

Parallels: Joe Orton, His Life and *What the Butler Saw*
by Susan Myer Silton, Dramaturge

Joe Orton put the finishing touches on his play, *What the Butler Saw*, early in July 1967. He had been writing it since October 1966. It was a product of an intensely prolific period, where he also penned *Funeral Games* for television, a film script, and the major revisions of *Ruffian* and *Erpingham*, which was published under the title *Crimes of Passion*. On Sunday, the 16th of July, 1967, he wrote in his diary that he had finished typing his final draft: "I added very little on this version (just incorporated Kenneth's suggestions, which were excellent) ..." Kenneth Halliwell, with whom he had spent the last 17 years, was also a writer.

Orton would never see the play produced; Halliwell murdered him and killed himself in the early morning hours of August 9, 1967. His obituary in *The Times*, written by drama critic Irving Wardle, called Orton "one of the sharpest stylists of the British new wave".

Orton's biographer, John Lahr, wrote that his "oeuvre was small but his impact was large". These notes will attempt to describe for you the impact on Orton's work of the times and environment in which he lived, as well as his relationships with his family and with Kenneth Halliwell. My hope is that it will give you context and fuel for development of character and your understanding of Orton's themes and through lines.

Joe Orton was born January 1, 1933 in Leicester, United Kingdom. In September 1939, Britain declared war on Germany and went to war against Japan in 1941, after it attacked British colonies in Asia. In 1945, the wars were over. The UK had suffered a high loss of life, and was economically damaged.

The Labour party won a landslide victory shortly after the War on the basis of its reform program, within which an emphasis was now placed on the nuclear family as a foundation of the new British welfare state. Women were sent back to the home after working outside of it during the War. They were encouraged to assume roles of wives and mothers with a government mandate that domesticity be reestablished as their primary occupation.

Orton places the characters of *What the Butler Saw* within the social order of Britain at the time. Not long before she married, Mrs. Prentice, who was likely from an upper middle-class background, worked as a chambermaid "as a joke shortly after the war," because "the effect of the Labour Government had to be seen to be believed". No doubt she dropped her social experiment after the wedding and adhered to the social design that post-war society dictated for women of all classes: to be a dutiful, domesticated wife. After all, the text gives her only her husband's name and the title of "Mrs."

Orton's family was, from the outside, the typical conforming family of the times. His parents, Elsie and William, married in 1931, when the effects of the Depression caused widespread poverty and unemployment, especially among the laboring class, which they inhabited. Elsie, a frustrated pub and light opera singer, took a job as a machinist at a factory in Leicester, where she and her husband settled. From eight in the morning until six at night, she stitched underwear, blouses, trousers and vests until her eyesight failed and she was forced to become a charwoman. William was a piece maker for shoe manufacture, a job he later left to work as a gardener for the city of Leicester. He'd be a gardener for 35 years, earning £2.10 a week at the beginning and £14 a week when he retired. His and his wife's income barely stretched to pay the bills, and creditors often came to the door, collecting for food and clothes. Their firstborn, John Kingsley Orton, was born on January 1, 1933. (He became Joe when he started to write successfully.) Douglas was born in 1937, Marilyn in 1939 and Leonie in 1944.

It was within this social and economic climate that Orton and his three siblings were brought up. In a diary entry from January 9, 1967, he told his producer, "I'm from the gutter," referring to the sprawling city council development of Leicester where he grew up.

In the biography of Orton, *Prick Up Your Ears*, which was also the title Joe had given the play he was working on when he died, John Lahr describes Leicester as "cramped, cold and dark, the rows of sooty pebble granite were to Orton a grey backdrop of impoverishment; set-pieces for a lifetime of making do." His family's emotional life was as drab and lifeless as its surroundings; void of connection and replete with bitterness and dull resignation. Leonie Barnett, Orton's youngest sister and the one member of the family with whom he remained friendly, said, "I remember as a kid feeling there was no escape." *The Victorian History of the Counties of England* characterizes Leicester by "the absence of any extreme or distinctive movements in politics, religion or culture." As Lahr writes, Orton's plays wanted to rattle the underpinnings of society with a rage spawned by a city whose essence was in its motto: *Semper Eadem* – Always the Same.

