look back in anger

JOHN OSBORNE
“Why don’t we play a little game? Let’s pretend that we’re humans and that we’re actually alive”

JIMMY
In May 1956, John Osborne’s play *Look Back in Anger* premiered at the Royal Court Theatre, London. No-one, especially not Osborne himself, could have predicted the huge impact this unknown writer would have on theatre at the time and since. His play exploded conservative theatrical conventions and spoke to a dissatisfied young generation. It was a huge success and paved the way for a whole generation of angry intellectuals, determined to portray the world as it was for the young working classes, a group ignored by theatre in the past.

Today, although its contemporary impact has faded, it is still a vibrant and often shocking piece of drama. The story of four young people struggling to live together and love each other is at times deeply upsetting. Jimmy Porter’s venomous relationship to the world and the people he loves is frightening in its fury and tragic in its vulnerability.

Not simply a museum piece, *Look Back in Anger* represents the anger and disillusionment of young people today as much as it did those in the 50s. Also, the richness of the language and the simple theatricality of the work mean that it has stood the test of time. However, it is the fact that the characters are not simply representatives of a young generation, but complex, sympathetic and entertaining that makes audiences relate to it as well today as they did in 1956.
Look Back in Anger is considered to be strongly influenced by Osborne’s own life. He was born on December 12, 1929, in London. His father was a white-collar, middle-class man; an advertising copywriter who married a barmaid. His father died when he was only 11, and left Osborne an insurance settlement which was used to finance a boarding school education. Osborne found himself, like Jimmy Porter, caught between a working class and a middle class society, bringing about the feelings of dislocation displayed by Jimmy in the play. He was unhappy at school and was eventually expelled for hitting the headmaster. He soon drifted in to the theatre world when he took a job tutoring young actors from a touring company with whom he then became assistant stage manager and then an actor. Osborne spent the next ten years working in provincial repertory companies, as the character of Helena is doing in Look Back in Anger. He was not a great actor; however, he did secure several small parts at the Royal Court Theatre, London. In 1951 he married actress Pamela Lane and was living with her, penniless, on a houseboat in 1956.

In 1956, George Devine, artistic director of the newly formed English Stage Company, advertised in The Stage requesting plays from new, young writers. Osborne had already tried his hand at writing plays and two of them (The Devil Inside Her and Personal Enemy) had been staged in regional theatres. However, he was still considered an ‘unknown’ and the ESC took a risk by selecting his play to feature in their opening season alongside Arthur Miller among others. In 1957 he divorced his first wife and married Mary Ure, who played the part of Alison in Look Back in Anger.

In the sixties, Osborne continued to produce work that was well received, including Luthor (1961), a play about the leader of the Reformation, and Inadmissible Evidence (1965), the study of a frustrated solicitor at a law firm. In 1965, his play A Patriot for Me, about homosexuality at the turn of the century, came up against the theatre censorship laws and was not granted a licence to be performed. So, like all unlicensed scripts, it could only be performed as a members-only club show. As a result, it made a loss of £16,500 in spite of being acclaimed as the best play of 1965. Stage censorship was abandoned three years later.

After the successes of his earlier work, Osborne’s plays fell away in both quality and popularity and were no longer produced by the Royal Court in the 70s. He did continue to write however and also produced some screenplays including Tom Jones in 1963, for which he won an Oscar. He also acted a little, including performances in films Get Carter (1971), and Flash Gordon (1980). He was married three more times, to writer Penelope Gilliat in 1966, to actress Jill Bennett in 1968, and to journalist Helen Dawson, his widow, in 1977.

His final play, Déjà vu, was written in 1991 and returned to the characters of Look Back in Anger over thirty years later. In it he reflected how his angry voice had become tiresome to the British public: “a churling, grating note, a spokesman for no one but myself, with deadening effect, cruelly abusive, unable to be coherent about my despair.” Osborne died as a result of complications from diabetes on December 24, 1994, in Shropshire, England.
In the mid 1950s, Britain was in a period of transition. Following the end of the Second World War in 1945, the country had been picking up the pieces and living in relative austerity, with rationing only finally abandoned in 1954. There was a general feeling of disenchantment across the nation. The Labour Government which had been voted in after the war had ended had nationalised many industries including electricity, gas and water, and established the National Health Service. Yet the public felt they had failed to make any real difference to the social and political landscape and had voted Winston Churchill's Conservatives back into power in 1951.

Britain was finding that its political power in the world was rapidly diminishing. From being the most powerful nation in the world before the First World War, it had lost most of its Empire, including India and Pakistan which became independent in 1947. The Suez crisis in 1956 was Britain’s last attempt at asserting its Imperialist power. To protect the Suez Canal in Egypt, which was under British control, from being regained by an Arab Alliance, British forces invaded Egypt with the backing of the French. However, The United States and the Soviet Union joined forces at the United Nations and demanded a cease-fire and the Anglo-French alliance was forced to withdraw.

The death of Stalin in 1953 and the acquisition of the atom bomb by many countries would change world politics dramatically and Britain was struggling to find a place in the new world order. Many of the British people looked back nostalgically to the 30s and 40s and felt, like Jimmy Porter, that ‘there are no good brave causes left’ ([*Look Back in Anger*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Look_Back_in_Anger)).

The media hyped up many of the major events of the time. The young Queen Elizabeth’s coronation in 1952 was widely celebrated. The conquering of Everest by a British expedition headed by Edmund Hillary in 1953 and the running of the four-minute mile by Roger Bannister in 1954 were seen as a move back to the confidence and greatness of the pre-war years.

