

Joe Orton: A High Comedy of Bad Manners

Joel Greenberg

Joe Orton, dubbed 'the Oscar Wilde of Welfare State Gentility' by critic Ronald Bryden, established a new kind of theatre with just three full-length plays and less than a half dozen one-act and radio plays. That so modest a body of work altered the possibilities of stage comedy is remarkable, but that the playwright spent only three years of his life, the last three years (1964-67), in his pursuit of and mastery over a unique voice is nothing short of extraordinary.

Orton was an exemplary student, whose education came not from formal training but from his inexhaustible appetite for reading, listening to radio drama, attending theatre and eavesdropping on life on the street and in the gutter. No stranger to the works of the great Restoration playwrights or Oscar Wilde, Orton eschewed the new naturalism of writers like Osborne and Wesker, preferring the indirection and obfuscation of a comedy whose ultimate aim must be to resist the predictable in order to lacerate the audience's complacency. Between 1964, with his premiere production, *Entertaining Mr. Sloane*, and 1967, when he completed the rehearsal draft of *What the Butler Saw*, Orton struck chords of outrage and delirious glee as he perfected his unique brand of high comedy which would, in his lifetime, come to be known as 'Ortonesque.'

High Comedy begins with the playwrights of the British Restoration. What is most striking about Restoration comedy is its passionate reliance on language over action, a predilection of British theatre writing that served as Orton's chief inspiration. And what Orton most valued about the Restoration period, was that it emboldened the theatre by putting sex on the stage as it had not been presented before. Innuendo, a popular device for enlivening a scene onstage, was a principal component of Restoration comedy. And while the freedom to speak lewd and carnal thoughts aloud was unique, the event was made more potent with female characters for the first time being played by women. A sexual charge, with many scenes even suggesting the sexual act itself, was created by a perfect balance of heightened language and emphatic self-adoration.

In Orton's world, people respected the impact of a well-chosen phrase, but unlike the Restoration's focus on high society, Orton's characters were drawn from many social layers, the disenfranchised as much as the well-born.

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Following the Restoration, the Comedy of Manners re-emerged with writers such as Sheridan and Wilde. The best-known and most frequently studied and performed of these playwrights' works reveal society's delight at seeing itself reflected through a mirror crystal-clear that paradoxically warps the displayed middle-class values and got away with it because his audience was exhilarated at the same time as it was offended. Orton, a keen admirer of Wilde's dexterity, noted that in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, for example, Wilde shuffled an assortment of characters whose verbal jousting could sustain a threadbare plot, because what they said was infinitely more valuable and entertaining than who they were or what they did. (*Earnest*, in fact, may be the single pre-Orton play to succeed on its epigrammatic wordsmithery alone.) And Orton, like Wilde, would, in his plays, find the key to releasing the audience by driving them almost mad with laughter. But while Orton understood and appreciated Wilde's professional mastery, borrowing heavily from him as he experimented with his own comic to-and-fro, he always believed that Wilde's attempt to closet his private life blocked rather than served him.

Precisely what it was that contributed to Orton's arsenal of contempt and outrageous mischief, and why it was the theatre that was his medium of choice, is speculative. As logical as Orton's nightmare scenarios are, his own life appears to have been an illogical blueprint for his startling career.

Orton grew up in Manchester, in a lower middle-class family, the eldest of four children. His father was ineffectual, lavishing more care on his garden than on his own family. (Except for *What the Butler Saw*, all Orton's older male characters reflect elements of his father.) His mother was the family's dominant force and her unceasing efforts to reach respectable middle-class status provided Orton with material enough to create several hideous matrons in his scripts. He escaped to London where he was accepted into RADA, an experience he dismissed except for the fact that it was there he met Kenneth Halliwell, the man with whom he would spend the rest of his life. (Halliwell was also the man who would eventually murder Orton and then commit suicide.) Halliwell, for his part, tutored Orton by assigning him books to read, and together they embarked on writing a series of novels that never saw publication during their lifetimes.

In the early sixties, both men were imprisoned for defacing a number of library books, but upon his release Orton emerged transformed and playwriting had become his single obsession. Though this sudden change is impossible to explain, the imprisonment released in Orton any self-censorship or lack of worth that he may have harboured previously. Orton wrote: "Before, I had been vaguely conscious of something rotten somewhere; prison crystallized this. The old whore society lifted up her skirts, and the stench was pretty foul. Not that the actual prison treatment was bad; but it was a revelation of what really lies under the surface of our industrialized society." Further exploring how the jail experience fed into his

newfound gifts, Orton stated: "Being in the nick brought detachment to my writing. I wasn't involved any more and it suddenly worked." For Orton, then, the key to his comedy, a High Comedy of Bad Manners, lay in exposing the middle-class values he had grown up to revile and the society for which he had a palpable loathing. Life in Manchester drove Orton to London; working as a young actor helped him to learn that writing was the proper focus; pre-prison life with Halliwell, sharing a cramped bedsitter and collaborating on stories that were rejected as soon as they were submitted, was replaced by a professional ascendancy and a fully liberated private life.

