

Look Back in Anger by John Osborne. Royal National Theatre of Great Britain, London. 9 July 1999.

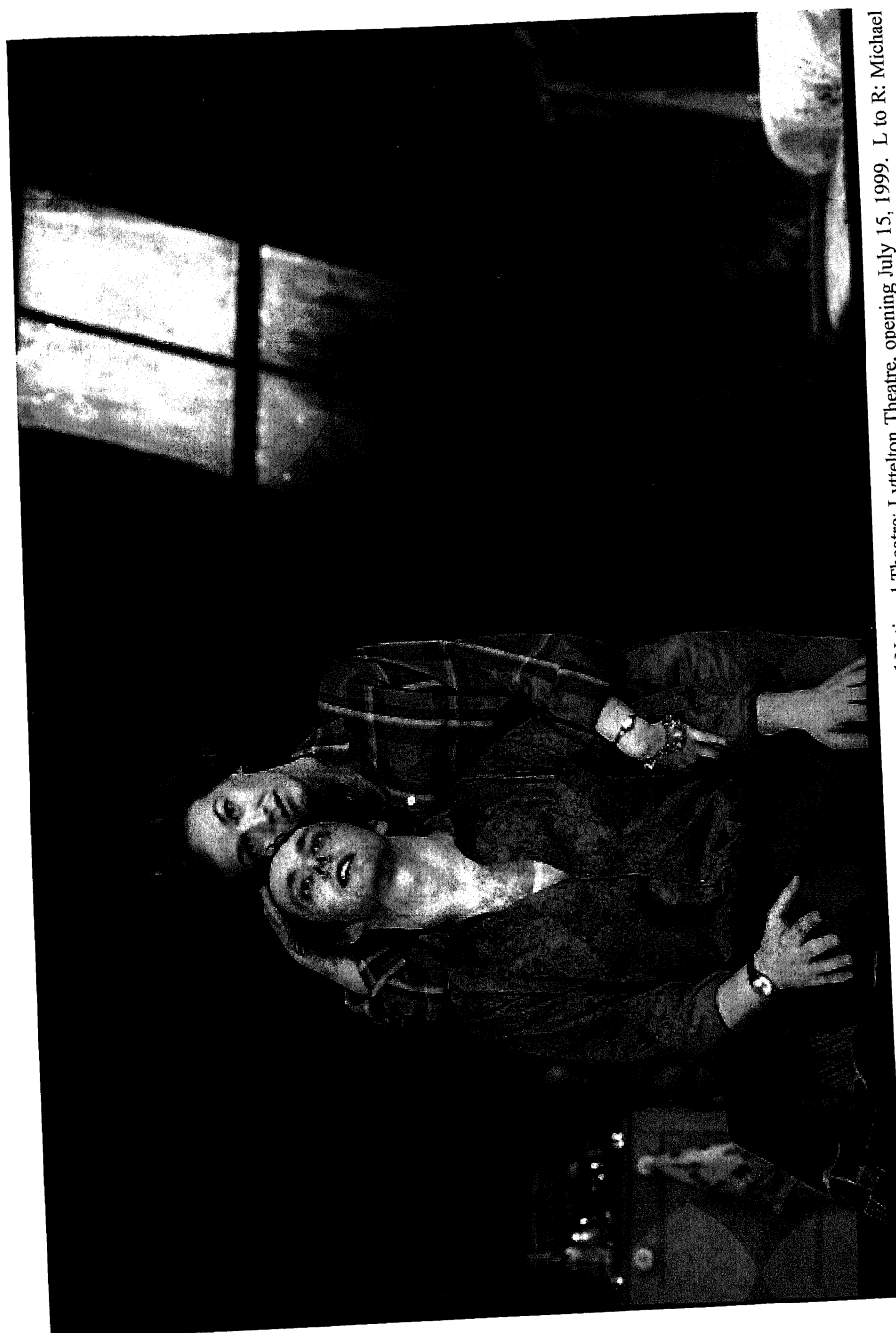
Distinctly divergent views on the historical significance of the late John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* on the development of post-World War II drama have emerged in recent years. When the play premiered on May 8, 1956, critic Kenneth Tynan called Osborne "the first spokesman in the London theatre" and insisted that *Look Back* presented "post-war youth as it really is." Writing in his journal that same year, Malcolm Muggeridge called *Look Back* "quite execrable—woman ironing, man yelling and sniveling, high brow smut, 'daring' remarks (reading from a Sunday paper; Bishop of . . . asks us all to rally round and make hydrogen bombs). Endured play up to a point where hero and heroine pretended to be squirrels." This response was most typical of the resistance to *Look Back* when it first appeared; its assault on the foundations of 1950s British culture depicted through the misalliance of two social unequals, Jimmy Potter and his wife Alison, caused controversy and consternation. Osborne himself described the ways in which the play cut its unsuspecting audience adrift from comfortable expectations. They were, he said, "like Eskimos watching a Restoration comedy." More recently, theatre historians and scholars have challenged Tynan's enthusiastic proclamations about the seminal importance of *Look Back*, pointing to the vitality of earlier plays produced by Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop in the 1940s, or by Peter Hall and the Royal Shakespeare Company in the 1960s, as at least equally significant signposts of the profound changes in the subjects and styles of post-war English-speaking plays. Whichever view prevails, the furor generated by the first performances of *Look Back* at the Royal Court Theatre has long since subsided, and its influence on subsequent British playwrights—including John Arden and David Hare—has already been absorbed or superseded by many other evolutionary changes in contemporary theatre.

