

## ***Look Back in Anger* by John Osborne**

The first production of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* in 1956 provoked a major controversy. There were those, like the *Observer* newspaper's influential critic Kenneth Tynan, who saw it as the first totally original play of a new generation. There were others who hated both it and the world that Osborne was showing them. But even these critics acknowledged that the play, written in just one month, marked a new voice on the British stage.

Howard Brenton, writing in the *Independent* newspaper at the time of Osborne's death in 1994, said, "When somebody breaks the mould so comprehensively it's difficult to describe what it feels like". In the same paper, Arnold Wesker described Osborne as having "opened the doors of theatres for all the succeeding generations of writers".

*Look Back in Anger* came to exemplify a reaction to the affected drawing-room comedies of Noel Coward, Terrence Rattigan and others, which dominated the West End stage in the early 1950s. Coward et al wrote about an affluent bourgeoisie at play in the drawing rooms of their country homes, or sections of the upper middle class comfortable in suburbia. Osborne and the writers who followed him were looking at the working class or the lower middle class, struggling with their existence in bedsits or terraces.

The "kitchen sink" dramatists—as their style of domestic realism became to be known—sought to convey the language of everyday speech, and to shock with its bluntness. Eric Keown, reviewing *Look Back in Anger* in *Punch* magazine at the time, wrote that Osborne "draws liberally on the vocabulary of the intestines and laces his tirades with the steamier epithets of the tripe butcher".

### **The play**

The three-act play takes place in a one-bedroom flat in the Midlands. Jimmy Porter, lower middle-class, university-educated, lives with his wife Alison, the daughter of a retired Colonel in the British Army in India. His friend Cliff Lewis, who helps Jimmy run a sweet stall, lives with them. Jimmy, intellectually restless and thwarted, reads the papers, argues and taunts his friends over their acceptance of the world around them. He rages to the point of violence, reserving much of his bile for Alison's friends and family. The situation is exacerbated by the arrival of Helena, an actress friend of Alison's from school. Appalled at what she finds, Helena calls Alison's father to take her away from the flat. He arrives while Jimmy is visiting the mother of a friend and takes Alison away. As soon as she has gone, Helena moves in with Jimmy. Alison returns to visit, having lost Jimmy's baby. Helena can no longer stand living with Jimmy and leaves. Finally Alison returns to Jimmy and his angry life.

The problems, which even a fine revival like this production has, are with the melodramatic qualities of the narrative. Osborne's script became almost a template for the new school of writers, and it is difficult to present his work without being aware that there is a faint whiff of formula about it. But despite the plot's shortcomings (which were recognised even by such a fierce admirer as Tynan), it still has the power to startle. There was an audible intake of breath from the audience when Jimmy fell into Helena's arms. Thanks to a fine performance from William Gaunt the sympathy felt by Colonel Redfern, Alison's father, for Jimmy came as a revelation, but still totally understandable within the framework of the play.

The language, too, still has the power to shock, such as when Jimmy, unaware of Alison's pregnancy, says to her:

"If only something—something would happen to you, and wake you out of your beauty sleep! If you could have a child, and it would die. Let it grow, let a recognisable human face emerge from that little mass of India rubber and wrinkles. Please—if only I could watch you face that. I wonder if you might even become a recognisable human being yourself. But I doubt it."

It is a tribute to Gregory Hersov's direction and Michael Sheen's performance as Jimmy that this does not seem overblown or ridiculous.

Some of the imagery and language doesn't travel too well historically and reflects only the preoccupations of the era. It is difficult, for example, to imagine jazz being quite as exotic as it is for Jimmy. Or to understand the intellectual courage of saying about a gay man, "He's like a man with a strawberry mark—he keeps thrusting it in your face because he can't believe it doesn't interest or horrifies you particularly. As if I give a damn which way he likes his meat served up". At the time homosexuality was still illegal in Britain.