In *What the Butler Saw*, Rance and the Prentices represent those underpinnings of society, the establishment that Joe, as well as the avant-guard of the sixties, wanted to rattle. Once England began to rebuild, and the economy became stronger, things began to brighten. The fifties gave way to the age of "Swinging London," where the early sixties would usher in an era made all the more swinging by sexual liberation. In 1964, the pill became available to unmarried women (married women could get it in 1961). Because it was deemed 100% effective, women were free to experience sex, including sex before marriage and with several partners, without fear of pregnancy. Homosexuality was legalized in 1967 by the Sexual Offences Act, which decriminalized homosexual acts in private between two men, both of whom had to have attained the age of 21. Abortion was legalized in 1967. Within a matter of a few short years, people were experiencing

sexual freedom and a relaxation of sexual mores that had not been experienced before.

Rance and the Prentices' vocabulary suggests an awareness of the so-called sexual revolution, but they had no interest in upsetting the status quo. Conservatism and compliance secured their status in the prevailing order. Normalcy is the bedrock of their professional practice, so they had a vested interest in preserving it. Geraldine wants entrance into the society Dr. Prentice represents, even as she understands she will always be relegated to the supporting role of secretary. Nick, on the other hand, recognizes that he can profit from their society by keeping himself close to its circles through his hotel job, which gives him access to the hidden, darker environs of its underbelly. The twins Nick and Geraldine couldn't be more different in their approach to the social order: Geraldine is timid, conforming and conventional, suppressed by her circumstances, bearing a "numbed acceptance" that Lahr says, "Orton's plays dug angrily at". Alternatively, Nick exploits the inherent hypocrisy in the veneer of propriety of people like the Prentices and Dr. Rance.

His parents and their relationship also influenced Orton's characters. His mother had a cruel, aggressive contempt for his father. Always disappointed and let down by him, she was never satisfied. Elsie harped at William in the way that the Prentices hurl accusations at one another in *Butler*. "Dad was everything John didn't want to be," Douglas Orton, his brother nearest in age, observed. "You could push Dad around. He was domineered. If you said sit there, Dad would sit. He'd never tell John what to do ... He never showed any affection." William never played with his children or bought them presents. He never had dinner with his family and rarely went on vacations with them. Joanne Runswick, who had directed Orton in one of his amateur theatricals, said, "He seemed a child that had missed out on a lot of love." Orton despised his father's subservience to his mother. He didn't respect him. Because he was unwilling and unable to control his wife or his children, Joe put him in the center of the family's problems. "I lived in a normal family," Geraldine tells Dr. Prentice during her job interview in the opening pages of *What the Butler Saw*. "I had no love for my father."

His contempt for his father and scorn for society's pretensions fueled the voracity with which Orton would tear down the ruling establishment through his writing. Drs. Prentice and Rance, with all the power and legitimacy bestowed on them by way of their authority, are exposed as the inept, shortsighted, dehumanized and laughable buffoons they really are.

The Orton siblings acknowledged the emotional starvation in the home, and none could remember their parents displaying any public affection. After their fourth child was born, Elsie expelled William from their bed to another room. She shared the double bed with with her younger daughter and William never again had sex with his wife. Marilyn said, "Mum hated sex. She told me she hated it ... She meant it."

Throughout his life, and in his plays, Orton strove to make sexual connection. As in his own life, it wasn't necessarily connected with love: in their later years his longtime companion, Kenneth Halliwell, accused him of being incapable of love, and only wanting physical sex. In *What the Butler Saw*, as in his other writings, Orton made "a spectacle of sexual appetite," as described by Lahr. Sexual hunger, and how people sated it, amused him. Yet, he punishes Mrs. Prentice for her craving. He has her admit "quietly" to her husband that she "hardly ever" has sexual intercourse, blaming her troubles on his inadequacy as a lover and confessing that she fakes her orgasms. Not unlike Orton's indifference to Halliwell, which is explored later, Dr. Prentice diminishes her and her needs, calling her a nymphomaniac, talking of her promiscuity, and accusing her of "masquerading as a sexually responsive woman." Yet, he doesn't hesitate to hit on Geraldine during her job interview, coercing her to strip naked. This effectively sets off the relentless, wild "peccadilloes" of the day as he first attempts to conceal her dress from his wife, who in turn calls him a transvestite. Robert Breslo, in a review of the 1981 revival of *Butler*, observes, "Sexual desire, thwarted by social unacceptability, is forced to disguise itself, which leads to social misinterpretation. Such a process undermines the social hypocrisy behind the relativity of vices: the doctor must choose between transvestitism and adultery."

