Two, Trooper believes Antonia’s ridiculous curse and becomes blind, even though actually it is because of the blackout.

Antonia: ... To make a belly in honor of the miracle of Santa Eulalia! And anyone who doesn’t believe in it is cursed! (Barnet et al 1118)

It is obvious that nobody would believe the nonsense, but Trooper does believe it and becomes panicked. When he tries to get out of Antonia’s place, he hit his head. This leads to another absurdity—the two women blows Trooper up with hydrogen. (Barnet et al. 1119)

2.3 Social realism

Even though We Won’t Pay! We Won’t Pay! is full of black humor and absurdity in it, Dario Fo integrated real political events in his play. He was inspired by “a consumer revolt in which people refused to pay inflated prices.” At that time, in southern Italy, working people carried out this kind of mass civil disobedience. This is because Italy was experiencing a serious economic crisis in the mid-1970s. Soaring prices and high unemployment rate made working class find it hard to survive. Thus, in this play, Fo let people of the lower classes, such as housewives and factory workers, rise up to fight for their own rights of survival. (Barnet et al. 1103)
When the play is put on stage in different places, it is usually altered to fit the social situations in that place. For instance, when it was performed in Taipei in 1998, the audience could share the same feelings with the actors because they applied local problems to their play. This is one of the reasons why the play has been popular for more than thirty years.

In addition, the most popular English version of the play was translated by Ron Jenkins. He incorporated political characters and events, such as Hilary Clinton, into the play to make it friendlier to the American audience.

2.4 Coincidence

Coincidence is the way how Dario Fo brings the comic points to his audience. Through dramatic coincidences, Dario Fo declares his serious purpose---criticizing the corruption of the government---applying seriousness and humor by turns. Take one scene of the play for example. Antonia told Magherita that she doesn’t pay the electricity bill so the electric company will cut off their electricity. When Trooper is suspicious about Magherita’s belly, the apartment is out of electricity suddenly. Thanks to the coincidence, Antonia and Magherita was exempted from the trooper’s search or they might be arrested and the whole play will lose its humor; That is to say, without these coincidences, the plot would be a failure.

Another example is that when Luigi and Giovanni are worried about where to hide the sacks without being caught by the troopers, Gravedigger appears. So Giovanni and Luigi decide to put the sacks into the casket so that they may not be found.

_Giovanni: I’ll like to a cop who’s got the guts to stick his nose into a dead man’s_
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casket. I’ll be the corpse, and you can be the undertaker making a delivery to the house. *(Barnet et al. 1120)*

In the end of the play, Giovanni and Antonio find both of them steal something and both of them hide the stuff in their house, one in the closet, the other in the casket. This coincidence leads them to apologize each other in the end.

Dario Fo arranged the same actor to play four different roles, namely Sergeant, Trooper, Gravedigger and Old Man. He did this intentionally because he made the actor to say something like, “Well, hello…you again?” *(Barnet et al. 1111)* This special arrangement may seem coincidence to the audience, but in fact, Dario Fo used these comic characters to cause some misunderstandings and humorous effects in the play. For example, when Giovanni takes Trooper for Sergeant, he said, “…Isn’t that true, officer, that you’re fed up with robbing people in the name of authority. Tell my wife how you police officers are sick and tired of salivating when the while blows…” *(Barnet et al. 1111)* This infuriates the policeman and he even claims to cuff Giovanni.

2.5 Satire

Satire is a literary form, in which human weaknesses are held up to condemn by means of ridicule, irony or other methods. Although satire is meant to be funny, the main purpose of the person who uses satire is to attack others with his wit.

In *We Won’t Pay! We Won’t Pay*, Dario Fo wanted to stand up for the working people. His play implied that he supported the low class even though they commit crimes. He believed that they did it just to survive. He arranged the character, Givonni, who is a man of
integrity. He would rather die than steal. He claims he will kill his wife if he finds she steals. He created Giovanni to make fun of those who obey the government blindly. Though the help of his wife Antonia, Sergeant and his friend Luigi, in the end, Giovanni also changes.

The character Sergeant blamed the government in the presence of Giovanni. This shows that even a public servant does not obey his superiors willingly. The satire mocks the relationship between the government and its officials.

III • Conclusion

With the distinguishing features of black humor, absurdity, social realism, coincidence and satire, We Won’t Pay! We Won’t Pay! is one of Dario Fo’s most successful plays. He maintained his trademark of writing politically-related script about working class. To obtain the consensus of the audience, he supported the low class and blamed the government. No wonder, when the play was performed in Taipei, it was stopped by the applause for ten times. Although Dario Fo did not win his Noble Prize because of We Won’t Pay! We Won’t Pay!, his perfect writing skills are confirmed.

As mentioned above, the stage play We won’t pay! We won’t pay! has been performed many times by many famous companies. Dario Fo indicated that inflation might happen if the government could not handle its finance well. When citizens meet this kind of situation, what action should they take to face this bread-and-butter problem? “We won’t pay! We won’t pay!” is just an alternative way to face the serious problem, but it is not suggested by Dario Fo because if people do take things without paying, they may still go to court for that, just like Antonia and Giovanni have to hide the stolen goods to avoid being arrested.
Since inflation will happen to every economic body over and over again, we believe with small alternation, *We won’t pay! We won’t pay!* will be put on stage again and again.

IV • Reference

1. “We Won’t Pay! We Won’t Pay!” Film script Dario Fo
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