Culturally, however, there were huge leaps forward into a modern age. In theatre, Bertolt Brecht’s play [*Mother Courage*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mother_Courage) was first performed in Britain in 1955 and the translation of Samuel Becket’s [*Waiting for Godot*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waiting_for_Godot) into English was premiered in 1953. These two plays, along with [*Look Back in Anger*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Look_Back_in_Anger) and Harold Pinter’s [*The Birthday Party*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Birthday_Party) (1958) changed the face of Western drama.

Meanwhile, an “age of youth” was beginning in popular music and film. The Teddy Boy emerged in 1954 and represented the first face of British youth culture. American youth culture also became very popular in Britain. James Dean starred in the film [*Rebel Without a Cause*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rebel_Without_a_Cause) in 1955 and a few months later was killed in a car crash. Elvis Presley released his first single in 1956 and also in this year, showings of the film [*Blackboard Jungle*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackboard_Jungle) featuring [*Rock Around The Clock*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rock_Around_the_Clock) by Bill Haley caused riots in cinemas all around the country as police were called to eject youths ‘jiveing’ in the aisles.

This popular movement was driven by the same disillusioned youth that John Osborne belonged to. Disappointed, confused and angry, they radically changed British culture.
John Osborne’s play was seen to belong to two strands of work that were key in the mid to late 1950s.

**Kitchen Sink Drama**

Prior to *Look Back in Anger*, British theatre was fairly stagnant and unchanged since the 1930s. Where American work by Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams and European work by Bertolt Brecht and Samuel Beckett was making radical advances in drama, British theatre remained much as it was through the 40s and early 50s.

Apart from some verse dramas from writers such as T.S. Eliot and some realistic plays about the war, most productions were not ground breaking in any way. In an unstable economic climate, theatres preferred to stick to proven box-office successes: lightweight whodunnits, American musicals, classic revivals and drawing-room comedies. These comedies were largely naturalistic pieces of work concerning upper middle class protagonists, with the painted backdrops and box-sets favoured by the Victorians. New plays by living playwrights were difficult to find.

Osborne blew all this away with *Look Back in Anger*. One of the greatest shocks to a British audience was to see an ironing board on stage as such a domestic scene had never before been shown. The working class home became a common setting for drama after this, with work that was concerned with working class domestic issues becoming known as Kitchen Sink Drama. The writers wanted to expose middle-class theatre goers to the real lives of the working people.

**Angry Young Men**

In 1954, a writer called Somerset Maugham reviewed a novel by Kingsley Amis called *Lucky Jim*. In his review he made this comment about a new sector of society.

“I am told that today rather more than 60 per cent of the men who go to university go on a Government grant. This is a new class that has entered upon the scene. It is the white-collar proletariat. They do not go to university to acquire culture but to get a job, and when they have got one, scamp it. They have no manners and are woefully unable to deal with any social predicament. Their idea of a celebration is to go to a public house and drink six beers. They are mean, malicious and envious. They are scum.”

Maugham was a traditionalist and was appalled by this new breed of men. On the other hand, these young men were fighting against everything he stood for: old-fashioned values, a prohibitive class system and a dying world view. The writers, both novelists and playwrights, who belonged to this new class became known as the ‘Angry Young Men’. Their views were seen as radical and in their work they described the social alienation they felt. They focused their attention on the working classes, portraying the drabness, mediocrity and injustice in the lives of these people and directing their anger at the upper and middle class establishment.

Playwrights belonging to both these groups included John Osborne, Arnold Wesker (*Roots*), Shelagh Delaney (*A Taste of Honey*), and John Arden (*Sergeant Musgrave’s Dance*).
In 1955, the English Stage Company was formed and took up residence at the Royal Court Theatre in London. Their vision was to challenge the stagnant and commercialised British theatre world with popular new productions by contemporary young writers.

In its first season, the theatre programmed plays by first-time playwrights alongside foreign work including *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller. One of the new plays was *Look Back in Anger*, which Osborne had sent to the theatre after seeing an advert in *The Stage* asking for new work.

The play opened on May 8 1956 with Kenneth Haigh as Jimmy, Mary Ure as Alison and Alan Bates as Cliff. Legend has it that as the curtain went up, the audience gasped at the sight of an ironing board on a London stage. Some walked out.

The critics’ responses show how unused to a domestic setting theatre audiences were. On the BBC Ivor Brown described the setting as “unspeakably dirty and squalid. It is difficult to believe that a colonel’s daughter, brought up with some standards, would have stayed in this sty for a day.” Gerald Berry, talking on the same programme, also suffered: “I nearly had a nervous breakdown watching her take so long to iron one pyjama top.” The *Daily Mail*’s Cecil Wilson felt that “Mary Ure’s beauty [was] frittered away on the part of a wife who, judging by the time she spends ironing, seems to have taken on the nation’s laundry.”

However, the respected critic Kenneth Tynan’s review in *The Observer* sealed *Look Back in Anger*’s fate. “I agree that *Look Back in Anger* is likely to remain a minority taste. What matters, however, is the size of the minority. I estimate it as roughly 6,733,000, which is the number of people in this country between the ages of 20 and 30. And this figure will doubtless be swelled by refugees from other age-groups who are curious to know precisely what the contemporary young pup is thinking and feeling. I doubt if I could love anyone who did not wish to see *Look Back in Anger*. It is the best young play of its decade.”

At first the audiences for the production were not huge. But then, the BBC presented a 25 minute extract on television and the response was immediate. *Look Back in Anger* was the play to see and after its run at the Royal Court, it transferred to the Lyric, Hammersmith. It toured to Moscow, transferred to Broadway. In 1958, director Tony Richardson made it into a film starring a smouldering Richard Burton and extending the action to include scenes that happened outside the flat.

