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WHAT THE BUTLER SAW

NEXT...
VENUS
BY SUZAN-LORI PARKS

DARING, DANGEROUS & DAZZLINGLY THEATRICAL

OPENS DECEMBER 4

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we urge you to join their ranks!
Even as an established playwright, Orton still couldn’t resist the idea of a romp for its own sake. "If I’ve time on my hands at the end of the year," he wrote in 1967, "I’d like to amuse myself by writing a bit of rubbish under an assumed name, in the nature of a joke play." Orton’s squandering of energy in pranks released a festive vulgarity which, when disciplined, found its way successfully into his plays. But when he indulged himself, his fun became frivolity, his outrage merely outrageousness. There was always a little boy in Orton—the Peter Pan part of him—that responded to Beatrix Potter and Daisy Ashford, who inflated prophecy-tactics and dropped them into the caretaker’s hollyhocks; who wrote obscene scenarios played against a backdrop of upper-class life.

Pick Up Your Eggs
For most of his life, Joe Orton was unsuccessful in the theatre world, but was always full of unrelenting ambition. This desire for recognition came to fruition in August 1963, with the publishing of his first play, *The Ruffian on the Stair*. Unfortunately, it was only four years after his professional breakthrough, in August 1967, that he was brutally killed at the age of 34 by his lifelong lover, Kenneth Halliwell, in a gory murder-suicide. In those few short years, however, two more of Orton’s plays were produced: *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* (October 1965) and *Loot* (originally produced unsuccessfully in 1965 and revived in September 1966). Orton also wrote two television plays, the screenplay for a never-filmed Beatles movie titled, *Up Against It* (1967), and a last full-length play, *What the Butler Saw*. Orton’s disdain for propriety and social conventions is clearly highlighted in the irreverent humor of his plays and his need for excitement in life.

Joe Orton’s contempt towards respectable suburban society had its roots in his relationship with his parents. Orton was born to Elsie and William Orton in 1933 and grew up in council housing (government-funded housing) in Leicester, England. Orton’s family, which included three other siblings, was decidedly working-class, but, as his biographer John Lahr says, that didn’t dampen Elsie’s “preposterous propriety.” Elsie was demanding, proud, and hypocritical, and Orton despised her obsession with appearances. His father, William, on the other hand, seemed completely beaten down by his family, which included three other siblings, was decidedly working-class. Orton was eager to escape Leicester, where he lived until he was eighteen years old, and the “emotional wasteland of his family.”

Orton got his chance to leave in May 1951, when he moved to London to attend RADA, the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. It was there that he met, and soon moved in with, Kenneth Halliwell, an older man who was also interested in writing (but who never did get published). Halliwell became a sort of mentor for Orton, who was also interested in writing. In 1959, the pair moved to a new flat in Islington, and continued to struggle as writers. During this period of frustration, Orton and Halliwell stole books from the Islington Library and defaced them with fake blurbs and collage art on the covers. In...
May 1962, they were arrested and sentenced to six months in prison. The jail experience would prove to be a turning point for Orton, who discovered the authorial distance that he needed in his work. In 1963 came his first publication, the radio-play, *The Ruffian on the Stair*. From that point, Orton emerged from Halliwell’s shadow. *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* was very well-received, as was the 1966 revival of *Loot*. The playwright was working on a deal with producer, Oscar Lewenstein, for the Beatles’ *Up Against It* script in July 1967, as well as getting initial reactions to the script of *What the Butler Saw* when, in the early hours of August 9, 1967, the night before Orton was to meet with Lewenstein and director, Richard Lester, about the movie project, Halliwell bludgeoned Orton to death with a hammer while the latter slept, then killed himself, cutting short the life of the young and prolific playwright in his prime.
Before the mid-1900s, the United Kingdom had the largest and most powerful empire the world had ever seen, in power for over 200 years. In 1947, however, Britain withdrew from its colonial outpost of India—the first indication of the Empire’s end. In the following years, through the early 1960s, Britain backed out of most of its remaining colonies to avoid the cost of engaging with the local nationalist movements that had arisen. By the late 1960s, the Empire had mostly been broken up and since then, Britain has been forced to come to terms with its imperial legacy. It is against this backdrop that Orton wrote and lived.

According to the introduction to a collection of teaching resources on Britain’s 1960s, the seeming liberalization of British society was in contrast to the tight economic situation. Prime Minister Harold Wilson devalued the pound in 1967, an act which hinted at the difficult times of the 1970s. Additionally, the obscenity trial of D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* in 1960 was representative of the conflicting ideologies of permissiveness and tradition. The verdict delivered, however, was “not guilty”, which opened the doors for more explicit content published in Britain. In the same decade, divorce laws were reformed, abortion legalized, and homosexuality decriminalized.