Any play's impact changes with time, but its script remains the same. Quite aside from any theatrical renaissance *Look Back* may or may not have set off, after nearly forty-five years the play must now be judged on its individual merits divorced from the social circumstances that inspired it. Does *Look Back* hold up? The current production at London's National Theatre, insightfully directed by Gregory Hersov, and superbly acted by Michael Sheen and Emma Fielding, certainly suggests that *Look Back* does indeed survive its iconoclastic reputation. The play seems far less revolutionary in its style and structure than its reputation would suggest, but *Look Back* has lost none of its impact in involving and moving an audience on a more immediate and personal level.

One claim made about *Look Back*, last revived on a London stage with Kenneth Branagh and Emma Thompson in 1989, is that it signaled the demise of

the “well-made play,” however, it most certainly is one. Samuel Beckett brought profound changes to the construction of dramatic literature in the same era, but Osborne belongs to the realistic tradition Ibsen established nearly a century before. *Look Back* is a slice-of-life domestic drama that cannot be shifted out of the particular era in which it is set. It signaled the rise of the “Angry Young Man,” who expressed disenchantment about society and himself with a ferocity of feeling rarely seen on the British stage prior to the mid-1950s. From a contemporary standpoint, the plot structure seems old-fashioned and none too efficient in introducing the play’s characters and exposing its themes, and two of the three secondary characters, Helena Charles and Colonel Redfern, are seriously underdeveloped. Hersov’s persuasive and moving production, which opened officially in the National’s Lyttleton Theatre on July 15, 1999, is appropriately sharing this venue with a revival of Noël Coward’s glossy 1930 comedy, *Private Lives*. This provides an apt and instructive comparison between 1930s and 1950s British theatre, since Coward’s gossamer drawing-room witticisms were exactly what Osborne aimed to supplant with *Look Back*. In his diary, Coward wrote of *Look Back* that it “is full of talent and fairly well constructed, but I wish I knew why the hero is so dreadfully cross and what about? I expect my bewilderment is because I am very old indeed and cannot understand why the younger generation, instead of knocking at the door, should bash the fuck out of it.” The importance of Osborne’s emergence is that it signaled a change not in social beliefs—those were already changing on their own—but in the way social dialogue could be conducted on the stage.