The production stays close to Osborne's original stage-image. This enables it to show the play as standing at a crossroads both of the British stage and also of political and historical epochs. Before the show, the title is projected onto the curtains like a jazz album cover. Between scenes, wreaths of cigarette smoke rise up the curtains. An era is evoked. Matilda Ziegler's Helena also captures a lost period of weekly repertory theatre, of companies travelling the country with precisely the sort of play that *Look Back in Anger* was attacking; a world evoked with such nostalgia in *The Dresser*. It was a time when actors auditioned in suits or the sort of starched twin-pieces that Helena wears before she moves in with Jimmy. The admiration of William Gaunt's Colonel Redfern for Jimmy's principles and his amusement at Jimmy's description of Mrs Redfern as "an overfed, overprivileged old bitch", are set against his total lack of comprehension of what Jimmy's life actually means. Alison says to him "You're hurt because everything is changed. Jimmy is hurt because everything is the same. And neither of you can face it. Something's gone wrong somewhere, hasn't it?" Or as it was put in a *Daily Express* article from December 1959 which is quoted in the programme: "Out of this decade has come the Illusion of Comfort, and we have lost the sense of life's difficulty".

It is clear from Osborne's script that there was no lack of a sense of life's difficulties around at the time. But the emphasis had shifted from the martyred expressions of the British ruling class and their "white man's burden", as represented in Colonel Redfern, to a more serious appraisal of life for those outside that ruling class. Emma Fielding does a good job playing Alison, who has grown up with the one attitude but has been forced by her situation into the other. Fielding gives a good performance as the woman who tolerates Jimmy's invective, living constantly with the threat of something erupting in front of her. Helena on the other hand ultimately cannot stay with Jimmy precisely because of the destruction of all her old certainties.

Perhaps the only truly sympathetic character in the play is Cliff, here excellently played by Jason Hughes. From his role as Jimmy's foil in the early exchanges, to appearing as Alison's real friend, to the point when he decides that he does not want to stay in the flat, Hughes gives a magnificent portrayal of solidness. Whilst Alison is forced to accept Jimmy's rages because her family background has robbed her of any other viable option, Hughes shows us Cliff as someone who is keeping the peace by hiding his real character—by playing along with all the games.

In Jimmy Porter, Osborne created what came to be seen as a model of the "angry young man"—railing at the lack of passion of his age, entreating Alison and Cliff to show some enthusiasm. He is marvellously, unreasonably idealistic in a wildly unfocussed way. Kenneth Tynan, who described Jimmy as "the completes young pup in our literature since Hamlet", criticised those who attacked the recklessness of Jimmy's attacks. "Is Jimmy's anger justified? Why doesn't he do something? These questions might be relevant if the character had failed to come to life; in the presence of such evident and blazing vitality, I marvel at the pedantry that could ask them. Why don't Chekhov's people do something? Is the sun justified in scorching us?"

It is just this "evident and blazing vitality" that Michael Sheen represents so well. Spluttering with indignation, retreating into his pseudo-literary takes on vaudeville, firing off his vindictive gags almost because he can do nothing else. Osborne, throughout his work, was fascinated by end-of-pier music hall and vaudeville. In *The Entertainer*, one year later, he used vaudeville and its washed-up performer Archie Rice in a brilliant take on the crisis in post-war British society. Here he

has Jimmy and Cliff performs a variety-style number, "Don't be afraid to sleep with your sweetheart just because she's better than you", as well as trading cheap cracks in true hackneyed music hall style.

More than any other writer of his generation, Osborne was fascinated by the tragedy lurking at the heart of the light entertainment performance. Michael Sheen adds another layer to this in his spluttering soliloquies, carrying with them an echo of Tony Hancock's ridiculous suburban pretensions. It is a fascinating comparison: Hancock, the parodist of lower-middle-class aspirations, and Jimmy Porter, the raging expression of the frustrations of the lower middle class. Sheen has a lightness of touch that suits Jimmy's failed jokes and misplaced comments, as well as his more furious denunciations of the absence of passion.

The impact Osborne had on British theatre is incalculable. With *Look Back in Anger* he brought class as an issue before British audiences. Under Hersov's direction, Sheen articulates the realisation of a man who has reached the limits of the possibilities open to him but is struggling to retain his dignity. "Why don't we have a little game?" he asks. "Let's pretend that we're human beings, and that we're actually alive". Sheen gives a marvellous performance of a man running in circles trying to find a way out.

