JOHN JAMES OSBORNE

look back in anger

edited with an introduction and notes
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EDIZIONI SCOLASTICHE MONDADORI

The "Angry Young Men"

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With his very first play to be produced in London Osborne established himself at once as the foremost representative of the 'Angry Young Men' movement, and Jimmy Porter, the hero (or rather 'anti-hero') of *Look Back in Anger*, became the prototype of these 'men', far more typical of their attitudes than the characters in the novels which had preceded the play or came out during the same period of years: Joe Lunn in *Scenes from Provincial Life* (1950) by William Cooper (pseudonym of H.S. Hoff), Charles Lumley in John Wain's *Hurry on Down* (1953), Jim Dixon in Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954), Joe Lampton in John Braine's *Room at the Top* (1957), Larry Vincent in Thomas Hinde's *Happy as Larry* (1957), etc.
Other names usually associated with the movement are Stan Barstow (*A Kind of Loving*, 1960), J.P. Donleavy (*The Ginger Man*, 1955), Colin MacInnes (*City of Spades*, 1957), Alan Sillitoe (*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, 1958), Keith Waterhouse (*Billy Liar*, 1959), Colin Wilson (*The Outsider*, 1956).

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These 'Angry Young Men', as they came to be called from the title of L.A. Paul's autobiography, *Angry Young Man*, published in 1951 (but the phrase was in fact first applied to Jimmy Porter), represented a revolt against their age, a rejection of traditional values, and an aspiration to something 'different'.
Some of them were from the right, others from the left; many were unclear and uncertain of their aims and position; all of them, however, had some quarrel with the events and aspects of the times:
– the fall of Winston Churchill's Cabinet in 1945, even before the war with Japan was over (this was considered by many a

monstrous case of national ingratitude), and the election of Clement Attlee's Labour Cabinet, which however did not quite mark the start of a new era of the 'Common Man', bringing real democracy to the workers of England;
– the dissolution of the Colonial Empire (1947-8: India, Pakistan, Ceylon, Burma, Egypt, the Sudan, Iran, Israel become independent, gradually followed by most of the other Dominions and Colonies), with the consequent loss of political prestige and military importance: even Jimmy Porter clearly feels a nostalgia for the days of the 'Empire';
– the failure of a Socialist utopia to come true, even with the application of the Beveridge Plan and other reforms (the nationalisation of the Bank of England, railways, motor transports, airlines, telecommunications, the coal, gas, steel and electric power industries, the medical services), and the establishment of the welfare state and a practically universal system of social security;
– the end of the social revolution in 1951, with the return to power of a Churchill Cabinet, and the economic failure of the 'Festival of Britain';
– the fact that it became gradually apparent that there was little substantial difference between a Tory (Conservative) and a Labour (Socialist) Cabinet (just as between a Democratic and a Repubblican Administration in the U.S.A.), with the consequence that many people became politically disillusioned;
– the false euphoria of the 'New Elizabethan Age', following the accession of Queen Elizabeth II to the throne in 1952;
– the discrepancy between political vision and social dream on the one hand, and reality (at home and abroad) on the other;
– the political, military and economic decline of Great Britain, which was now definitely a second-class power;
– a feeling of helpless impotence before the might of the U.S.A. and the Soviet Union, with their aggressive ideologies, their enormous armies, their intercontinental missiles and their A (Atomic) and H (Hydrogen) Bombs, the last especially making any dream of personal heroism and effective protest entirely futile;
– the pseudo-affluence of the post-war years, with its 'economic miracles' (not in England...) and its problems of overpopulation, technocracy and pollution;
– the religious 'Establishment' (the laxity and irrelevance of the Anglican Church);
– the attempt to revive religious belief, seen by many (including

Jimmy Porter) as an irrational escape from the dangers, terrors and evils of the Nuclear Age;
– the social 'Establishment' (the stifling power of the middle classes);[3]
– the educational 'Establishment', and the fact that, though many more young people went to university than before the war, they were not absorbed within the dominant class, and often remained 'outsiders': Jimmy has studied in a university (which he affects to despise), but is now selling sweets in a kiosk;
– the collapse of the literary 'Establishment' of the thirties (the old 'literati' were now seen as empty windbags, capable only of producing 'hot air'): see Jimmy's comments on university professors and their literary interests;
– the English Sunday, with its stifling atmosphere of stagnation and its Sunday papers: see Jimmy's comments in the play;
– in 1956 in particular there were the Hungarian revolt and the Suez War (the Egyptian nationalisation of the Suez Canal, followed by Israeli, English and French intervention, and finally by U.N. intervention as a neutral surveillance force); there were also the campaign against capital punishment and the one for Nuclear Disarmament,[4] with its marches and sit-downs.

