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reviews

Accidental Death of an Anarchist (Sydney Theatre Company)

Amber McMahon is an absolute maniac in Dario Fo's political farce.

by [Angus McPherson](#) on September 15, 2018

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Drama Theatre, Sydney Opera House
September 14, 2018

In a post-truth world, Italian Nobel Laureate Dario Fo's classic political farce *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, dealing with corruption, cover-ups and the abuse of power, feels particularly timely – but that's no doubt been said of every production of the play since it premiered in 1970.

In her production for Sydney Theatre Company, director Sarah Giles sets the play in period, designer Jonathan Oxlade creating a delightful set, playfully conjuring a run-down 70s Italian police station with a gritty office space complete with wilting indoor plant, posters (Sophia Loren, and a Playboy Bunny) corroded grey filing cabinet, antique electric fan, radio and so on. It's a fun space to explore visually – there's even a fishbowl with what appears to be a live Siamese Fighting Fish!



Amber McMahon in Sydney Theatre Company's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*. Photo © Daniel Boud

The centrepiece of Oxlade's set is the panoramic window – from which the titular anarchist fell, jumped or was pushed, during an interrogation – looking out on a diorama Milanese cityscape, which lowers as the action moves from the third floor to the fourth, where the incident took place. Trent Suidgeest's lighting charts the passage of time from the morning to evening over which the play takes place.

Into this scene steps a mischievous impersonator dubbed the Maniac, brought into the station on other charges, but who runs rings around the dim-witted police force in an attempt to get to the truth of the matter with a sharp tongue and a penchant for disguise.



Bessie Holland, Amber McMahon, Caroline Brazier and Susie Youssef in Sydney Theatre Company's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*. Photo © Daniel Boud

Inspired by Melissa McCarthy's impersonation of the White House's former press secretary Sean Spicer on Saturday Night Live, Giles uses an all-female cast – and it works a treat. Julie Forsyth is a half-bright, crooked Inspector Bertozzo; Bessie Holland brings the muscle with a tough but none-too-smart Inspector Pisani; Annie Maynard (who also plays journalist Maria Feletti) and Susie Youssef are the lower ranking constables struggling to keep up, while Caroline Brazier is the straight man Superintendent trying to hold it all together. In the middle of all this is Amber McMahon in a brilliant turn as the Maniac, the play's chaotic puppet-master, winking to the audience and setting the cat amongst the pigeons.

This is a verbose play (though Francis Greenslade and Giles' adaptation keeps it snappy) but McMahon and the cast wield grammatical jokes and wordplay with the same deft panache they do the physical humour, and Giles keeps the action rocketing along: several doors make for surprise entrances, Stefan Gregory gives us an Italian film score and comic soundtrack – and there's plenty to see out the window. The momentum rarely dips and if occasionally the humour feels a little dated, it's of a piece with the set's affectionate love-song to the 70s and therefore still offers plenty of charm.



Julie Forsyth, Susie Youssef and Annie Maynard in Sydney Theatre Company's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*. Photo © Daniel Boud

Far from being a gimmick, casting the male characters as women highlights the particularly male power structures at play in the police station, which are thrust into the spotlight with the arrival of a female journalist, Maria Feletti, and the immediate change in body language and attitude of the police officers. In the space of minutes she's subject to everything from swaggering arrogance, to mansplaining, sexual harassment and the unmistakable threat of imminent violence. Though this production is played light, there is still an acknowledgement here of the danger to outspoken women resulting from these structures – the consequences of which Fo's partner and collaborator Franca Rame experienced first-hand and plumbed in her one-woman show *Lo Stupro* (The Rape).

Giles' production, however, is ultimately optimistic, without sacrificing the incisive commentary of Fo's original, which skewers both corruption in the halls of power and the role a well-meaning media can play in reinforcing that power. But most of all *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* is outrageously funny – this is a high-energy cast with no weak links and Amber McMahon is an absolute maniac.

Sydney Theatre Company's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* is at the Sydney Opera House until October 27

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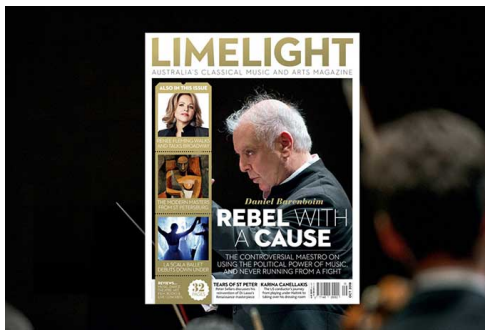
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