Osborne has often been criticised for not seeing a way out, and not explaining more carefully the crisis in which Jimmy finds himself. Robert Wright, reviewing the first production in the *Star*, wrote "He obviously wants to shake us into thinking but we are never quite clear what it is he wants us to think about. Is it the Class Struggle or simply sex?" This incoherence in Jimmy's rage is both strength and a limitation to the play.

It is apparent from the text that Osborne recognised this limitation, even tacitly. Helena criticises Jimmy, saying, "There's no place for people like that any longer—in sex, or politics, or anything. That's why he's so futile.... He doesn't know where he is, or where he's going. He'll never do anything, and he'll never amount to anything." It seems almost a recognition that within his own work there are insufficient answers. This goes hand-in-hand with Jimmy's statement that "people of our generation aren't able to die for good causes any longer.... There aren't any good, brave causes left."

Such a statement could be read as the voice of pessimistic nihilism. Writing about Celine's novel *Journey to the End of Night*, Trotsky described it as "a book dictated by terror in the face of life, and weariness of it, rather than by indignation. Active indignation is linked up with hope. In Celine's book there is no hope." That is clearly not the case here. Jimmy yearns for passion, and clings to the idea of it. When Alison returns to him he tells her "I may be a lost cause, but I thought if you loved me, it needn't matter." There is a vision, however confused, of the possibilities of human existence. What makes Jimmy's statement so interesting is precisely the historical context in which it occurs.

Kenneth Tynan, who referred to the play's "instinctive leftishness" in his *Observer* review, wrote in a piece on "The Angry Young Movement" that Jimmy Porter "represented the dismay of many young Britons ... who came of age under a Socialist government, yet found, when they went out into the world, that the class system was still mysteriously intact."

It is the mistaken association of the post-war Labour government with the failure of socialism per se that accounts for Porter's frustration. Osborne, active in various protests at the time, such as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, articulated his own sentiments through his lead character. In this respect, it is possible to see in the play expressions of the political impasse that had been reached in Britain during the 1950s, as a result of the domination of intellectual life by Stalinism and social democracy.

Nonetheless, it is also possible to see a challenge, albeit confused and unclear, to that impasse. There remains somewhere at the play's core, even if it cannot be explained, hope. There remains a belief that somehow people can survive the worst and perhaps even overcome it; a belief in humanity, and the possibility of a way forward.

## **CHARACTERS**

### **Helena Charles**

Helena is Alison's friend, a very proper middle-class woman. She is an actress who comes to stay with the Porters while she performs in a play at the local theatre. Jimmy has long despised her, as he considers her a member of the Establishment. When she contacts Alison's father and asks him to take Alison home, Helena seems genuinely concerned about Alison. However, she seduces Jimmy and replaces Alison in the household. When Alison returns, Helena realizes that her affair with Jimmy is wrong and decides to leave

## **THEMES**

### **Alienation and Loneliness**

Jimmy Porter spoke for a large segment of the British population in 1956 when he ranted about his alienation from a society in which he was denied any meaningful role. Although he was educated at a "white-tile" university, a reference to the newest and least prestigious universities in the United Kingdom, the real power and opportunities were reserved for the children of the Establishment, those born to privilege, family connections, and entree to the "right" schools. Part of the "code" of the Establishment was the "stiff upper lip," that reticence to show...

*Look Back in Anger* (1956) is by far the most famous of John Osborne's plays. It was the foundational work of the genre for which the term "kitchen-sink drama" was coined. The gritty realism of its setting represented a revolution in the British theatre, one which gave to the play when it was first produced a political and cultural significance which it is hard to comprehend nearly 50 years later. The play was perceived as giving voice to a frustrated and politically and culturally disenfranchised constituency – the lower-middle-class, first-generation graduates whose literary heroes, including Osborne, became known as the Angry Young Men

The play describes 1950s life in an East Midlands bed-sitting room among the underemployed graduate classes. The extreme unglamorous of the setting alone represented something of a break from theatrical tradition. The central character, Jimmy Porter, turns a sort of rancorous verbal machine-gun on all those around him, as well as anything and anyone that they hold dear. In Jimmy Porter, Osborne is engaging in the first of several exercises in self-portraiture which characterize his major plays. The portrayal is vivid; Jimmy Porter's language crackles with acid energy as he hurls grenades of invective. He also embodies the frustrations of a particular age and class, a generation of young men who had attempted to leave behind their working-class origins, using higher education as the means by which to do so. The problem was that, once these men arrived in the promised land of the educated middle classes, they found (or pretended to find) that the promise had been a hollow one, and that the real, worthwhile privileges had carefully been retained within the inaccessible citadels of a class-ridden Establishment. That, at least, is one version of the play's theme. An alternative point of view would condemn Jimmy, first for his sheer futility, and then for his general unpleasantness, finally for the nastiness of his attempts to dominate the women in his life.