The Prentices' frank but misguided exchange about sex contrasts with Elsie Orton's determination to keep sex away from her life and that of her children. Elsie never discussed sex with her children; Leonie learned from her mother that, "Sex was dirty. She wouldn't have anything to do with it." The body was also dirty. Despite being her mother's bedmate, Leonie said, "I never saw her body. I only saw her head, her hands, and her legs."

Having kept her children in the dark about sex, Elsie would have been horrified to learn that young John had been molested at 14 in a movie house where she'd take the children every Monday evening, even as she cautioned them not to pay attention to the couples kissing in the audience. Orton's diary entry on February 19, 1967 recalls, "I was interfered with. A man took me into the lavatory of the Odeon and gave me a wank. I relived those happy moments ... I remember coming down his mac."

As a boy, Orton would shock his mother by parading about in his underpants, flexing his growing muscles from his new bodybuilding routines. She'd chase him back upstairs, admonishing him, "Look at you – you're disgusting." In 1955, four years after he had moved in with Kenneth Halliwell, he snuck a bridesmaid upstairs to his mother's bedroom at Douglas' wedding. Elsie caught them in bed, and screamed at John to "Get that whore out of my house! What do you think this is, a bleeding brothel?"

The incident with the bridesmaid was just one example of the split in Orton's sexual nature. In his early diaries, he admitted to being "a bad loser" with women socially, "though I try not to show it." Lahr writes, "Girls never seemed to pay him the right kind of attention. They confounded and often rejected him, a familiar

adolescent obstacle that was made more daunting by the deep distrust of women Elsie Orton's volatile behavior had bred in her son." In his 1949 diary, he often lamented that he was "fed up with girls". On February 9 of that year, he recounts an incident when a girl, Penny, stood him up. "I waited like a fool in the howling wind and pouring rain." On March 12, 1949, he saw Penny at the theatre with some other boys and declares that he is "finished with her completely." His April 2, 1949 diary entry proclaims, "My opinion of women is going down. At present it is zero."

Nevertheless, Joyce Holmes was a major crush of Joe's from the time they were aspiring thespians in 1949 in Leicester to the end of his first year at RADA, the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, in London. Three weeks after he started there, he wrote to her, encouraging her to come to RADA. In the letter, he also asked her, "What do you think of "free love"? I think it's cute." It was 1951. Although the austerity bred by Britain's economic recovery after World War II would last through much of the fifties, the notion of "free love" was not tossed on entirely unfertile ground. The way was starting to be paved for the "Swinging Sixties", especially in London, which was culturally further ahead than provinces such as Leicester.

What was once an "almost unhealthy preoccupation" with Joyce, according to Orton's friend, Bernard Widdowson, who used to stand with Joe under her second-floor window, would soon be replaced. During his summer vacation from RADA, he planted a tepid kiss on her in the lighting booth while a Leicester amateur theatrical production was staged. Lahr called it "a curiously unisexual embrace that left her thinking, 'He's just a boy.'" By then, Orton had found a lover much more eager for his affection: Kenneth Halliwell, who had been romancing Joe since they met on May 25, 10 days after he started RADA. He invited Orton to live with him on June 8, and by June 16 Joe had moved in. They would be inseparable until their deaths.

Yet, Joe's sexual dilemma lingered even in adulthood. In an interview in BBC radio on July 4, 1964, 13 years into his relationship with Kenneth Halliwell, he described a bisexual character, Eddie, in his play *Entertaining Mr. Sloane*. "He's quite potent or could be potent again, but he just sort of got fed up with messing around with women and all the things one has to put up with in a woman." Lahr writes, "This was his own attitude towards his own sexuality and heterosexual courtship." As evidenced by a diary entry on May 19, 1967, he still had moments where he found himself fantasizing about physical contact with women. That day he wrote about squiring a beautiful "German (or Danish)" woman about the Casbah in Libya. "How right the Arabs were about women. I enjoyed the looks of envy as I walked along with her ... she, whilst in my company, was my possession."

