

Venue

Preview Can't Pay?! Won't Pay!!

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The dark, skint, featureless days of January are always something of a post-festive fag-end. Something is needed, it seems, to brighten the gloom and sense of anticlimax.

Step forward Bristol's RoughHouse Theatre (recently arrived from Australia and purveyors, thus far, of a Weimar Republic-era 'Twelfth Night' and a strange, gripping Nick Hornby short 'Nipplejesus'), in tandem with a comedy by legendary Italian satirist Dario Fo centred, rather appropriately, on crippling economic decline.

"We wanted to do something relevant, something 'now'," explains Roughhouse's Shane Morgan of the company's latest outing. "It's January, post-Christmas, nothing's happening, everyone's feeling miserable back at work: and we're in a period of economic decline. I wanted to put a smile on people's faces and say, 'welcome to 2009. It's OK.' And Fo is one of the cleverest, most potent playwrights there is."

In Fo's 1974 black comedy, it's the housewives of Milan who are revolting. After months of rising rents, bills and food costs, a group of women decide to tackle issues head on. Led by the charismatic Antonia, the Milanese revolt in their local supermarket.

"They agree on a pay-what-you-can system," Shane explains. "Of course, the majority of them take full advantage and decide to pay nothing for their groceries." At which point the police - numerous, heavy-handed and hapless - intervene. "The police are a major bugbear of Fo's - throughout his plays they're portrayed as bumbling, incompetent fools."

Cue comic anarchy on various levels - not least a phantom pregnancy, a dubious saint and an inflatable inspector. Shane and co have re-set the play to the here and now of Bristol, early 2009. As audiences walk in each night, a TV will be relaying the day's news. "It just seemed right to bring it into the present, especially as we're living through such similar conditions now," Shane reasons. "The play also lends itself well to flexibility - if there's a massive event during the run, we have the opportunity to fit that into the script. For instance, the play has a reference to postal workers going on strike, as in fact happened in the UK just before Christmas."

Beneath all the slapstick, Fo has serious points to make about the everyday realities of larger political, economic and even religious policies (the Catholic church's anti-contraception stance is another rumbling source of unrest throughout), and how much power civilians can take into their own hands.

"That's the beauty of great satire, and of Fo's writing in particular," says Shane. "His characters are colourful, larger than life, almost commedia dell'arte. But there's a very serious message underneath. I want audiences to go out having been entertained, but also thinking, 'this is something we are dealing with today: what can we do about it?' There has to be some sort of collective sigh of relief, a feeling that you're not alone - we're all in this together."

CAN'T PAY? WON'T PAY! IS AT THE ALMA TAVERN, BRISTOL FROM WED 7 - SAT 24 JAN.