This three-act, single-set play opens with Jimmy, his wife Alison and his friend Cliff. Jimmy spends Act I baiting Alison and Cliff in a tour de force of childlike egotism. Jimmy and Cliff spend most of the Act sitting around with the Sunday newspapers, while Alison, wearing one of Jimmy's shirts, irons clothes. In Act II, Alison's friend Helena arrives, and her presence rouses Jimmy to verbal excesses arguably even greater than those he had perpetrated in Act I. Helena persuades Alison to leave Jimmy, and then takes her place as his lover. Act III opens with Jimmy and Cliff sitting around with newspapers, while Helena, wearing one of Jimmy's shirts, irons clothes. Then Alison returns. It transpires that, unknown to Jimmy; she has been carrying his child which has then

miscarried. In a less than convincing fit of conscientiously doing the right thing, Helena departs, leaving the field to Alison. Alison then totally abases herself before Jimmy, and he accepts this abasement as if it were his natural right. Finally, however, Jimmy evidently finds nothing more to rage about, Alison no longer constituting an adequate target for his invective, and the play ends with Jimmy and Alison retreating into an infantile role-play game of Bears and Squirrels.

The visual symbolism of the two women successively ironing clothes while wearing one of Jimmy's shirts might promise some kind of feminist motif. However, the play's sympathies are so determinedly with the character of Jimmy, that any such potential gender-political irony is dissolved. One of the criticisms most often levelled at the play is that it is not apparent what Jimmy Porter is angry about. For Osborne, the answer seems to lie in Jimmy's Act III speech:

I suppose people of our generation aren't able to die for good causes any longer. We had all that done for us, in the thirties and the forties, when we were still kids. There aren't any good, brave causes left.

Thus, Jimmy's anger arises from a sense of having missed out on the opportunities for idealism, or heroism, or at least for action of some sort, that had been provided to the previous generation first by the antifascist struggles of the 1930s, and then by the Second World War. There has been wide acceptance of this explanation of Jimmy Porter's anger as having its origins in the absence of opportunities for glory. However, this acceptance needs to be tempered by the observation that, far from an absence of "good brave causes", the 1950s saw a substantial array of causes and awareness of them – from nuclear disarmament through to the first post-war stirrings of feminism. Nevertheless, Jimmy's frustration must be allowed to stand on its own terms. That said, perhaps insufficient critical attention has been paid to the first and last sentences of this same Act III speech, which are: "Why, why, why, why do we let these women bleed us to death?" and "No, there's nothing for it, me boy, but to let yourself be butchered by the women". On this basis. There seems little doubt as to where Jimmy Porter seeks to lay the blame for his anger and frustration.

That Act III speech is one delivered by Jimmy in relatively cool, reflective mode. When he is allowing his anger to show, on the other hand, he becomes positively vicious: "If you could have a child, and it would die" he prophetically wishes upon Alison, in the course of a speech in which he also speaks of her "distended, overfed tripes", before concluding Act I with "she'll go on sleeping and devouring until there's nothing left of me." It is clear that, through Jimmy Porter, Osborne expresses a masculine anxiety about disempowerment or spiritual emasculation, and that he places the fear of or blame for that emasculation on to women. The reality of masculine disempowerment at this time is questionable: the reality of the illusion of disempowerment is not. For men of Jimmy Porter's age and class, a unique cocktail of factors was coming together to fuel a sense of rage and frustration: while they had been too young to acquire cachet by fighting in World War Two, they were expected to participate in the new domestication which was perceived as constituting the just deserts of returning heroes. Well-behaved domestication was very much at odds with the peculiarly masculinist culture that prevailed, a result of the combined effects of the extreme homosociality bred by National Service, a politically determined effort to devalue women in employment and an hysterical national homophobia. Meanwhile, Britain's international role was plainly in decline with the end of empire and the futile attempt to demonstrate national virility represented by the disastrous Suez adventure of 1956; a symptom at national level of the same malaise that Jimmy Porter was suffering at the personal level. Thus it is the case that Osborne succeeded in capturing in Jimmy Porter the prevailing state of mind among a significant body of disenchanted young men of the 1950s. The genius of the play lies in Jimmy Porter's embodiment of this masculine angst.