By the time he published *What the Butler Saw*, Orton's writing suggested that his sexual ambiguity had resolved by evolving into a more embrace form. Breslo's review describes the transition: "Orton forces us into considering all sexual

behavior as the manifestation of one huge collective Id that strives, as do his plays, toward eradicating the social restraints placed upon it ... Standard social constructs for sexual behavior have been explosively and dramatically leveled. Orton achieves that leveling process by implicating the audience morally in the action.” Breslo goes on to say that Orton accomplishes this through his subtle use of language and the double entendre, using as an example Nick’s declaration that he “had a hard boyhood” (discussed in the Glossary for Act I). “Yet,” Breslo writes, “if you do ‘get the joke’, your own morals are called into question, if morals have anything to do with it.” If you were Elsie Orton, they would. However, the joke is on her. The subtext that the audience evokes is not the character’s, but its own. “In this way,” Breslo points out, “the audience is always responding to sexual innuendo, and yet is always supplying it. Which puts the audience on the same moral plane that they would like to condemn.”

Orton’s ambivalence wasn’t just with women – he was also ambivalent about family, particularly his own – a sentiment he shared with his siblings. When he left Leicester for RADA in May 1951, he closed the door on his past. When he moved in with him, Kenneth Halliwell became Orton’s emotional home. In Kenneth, he found a surrogate father with whom he would form the only family he ever acknowledged. “People want to know,” Elsie wrote to her son on September 10, 1964, “why there is never any mention of your parents” in the articles and interviews she clipped from newspapers and magazines. Lahr writes, “His resentment of the emotional wasteland of his family first expressed itself in adopting a sexual bond that offended and denied a bourgeois sense of family and a lifestyle that mocked the sermons about work that William and Elsie tried to give their children: ‘You’ve got to graft bloody hard for your money. And then when you’ve grafted, you have your enjoyment.’” Described by his friend, writer Penelope Gillant, Orton’s “cold, marvelous, funny fury” around the emotional distance within his family would next express itself in his work. It found its creative voice in comedy that made amusement overwhelmingly seductive. Nick in *What the Butler Saw* shares three attributes with his counterparts in Orton’s other plays: they are young, male, and they claim to have no family. Orton airily presents the concept of having lost the family or never to have known it without apology.

Harboring no sentimentality about family matters throughout the ensuing years of his life, Orton distanced himself further and further from them, all the while mining his past life with them for its farcical gems. He put so many of Elsie’s eccentricities bitterly on stage in *Entertaining Mr. Sloane*, he had to pretend he was out of town and sent Halliwell to see it with her. (It was 1964, and the first time Halliwell would meet Orton’s family.) In *Butler*, he brought family into the darkest, most taboo of places. In a diary entrance on July 30, 1967, he records an early morning telephone call from Peggy Ramsay, his theatrical agent. She told him that *Butler* gave her “hysterics”, and it was “the very best thing he had written since *Loot*”. Nevertheless, she had reservations. One was that the Lord Chamberlain wouldn’t allow him to show Churchill’s prick on the stage. (Hoisting the great man’s prick aloft was the original end to the play. Orton would offer an

alternate ending for productions of the play in the UK. The Samuel French version we're using has neither the original ending nor the bowdlerized one. In other words, no holding up pricks in America.) "And the other thing is the incest," Peggy said, "I simply don't know whether all that fucking of parents and children will be allowed. The play is bound to be a scandal ... it'd be a pity if your considerable talent would always be associated with subjects of scandal and concern."

Orton loved to shock and was undaunted by her words. Back in March, he had been speaking with Kenneth on Easter Sunday about *The Living Theatre* in America, which promoted complete sexual license. Inspired by them, Joe immediately vowed to "hot-up" *Butler* when he went to rewrite it. "It's the only way to smash the wretched civilization. It's the only way to infuriate them. Much more fucking, and they'll be screaming hysterics in no time."