*Look Back in Anger* paved the way for a whole generation of young contemporary playwrights, many of whose productions were premiered at the Royal Court; Trevor Griffiths, Edward Bond, Arnold Wesker, and ten years later David Edgar, David Hare and Howard Brenton.

Images: Theatre Museum, London; © V &A Images
Mary Ure as Alison, Alan Bates as Cliff, Helena Hughes as Helena and Kenneth Haigh as Jimmy in the original production of *Look Back in Anger* at the Royal Court.
Plot Synopsis

Act One
Jimmy Porter and his wife Alison are spending a Sunday afternoon together in their small attic flat in the Midlands with their friend Cliff. Alison irons, while the men read the newspapers. In the dialogue, we learn that Jimmy has studied at a ‘red-brick’ [new] University and now runs a sweet-stall, helped by Cliff. Alison is from an upper middle class family for whom Jimmy has much contempt. During the scene, Jimmy rants at Alison, Cliff and the world in general, especially attacking Alison’s family. During a mock fight between Cliff and Jimmy, Alison’s arm is burned. As Cliff helps her, she confides in him that she is pregnant. On Jimmy’s return, he is regretful and kind to Alison until she gets a phone call from her friend Helena who, she tells them on her return, is coming to stay. This provokes a violent outburst from Jimmy, who tells Alison that he wishes she might have a child that would die.

Act Two Scene One
Two weeks later. Alison and Helena, who has been staying with them, are preparing to go to church. Alison is telling Helena about her relationship with Jimmy, their courtship and early days of marriage when he and his friend Hugh had gate-crashed the parties of Alison’s friends and family whom they despised. Cliff and Jimmy enter for tea and when Jimmy realises that Alison is going to church he verbally attacks her. He is interrupted by a phone call. While he is out of the room, Helena tells Alison she has sent a telegram to her father to come and get her. Alison agrees to go. When Jimmy returns he tells them that his friend Hugh’s mother has had a stroke. He asks Alison to come with him to see her but she leaves and goes to church.

Act Two Scene Two
The following evening. Alison’s father has arrived to collect her and as she packs she talks to him about her relationship with Jimmy. Helena enters and reveals she will be staying that evening. Cliff enters – he is sad to see Alison go and angry with Helena. After Alison leaves, he leaves Helena alone to tell Jimmy when he gets back. Jimmy enters, having seen Alison leaving in the car. He is angry and upset – Hugh’s mother has died. He directs his anger at Helena who first slaps and then kisses him.

Act Three Scene One
Several months later, on a Sunday afternoon. Helena, who is now living with Jimmy, is ironing while Cliff and Jimmy read the papers. A similar dialogue as in Act One, where Jimmy teases Helena. When Helena leaves the room, Cliff tells Jimmy he is leaving – he feels that ‘it’s not the same’. Helena and Jimmy seem happy together – but then Alison enters.

Act Three Scene Two
Helena and Alison talk while Jimmy plays the trumpet next door. Alison has come back ‘out of morbid curiosity’ but her return and the fact she has lost her baby makes Helena feel guilty and she feels she cannot stay. Alison begs Helena not to leave as she is worried about Jimmy but Helena calls Jimmy in and leaves. Jimmy tells Alison how he felt abandoned by her. She breaks down, revealing how hurt she has been about the death of the baby. They make a kind of reconciliation, playing a game of squirrels and bears, their way of escaping from the pain of the world.
Jimmy Porter
Jimmy Porter has come from a working class background and is one of the new generation who could attend university due to the introduction of government grants in the 1940s. As a result, he is well-educated – but has yet to find an outlet and is working on a sweet stall. Jimmy is intelligent, passionate and an idealist. But he feels disappointed by a society that he finds does not want what he has to offer and still works on a system of privilege and class. Jimmy lost his father at an early age and this seems to have affected his view of the world. He aggressively attacks everything he sees as stagnant and unjust about society, especially the middle class establishment. He also directs his anger at his wife who not only represents the middle class but who he also feels has failed him in her inability to love or support him. Despite Jimmy’s cruelty, he is, as his wife recognises, ‘young and frail’, often childish and attacks in order to defend himself. He is also old-fashioned in that he looks back to a time when there were ‘good, brave causes’ to fight for and is lost in the changing world of the 1950s. As Helena says ‘There’s no place for people like that anymore…’

Alison Porter
Alison is from an upper middle class background and has married Jimmy against the wishes of her family. She fell in love with him after meeting him at a party: ‘Everything about him seemed to burn…’ She has since become ground down not by the poverty but by the angry, aggressive atmosphere she lives in and is exhausted, frustrated and bitter. She is unable to reach out to Jimmy and turns away from him when he needs her, seeming cold. She leaves Jimmy because she cannot be with him, but returns because she cannot be without him – ‘I knew I was taking on more than I was ever likely to be capable of bearing, but there never seemed to be any choice.’ She is devastated by the death of her baby and her complete breakdown forces Jimmy to become supportive of her.

Cliff Lewis
Cliff lives next door to Jimmy and Alison. He is a kind and laid-back Welshman who acts as a buffer between the couple. He is very fond of Alison, but does not seem to be in love with her as Helena suggests. He is dependent on the couple; he feels that he cannot live alone. However, when Alison leaves, there is no role for him and he leaves too.

Helena Charles
Helena is an actress in Repertory Theatre (as Osborne was), an old friend of Alison’s. She represents Alison’s old life and is appalled by Jimmy’s treatment of her friend. However, like Alison, she falls in love with his passion and energy. It is possible that Helena’s engineering of Alison’s departure is partly or even wholly to get to Jimmy. However, she leaves quickly when Alison returns as she recognises that it is not her place.