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The consequences of the general feeling of disillusionment and impotence ("There are no good causes left", says Jimmy) were often empty rage, social irresponsibility, political cynicism, self-centred attitudes ("– you, Joe; I'm all right!"), insolent bad manners, the coarsening of the language (which becomes slangy and often vulgar and obscene), a revolt against traditional sexual mores, a refusal to accept long-established conventions (always seen as forms of hypocrisy), iconoclasm, a sometimes

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[3] It has also been noted that a frequent problem in 'Angry Young' plays and novels is male hypergamy, i.e. the often difficult psychological situation of a man marrying a woman from a better social class: this is certainly a factor in *Look Back in Anger*.
[4] Not many people know that the symbol ☮ represents the combined positions of the two flags for the letters N and D (Nuclear Disarmament) in the naval alphabet of flag signals.

hysterical search for 'honesty' (also 'sincerity', 'decency'), a new form of often morbid sensitivity to the evils of the world and a total inability to accept the fact of suffering, a profound desire for some sort of a 'lost innocence', the rise of the 'anti-heroes' (a whole generation of 'malcontents': tough, rude, clumsy, ill-dressed, ill-washed young men who find the whole world disgusting and false), a desire to opt out of society altogether ("Stop the world: I want to get off!"): many of these attitudes are clearly observable in Jimmy Porter.

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Many precedents and analogues have been pointed out for the 'Angry Young Men' movement, starting from Christ's anger against the merchants in the Temple and proceeding all the way down to H.G. Wells, Arnold Bennett, Thomas Hardy, Bernard Shaw, and especially D.H. Lawrence and George Orwell,[5] the intellectuals who took part in the Spanish Civil War (W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender, C. Day Lewis, Roy Campbell), Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg, the Italian 'Futuristi', Françoise Sagan, Céline and the French Existentialists, and many others.

In conclusion we may say that, though the movement drew a lot of attention in the fifties, it was not an entirely new phenomenon, and with the sixties it gradually died down and finally disappeared, while the political, social and cultural atmosphere of England progressively changed.

At the time of writing this introduction British life certainly presents a number of interesting aspects and characteristics, but anger is definitely not one of them (with the exception, of course, of the Ulster problem).

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A movement similar to that of the 'Angry Young Men' developed in the U.S.A. during the same period: its represent-

[5] 'George Orwell' (Eric Blair, 1903-1950), the author of *Down and Out in Paris and London, Animal Farm, 1984*, is probably in many ways the closest analogue one can find to Osborne and his hero, combining a hatred of the present with a fear of the future and a simultaneous disdain and nostalgia for the past.

atives were called the 'Beat Generation' (also 'Beats' or 'Beatniks'), and the principal names were Jack Kerouac (*On the Road*, 1957; *The Dharma Bums*, 1958), Clellon Holmes (*Go*, 1952), George Mandel (*Flee the Angry Strangers*, 1952), Chandler Brossard (*Who Walk in Darkness*, 1953), 'William Lee' (*Junkie*, 1955), J.D. Salinger (*The Catcher in the Rye*, 1951: its famous hero, Holden Caulfield, is however far different and gentler than the typical 'Beatnik'), the poets Allen Ginsberg and Kenneth Rexroth, and many others (also in the fields of the cinema and the arts).

The American Beatniks' rebellion, however, was far more of a total withdrawal from conventional society than the English Angry Men's, and was often associated with the excessive use of alcohol and narcotics, and other antisocial attitudes; it also became involved with vagabondage, total sexual freedom and other often picturesque phenomena (the 'long hairs', 'flower people', 'hippies', 'communes', etc.).

While at first it appeared therefore as an almost totally negative attitude, it has more recently developed into a new 'commitment', and a strong involvement with the tragic American (but not exclusively American) problems of our generation, such as the atomic menace, racial discrimination, the freedom of education and employment, the problem of minorities in general, the drug problem, industrial pollution, the political tyranny of the military-industrial complex, women's liberation, Black Power, the freedom of political dissent, anti-colonialism, the Vietnam War, etc.).