Orton wanted to jolt the audience out of their indifference, and he knew how. "The only field still heavily unexplored is the sexual one," he told Peter Burton in an article for *The Stage*, October 6, 1966. *Butler* would have it all, going where every playwright before had been afraid to tread. Before anyone else, Breslo wrote, "Orton integrated homosexuality, both as a personal theme and a sexual phenomena, into a much larger social and theatrical system. He brazenly makes it a given in the world of his plays, assumed and unexcused – naturally". By doing so, he managed to convert audiences into acceptance, even in the more hostile times when his plays were first produced. While *Butler* doesn't have a single homosexual affair, pursuit or character – with the exceptions of those that are implicit – there is the constant reference to all three. Breslo writes, "Mistaken identity, characteristic of all classic farce, is mistaken sexual identity in *What the Butler Saw*."

But Orton didn't stop there. In an interview in the *Guardian* in 1966, he said, "Every good play expresses something of the time in which it was written, and at the moment, we're living in a very sick society." He had seen a dress rehearsal of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, and he wrote in his diary that he admired Tom Stoppard's "wonderful idea. I'd give anything to have such an original idea." He lamented, however, "the only drama in the play is by Shakespeare ... Great events. Murders, adulteries, dreadful revenge happening all around them and they just talk. This is what the play should have been about but wasn't."

Girded by his resolve to expose society's sick excesses, Orton set about to do with *Butler* what he felt Stoppard had not done. Dr. Rance follows his lead: "The final chapters of my book are knitting together: incest, buggery, outrageous women and strange love-cults catering to depraved appetites. All the fashionable bric-a-brac ... Society must be made aware of the growing menace of pornography. The whole treacherous avant-garde movement will be exposed for what it is – an instrument for inciting decent citizens to commit bizarre crimes against

humanity and the state ... As a transvestite, fetishist, bisexual murderer Dr. Prentice displays considerable deviation overlap. We may get necrophilia, too.”

Orton adds the theatrical madness of farce to the mix, and by setting the play in in “a private mental clinic,” adds the dimension of institutionalized insanity. The madness takes on gruesome proportions: it becomes physical, tangible, violent and real. As the story catapults to a darker and darker denouement, we find ourselves laughing hysterically at murder, blackmail, buggery, incest, and vicious, conniving sex. “By the end of the play,” Besto writes, “the set, their characters and their entire social order have all been completely destroyed ... the comic resolution (such as it is) is preposterously perverse.” Orton has created total anarchy.

Orton’s sexual promiscuity was part of his self-anarchy. It had elements of rebellion: on the day of his mother’s funeral, December 29, 1966, he wrote in his diary, “I arrived at Leicester at 4:30. I had a bit of quick sex in a derelict house with a labourer I picked up. He wore a navy blue coat with leather across the shoulders. He carried a sort of satchel. Some kind of road member, I thought.” He goes on, describing the sex, and concludes nonchalantly, “I got home at 5:30.”

His diary details many other encounters: some in lavatories, others in dark corners of city alleys, some under his and Halliwell’s roof. Unfettered by the strictures that the threat of AIDS would one day provide, his adventures were bright and spontaneous, filled with excitement and joy. Other times, Lahr says, “He also sought release in rough trade.”

Halliwell hated Orton’s promiscuity. He would read and re-read Orton’s recounting in his diaries, the bulk of which were written in the tiny, 16 by 12 room they shared. Lahr writes that they were “kept in a red-grained leather binder in a writing desk where Halliwell could – and did – read their punishing contents.”

According to Lahr, “They argued at length about promiscuity, which Halliwell found upsetting, but Orton claimed stimulated his view of the world.” A friend, the actor and comedian Kenneth Williams, recalls, “Halliwell’s argument was that continual immersion of yourself in an anonymous sexual set-up, going with strangers into rooms or alleyways, was going to lead to a wastage of aims.”

Orton refused to give it up. It was tied closely and fed into the anarchy that themed his writing and his life. Lahr identified his “clown’s appetite for political anarchy,” which, for Orton, “was impossible without sexual anarchy”. Promiscuity, like *Butler*, was “a submersion in chaos,” as Lahr describes.