The late 1960s were also an important time for women’s rights, when the Women’s Liberation Movement came to the forefront of the feminist cause in Britain. The oral contraceptive, widely known as The Pill, became available in England in the late ’60s in the US in 1960, and for married women in the UK in 1961. The Pill gave women more sexual freedom and changed relationship dynamics, as women were able to take charge of their own reproductive health. On the heels of the American author Betty Friedan’s extremely influential 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*, came what is known as “second-wave feminism”. Jenni Murray, host of the BBC program “Woman’s Hour”, describes this movement as a time when “women were saying that what is most personal is political and they were questioning and redefining their roles as wives, mothers, workers and lovers in the light of their own experience, rather than through men’s eyes.” The movement advocated for the individual choice for every woman to decide her own personal and political identity.

The two biggest pop culture events of the 1960s were surely the establishment of The Beatles and the premiere of the television serial, *Doctor Who*. The Beatles were formed in Liverpool in 1960, and grew to become arguably one of the most popular musical groups of all time. By the time Joe Orton was approached to write their *Up Against It* screenplay, there had already been two Beatles films—*A Hard Day’s Night* and *Help!*, and there would be two more movies in that decade alone. In November 1963, another long-running and incredibly well-known cultural phenomenon first aired—the first episode of the British science fiction show, “Doctor Who.” Besides one fifteen-year break between 1989 and its revival in 2005, “Doctor Who” has been running almost continuously since that first episode in 1963. It is an influential part of British popular culture and has had a significant international viewership as well. Scottish actor, David Tennant, who was the Tenth Doctor from 2005 to 2010, played the role of Nicholas Beckett in the 1995 Royal National Theatre production of *What the Butler Saw*.
English farces...although more reliant [than the nineteenth-century French farces of Labiche and Feydeau] on eccentricity or playfulness of character and language...share an enactment of accelerating social or sexual transgressions, creating opportunities for physical comedy, and generating an embarrassing or dangerous madness released in audience laughter. Rapid entrances, exits, concealments and chases contained within precise settings furnish immediate physical demonstration of social transgressions, complemented by transgressions of dress or costume and verbally by transgressive puns, double entendres and nonsense."

–Chambers, Colin, ed. The Continuum Companion to Twentieth Century Theatre

The title of this work, What the Butler Saw, seems to refer to the early 1900s erotic film of the same name. This Mutoscope movie invited viewers to look through a slot at a woman undressing in her bedroom. It plays on the idea of a household’s butler sneaking a peek at certain bedroom activities; the title implies a playful breaking of societal rules that would have appealed to Joe Orton’s sense of humor. The title of this work, What the Butler Saw, seems to refer to the early 1900s erotic film of the same name. This Mutoscope movie invited viewers to look through a slot at a woman undressing in her bedroom. It plays on the idea of a household’s butler sneaking a peek at certain bedroom activities; the title implies a playful breaking of societal rules that would have appealed to Joe Orton’s sense of humor.

Sir Winston Churchill (1874-1965) was the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1940-45 and again from 1951-55. He was the wartime head of Britain during World War Two, the conflict referred to in What the Butler Saw, and his public speeches, motivating the British people to deal with the unfolding conflict, are considered masterpieces of political oratory. Churchill was revered by many in the U.K. as being a strong leader in the face of national adversity. He was known for his love of Cuban cigars, and there is, in fact, a cigar named in his honor.

CAST

Dr. Prentice  Ian Von Fange
Geraldine Barclay  Kathryn Loveless
Mrs. Prentice  Halle Burns
Nicholas Beckett  Michael Tamburrino
Dr. Rance  Daniel Mensel
Sgt. Match  Alberto Carrillo Casas
Until 1967, it was illegal to be homosexual in England. The playwright Oscar Wilde, for example, was accused (by his lover’s father) and arrested on charges of sodomy and gross indecency and was sentenced to two years of hard labor in 1895. England did not decriminalize homosexuality until July 1967 through the Sexual Offences Act. This law stated that “homosexual acts” would not be considered an offence provided that both parties were consenting and at least twenty-one years of age. However, it also made clear that sex with more than two people or sex in public lavatories was still illegal. Additionally, the age of consent was higher than that for heterosexual acts, which was sixteen years of age. As the Imperial College London’s page on “A History of LGBT Rights in the UK” notes, the condition of the Sexual Offences Act prohibiting sex with multiple people or in public places “was interpreted strictly by the courts, which took it to exclude acts taking place in a room in a hotel, for example, and in private homes where a third person was present (even if that person was in a different room).” It is debatable whether or not this act actually affected any real change.