Entertaining Mr. Sloane, the first of Orton's plays to be produced, drew critical and public praise as much as it provoked indignation from those same constituencies. With Terrence Rattigan's influence and financial assistance, the play transferred to the West End where leading commercial producers damned its filth and argued against the right of the playwright to be in the West End at all. Orton couldn't have been happier with the hysteria attending his work and his own emerging celebrity. Not since Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* had a playwright tapped so deeply into his own time. But while Osborne's creation of the post-war generation was exposed through a naturalism of language and action, Orton's vision was both comic and unrelievedly dark. His talent for blending the commonplace with the macabre, eliciting laughter in the process, set him apart from other playwrights of his day, and his young voice showed influences of his peers, particularly Harold Pinter.

Entertaining Mr. Sloane is set in a house situated in a garbage dump. The tackiness evident in the décor and the people who inhabit the house remind us of Pinter's play, *The Birthday Party*. Tension is created through the use of non-sequiturs and disjointed pauses, much as Pinter did in his early one-act plays. (In modern drama it is, after all, Pinter and Beckett who mined the pause for its myriad theatrical possibilities.) Orton, showing the influence of Pinter before him, relies exclusively on language to fuel the action of his play. The opening scene between Sloane and Kath, the woman of the house, illustrates this:

Kath: This is my lounge.

Sloane: Would I be able to use this room? Is it included?

Kath: Oh, yes.

PAUSE

You mustn't imagine it's always like this.

Sloane: The bedroom was perfect.

Kath: I never showed you the toilet.

Sloane: I'm sure it will be satisfactory.

PAUSE

Kath: I should change them curtains. Those are the winter ones.

The summer ones are more of a chintz.

PAUSE.

Sloane: I can't give you a decision right away.

Kath: I don't want to rush you.

PAUSE

What do you think? I'd be happy to have you.

SILENCE

Sloane: Are you married?

PAUSE

Kath: I was. I had a boy...killed in very sad circumstances.

PAUSE

Sloane: A son?

Kath: Yes.

Sloane: You don't look old enough.

PAUSE

Kath: I don't let myself go like some of them you may have noticed.

PAUSE

Sloane: I'll take the room.

Here Orton follows the pattern so popular in the standard comedy of manners. Societal norms are debunked, one after the other, and hypocrisy is revealed as the best survival technique in a patently self-serving world. Had Orton merely broadsided conventional thinking and predictable targets, the play might have vanished or, at best, might have found a small audience to jostle. But the author's genius was that he drew upon the turmoil that so characterized the sixties in London. The era, defined by consuming self-interest, desecration of the Establishment and the icons that represent the old order, sexual revolution, interchangeable gender labels and drug culture, finds a voice with Orton. In *Entertaining Mr. Sloane*, the title character begins the play having murdered one man and, before the final curtain, he will murder again. He sells himself willingly and knowingly to both the brother and sister of the house, and following the murder of their father by Sloane himself, they agree to an arrangement whereby they will share the young man's sexual favours, much as parents agree to shared custody of children. By our current standards this may sound tame and almost toothless, but until Orton no one had dared to speak ideas like these with such brazen audacity, let alone on a public stage in a commercial venue.

It is important to recall that homosexuality was still illegal in England, a prison sentence the likely punishment for being 'discovered'. Orton, whose published diaries reveal an aggressive fascination with and practice of dangerous sexual encounters, exposed his private life in his professional life by including references

to the sex trade and his endorsement of the liberation of self at all costs. In *Sloane* the references are by way of innuendo, but the aim is to increase sexual tension and the play's unstated mysteries, more than it is to raise a quick and easy laugh. Midway through the first act, Sloane meets Ed, the brother of the family and the man who supports Kath, his sister:

Ed: I . . . my sister was telling me about you.

PAUSE

My sister was telling me about you being an orphan, Mr. Sloane.

Sloane: (SMILING) Oh, yes?

Ed: Must be a rotten life for a kid. You look well on it though.

Sloane: Yes.

Ed: I could never get used to sleeping in cubicles. Was it a mixed home?