Halliwell couldn’t accept Orton’s promiscuity on many levels. When they first moved in together, Halliwell was Orton’s world. He cooked for him, clothed him, spent his money to provide for his needs. They would do everything together: acting, writing, making art, even anarchy. They each served six months in prison for stealing 72 library books and artfully defacing them. They were as close as two

people could be, sharing the same bed and living in a space so small that the two of them could not easily move about it at the same time. Halliwell knew that he was the focus of Orton's affections, but that he was never the focus of his sexual desire. He didn't have Orton's sexual vitality and good looks. Orton's dependence on him waned as he began to branch out into his own pursuits. His writing began to bring him attention, fame and money. As Joe's star ascended, Kenneth was pushed further and further into the background. Highly creative, a writer and an intellect, Halliwell contributed greatly to Orton's creative process as an advisor and collaborator. Orton would credit him privately, but never publicly. Kenneth, who was once his mentor, was now relegated to the role of secretary. During a weekend in Brighton with the playwright Sir Terence Rattigan after the success of *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* in 1964, Halliwell went on and on about Orton's sexual antics and how it was he who wrote his plays. Sir Terence recalls, "It was perfectly plain to me ... that Halliwell was wildly jealous of Joe's sexual escapades ... it was one part of Joe's life he couldn't collaborate in." Another weekend in Brighton, this time in July 1967 and with Orton's producer Oscar Lewenstein, was a tense time, fraught with Kenneth's depression. Kenneth saw some theatre friends the following week, Sheila Ballentine and Kenneth Cranham. He told the two how ill he was and how he was going to have a nervous breakdown. Desperate, piteous, and still smarting from Lewenstein's characterization of him as a "middle-aged non-entity," he said, "It was me who thought up the title for *Loot*. It was me who got Joe to write."

A month earlier, during their time in Tangiers, Joe wrote in his diary that his mockery of Kenneth's lack of sexual prowess precipitated Halliwell's first act of violence against him, attacking him by "hitting me about the head and knocking the pen from my hand." This attack to Joe's head was the precursor to the events of August 9, 1967, where Halliwell bludgeoned his skull with nine merciless blows. Kenneth's increasing anger had burgeoned into irrational rage, fueled by the humiliation of being seen as inadequate, and the sense of being powerless and a non-entity.

Orton would not listen or respond to Halliwell, further provoking his rage. Swept up in his new celebrity, he could not fully comprehend Halliwell's unraveling. While Kenneth was depressed, he was "feeling merry," fiddling while Halliwell burned. In the farce mayhem of *Butler*, the characters' pursuit of their own intentions and their infinite self-absorption prevents them from truly hearing one another or making any kind of connection, reflecting both Orton's family dynamics and his obliviousness to Halliwell. Lahr writes, "Orton's laughter invokes a world of no consolation; and in private, Orton could give little to Halliwell." Farce, Lahr explains, "is ruled by the law of momentum: at a certain speed all things disintegrate". With uncontrollable speed, panic substitutes for reason and characters are pushed beyond guilt and beyond their connection to each other. So it was with Orton and Halliwell." And so it is with *Butler*: the accumulating momentum of its relentless speed leaves its characters spent; beaten and bleeding among the wreckage of the set, stripped naked, their bodies and their surroundings disintegrated into ruin.

Joe drew from his and Kenneth's overdramatic and arduous wrangling about each other's personal needs to shape *Butler*. Art has asked you to read a section of Lahr's *Prick Up Your Ears*, which will be given to you at the first rehearsal. It details how the collapse of Orton's relationship with Halliwell is echoed in the play.

It was a tragic end for both of them. Orton would have been 81 today. In truth, he is still very much alive, having achieved what he contemplated in his novel, *Head to Toe*: a new kind of writing "that would create a cosmic disturbance" whose "shock waves were capable of killing centuries afterwards". Who knows what else he'd have given us? His vision for *Prick Up Your Ears*, the new play he was working on when he died, was of a new, unconventional theatrical form. I would have liked to see that one!

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