

# John Osborne

## (1929-1994)

John Osborne was born in London in 1929 from a lower middle-class family. In 1941 his father died. He studied in Devon but did not finish his studies, heartbroken over his father's death.

He started working in the theatre first as an actor and then as a stage manager. *Look Back in Anger* was produced in 1956, while in 1957 *The Entertainers* appeared on stage. In 1961 *Luther* was first performed, but after that, he produced a series of unimportant works.

Between the 1970s and the 1980s he wrote television plays and he also won the Academy Award for the script of the film *Tom Jones*.

Osborne died in 1994 as a result of complications from diabetes.

## Keywords

### **British renaissance**

As a reaction to traditional plays like Noel Coward's and Terence Rattigan's escapist middle-class comedies, a post-war younger generation of playwrights gave voice to the complexity of the social and cultural changes taking place in Britain after 1945. Both the Absurdist dramatists and the politically committed playwrights of the Theatre Workshop claimed their dissatisfaction with the commercial theatre respectively, under the influence of existentialism and socialism (Brecht). Also the Royal Court Theatre then run by George Devine and Tony Richardson staged non commercial plays like *Look Back in Anger* in 1956. All these experimental plays were for different reasons successful and the new wave of dramatists was defined as the 'British theatre renaissance'.

### **Social background**

After the two world wars British power in the world has dramatically diminished together with its imperial presence, leaving a traumatic economic depression. Also the Labour Party has not managed to reach full social improvement after its post-war election. For example, the lower middle-class youth could apparently reach a better life thanks to the new universities but nothing happened because they could not find a suitable place in the rigid class system in Britain. Consequently a sense of disenchantment with the political class, disillusionment with social betterment and desperation for one's future were the dominant feelings of the time.

### **Claustrophobia**

*Look Back in Anger* takes place in a domestic interior, like the conventional plays of the time, but the setting is actually a bed-sitter, not a drawing room. This implies a radical change from a refined background to harsh reality or 'kitchen-sink drama', as plays like this were defined. Therefore the atmosphere is often oppressive, not only for the little space available, but mainly because of the never-ending tensions among the characters and because of Jimmy's rage against all England around him. His targets, in fact, are the posh papers, the establishment and the Church, his wife, marriage and women in general, since he feels oppressed by a sense of inadequacy.

### Anger

The deep frustration resulting from Jimmy's private and social problems turns into protest and criticism against his wife and the establishment, but it never turns into action. This is the reason why he may be considered an anti-hero: he is young and poor, but does not take action to shape his destiny, he is a rebel who fails to find a single ideal, since he has no precise social identity. As Prince Hamlet before him, he can simply express his failure, rage and restlessness, verbally attacking the lack of values of the old classes with crude words, which makes him a rebellious, popular hero. The play is thus the first attempt to give youth a voice of its own, a phenomenon which will have its climax in the Sixties. Jimmy therefore expresses the disillusionment of a whole generation of 'angry young men' protesting against a corrupt society in which they have no influence.

### Class wars

Jimmy belongs to a new generation torn between the old upper class rooted in the past and attached to the dying imperialist values and the traditional working class. He feels alienated from both, since he is a sort of outsider: his father was a proletarian, his mother a lower-middle class member, Jimmy himself was given the opportunity to get a degree, but he runs a sweet stall. Yet he is married with an upper-class woman. The result is a radical dissatisfaction with his social status. Therefore he feels at odds with Helena, Alison and her father, who are upper class; he complains and gives vent to his resentment but does nothing to change his situation. He claims that there are no 'brave causes left', thus somewhat regretting the previous *status quo*.

### Structure and style

The play, as Osborne once said is 'formal, rather old-fashioned' since it includes structural elements of traditional drama, like the exposition, the development and the resolution. However, it features a new dramatic style based on disruptive elements:

- it is a one-character play revolving around a lower class anti-hero;
- it uses a crude, ordinary language, a jargon typical of the younger generations;
- it deals with the theme of existence as a failure to come to terms with reality;
- it is a circular play in which the final situation brings back to the beginning.

Circularity is a feature of existentialist drama.

### Look Back in Anger (first performed 1956)

A drab bed-sitter in the Midlands is the setting of the play, whose protagonist is Jimmy Porter, a young working class rebel. He is totally dissatisfied with his life and critical against the establishment, so that he is always attacking the targets immediately around him, namely his wife Alison and his friend Cliff. Alison is pregnant, but when she is about to tell her husband, they have one of their usual arguments. In Act 2 an old school-friend of Alison's, Helena, now lives with the couple and Cliff; she persuades Alison to go back home so as to avoid Jimmy's abuses and calls her father, Colonel Redfern, to take her home. Alison leaves and Helena takes her place near Jimmy. Everything seems to go on as usual, when, in Act 3, Alison comes back after a miscarriage. Ready to face Jimmy once again, she involves him in a game with erotic implications, which seems to suggest a new beginning.

The play shows to what extent the traditional patriarchal family was changing. This process mirrors the social changes taking place in Britain after World War II: Osborne mainly focuses on the new social dynamics that allow an upper class woman like Alison to marry Jimmy, a lower-class member. Their relationship is based on mutual attraction, but she feels he wants to take revenge on the upper class through her, while he is incapable to overcome his intellectual apathy and cannot improve his social position. Hence the sense of frustration and the anger which made the play extremely successful.

### ***The Entertainer (1957)***

Through the character of Archie Richie, a music hall comedian, he touches on the theme of British decline and nostalgia for a glorious past. Laurence Olivier's interpretation of the lead role partly contributed to its popularity.

### ***Luther (1961)***

The play analyses the main character's personal search for the existential truth through his rebellion against his age. Luther thus becomes a sort of second Jimmy Porter.