

An inarticulate hope

Look Back in Anger by John Osborne

Playing at the Royal National Theatre, London through September 18

Paul Bond
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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 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 problem, which even a fine revival like this production has, is 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 horrify 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 completest 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 perform 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.

(All quotations from Kenneth Tynan are from *Tynan on Theatre*, Penguin, 1964.)



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