

John Osborne - The man who turned anger into art

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John Osborne - the original "angry young man"

John Osborne changed the face of British Theatre. His play "Look Back in Anger" was the turning point in postwar British theatre. He was an 'angry young man' who spent his happiest years in Shropshire.

FACTS

John Osborne was married five times.

He won an Oscar for his screenplay of Tom Jones in 1962.

He wrote to David Hare, consoling him about a professional disappointment, "Never mind. I lift my eyes to the blue remembered hills, and they call back: "Shove off".

Born on December 12th 1929, in London, John Osborne changed the face of British theatre. His father, an advertising copywriter, died in 1941, leaving Osborne an insurance settlement which he used to finance a boarding school education at Belmont College in Devon.

Still heartbroken, however, over his father's death, Osborne could not focus on his studies and left after striking the headmaster.

He returned to London and became involved in the theatre when he took a job tutoring a touring company of young actors. He went on to serve as actor-manager for a string of repertory companies and soon decided to try his hand at playwriting.

Before Osborne arrived on the theatrical scene, the British theatre consisted mainly of melodramas and drawing-room comedies. But in 1956, Osborne's third play and first London-produced drama, *Look Back in Anger*, shocked audiences and "wiped the smugness off the frivolous face of English theatre," as John Lahr put it in a *New York Times* Book Review article.

Osborne's protagonist, Jimmy Porter, captured the angry and rebellious nature of the postwar generation, a dispossessed lot who were clearly unhappy with things as they were in the decades following World War II. Jimmy Porter came to represent an entire generation of "angry young men."

Look Back in Anger established Osborne, the struggling actor and playwright, as a leading writer for theatre, television and film. It also had a profound effect on British culture.

The play not only influenced playwrights such as Joe Orton and Edward Albee, but it also threw cold water in the face of a sleepy popular culture. All manner of writers, actors, artists, and musicians (including the Beatles) soon reflected the influence of Osborne's "angry young man."

So impressed was Laurence Olivier with *Look Back in Anger* that he commissioned Osborne to write a play for him. The result was *The Entertainer*, which featured a leading role that is considered one of the greatest and most challenging parts in late twentieth-century drama.

In *The Entertainer*, (1957), Osborne continued to examine the state of the country, this time using three generations of a family of entertainers to symbolize the decline of England after the war.

Laurence Olivier played Archie Rice, a struggling comedian, and the role

resulted in one of his most famous performances.

An experimental piece, *The Entertainer* alternated realistic scenes with Vaudeville performances, and most critics agreed that it was an appropriate follow-up to the wild success of *Look Back in Anger*.

After this, the quality of Osborne's output became erratic. Although he produced a number of hits, he also produced a string of unimportant works. Critics began to accuse him of not fulfilling his early potential and audiences no longer seemed effected by his rage.

Osborne died as a result of complications from Diabetes on December 24th 1994 and is buried in the churchyard at clun.

He left behind a large body of works for the stage as well as as several autobiographical works. Several of his plays were also adapted for film including *Look Back in Anger* and *The Entertainer*. In 1963 Osborne won an Academy Award for his screenplay for *Tom Jones*.

After his death, playwright David Hare made a moving tribute to John Osborne saying, "It took the author's sudden death last Christmas and his burial in a Shropshire churchyard, just a few miles from the blissful house he shared with his beloved Helen, to wake his own country into some kind of appreciation of what they had lost".