Sloane: Just boys.

Ed: Ideal. How many in a room?

Sloane: Eight.

Ed: Really? Same age were they? Or older?

Sloane: The ages varied by a year or two.

Ed: Oh well, you had compensation then.

And then later in the same scene, his sister in attendance throughout, their exchange suggests a pick-up that Orton himself might have experienced in one of his tearoom excursions:

Sloane: . . . yes I like a good work out now and then.

Ed: A little bodybuilder are you? I bet you are . . . do you . . .

SHYLY

Exercise regularly?

Sloane: As clockwork.

Ed: Good, good. Stripped?

Sloane: Fully.

Ed: How invigorating.

Sloane: And I box. I'm a bit of a boxer.

Ed: Ever done any wrestling?

Sloane: On occasion.

Ed: So, so.

Sloane: I've got a full chest. Narrow hips. My biceps are—

Ed: Do you wear leather . . . next to the skin? Leather jeans, say?

Without . . . aah . . .

Sloane: Pants?

Ed: The question is are you clean living? You may as well know
I set great store by morals.

Two years later Orton wrote *Loot*, the play that confirmed his unique voice. Like much else in Orton's life, *Loot* had begun with a false start when the out-of-town production failed to make it into the West End, leaving Orton distraught and threatening to give up writing for the theatre forever. But a successful new production, which opened eighteen months later and in the West End, liberated the writer to do what he pleased and to write as he chose. The carefully calculated dialogue in *Entertaining Mr. Sloane*, which successfully combined tension, mystery and double entendre to excellent effect, was surpassed with the new play's truer understanding of the stage as a physical world. An equally dull room in *Loot* replaced the dull sitting room of the first play, but the difference was the way in which the room was integrated into the play's action. The setting had grown to define the play and to make its presence inseparable from the characters that inhabited it.

Thematically, *Loot* digs deeper and touches a more exposed social nerve. Death and the way it is acknowledged and euphemized are central to this tale of theft, murder and government corruption. Using a detective and suspense plot as the frame, Orton inverts traditional stereotypes at the same time that he demolishes respectability. Without sacrificing his ear for the brittle repartee of high comedy, Orton accelerates the pace and the viciousness of characters' responses so that threatened loss of control adds an urgency entirely absent from the earlier play.

In the opening scene, Fay, the nurse who has attended the late Mrs. McLeavy, interrogates Hal, the late woman's son:

Fay: The priest at St. Kilda's has asked me to speak to you.
He says you spend your time thieving from slot
machines and deflowering the daughters of better men
than yourself. Is this a fact?

Hal: Yes.

Fay: And even the sex you were born into is not safe from
your marauding. Father Mac is popular for the remission
of sins, as you know. But clearing up after you is a full-
time job. You do see his point?

Hal: Yes.

Fay: What are you going to do about this dreadful state of
affairs?

Hal: I'm going abroad.

Fay: That will please the Fathers. Who are you going with?
Hal: A mate of mine.
Fay: Have you known him long?
Hal: We shared the same cradle.
Fay: Was that economy or malpractice?
Hal: We were too young then to practise, and economics still defeat us.

Later in the same scene, she begins to suspect Hal of committing a bank robbery:

Fay: Do you know the men concerned?
Hal: If I had that money, I wouldn't be here. I'd go away.
Fay: You're going away.
Hal: I'd go away quicker.
Fay: Where would you go?
Hal: Spain. The playground of international crime.
Fay: Where are you going?
Hal: Portugal.

In *Loot* there is a sauciness not present in *Sloane*, an aggressive and unapologetic assault on sensibilities. Here, nothing is sacred and everything is violable. Sexual favours are equated with commerce and the ambiguities of *Sloane* are replaced with flagrant expressions of sexual freedom never before presented onstage. This is where Orton separates himself forever from any comparison to Oscar Wilde, since in Wilde's plays there is no intercourse between characters, except above the neck. And Orton's unashamed approach to freedom in liberated and promiscuous sexuality defines him as an indelible icon of London's counter-culture generation.

Additionally, government officials, the church and the royal family emerge in this play as among Orton's favourite brickbats. Sgt. Truscott, the detective investigating the bank robbery, arrives in disguise as a representative from the water board. In a scene that can only anticipate Monty Python, he begins to question the nurse:

Truscott: Good afternoon.
Fay: Good afternoon. Who are you?
Truscott: I am attached to the metropolitan water board.
I'm on a fact-finding tour of the area.
You'll be out of the house for some considerable time this

afternoon?

Fay: Yes, I'm attending the funeral of my late employer.