It would therefore appear that, while the anger of the English Young Men has by now run its course, and is no longer effective, or even operating, the protest of the younger generation of American intellectuals, writers, artists, students, minority groups (and even politicians) has ample scope for activity, and shows definite promise for the future.

Look Back in Anger

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Coming now to the play, we must point out at once that it exploded like a bomb on the British stage of the fifties, which had been dominated by the verse-plays of T.S. Eliot and Christopher Fry, and the well-made but hardly creative pieces of such elderly authors as Terence Rattigan, Somerset Maugham and Noel Coward (Bernard Shaw was by now long past his really creative years), and as a consequence was in serious decline: audiences were falling, and theatres were closing everywhere, also because of television's competition (as many people believed).

Then, in 1956, the English Stage Company was formed, with the aim of encouraging new playwrights; many similar enterprises had failed before; this one was lucky in receiving (by mail), in answer to its advertisements, a new play by an unknown 26-year-old.

The play was received with considerable critical attention and appreciation, and, in the case of Kenneth Tynan, even enthusiasm;[6] the box-office success was however moderate, until one act was shown on TV. Thus millions saw it, and suddenly became interested, and queued up at the Royal Court

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[6] Here are some critical opinions: "The authentic new tone of the fifties, desperate, savage, resentful, and, at times, very funny" (T.C. Worsley, *New Statesman*); the play is "intense, angry, feverish, undisciplined. It is even crazy. But it is young, young, young" (J. Barber, *Daily Express*); "A play of extraordinary importance. Its influence should go far beyond *Waiting for Godot*" (D. Granger, *Times*); "I doubt if I could love anyone who did not wish to see *Look Back in Anger*. The best young play of the decade" (K. Tynan, *Observer*). Of course, there were also disapproving voices: "An angry play by an angry young author, neurotic, exaggerated and more than slightly distasteful" (R. Tee, *Daily Mirror*); "Aims at being a despairing cry, but achieves only the stature of a self-pitying snivel" (M. Shulman, *Evening Standard*).

Theatre to see the whole play: in this case therefore it can be said that television was the main contributor to a dramatic success.

Unlike the general run of English plays in the fifties, *Look Back in Anger* was genuine drama, about real events and people; an authentic picture of the younger generation in post-war English society; not a crudely propagandist play, but a valid study of a highly complex and contradictory personality.

For this reason it caught the imagination of a generation, and very soon became a kind of myth (with the consequence that its hero's personality tends to be oversimplified by ordinary audiences and readers).

Though we may now think that Jimmy's antagonists are too weak as characters, and therefore his opposition too feeble and the whole argument too one-sided, it must be recognized that his rhetoric is still forceful, and his character still magnetic, though in many ways intensely dislikable.

The play is taut in construction, full of stimulating ideas, and ends not in a certainty, but in an enigma. The conclusion is in fact ambiguous (and, according to many critics, excessively sentimental): Jimmy is finally overwhelmed by Alison's suffering, and seems at last to realize his immaturity, cruelty and excesses; Alison, having suffered so much, may now feel a closer attachment and a deeper commitment to her difficult husband.

They resume physical love (the 'bear-and-squirrel game') – but will all this be enough to carry them through the rest of their lives? We do not know; we remain in doubt, and may well be pessimistic rather than optimistic about their future.

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When we come to examine the characters of *Look Back in Anger* we must first of all remember that Jimmy Porter is *not* John Osborne, though it cannot be doubted that there is something of his creator in him; there is also considerable critical irony in Osborne's portrait of his hero, however.

Jimmy is the 'small, good-hearted rebel or anti-hero, too feeble to make his protest against society seem more than a clown's gesture, not even able to clarify to himself what is wrong with society, except that it is full of humbug' (Anthony Burgess);

he is the typical 'angry young man' because he is half-way between disgusted cynicism and passionate idealism.

He has many of the characteristics we have already mentioned: he is socially adrift, *déraciné*, an outsider in rebellion against the whole 'Establishment' (social, economic, cultural, educational), which he sees personified in his wife and her family; he is the prototype of the 'protester' without a clear, definite cause to fight for, and is continually searching for one, with courage, honesty and sincerity, but also with morbid self-pity and hysterical excesses.