Colonel Redfern
Alison’s father. He stands for all the old-fashioned, middle class values that Jimmy hates. However, when he enters we see he is a kind and fair man who has a kind of respect for Jimmy and is embarrassed about the way he and his wife have treated him. Jimmy feels sorry for him as being a remnant of the Empire ‘that can’t understand why the sun isn’t shining anymore.’

Referred to:
Hugh Tanner Jimmy’s friend. Alison and Jimmy lived with him after they were married. He and Alison disliked each other. Hugh and Jimmy had launched a kind of ‘class war’ on Alison’s friends and family, gate-crashing their parties. Hugh emigrated to China to escape the re-elected Conservative government and fell out with Jimmy when he refused to go with him.

Hugh’s Mother She owns the sweet stall, bought to set Jimmy up in business. Jimmy is very close to her. Alison dismisses her as ‘ordinary’. A charwoman who married an actor. It is possible she represents Osborne’s own mother, who was a barmaid.

Jimmy’s Father Like many left wing British men, Jimmy’s father fought in the Spanish Civil War against the Fascists as a volunteer. He died at home and Jimmy sat with him at his bedside.
Despite *Look Back in Anger*’s revolutionary reputation, the structure of the play is actually very traditional. It follows the structure of the ‘well-made play’ which had been the principal dramatic structuring of serious drama and comedy for almost a century.

*piece bien faite*: The ‘well-made play’

As defined by French dramatists Eugene Scribe and Victorien Sardou in the mid-nineteenth century. In this form, the play is broken into three sections:

**Exposition** Introduction of character, social and geographical context and placing of elements used which will be important later in the play.

**Complication** The situation of the exposition is complicated by new events or revelations, often the appearance of a character from the past.

**Denouement** The solution, or the crisis point which ends the play.

Examples of ‘well-made’ plays: *The Second Mrs Tanqueray*, Arthur Wing Pinero; *An Ideal Husband*, Oscar Wilde; *A Doll’s House*, Henrik Ibsen; *The Mousetrap*, Agatha Christie

Osborne has clearly followed this convention:

**Exposition** Act 1: All the major characters are introduced, either on stage or in the dialogue and the audience learns about their lives. Alison’s pregnancy is mentioned and Helena’s imminent arrival is discussed.

**Complication** Act 2: Alison and Jimmy’s situation is complicated by: Helena’s arrival, the death of Hugh’s mother and the arrival of Alison’s father with whom she leaves. Helena tells Jimmy about Alison’s pregnancy at the end of the Act which leads into the...

**Denouement** Act 3: When Alison returns, having lost her baby, the situation moves to a kind of resolution, with Jimmy and Alison together again. The shift in their relationship leads to a hopeful ending.

**Curtain Lines**

The play also uses the traditional theatrical device of the curtain lines. A curtain line is the last line of dialogue, action, visual image or sound effect in a scene or act after which the curtain falls. The curtain line leaves the audience with something unanswered and should be strong enough to make the audience want to know what will be the outcome in the next movement of the play.

A good example is the stage directions at the end of Act 2:

*She [Helena] slaps his [Jimmy’s] face savagely. An expression of horror and disbelief floods his face. But it drains away, and all that is left is pain. His hand goes up to his head, and a muffled cry of despair escapes him. Helena tears his hand away, and kisses him passionately, drawing him down beside her.*

The modern equivalent of this is the soap opera cliff-hanger.
Style, Language and Themes

Style

Realism
As regards the dramatic style of *Look Back in Anger*, again Osborne employed what was by the 1950s the standard: Realism. Realism was an artistic movement that began in 19th century France. Realist drama was a careful observation of human characteristics and the language attempted to be as close as possible to natural conversation. Contemporary costuming and three-dimensional sets were used so as to create a ‘lifelike’ stage picture. The plays were usually critiques of social problems. Although *Look Back in Anger* follows what was a century-old style, it was the first play to use a working class setting, rather than the middle class setting traditionally employed.

Stage Directions
Like George Bernard Shaw and Arthur Miller before him, Osborne gives very detailed stage directions to directors and actors. He gives directions on:

- **Set**: ‘below the bed is a heavy chest of drawers, covered with books, neckties and odds and ends, including a large, tattered teddy bear and soft, woolly squirrel’
- **Costumes and Casting**: ‘Jimmy is a tall, thin young man about twenty-five, wearing a tweed jacket and flannels.’
- **Characterisation**: ‘She is tuned in a key of well-bred malaise’
- **Physical actions**: ‘Helena tears his hand away and kisses him passionately’
- **Motivation**: ‘He’s been cheated out of his response, but he’s got to draw blood somehow’
- **Sound effects**: ‘Church bells start ringing outside’

Osborne is carefully controlling all the elements additional to dialogue to make his vision very clear to actors and directors. This style of realism recognises how much human communication is non-verbal and the silences, unspoken thoughts and actions of the actors are key to the audiences’ understanding of the characters. All the staging elements add to the particular atmosphere of the characters’ surroundings, again deepening an audience’s understanding of their lives.

Language

Contemporary references: As Osborne is creating a realistic picture of 1950s Britain, it is vital that he includes contemporary references to set the characters in their time. E.g. Cliff: ‘He makes a very moving appeal to Christians to assist in the manufacture of the H-bomb’ (refers to the Hydrogen bomb – a kind of nuclear bomb being developed at the time and first exploded in 1957)

Cultural references: Jimmy regularly references literature, theatre, history and politics in his speech. It shows that he is well educated and not ignorant. The middle-class theatre audience would have recognised and been amused and impressed by the use of the references. e.g. ‘Pass Lady Bracknell the cucumber sandwiches will you?’ [Lady Bracknell is a character in Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the kind of drawing-room comedy that *Look Back in Anger* is a move away from].
Jimmy’s Language

It is Jimmy’s voice that drives this play and caused such a reaction at the time. He can be

funny: Thought of the title for a new song today. It’s called ‘My mother’s in the madhouse – that’s why I’m in love with you.’

abusive: You are ignorant

kind: You’re all right. You’re all right now.

vicious: you evil-minded little virgin

intelligent: They’re what they sound like; sycophantic, phlegmatic and pusillanimous.

sarcastic: There’s no reason why we shouldn’t have the parson to tea up here

furious: My heart is so full, I feel ill – and she wants peace!

childish: Come on, let me have that one, and you have this

violent: If you slap my face – by God, I’ll lay you out!