The first production of *Look Back in Anger*, in May 1956, was regarded as a turning point in British theatre by many of the critics from the late 1950s onwards. Notoriously, the critic Kenneth Tynan wrote in his review in *The Observer* that "I doubt if I could love anyone who did not wish to see *Look Back in Anger*. It is the best young play of its decade". Subsequently, in the 1990s, a more hostile critical opinion of the play prevailed. Among the criticisms expressed in the 1990s was the

theory that a spirit of misogynistic masculinism seemed to inspire both the play and the earlier body of critical opinion. A legend had arisen that the play had electrified audiences and critics alike from its first performance. The more level-headed revisionists pointed out that the initial press reception had in fact been less than ecstatic, the first reviews being mixed or hostile, or at best identifying Osborne as a potential future talent. Tynan's review had been the exception, but had been extraordinarily influential both on public opinion during the latter part of the play's initial run in 1956, and on much academic opinion for the better part of the next three decades. However, Tynan, it was later suggested, had conspired with George Devine, the then guiding light of the Royal Court Theatre, to endeavour to cleanse the London theatre of excessive homosexual influence. On that basis, Tynan's enthusiasm for *Look Back in Anger* should be seen as a part of a much larger exercise in heterosexualization and masculinization of the mid-1950s theatre. Neither the adulatory response to the play in the late 1950s and 1960s, nor the later hostile revisionism conveys an adequate view of the play, however. Even if the initial critical reaction was not nearly as enthusiastic as legend subsequently accounted it to have been, individual recollections of the play's first performances indicate an invigorating revelation, an awareness of startling innovation.

Anybody seeking an explanation for the play's contemporary success needs look no further than the immediacy, energy, and sheer fun of some of Osborne's linguistic fireworks. In a speech untainted by the misogyny that raises question marks over much of the play, Cliff shows what fun Osborne is capable of having with linguistic parody:

You're like a sexual maniac – only with you it's food. You'll end up in the *News of the World*, boy, you wait. James Porter, aged twenty-five, was bound over last week after pleading guilty to interfering with a small cabbage and two tins of beans on his way home from the Builder's Arms.

Thus far, the play's success and influence can readily be accounted for. Whether this success and influence were achieved because of or in spite of Jimmy Porter's misogyny, however, are another matter, and a difficult one, especially given how extreme the misogyny sounds to early-21st-century ears. If Osborne's characterization of Jimmy Porter accurately captured the spirit of the age in other respects, then the question arises as to whether that spirit might have been, in fact, as misogynistic as he was. Some clue to the answer is to be found in the contemporary reviews of the play. Although some of these reviews note that Jimmy behaves unchivalrously, or boorishly, or even sado-masochistically towards Alison, there is little in the way of suggestion that this behaviour should be regarded as remarkable – distasteful, perhaps, but by no means out of the way. It follows that the misogyny may well be one more respect in which Osborne succeeded in representing in the theatre the spirit of the age, and infusing it with Jimmy's vitality and immediacy.

It is in any case clear that in its day the play had tremendous cultural impact and, because of that impact, it constituted a turning-point in the history of post-war British theatre. A number of playwrights have cited *Look Back in Anger* as a substantial influence on their work. Perhaps the most significant example is Arnold Wesker, who specifically refers to the play's stimulus on the writing of his own *Chicken Soup with Barley* (1958). Given the changes that have since taken place in British culture and politics, however, it is unclear whether *Look Back in Anger* can nowadays be regarded as anything other than an historical artefact, an example of one of the great influences on the historical development of the British theatre, rather than a play capable of speaking directly to a 21st-century audience.