His anger starts in moral idealism, but is corrupted by selfishness and destructiveness, by neurotic exaggerations and puerile contradictions: we are made to feel very clearly that anger can be an indispensable virtue but also a dangerous vice; he also has a frustrated Messiah complex, with a tendency to try and destroy the world which he cannot save. M. Praz says he is "un nostalgico mascherato da energumeno, che camuffa da lotta di classe la sua nevrosi sessuale"; this is perhaps excessive, but Jimmy's psychological attitudes clearly show the consequences of childhood trauma (his father's death), a sense of personal failure (though he is well educated, he has no profession and very little income), a persecution complex (see his attitude to Alison's family and friends) as well as a betrayal complex (he sees Alison's contacts with her family and friends as a conspiracy against himself); he is simultaneously masochistic (see his insistence on his working-class origins and his excessive sensitivity to pain and suffering) and sadistic (he is horribly cruel to Alison and offensive to Cliff and Helena; in particular, he sees love chiefly as a conquest, and marriage as a kind of revenge); he is also sexually immature and opportunistic, impatient with good manners and vulgar.

With all that, we are made to feel that Alison, Cliff, even Helena and Alison's father accept him as fundamentally a good and just man, honestly angry although confused, and in the last analysis deserving affection and appreciation: Alison sees him as her 'knight in shining armour', Helena thinks he should have lived in the French Revolution.

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The other characters obviously pale before Jimmy, though Alison is far more complex than would appear on the surface: she is Jimmy's victim (a squirrel to his bear), but is so from her own choice; in fact it might be said that she is the stronger of the two: it takes definite courage to leave her family, choose Jimmy as her husband,[7] bear his rudeness, support herself, keep the house in order and the family going.
Jimmy has been said by some critics to be a kind of penance, but also a luxury that Alison concedes herself, the cross she has *elected* to bear; he is also the judge and punisher Alison masochistically needs to feel a victim, to expiate the faults of her class.
Nor is Jimmy's anger at Alison totally unjustified: she has married him, but does not accept his ideas and ideals; she responds to his love, but does not offer it; she listens to his speeches, but reserves approval and refuses praise. She does not give all of herself to her husband; as her father says, she "likes sitting on the fence".
When the situation becomes really serious (i.e. when she is pregnant) she refuses to 'play' on, and leaves Jimmy; she only comes back when the child is lost and she knows she cannot have another.
Helena, on the other hand, is as honest and straightforward as Alison is complex and tortuous; she is in fact Alison's counterpart, just as Cliff is Jimmy's. She is frankly middle-class and honestly conventional; she believes in the traditional distinction between right and wrong (she may do wrong, but she knows it); she recognizes Alison as Jimmy's 'rightful wife', even though she has taken Jimmy for a lover (but not a husband). She never pretends to accept Jimmy's ideas and values, and therefore never betrays him, as Alison does in a way.

[7] The play makes it clear that the decision to marry was Alison's before it became Jimmy's; why Jimmy should have accepted it can be an interesting matter for speculation: physical attraction? A desire to save her from middle-class corruption and hypocrisy? The irresistible temptation of hypergamy?

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Though *Look Back in Anger*, owing to its novel theme and argument, started a revolution in the British theatre, its structure is highly formal, and even 'rather old-fashioned' (as Osborne himself said in 1961); it is in fact, at least on the surface, conventional and 'craftsmanlike', in the tradition of the 'well-made play' which had dominated the English stage from Bernard Shaw to Terence Rattigan; it is only Jimmy's rhetoric which disrupts the structure, not any technical innovation of the kind which the 'new', experimental theatre has now made popular.
One point that is soon apparent is the symmetry of the actions: Alison and Helena are both seen ironing at the beginning of Acts I and III (which both take place on a Sunday); the same repetitions occur in the case of Jimmy and Cliff's arguments about the Sunday papers, their scuffles, Cliff's undressing on stage, Jimmy's singing and many other things (which will be pointed out in the footnotes).
For these reasons, as well as others, the play seems in fact almost anachronistic, coming as it did after such a revolutionary piece as Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952), and this may explain why it had little or no influence on such later dramatists as Harold Pinter, John Arden, Arnold Wesker, Angus Wilson, Ann Jellicoe, Nigel Dennis, Robert Bolt, Henry Livings, David Campton, Brendan Behan, Shelagh Delaney, Wolf Markowitz.