But above all the language is always honest, dynamic and powerful. While he often shocks with his directness and violence, the vibrancy of his speech keeps the audience engaged with the character.

Themes

The past: There is a lot of reminiscing in the play. Jimmy looks back to the past with sentimentality, his relationship with Madeleine for example and the fact he feels there once were ‘good, brave causes’ to believe in. Alison is much more critical, seeing now what she could not see at the time, much like her father. Jimmy criticises the Colonel for looking back to an idealised past, the Empire. However, it is Jimmy who looks back so often, and cannot move forward optimistically because of this.

Women: Jimmy’s anger towards Alison and Helena is not just to do with their class but also their gender. In Act One, he makes his disdain for women clear: ‘the eternal flaming racket of the female’. He has a feeling that he will be ‘devoured whole’ by his wife: this echoes a character in George Bernard Shaw’s play Man and Superman who feels that being with a woman will drain him of all his creativity. Jimmy also expects that women will betray him, as he feels his mother betrayed his father.

The class system: Jimmy often refers to the class distinctions which were still so present in Britain. He reads the ‘posh’ papers but criticises the writers and the editorials. He and Hugh refer to the upper middle class as ‘her lot’ or ‘Dame Alison’s Mob’ and are rude about them and to them. However, it is only them who do this – when Alison talks about Hugh’s mother she says ‘Jimmy insists on calling (her) working class’. Jimmy feels like he is trying to break out of the constraints placed on him by the class system, but upholds it by constantly identifying people as one class or another.

Hell and religion: The characters often refer to the situation they are in as like being in hell. Alison says ‘I’m in the fire, and I’m burning’ and Cliff says the flat is ‘a very narrow strip of plain hell’. There are references to ‘living in sin’ ‘souls’, ‘paradise’ etc. There is a divide between the women, who are religious and Jimmy, who has renounced religion. However, even he uses religious imagery over and over again.
Look Back in Anger
Royal Lyceum Theatre Company
15 January – 12 February 2005

cast

Jimmy Porter      David Tennant
Cliff Lewis       Steven McNicoll
Alison Porter     Kelly Reilly
Helena Charles    Alexandra Moen
Colonel Redfern   Gareth Thomas

company

Director          Richard Baron
Set Designer       Trevor Coe
Costume Designer   Monika Nisbet
Lighting Designer  Jeanine Davies
DSM on the book    Claire Williamson
The First Production Meeting

Claire Williamson:
Assistant Stage Manager on the Book

Claire is 24 years old and has been working at the Royal Lyceum Theatre as an Assistant Stage Manager for three and a half years. She studied at Queen Margaret University College in Edinburgh, where she completed a degree in Stage Management and Theatre Production.

Production Meeting: 29/11/04

Today I attended the first production meeting and model showing. This is when the entire team of people working on the show sit together and discuss how we are going to turn the designer’s vision of the play into reality.

Trevor Coe, the designer, has built a model of how he wants the set to look. The workshop team of carpenters and painters need to figure out how the whole thing will be built and painted to match the model. Everyone has a lot of questions for Trevor and also the director Richard Baron.

One of the aspects which needs to be discussed is the proposed rain bar. This is a bar or pipe with holes across its length. Water runs along the pipe and falls through the holes. The position of the bar above the window makes it seem as though it is raining outside. Trevor also wants there to be a drip in the ceiling, which will drip over the bed into a chamber pot. These ideas are discussed with Tommy Brophy our Chief Stage Technician who is experienced in creating rain onstage. This will be the second time this season it has rained!

The production meeting is a vital part of the production process, particularly at the onset of the production. For example, it is when we in stage management find out which props will be practical, will have to work. In Look Back in Anger we are thinking of having a Victorian airer for drying clothes which works on a pulley system. Trevor wants the actors to be able to winch the airer up and down and take clothes on and off it. While this shouldn’t cause too many problems there are other things which are simply not feasible. Trevor would like the cooker onstage to work. For a start it’s difficult to find 1940s cookers that work, but even if we did, the health and safety implications would be too high. We now have to come up with new ideas to make the cooker seem as though it is on.

The really difficult part will be all the additional dressing required. Dressing is the extra bits and pieces which essentially clutter the set and suggest the kind of people who live in the home we are trying to create onstage. They are the things that often really bring a set to life; food in the cupboards, clothes in the wardrobe, all the strange bits of rubbish that we all tidy away under our beds! Most of these things will never be used but placing them around the set makes the world the actors are trying to create for us so much more believable.

The first two weeks of our rehearsals will be happening in London. This is unusual for us and creates new difficulties particularly for the stage management and wardrobe departments. We will need to provide props and furniture to go to London in a lorry as Trevor and Richard would ideally like as much of the actual furniture as possible in rehearsals. This leaves us only 9 days to collect everything! It will be particularly difficult for us as 3 members of our team are working full time on our Christmas show and there is an immense amount to be done. In London if a new prop is discussed I will have no one to get it for me while I am full time in rehearsals.

