

A TALENT TO ABUSE

Looking back at John Osborne.

BY JOHN LAHR

John Osborne's rowdy, shocking anger—first broadcast in his play “Look Back in Anger,” which is now in revival at the Roundabout Theatre Company's Laura Pels—was his trademark, his gift, and his epitaph. “When the bell rings, I not only *come out*. I'm the *first out*. Fighting,” Osborne taunted wife No. 4, the actress Jill Bennett, the “pretty scalpel,” whom he was divorcing in the late seventies. Osborne's hate knew no bounds: it combined contempt with a desire to punish. Of Bennett, who committed suicide, he wrote, “I have only one regret now in this matter of Adolf”—his nickname for her. “It is simply that I was unable to look down upon her open coffin, and, like the bird in the Book of Tobit, drop a good, large mess in her eye.” Osborne's cannonade was aimed at the body politic as well as at the people around him. “Damn you, England. You're rotting now, and quite soon you'll disappear,” he wrote in 1961, in his infamous “Letter to My Fellow Countrymen,” which appeared in the left-wing paper *Tribune*. Onstage, the blast of his full-throated abrasive music was a kind of blues, in which the singing itself was a deliverance from sorrow. It was also a kind of psychological evacuation. “The problem is, John doesn't write a play, he *shits* it out—and it just lies there in a great steaming heap,” George Devine, the first artistic director of the English Stage Company, said.

The flame-throwing that made Osborne a subject of national scandal and concern was learned at his mother's knee. “Throughout my childhood no adult ever addressed a question to me,” Osborne wrote in “A Better Class of Person” (1981), his best-selling first volume of autobiography. Nellie Beatrice Osborne, an uneducated Cockney barmaid, rained withering contempt on her son throughout their arid life together, attacking him for his timidity, his spindly looks, his bed-wetting, his aspiration to better himself. After his loving father, an adman with lit-

erary yearnings, died, of tuberculosis, when Osborne was ten, the boy was forced to live alone with Nellie, “the grabbing, uncaring crone of my childhood,” in what he called “her loveless embrace.” “When I was with her I was never whole,” Osborne wrote in a notebook entry, reproduced in John Heilpern's splendid 2006 biography. Oppressed by Nellie as a child, he was humiliated by her as an adult. “It's such an honor for us to meet you,” she said to Paul Robeson, when Osborne took her to see his “Othello” at Stratford. “Especially my son. You see, he's always been very sorry for you darkies.” “She was a disease from which I was suffering, and would go on suffering until one of us died,” Osborne said. (At the time of her death, in 1983, Osborne hadn't spoken to her for seven years; he didn't attend the funeral.) “I've never known anybody in my life who was so easily wounded,” Doris Lessing, one of Osborne's long string of lovers, said. If his thin skin had its origin in his mother's abuse, so did his compulsive, cauterizing, reckless voice. Part protest and part projection, his characters' hectoring was a sort of wrecking ball that allowed Osborne to put outside himself the destruction that Nellie had put into him.

When the English Stage Company mounted “Look Back in Anger,” at the Royal Court, on May 8, 1956, the play's mocking, even seditious, rage quickly made big news, and the twenty-six-year-old Osborne became a poster boy for the notion of the Angry Young Man. (“AYM” was the license plate of his first sports car.) The brazenness of “Look Back in Anger” pulled the porcelain plates off the well-set table of British theatre and replaced them with a whole new menu of people, manners, idioms, and concerns. The old playwriting establishment was swept away almost overnight, and its figureheads were left stunned and snuffy. Noël Coward condescended to the play (“dreariness for dreariness sake”); Terence Rattigan

huffed about its improbable success (“then I know nothing about plays”); and J. B. Priestley blew his top in front a group of young Royal Court playwrights (“Angry? I’ll give you angry. I was angry before you buggers were born!”). Kenneth Tynan, though, labelled Osborne’s hero “the completest young pup in our literature since Hamlet”—in one of only two good reviews of the play—and a whole generation of disaffected English youths got high off the fumes of his rage-outs, which gave expression to their aimlessness, their anarchy, their post-imperial jitters. When Osborne co-founded Woodfall Films, with the director Tony Richardson, in 1958, in order to make a movie of “Look Back in Anger,” the shift in cultural paradigms extended from the stage to the cinema; among the films produced by his company were “The Entertainer,” “A Taste of Honey,” “The Knack,” and “Tom Jones,” for whose screenplay Osborne won an Academy Award.

