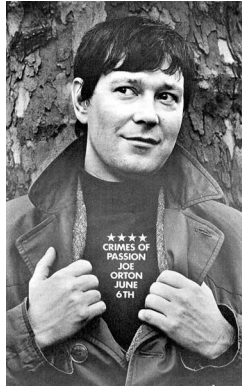


What the Butler Saw



By Joe Orton

A Playgoer's Guide

Synopsis

This two act play, full of many ironies, explores the shady private practice of Dr. Prentice. This lustful psychiatrist is attempting to seduce Geraldine Barclay, a prospective secretary. However, the unexpected arrival of Mrs. Prentice during the "interview" is the inciting force behind the series of conflicts in this play. We learn of Mrs. Prentice's situation regarding her own seducer, Nicholas Beckett, who is blackmailing her. To make Mr. Prentice's situation worse, his wife hastily promises the secretary position to Nick. The situation deepens upon the government's inspection by Dr. Rance and we learn the true madness behind Dr. Prentice's clinic. All the while, Sergeant Match is conducting a search for two "confused" offenders and Mrs. Prentice can't help but make every situation even more perplexed. After the nudity, examinations, gender role reversals, straight jackets, drugs and guns comes the inconceivably twisted ending. This outcome will serve as the climax to the novel that Dr. Rance will be publishing upon witnessing these outrageous circumstances surrounding the madness of Dr. Prentice's private psychiatric clinic. The title (reminding us of the two-minute "nudie" porn flicks which used to be available on hand-cranked viewers at

fairs), as Stephen Pederson said reviewing the recent production at Neptune Theatre in Halifax, warns us. "It has to be a sex farce."

Joe Orton

Born John Kingsley Orton, January 1, 1933 in Leicestershire, England, Orton started off as an actor but switched to writing in the late 1950's. His first successful play was a radio play, *The Ruffian on the Stair*, broadcast by the BBC. His three full-length plays, *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* (1964), *Loot* (1965) and *What the Butler Saw* (1969) were all brilliantly successful. They were all "outrageous and unconventional black comedies that scandalized audiences with their examination of moral corruption, violence, and sexual rapacity" (*Encyclopedia Britannica*). In his plays, he expresses his dislike of social institutions and attempts to shock his viewers.

He was approached to do a film script for the Beatles but it was turned down by Brian Epstein because it wasn't suitable. Orton had the Beatles commit adultery, murder, dress in drag, go to prison, and seduce the niece of a priest.

On August 9th, 1967, Orton's lover, Kenneth Halliwell, killed Orton with a hammer and then killed himself with an overdose of sleeping pills. He had willed his work to Halliwell, whose family would have destroyed it, but the coroner ruled the Orton actually died after Halliwell as Orton was in a coma for some hours after Halliwell ingested the pills. Therefore, Orton's work went to his family and this is the reason we have much that he did not publish before his death, including *What the Butler Saw*.

50,000 pounds of lottery money was spent to refurbish London's underground public lavatories in his honour, as he frequently visited them during his life. A biographical film about Orton was produced in 1987 titled *Prick Up Your Ears*, the intended title for the Beatles film. Orton was considered by many to be "the most successful and feted playwright of international reputation in the 1960's."

His obituary in the Times said, "Orton will be remembered as one of the sharpest stylists of the British New Wave, and as a playwright who outdid all his contemporaries at offending the traditional West End audience."

reviewers have said . . .

It's clear from looking at reviews through the 25 years since its first production that *What the Butler Saw* has been controversial. Here's a sampling. You can find more -- and read the full texts of these -- on our Web site.

"*Butler* was Joe Orton's last play. Written in 1967, it doesn't seem to have aged well at all. It comes off as a relic from a time when everything seemed so much funnier thanks to the liberal application of chemicals to the cerebellum. Unfortunately, I forgot to smoke a lot of pot before I went to the theater ... We are encouraged to regard *What the Butler Saw* as a groundbreaking theatrical masterpiece challenging conventional mores about sex roles and gender and the like. I rather think of it as exemplary of the generation that thought it invented sex. Joe Orton was not the first to present sex (in all its variations) to the theatergoing public (Noel Coward was there before him); he only helped eliminate the elegance once associated with it."

-- Curtis Elliot, *Show Business Weekly Online*

"What Joe Orton wrote over thirty years ago is able to stand on its own in the present and has the internal structural strength to overcome any minor flaws imposed upon it by those who attempt to bring the play's words to life. And this strength does not derive from the play's plot, but rather from Orton's predilection and his iconoclastic spirit."

-- David Roberts, Theatre Reviews Limited

"The play is still vital and effective even 32 years after it was written. It is more. It is a 20th century classic." -- Stephen Pedersen, *Halifax Herald* (November 22, 2000)

"The undressing, cross-dressing and sexual innuendoes may no longer shock in these days of Jerry Springer, Opra, et al., but the dialogue continues to pop out at you fast, furiously and funny."

-- Elyse Sommer, *Curtain Up Review*

"To specialize in bad taste requires exceptional refinement, and no one understood this better than the late Joe Orton. . . . Although there are good lines and effective running gags, the general effect is vulgar in the wrong way. The reason, I think, is that Orton is relying on a mechanical formula; simply

reversing normality and expecting to produce a laugh. Churchill is a national idol, so Churchill gets one in the teeth."

-- Irving Wardle, *The London Times* (March 6th, 1969)

previous productions

The first North American production of Joe Orton's *What the Butler Saw* premiered on May 4th, 1970. The show opened after eight previews at the Mcalpin Rooftop Theatre in the Mcalpin Hotel in New York City. Currently, *What the Butler Saw* is running off Broadway at the Theater St. Clemens and is performed by The New Group. It was also performed by Halifax's Neptune Theatre in November of 1999, and in London, England in 1998 at the Vaudeville Theatre.

awards

* 1969-1970: Obie Award, Best Foreign Play

* 1994: Orton Society founded, closed down a few years later

* 1997: Joe Orton listed #32 in the Top 500 Gay and Lesbian Heroes in *The Pink Paper*

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