For the wardrobe department the first couple of weeks are crucial for costume fittings. Our wardrobe department makes a lot of the costumes for our shows and not having the cast nearby makes it very difficult for them. However two members of the wardrobe team will be in London for the first two days of rehearsals to do fittings and alterations. The director, Richard, has also asked for pieces of rehearsal costumes to come down with us. These pieces will be very important for the members of the cast as throughout the production they will spend their time dressing and undressing.

It feels like there is a mountain of things to try and organise in such a short time; it’s quite a daunting feeling. It really is going to be a crazy couple of weeks!
Set Designer Trevor Coe explains the process and concept of his design for *Look Back in Anger*.

**First Stage**

We started off with the idea that because it was one of the first so-called 'Kitchen Sink' dramas, it broke away from the more traditional theatrical presentation. In this period they were just getting away from having painted wings and backdrops and getting in to real, three dimensional sets. We knew it had to be a real space; it had to have real furniture and real props and dressings.

The first thing to look at was the relationship between the furniture, because that’s quite important in terms of how the play pans out. I came up with a plot of where the furniture needed to be on stage. Things like, the dining table had to have some kind of relationship to the dressing table and the bed. There is a moment, for instance, where Alison has to be sitting near her dressing table but she has to be sitting behind Jimmy eating his tea at the table. We had to plot all these positions really carefully because those relationships are important to the play. We plotted where the furniture had to be and that gave us the shape that the set had to be to wrap around the furniture. So the shape of the attic evolved out of the furniture plot: the furniture came first.
The Set

Style: The Newspaper Concept

Having said it had to be a real space, we didn’t want it to become just a bog standard box set. We wanted to get something more interesting and dynamic out of it. So the next question was what we could do with the set to lift it out, to make it a bit more interesting while still retaining the physical shape of an attic. At this point in time we were looking at facsimile newspapers from the 50s. There were lots of things happening in the 50s; the coronation, Suez, Bannister breaking the four minute mile. The original idea was that we would wrap around this real acting space in some form using newspapers, put newspapers around the set so people could relate what was happening to what was happening in context, period wise. We had to find some format to display these newspapers and one of the ideas was to make a false prosc, a sort of secondary proscenium arch* upstage of the real proscenium arch. So the first design had this false prosc with large scale newspaper headlines collaged and pasted up on them in a sort of hoarding fashion.

I worked that up into a rough model and we took one look at it and said “it’s far too busy; all the audience will do is sit and read the newspapers, because there are too many interesting things happening up on the walls”. We were quite keen on keeping the newspaper feel because newspapers figure quite heavily in the business of the play. So we’ve used the newspapers in a different way; on the final model, you’ll see I’ve collaged newspapers on to the architecture. The outside of the building is collaged with newspaper, blown up slightly so you can read it from a distance but not so big that you get in to reading it which would be distracting. It gives a sort of pale, washed out newspaper kind of feel to it. We’ll follow that up by using lots of newspapers on the set: for instance, we’ll tuck newspapers underneath the carpets which is what people used to do in these kind of flats, a sort of poor man’s underlay.

Style: False Perspective

The rest of the set is in what we call ‘false perspective’ which gives it a sort of dynamic feel. We retained the false prosc in a sense. We have a sort of angled, black false prosc upstage of the set. But we left it just plain black so that it wasn’t so busy. It gives the set a quality where it’s bursting out of the prosc arch, i.e. breaking down the conventions of the prosc arch. If we had the space, we’d probably have brought the set even further down stage and we would have burst it out of the real prosc arch to suggest that we’re breaking theatrical convention even more by literally bursting out of the confines of traditional theatre. But because we can’t get weight downstage, that’s another reason why we had to do a false prosc upstage of the real one.

The black false prosc is also framing the back projection which is hopefully going to be a photograph of a midlands town. We’re still in the mechanics of working out how we’re going to do it, whether we’re going to back project or have it printed on to a back projection screen and then light it from behind. There’s a number of different ways of approaching it and we haven’t quite sorted out which one we’re going to use. It’s going to be cost driven. But if we don’t get that, then we’ll still have to do something on the back and it’ll probably be monochrome clouds.

Technical Implications

It’s my job to liaise with the director and translate what we want to have visually and artistically so it can be done technically. I rely on the technical people in this organisation to help me do that. But I have to sort out what is physically possible, what can fit in to the space. Because the production is going to the Theatre Royal, Bath after here, I’ve actually had to design for that space because it is smaller. I designed it for Bath, knowing it would fit in here. Bath is very similar only slightly smaller, so there won’t be much change in the production. The projection is slightly contentious at the moment because there is less backstage space, so we may well have to come up with something slightly different for that.

* Proscenium arch (prosc): the arch or frame which surrounds the raised stage and separates it from the auditorium.
Monika Nisbet designed the costumes for *Look Back in Anger*. Here she talks about her process and about two of the costumes.

I think the job of the costume designer is to pick out elements of the character and introduce them in to the costumes to give a much more rounded image to the audience. It's these little subtleties, these little pointers that some members of the audience will pick up and some won't.

My costume drawings tend to be not so much fashion drawings but more character studies so that the actors and the director can relate to them. They're usually put on the wall of the rehearsal room. Although I'm not a portrait painter, I try to get at least the similarity and colouring of the actor so that they can look and see 'that's me and that's what I'll be wearing'. I have worked with directors who have asked me to do the drawings before they have cast the actors, so that they can take the drawings in to casting and get an image of how I see the character.

I try to identify with the character in the play when I'm drawing. I actually find the process very exhausting because I almost become the character for the time it takes me to do the drawing. I've tried to be more technical but it's more important to me to get the character across.