In the current staging of “Look Back in Anger,” the director, Sam Gold, has tried to match Osborne’s verbal showboating with a cockiness of his own. It’s an egotistical production whose stylization competes with the play. Gold has denuded the play of any semblance of Englishness and class, an issue that should be central to the argument between the bullying, blue-collar Jimmy Porter (Matthew Rhys) and his browbeaten middle-class wife, Alison (Sarah Goldberg), who are two emotionally stuck babes in the provincial woods. The excellent ensemble performs “in one,” at the lip of the stage, with a behemoth black wall looming behind them, thrusting them toward the audience as if they were figures on a frieze. Amid the detritus of the long, cluttered proscenium, which—with a mattress propped against the wall, newspapers, cups, cans, and clothes littering the floor—looks more like a crack alley than like the Porters’ attic room, the characters peck, cluck, and wander like pigeons on a ledge. In both a literal and a metaphorical sense, depth is lost. The startling staging abstracts the people from the period, from the place, from nostalgia, and, to some degree, from credibility.

Gold stresses the homoerotic horseplay between Jimmy and his friend and business partner, Cliff (the superb Adam Driver), who lives across the hall, to powerful effect; the ménage-à-trois setting insures that the sadistic Jimmy always has an audience for

his misogynistic triumphs and the masochistic Alison always has a shoulder to cry on. “All this time, I have been married to this woman, this monument to non-attachment, and suddenly I discover that there is actually a word that sums her up,” Jimmy brays to Cliff, in front of Alison:

Not just an adjective in the English language to describe her with—it’s her name!



Ménage à trois: Driver, Goldberg, and Rhys in “Look Back in Anger.”

Pusillanimous! It sounds like some fleshy Roman matron, doesn’t it? The Lady Pusillanimous. . . . But I haven’t told you what it means yet, have I? . . . Here it is. I quote: Pusillanimous. Adjective. Wanting of firmness of mind, of small courage, having a little mind, mean-spirited, cowardly. . . . That’s my wife! . . . Hi, Pusey! What’s your next picture?

In his cruel diatribes, Jimmy Porter throws off illuminating sparks. One terrific speech tells us a lot about Jimmy and the world he has inherited; it also includes the first shout of Osborne’s boilerplate anti-Americanism:

The old Edwardian brigade do make their brief little world look pretty tempting. All home-made cakes and croquet. Always the same picture: high summer, the long days in the sun, slim volumes of verse, crisp linen, the smell of starch. If you’ve no world of your own, it’s rather pleasing to regret the passing of someone else’s. But I must say it’s pretty dreary living in the American Age—unless you’re an American, of course. Perhaps all our children will be American. That’s a thought, isn’t it?

You won’t find this speech in Gold’s production, however; he’s given the play a severe literary trimming. But when you cut away the fat you also lose the flavor. His

production, to my eye, is more of an adaptation than a rendition.

Since Osborne was strong on emotion but not on form—“I want to make people feel, to give them lessons in feeling. They can think afterward,” he said in 1957—his plays hardly feature in the cultural discussion these days. But what he wanted, as “Look Back in Anger” makes clear, wasn’t

so much discussion as capitulation. At the play’s jerry-built finale, Alison, having walked out on Jimmy and lost their child in the interim, walks back in and falls to her knees in front of him. “I’m in the mud at last! I’m grovelling! I’m crawling!” she says. “Look Back in Anger,” which was based on Osborne’s first marriage, engineers a fragile harmony that was never actually sustained in his life. By the end of his turbulent existence—he died in 1994, at the age of sixty-five—Osborne, whose habit of high living had earned him the nickname Champagne Johnny, and who signed himself “Ex-Playwright,” had become the kind of High Tory, Anglican country gent he’d once inveighed against. From a dramatic point of view, however, he remained “Johnny One-Note,” for whom “holding one note was his ace,” as the song says. The current revival skews the play’s focus, but it does preserve the unmistakable sinew of Osborne’s sound. The bruising operatic gusto of his speech—its gleeful rancor—is what’s unique about Osborne. In the end, it had more effect on the life of his time than on its literature. ♦