

Book review

Ramona Simuț, Review of “Look Back in Anger” from *John Osborne Plays One: Look Back in Anger, Epitaph for George Dillon, The World of Paul Slickey and Déjàvu*. Introduced by the author. By John Osborne. London: Faber and Faber, 1996, paper, ISBN 978-0-571-30083-9.

John Osborne’s play *Look Back in Anger* from 1956 announces new poets, playwrights and novelists of the postwar generation exasperated by the pretentiousness of modernism and avant-garde writers who claimed they were actually able to confine in their own self in order to find inspiration and escape bare reality. “The Movement”, as the young ensemble of twenty-three year old authors called themselves was to be shortly renamed in the media by a whole metaphor which they despised because it associated them with but one trait of their character, namely Angry Young Men. To put things into context, The National Health Service would by then offer public medical assistance starting with 1948, food restrictions were over, the fear that a new war might arouse dissipated, however not the fear of seeing that that the old imperial vanity was still in place and it was also present in British art, theatre, and literature. The new plays signed by Osborne, the poetry of Philip Larkin, Elizabeth Jennings, and Robert Conquest, Kingsley Amis’ novel *Lucky Jim* from 1954, all these advance anger as the young intellectual’s attitude confronting royal *hybris*. This is certainly not the first time that literature witnessed class conflict first-hand, but the authenticity of The Movement culminated in raising the common spectator’s awareness and the analogy in his mind between the domineering (*aristos*) conservatism and the old, self-sufficient literature where unproblematic, easily digested scenes of life were commonplace.

Much to the contrary, the new literature of the 1950s made waves, was deeply agitated and determined to be the Nemesis of self-sufficiency. The new artists’ anger was, to be sure, a warning and it spoke of a crisis situation, not a social crisis per se, but an internal one. For these young artists, if social calm equaled postwar *hybris*, the new author’s lack of inner satisfaction, the anger within, the realization that revelation fails to come from one’s own, and that the self has to be challenged and questioned incessantly and never praised, turn this new generation of writers into a real force opposing the unsuspecting old exponents of social peace. Their anger is not what they employ to hide some sort of deep anxiety, pain or sadness in their souls and therefore it needs not be psychoanalyzed; it is more like a visceral reaction infused with

adrenaline to passivity and lack of uproar. This was a unique and atypical case of madness, detached from violence and the opposite of apathy.

Resuming the fact that this particular edition was introduced by the author himself, asking why this is significant does not stand on its head just because the name has its notoriety. Surely, Osborne did not believe in profane questionings of his role as a postwar playwright. It is him that first notices the impact the first performance “sparsely” had on his May 8th, 1956 audience; although it amounted to that of a “tangible change of the climate and direction of the English theatre”, the author however dismisses “theories” that this event had tremendous “social, political and even revolutionary implications”. On the contrary, he is adamant that it were precisely those “fanciful inventions and speculation” about the performance that made it to be noticed as an historical phenomenon, and not the play itself, which even in 1993, thirty years since *Look Back in Anger* aired at the Royal Court Theatre and with the author still alive, continued to be misread and poorly performed.

There are several things that easily catch the eye in the very introduction to the volume. First there is the author’s remark that he keeps getting questions as naive as “Why did he write the play?”, to which he answers “Why does one wish to breathe, hope for laughter or fall in love?” And while apparently he resents the “motivation”, the author’s urge to bring his play to life, we find that it was precisely this drive and urgency of the youth – he was 25 and already divorced – , this vitality that he imprints to both his play and its 25 year old characters who, to be sure, are fairly anonymous people of small descent like their creator. As yet another detail, this youth impetus even governs the author’s writing intention as it turns from the moral, “liturgical” speech of the Anglican church and presents itself “vibrant and honest” in more than one way. This is not the lucid honesty of its creator only, but the actors too, who with their impetus help set into place a young cast at first taken aback by the novelty of the play and really surprised that they do not have to meet the expectations of Shakespearean monologues anymore. This was a new cast, very shy at first to have to exhort Jimmy’s tirades and Cliff and Alison’s half-answers and undecided postures.

Yet another significant detail is how the author – after thirty years – addresses the old, 1950s way, that dictated theatre’s stage and cast of characters and also the plot, forcing it to succumb to the patron and viewer’s wishes against the playwright’s indications. This fashionable Victorian stage, seasoned with the American taste for spectators’ response criticism is relentlessly but also distantly denounced, and this is the intent of Osborne’s short assessment according to which he has “never been a popular writer”.

Little does Osborne’s introductory presentation say about the other three plays of the volume, namely *Epitaph for George Dillon* (in three acts and two scenes), *The World of Paul Slickey* (in two acts and eleven scenes), and *Déjàvu*

(in two acts and three scenes), and not surprisingly, for *Look Back in Anger* gives the tone not just to his plays henceforth, but to an entire generations of playwrights for whom the stage is, from now on, a “one-room flat” somewhere in the attic above a large Edwardian house, the time of the day could be the evening in April or another day just as well, as it would not affect any thing nor any one. In the same note, the cast is scarce and the plot organized around a cleverly hidden spatial map: in this particular play it moves from L. to R., which probably means from Left to Right, but it could just as well move from the beginning (Look) to the end (Anger) since all the initial cast returns in the end. Thirty years into the play’s numerous performances at the time Osborne wrote this introduction, Jimmy seems not as angry as he first was and the psychological weight of his sensitive pose is long overdue. He could today pass as the old master of the furies, while Osborne is a classic himself. Jimmy’s language is inescapably familiar, for it is the author’s through and through, and since it is instilled in every one of his ensuing plays, it unveils an Osbornian tradition easily recognizable in his theatre of “bears and squirrels”.

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