It's also important to clarify the costume so that wardrobe have all the information they need. I don't produce patterns but I've got to draw something they can make the patterns from. I will choose the fabric that the costume's got to be made from; they provide me with samples. I also supervise the fittings so that during them I can change an element of the design. What I've drawn might look all right on the page but when an actor tries on that garment, the colour or style might not suit.
“While Alison’s been living with Jimmy she’s become careless and sloppy and depressive and so on and she’s taking less interest in her appearance so in early scenes she slops around in an old pair of pyjamas and her underwear when she’s ironing. But after Helena comes in to the picture, she’s brought under Helena’s influence. Helena’s much more uptight and much more careful about her dress; she’s an actress. So Helena has persuaded Alison to go to church which of course creates a terrific row with Jimmy when he finds out. She starts off the scene in her underwear at the dressing table preparing to go to church and she gradually gets dressed in this suit. First she puts on the skirt over her nylon stockings, suspenders, and the slip she’s wearing. She puts on the skirt and sits down to have a meal and before she leaves to go to church with Helena, she puts on the jacket, the hat, picks up her gloves and handbag, puts on her shoes and then she’s ready to become this much more prim person, this public schoolgirl that she was before she married Jimmy.”

This is for the same scene – it’s Sunday. Because he’s very rebellious, he hasn’t bothered getting properly dressed although it’s quite late in the day. He’s been in Cliff’s room, playing his trumpet. He’s called to tea, which Helena has prepared and he comes slopping in, with his trumpet, wearing this old dressing gown. He’s got underpants on but he doesn’t have slippers or shoes on, he’s in his socks. And he’s got a tie round his dressing gown, A) because he’s lost the cord and B) because Jimmy is actually very much a traditionalist, he’s actually conservative at heart. It was customary for public school boys to wear the old school tie around their cricket trousers. Jimmy has emulated this, to some extent unconsciously. He’s using an old tie because it’s something to tie round his dressing gown, but in fact he doesn’t realise that subconsciously he’s picked up the old school tie image which he’s been trying to reject.”
Director Richard Baron talked about his preparations for directing the play the week before rehearsals started.

When you were asked to direct Look Back in Anger why did you say yes?

It’s one of those plays that played a huge role in the history of British drama. It’s seen as breaking the mould of what was going on before, in the 1950s particularly. Osborne’s play crashed through and broke a lot of boundaries. So I thought it was interesting to look at it now, 50 years on and see whether it still holds up. I think one of the things that excites me is the great opportunities that it offers actors, particularly Jimmy Porter: here’s a man who uses language so interestingly, a man who’s very articulate, who obviously has a lot of pain and a lot of emotion to give. I think it’s a fantastic role for an actor to attempt and to look at it 50 years hence will be fascinating.

I think what’s also interesting about Look Back in Anger is that it’s quite a conventional play in the way it’s structured. It’s a three act piece with good curtain lines and full of pregnant moments. It will be about relishing the theatricality of it as well as the exuberance of it and the contemporary nature of it.

What do you think it has got to offer us today?

A lot of people might say that it was a play that was very contemporary in 1956. But I think that when you examine it carefully you see it’s a play about a relationship, and about a man and his psychological problems. So of course although it’s set in its time, I think the relationship between him and his wife and the world in general is still extremely relevant. I think the dissatisfaction with the people that ran the country at the time is also relevant to us at the moment. There was the Suez crisis at that point and a feeling of dissatisfaction with the ruling class and in our period there’s been big demonstrations against government policy, particularly against the war. So I think that clearly there are contemporary relevancies. One thing that we very clearly don’t want to do is make it a museum piece.

Are there elements that you’re going to add to make it more modern?

We’re not going to update it in terms of changing the period or anything like that. But I think what we will hope to capture is the initial shock and vigour that the play represented. Osborne was very influenced by the American writers of his period, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, who presented slice of life pieces with a lot of emotion and with a reality that hadn’t been seen on the British stage before. I think that immediacy is what is important, the fact that this is quite a sexy play, or was in its time. It’s a dangerous play about a man really on the edge and behaving in a manner which is extremely unpleasant and I think it’s up to us to give it that energy and exuberance and to play it to the hilt.

Jimmy is obviously the core of this play which everything revolves around. But how are you thinking about the women in this play in relation to Jimmy?

I think Jimmy’s attitude to women is extremely complicated, as probably is the writer John Osborne’s. The play is an examination of Jimmy’s sexuality in some respects, his examination of his own malehood and how that is counterpoised with his relationships.
with Alison and Helena. Clearly Alison represents a danger to him as well as a loving companion. He sees her as a threat to him; he uses imagery of her swallowing him whole. There’s a play by George Bernard Shaw called *Man and Superman* where the character is very worried that if he marries, the woman will deny him his creativity and will stop him becoming an artist. There is this worry about the relationship in *Look Back in Anger* too; it’s very fascinating, very psychologically deep.

What’s your plan for the rehearsals? What’s your process of working with actors?

I always like to go through the play quite quickly in the first week of rehearsals so that we explore the narrative of the play, see what actually happens if we walk about and perform it. By the end of that first week I might want to do a run through of the play so we know what it feels like to do it, even in a very rough way. At least then you know the size and the rhythm of the play a little bit. You feel the length of scenes and what it’s like to speak the lines over the course of two and a half hours; particularly for Jimmy who’s got these massive arias, these massive speeches. It gives him some structure in his head. I think one of the big tasks for us in rehearsal will be to modulate his speeches so they don’t all sound angry, so there’s some kind of light and shade in them, some wit and humour and we get the rhythm of the language.

Do you have any particular exercises in mind to help actors find their way through to their character?

I tend to approach it by working very closely with the actors. So once we’ve gone through it in a fairly quick way in the first week just to see what happens, then we go back in a lot of detail. What I don’t tend to do is sit around discussing a piece. I like to get it up on its feet and you make all sorts of discoveries when actors are at play rather than involved in exercises. If I’ve cast the right actors then once we can explore on our feet I often find that you get discoveries that way. You’ll find that the actors will make the discoveries for you if you give them the chance.