A famously promiscuous gay man, Joe Orton writes very descriptive accounts in his diaries about his various sexual encounters, and it is clear that many of these escapades did involve several men, and he had sex in quite a few public lavatories (an act known as “cottageing”), in alleys, and with young men when holidaying in Tangiers. Even though Orton appeared to be free to pursue his sexual desires, homosexuality was still illegal at the time, and disapproved of by the general society. When he and Halliwell were sentenced to six months in prison for the crime of defacing library books, Orton stated that the severity of their sentence was “because we were queers.”
John Lahr's biography of Joe Orton, *Prick Up Your Ears*, was published in 1978 and chronicles the life and works of Joe Orton. Lahr (b. 12 July 1941) is a writer and critic for the New Yorker and the author of several biographies and collections of criticisms and two novels, and the editor of *The Orton Diaries*. He is also the son of Bert Lahr, who famously played the Cowardly Lion in *The Wizard of Oz*. An engaging and insightful book, *Prick Up Your Ears*, details Orton's early life and relationship to his family, his relationship with Kenneth Halliwell, and, most of all, his ambition as a young actor and writer and his achievements as a playwright. Lahr spends a great deal of time analyzing *Entertaining Mr Sloane*, *Loot*, and *What the Butler Saw*, pointing out some of the major themes in Orton's work, such as open sexuality, farcical double entendres and other language play, and a hatred for the constant societal concern of propriety.

Lahr describes *What the Butler Saw* as a play that "satirizes analytic omniscience while making panic look like reason." He draws a connection between Orton's founding relationship with Halliwell and the characters of *What the Butler Saw*, saying that "the struggle between license and control, identity and invisibility, consciousness and 'self-consciousness' is at the core of the play's desperation—a mirror image of Orton's own struggle with Halliwell's neurotic problems." In Lahr's assessment, Halliwell's loss of identity and lack of acknowledgment on Orton's part is reflected in the identity loss and denial of humanity that constantly is played out in *Butler*.

*Lahr* in *Prick Up Your Ears* was made into a film in 1987, starring Gary Oldman as Joe Orton and Alfred Molina as Halliwell. The narrative of the movie was framed by Lahr's (Wallace Shawn) research on the biography with the help of Orton's renowned literary agent, Margaret (Peggy) Ramsay (played by Vanessa Redgrave).

Joe Orton and Kenneth Halliwell (23 June 1926–9 August 1967) met in May 1951 when Orton began attending the Royal Academy for Dramatic Arts (RADA). Orton moved in with him shortly afterwards, and they remained lovers for fifteen years until their deaths. Halliwell, according to John Lahr, "affected a sinister superiority." Seven years older than Orton, he had a shaved head and extreme insecurity and anger that would, in the end, prove to be murderous. Halliwell was particularly insecure in the face of Orton's success as a playwright—Halliwell was a perpetual literary failure. His reaction was to affect a kind of neurotic domesticity that Orton hated; their strained relationship was obvious to close friends. Halliwell felt rejected from the world, and especially from Orton's social sphere, and this anger cycled back and forth between periods of Orton's celebration of a new production. At last, overwhelmed by his insecurity and seriously unstable mental condition, Halliwell bludgeoned Orton to death with nine hammer blows to the head, and then committed suicide from an overdose of Nembutal.

John Lahr's biography of Joe Orton, *Prick Up Your Ears*, was published in 1978 and chronicles the life and works of Joe Orton.
Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) was an Austrian psychologist who was instrumental in developing some of the most influential psychological theories in the history of the field. He is best-known for his theories on the tripartite structure of the mind, repression, and the Oedipus complex. His concepts gave rise to the field of psychoanalysis, a practice of therapy that attempted to balance the three elements of the mind (the id, ego, and super-ego) and address sexual neuroses and repressed troubles. What the Butler Saw is chock-full of references to Freud; it is no coincidence that Dr. Rance’s diagnosis happens to frame the absurd events of the play using Freudian concepts of repression, childhood sexual abuse, and symbolism.

According to Freud, the main causes of mental turmoil were unconscious mental states, and he held that sexual drives were central to human behavior and desires. He also determined phases in child mental development, proposing three stages: oral, anal, and phallic. It is in this last stage that the commonly-alluded to “Oedipus complex” can come into play, when a child “develops a deep sexual attraction for the parent of the opposite sex, and a hatred of the parent of the same sex.” Alongside this complex is the “castration anxiety” that can come from fear of the father should the child continue pursuing his sexual attraction to the mother. Past this point, the child enters a stage of latency until puberty.

Psychoanalysis involves, in part, allowing the patient to speak freely about their condition so the psychiatrist can try and discover any unconscious causes of the issue plaguing the person. Freud felt that the interpretation of dreams and slips of the tongue would reveal the underlying thoughts in the patient’s mind. These, he believed, reveal the unguarded mind when the super-ego is not restraining the id and so repressed drives and subconscious conflicts are transformed into dreams that the psychiatrist can then interpret and use to diagnose the patient. It is alleged that the reason Freud suggested the theory of a sexually repressed subconscious is because it was a cover-up of his discovery of high rates of child sexual abuse, especially of young girls. Whatever the reason, psychoanalysis and Freud’s general structure of the mind are theories that are still used in psychotherapy today.