Truscott: Thank you, miss. You've been a great help.

LOOKING OUT THE WINDOW

Who sent the large wreath that has been chosen to decorate the motor?

Fay: The licensee of the King of Denmark. I don't think a publican should be given pride of place.

Truscott: You wouldn't, miss. You had a strict upbringing.

Fay: How do you know?

Truscott: You have a crucifix. It has a dent to one side and engraved on the back the words: 'St. Mary's Convent. Gentiles Only.' It's not difficult to guess at your background from such telltale clues.

Fay: You're quite correct. The dent was an accident.

Truscott: Your first husband damaged it.

Fay: During a quarrel.

Truscott: At the end of which you shot him. The incident happened at the Hermitage Private Hotel. Right?

Fay: This is uncanny. You must have access to private information.

Truscott: My methods of deduction can be learned by anyone with a keen eye and a quick brain. When I shook your hand I felt a roughness I associate with powder burns and salt. The two together spell a gun and sea air. When found on a wedding ring only one solution is possible.

Fay: How do you know it happened at the Hermitage Private Hotel?

Truscott: That particular hotel is notorious for tragedies of this kind. I took a chance which paid off.

Loot was the winner of both the Evening Standard Award and Plays and Players Award as Best Play of 1966. This public recognition only encouraged Orton to write bolder, larger and more forceful in-your-face satire and farce that dared restrained tastes to protest. And on the basis of his new status, Orton was commissioned to write a screenplay for the Beatles, a project that was never produced because the script threatened to subvert their celebrity and public image. With scenes including drug fests and multi-party sex play, there is little reason to

wonder why the project evaporated.

But there is no doubt that the success of *Loot* unleashed a creative energy of extraordinary power. In the next year, the last of his life, Orton would write *Funeral Games* and *Crimes of Passion*, an evening of two one-act plays, and his masterwork, *What the Butler Saw*. At the repeated urging of his agent, Orton also began recording a personal diary, a remarkably detailed and uncensored account of his professional, personal and sexual lives. Its posthumous publication confirms that Orton was inseparable from the plays that he wrote.

A month before he was murdered, Orton finished the final draft of *What the Butler Saw*, the play that synthesizes all that had come before. As in all past writing, he maintains his firm understanding of mannered comedy through the convulsive syntax that he applies to his characters, but in this new work, Orton reaches beyond himself again, this time bridging High Comedy with dizzying, door-slamming farce. He moves past the playful antics in *Loot*, wherein the dead mother's corpse comes and goes from an armoire to a bed and back again often ending on its head in the process, and he invents a style which aims to destroy the characters' lives as the audience looks on in shock and riotous horror. The free-for-all scenario is in the style of true farce, made the more demanding by retaining the language and the wordplay that is now rightly identified as 'Ortonesque'.

Set in a psychiatrist's clinic, the play skews the basic elements of West End comedy at its tired worst. Dr. Prentice attempts to seduce a young woman while his wife is away. She returns suddenly and all hell breaks loose as he tries to maintain the appearance of respectability. By the final curtain, the play has encompassed drug use, shootings, incest, rape, cross-dressing and fetishism, among other menu items.

In *Butler* the cut-and-thrust of epigrammatic dueling abounds, but never at the loss of mounting pace to drive the farce forward and the characters increasingly away from their place of safety. The opening scene reveals Dr. Prentice as he begins his seduction of Geraldine, the young secretary, who believes she is present for a job interview:

Dr. Prentice: I'm going to ask you a few questions. Write them down. In English, please. Who was your father? Put that at the head of the page. And now the reply immediately underneath for quick reference.

Geraldine: I've no idea who my father was.

Dr. Prentice: I'd better be frank, Miss Barclay. I can't employ you if you're in any way miraculous. It would be contrary to established practice. You did have a father?

Geraldine: Oh, I'm sure I did. My mother was frugal in her

habits, but she'd never economize unwisely.

His wife having returned, and the young Geraldine now hidden behind the drapes in the same room, Dr. Prentice begins his struggle to set things right or, at the very least, to suggest that everything is as it appears on the surface. Mrs. Prentice arrives pursued by a hotel bellhop, who is blackmailing her with pornographic photos he took the previous night. Within the first ten minutes of the play's opening, then we have been introduced to the principal characters not one of whom is what he or she appears to be. An exchange between husband and wife follows, and the true depth of Orton's venom is exposed:

Dr. Prentice: (addressing the bellhop) My wife said breast-feeding would spoil her shape. Though, from what I remember, it would've been improved by a little nibbling. She's an example of in-breeding among the lobelia-growing classes. A failure in eugenics, combined with a taste for alcohol and sexual intercourse, makes it most undesirable for her to become a mother.