What kind of preparation do you do before rehearsals start?

Obviously I read the play a lot but I also read around it. I like to read about the period because it’s important that we get all the references correct. One of the things I find very useful is listening to music of the period, particularly in this play because Jimmy plays the jazz trumpet and that’s one of his fascinations. So I’ve been listening to a lot of jazz from the period and people who might have influenced his taste. I find if I can hear the music it often helps me. It sets a sort of rhythm, a feeling for the period or the characters.

The other thing I’ve been looking at is small cuts because it was one of Osborne’s first plays and I feel that some of it could do with trimming to try and make it as sharp as we can.

Tell me about your discussions with the designer about the set.

I don’t think the set necessarily has to comment on the production in this case. I think it’s more about the acting and the language, so it’s got to be a sensible background to the piece without being distracting. It’s got to be somewhere they actually live so it was about trying to get that period feel of the 50s where people didn’t have much money. One of the things was to capture that feeling of three people living in very close proximity in this small space dominated by a big double bed. It’s quite a sexy piece. There is undressing in the course of the play and there are references to lots of sexual activity going on and there’s an interesting relationship between Cliff and Alison where he embraces her quite a lot. There’s a slightly Bohemian feel to quite a lot of it.

Do you feel freer to explore these elements as a modern director than you think they would have done in the 50s?

When you look at the play, you realise that it was actually censored – plays were censored until 1968. In Osborne’s autobiography he mentions that he had to change a line from ‘arse’ to ‘arm’ or something and there was a reference to pubic hair he had to cut. At the time it would have been very near the knuckle because it’s discussing sexual activity quite openly and there’s a big bed in the middle of the room. In its day it was quite shocking and we have to reflect that in our production; perhaps we have to slightly highlight that to make clear that this was an element that would have been new on the British stage.

What are you most looking forward to and what are you least looking forward to in the next few weeks?

I’m most looking forward to getting the actors all together. It’s very exciting when you hear it first being read out with the actors you’ve chosen. Some of them don’t know each other and have never met so working out whether you’ve got the combination of people right and how you’re going to get the best out of them as a team is very important. I think the rehearsal period might be a bit difficult because we’re rehearsing for two weeks in London and then coming up to Edinburgh but apart from that I can’t say that there’s anything I’m dreading. I enjoy the whole process, the whole thing fascinates me. I love putting it all together; the sound, the lighting, the music, the costuming, the whole thing.
Drama Exercises

Acting exercises

On your own
• Alison writes long letters to her mother. What do you think she says? What would Jimmy say if he was writing a letter to his friend Hugh? Write one of Alison’s or Jimmy’s letters. Read it out to the class.

In pairs
• Look at an exchange between two characters which is about a page long. Read it together.

• Look again at the exchange line by line. What is the subtext of each line – what are their real feelings or the real meaning behind what they are saying?

• Write a new dialogue that is only the subtext of their conversation. Read this out together.

In threes
• Set up an area to represent the stage set in Act One, Scene One with you playing the characters of Cliff, Jimmy and Alison. Sit in their positions and carry out the actions you think they would be doing – in silence. As you are sitting, think about the character and what they are thinking about. Try and show this in your actions - keep it simple.

• Repeat the scene. This time, take it in turns to say what you think the character is thinking about.

In a group (6 or more)
• Imagine you are at one of Alison’s family’s parties. People should play the characters of Alison, Jimmy and Hugh gatecrashing the party. The other members of the group could be: Alison’s mother, father, brother or a friend.

Production exercises

• Go through a scene in the script. Make a list of all the props that are mentioned and who would be using them. Find references [i.e. pictures] to show what these would be like. Remember the time period.

• Read Monika Nisbet’s comments about costumes. Pick another character [or another scene for Jimmy and Alison] and design a costume for them. You will have to do some research into the period. Try sourcing some fabric swatches that you would like the costumes to be made out of.

• Look at Trevor Coe’s box model for the set. In this photograph there is very little furniture on the set. Draw a picture or plan of the same set with all the furniture on it. You will have to do some research into period furniture. If you want, you could make a model.
Study Questions

Here are some questions to help students make an analysis of the Royal Lyceum’s production of *Look Back in Anger*.

- Describe the set. What elements were ‘realistic’ and what elements were not? What affect did the realism have on your understanding of the play?
- How did the placing of the furniture affect the positioning of the actors on stage?
- Describe the appearance of one of the actors. What physical elements enhanced your understanding of the character?
- Describe one of the actor’s costumes. What further pieces of information did you get about the character from this?
- Describe one of the sound effects. Was it realistic? What effect did the sound effects have on the atmosphere?
- Describe one lighting effect. Was it realistic? What effect did it have on the atmosphere?
- Describe two of Jimmy’s speeches. How did they differ in tone and delivery?
- Describe a key moment of silence. How did the actors use other elements to communicate something to the audience?
- Describe a curtain line. How was the tension created? Did it make you want to see more?

These questions are to help with further study of the play text.

- Why did audiences at the time find *Look Back in Anger* so controversial?
- Explain why *Look Back in Anger* is, in terms of structure, quite conventional.
- Jimmy is offensive, abusive and cruel. How can an audience sympathise with him?
- What elements of British society does Jimmy find so objectionable and why?
- What does Jimmy think of women? Do you think the playwright agrees with him?
- All the other characters in the play only exist to tell us more about the central character of Jimmy. Do you agree?
- Look at one of Jimmy’s speeches. How does Osborne inject a dynamic, energetic quality to his language?
- Why is the play called *Look Back in Anger*?
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