Hersov’s production of *Look Back* owes most of its effectiveness to its leading players. Sheen creates a more palpably vulnerable Jimmy than some of the character’s prior interpreters have made of him. His rants are at once hilarious, deeply disturbing, and touching; his childlike neediness and humanity are supremely evident as Jimmy’s insecurities bubble up from beneath his abrasive manner. His tirades are used as either a goad or a defense against his own inertia, as well as the emotional frigidity of Alison. Jimmy’s rampant self-centeredness is mixed up with his obsessive love of a wife he believes—rightly so—cannot love him as much as he needs to be loved. She will not—and apparently cannot—acquiesce to his demands, for she has not suffered the sort of heartbreaks and disillusionments that Jimmy has. Despite his attempts to verbally batter her, she resists his attempts to break through her emotional barriers. Sheen makes Jimmy’s self-hatred over the injuries he attempts to inflict on Alison, as well as on their friend Cliff, a driving force in this characterization. Some of his resentment against Alison is due to the class differences between them and he is full of what Tynan called an “impulsive, unargued leftishness, his anarchic sense of humor . . . his suspicion that all the brave causes had either been won or discredited” is central to his persona, as is his belief that the class system that placed him at the bottom remained intact and, to some extent, is represented by his wife. Jimmy is frequently referred to as



Look Back in Anger by John Osborne, Directed by Gregory Hersov. Royal National Theatre: Lyttelton Theatre, opening July 15, 1999. L to R: Michael Sheen (Jimmy Porter), Matilda Ziegler (Helena Charles). (Photo by Ivan Zyncl.)



Look Back in Anger by John Osborne, Directed by Gregory Hersov. Royal National Theatre: Lyttelton Theatre, opening July 15, 1999. L to R: Emma Fielding (Alison Porter). (Photo by Ivan Zyncl.)

a “mouthpiece for his generation”; a human symbol Tynan described as “the completest young pup in our literature since Hamlet.” The socio-political targets of Jimmy’s rancor have dated, as Osborne explored when he revisited the character in *Deja Vu* (1992), but his misogyny and anger with a world that pays him and his hurts no attention reminds the viewer more of Molière’s Alceste in *The Misanthrope*, or of those melancholy misfits Malvolio and Falstaff, than it does of Hamlet.

Fielding also finds new levels in Alison who, in this production, is no besieged drudge of a housewife (although her famous ironing board is still present), as Alison is frequently described and played. Fielding deftly mixes in touches of vulnerability (mostly when Jimmy is off stage) and a pained toughness; she is no victim, which charges her battles with Jimmy. Fielding’s Alison is strong and even a bit cruel in her emotional passivity. They meet as well-matched sparring partners employing quite different tactics, and both suffer in different ways from their collisions. He rants with a savage rage, but her steely silences bristle with intensity, and her sharply delivered retorts are at least as cutting in their coldness as his caustic sarcasm is bruising. When Jimmy berates Alison as a “none too bright squirrel,” she squeaks back at him in defiance of his absurd emotional despotism. Fielding sensitively negotiates the emotional complexities and confusions of Alison’s dilemma, so that when at the end of the play she returns to Jimmy pale and stricken following a miscarriage, the impact on the audience is electrifying.

Sheen and Fielding succeed in revealing a gripping portrait of two of life’s losers inextricably bound together by a deep emotional and sexual bond that simultaneously cripples and supports them in the socially reduced circumstances in which they are irretrievably stuck. Osborne may or may not have intended to illuminate the ways in which one’s socio-political persona is indivisible from their emotional-sexual life, but Sheen and Fielding, under Hersov’s perceptive guidance, boldly open up this aspect of the play in ways that are simultaneously gut-wrenching and vital.

An evocative atmosphere is created by designer Robert Jones, whose frowsy, attic loft apartment setting is strikingly illuminated by lighting designer Howard Harrison. Although their roles offer slimmer opportunities, the supporting cast members are nearly as strong as Sheen and Fielding. Jason Hughes is a compelling and highly sympathetic Cliff, whose affection for both Jimmy and Alison leaves him in permanent limbo regarding his deeper feelings for Alison. Hughes’s individual scenes with Sheen and Fielding are among the most compelling in the production. Matilda Ziegler does reasonably well with the tricky role of Helena, who must make the implausible leap from slapping Jimmy’s face to falling into his arms in a matter of moments. She does so with admirable skill. William Gaunt brings a depth to the one-dimensional Colonel Redfern that is well beyond what Osborne provides in the text, and his moments with Alison are fraught with

the pain and helplessness of a parent who cannot relieve his child's suffering.

The National Theatre's revival of *Look Back in Anger* provides a fresh introduction to a play that transcends its period and its contested influence. It is a devastating and emotionally-charged drama of the personal tragedies that socio-economic conditions, class divisions, and human politics can visit on us all.

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