Mrs. Prentice: I hardly ever have sexual intercourse.

Dr. Prentice: You were born with your legs apart. They'll send you to the grave in a Y-shaped coffin.

The wife admits that she is naked beneath her coat, takes the dress left by Geraldine and proceeds to spend the balance of the play fighting to retain her identity, and ultimately her sanity, as she sees people rushing about in various states of undress, cross-dressed and bleeding, strait-jacketed and unconscious.

And with cover-up and disguise the order of the day, Orton repeats a variation of the detective character from *Loot*. In that play, the representative of the government conducts his underhanded investigation on the pretext that he is working for the water board. In this final play, Orton inverts his earlier scheme and announces the bureaucratic outsider's true identity at the start, while he drives everyone else to madness, lying about themselves by name, by gender and by sexual preference.

Dr. Rance enters the clinic and immediately encounters a startled Prentice:

Dr. Rance: Good morning. Are you Dr. Prentice?

Dr. Prentice: Yes. Have you an appointment?

Dr. Rance: No. I never make appointments. I'd like to be given details of your clinic. It's run, I understand, with the full knowledge and permission of the local hospital

authorities?

Dr. Prentice: Yes. But it's highly confidential. My files are never open to strangers.

Dr. Rance: You may speak freely in front of me. I represent Her Majesty's Government. Your immediate superiors in madness.

And the momentum, thus begun, accelerates until all identities are meaningless within existing norms, until each character has been stripped of labels that hitherto defined who they were, both in themselves and to each other. Near the end of the first act, Dr. Prentice convinces the secretary and the bellhop to switch into each other's clothes as a strategy for escaping the clinic and returning to the world outside its walls. In the second act, passing themselves off as each other without ever having met, they come face-to-face with Dr. Prentice:

Nick: (looking at Geraldine in his uniform) Why is he wearing my uniform?

Dr. P: He isn't a boy. He's a girl.

Geraldine: (looking at Nick in her dress) Why is she wearing my shoes?

Dr. P: She isn't a girl, she's a boy. Oh, if I live to be ninety, I'll never again attempt sexual intercourse.

Nick: If we change clothes, sir, we could get things back to normal.

Dr. P: We'd then have to account for the disappearance of my secretary and the pageboy.

Geraldine: But they don't exist!

Dr. P: When people who don't exist disappear the account of their departure must be convincing.

In a world defined by as arbitrary a measure as appearance, Orton reminds us that the balance is tenuous, at best. In theatrical terms, however, he is saving his best for the last.

The play's final moment is stunning theatre because it combines the elements of pure farce: it rushes headlong to a catharsis through laughter while it remains rooted in the Comedy of Manners that inspired Orton from the start. All of the characters are in their various states of undress, some drugged and others bleeding from gunshot wounds. Dr. Rance finally locates the missing part of Sir Winston Churchill, a plot element that was introduced early in the first act, and holding a larger than life-sized phallus aloft, to the awed expressions of the assembled company, he sighs:

Dr. Rance: The Great Man can once more take up his place in the High Street as an example to us all of the spirit that won the Battle of Britain. How much more inspiring if, in those dark days, we'd seen what we see now. Instead we had to be content with a cigar—the symbol falling short, as we all realize, of the object itself.

The many plots resolved, the phallus providing a benediction of theatrical redemption, the characters climb up a ladder through the clinic's skylight and into the Truth and Salvation of blinding sunlight. It is an ending rich in literary imagery and equally rich in that it achieves the height of comic completion.

Shortly before his death, Orton assessed his own strength: "I'm an acquired taste. That's a double entendre if there ever was one. Oh, the public will accept me. They've given me a licence, you see . . . I'm a success because I've taken a hatchet to them and hacked my way in . . . It's always a fight for an original writer because any original writer will always force the world to see the world his way. The people who don't want to see the world your way will always be angry." And he was right. The posthumous premiere of *Buiter* was greeted with shouts of indignation through the opening night. The cries of disgust were directed at Orton's careful disregard for proprieties of all kinds. But it wasn't foul words that got to the audience, because Orton rarely resorted to expletives.

In *Head to Toe*, a novel published posthumously, he stated the belief that applied to everything he had ever written: "To be destructive, words must be irrefutable. Print was less effective than the spoken word because the blast was greater; eyes could ignore, slide past, dangerous verbs and nouns. But if you could lock the enemy into a room somewhere, and fire the sentence at them you could get a sort of seismic disturbance."