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There are a number of obviously symbolic elements occurring throughout the play: Sunday, the ironing-board, the knight in armour riding a white horse, the church bells, the jazz trumpet and the drums, Alison's and Helena's wearing Jimmy's shirts, Cliff's undressing on stage, Jimmy's comic songs and patter, the bear and the squirrel, Jimmy's pipe, his physical scuffles with Cliff, the invisible presence of the vicar, the landlady, Jimmy's friends (especially Hugh Tanner and his mother), Alison's mother, and still others: they will however be pointed out and discussed in the footnotes to the text.

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There is very little to be said about the language of *Look Back in Anger*; Osborne, at the beginning of his writing career, accepted the canons of naturalism (though his attitude to language changed considerably in later plays), and thus we have a form of speech which is entirely appropriate to the fifties and to the characters in the play, who are all well-educated; when Jimmy or Cliff use vulgar or dialect expressions they always do it consciously and for a purpose, be it the expression of humour, anger, irony or contempt.
Relevant instances of the use of colloquialisms, dialect, vulgar English, comic variations in spelling or pronunciation, slang (including an example of back slang), as well as technical expressions and abbreviations traditionally used in the text of plays, will be pointed out and commented upon in the footnotes.

Osborne's Later Plays

15

It may be of interest to say something about Osborne's plays following *Look Back in Anger*, especially since some of them, though they have not achieved the enormous critical resonance and popular success of the former, are in fact thought by many critics to be better plays, from the viewpoints of dramatic structure, characterization, dialogue, or symbolic significance.
Epitaph for George Dillon, performed in 1958, although written (in collaboration with Anthony Creighton) in 1955, presents a number of similarities with *Look Back in Anger*: George Dillon in fact is a kind of angry young man, a failed actor and playwright, who becomes a guest of the bourgeois Elliot family, and after a series of dramatic encounters with Mrs. Elliot, her daughter Norah and her disillusioned sister Ruth, ends by marrying her younger daughter Josie, and turning into a commercial playwright, willing to accept the mediocre values of middle-class life, and to achieve moderate financial success by writing 'sexy' plays.

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The Entertainer (1957) has been called an example of genuine 20th-century folk-art, celebrating the decaying glories of a once-popular stage form: its acts and scenes in fact succeed each other exactly like the numbers in a variety programme, and the short 'turns' presented by Archie Rice (the 'entertainer' of the title, an old, run-down comedian, alternately 'angry' and nostalgic, often disillusioned but ever hopeful), while they are actually the comic intervals which traditionally appear during a strip-show on the stage, alternate in the play with longer scenes, of a realistic character, showing the rest of Archie's disintegrating family, until his brother Bill finally offers to settle Archie's income tax debts and pay for the whole family's emigrating to Canada.
In the two short *Plays for England* (1962) Osborne also tries

to strike a light vein: *The Blood of the Bambergs* derides the worship for royalty, as exemplified by many naive people's attitudes to such royal occasions as weddings, funerals, coronations, etc.; *Under Plain Cover* is about the vulgarity and interference of the press, which sometimes ruins people's private lives (in this case the love life of a strange couple, Tim and Jenny, whose behaviour and dialogue strongly suggest the influence of the French author, Jean Genet).

The World of Paul Slickey (1959) is Osborne's only true 'musical comedy' (*The Entertainer* was rather a hybrid: a naturalistic play with musical intermissions), and its form is strangely in contrast with its theme, which is a savage attack against the 'Establishment', especially as represented by the press and the peerage, or aristocracy.

Paul Slickey, an unscrupulous journalist and son-in-law to Lord Mortlake, is only one in a merry-go-round of distinguished people, all of them constantly preoccupied with making money without paying taxes on it, and going from one adultery to the other, with the further complication of a mad uncle, who has discovered an elixir which makes people instantly change sex.

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In 1960 Osborne abandons both the naturalism of his previous plays and his attempt at musical comedy; he returns to straight prose and begins a series of plays about historical characters.

The first is *A Subject of Scandal and Concern*, a short work (presented on television) about George Holyoake, a real person who was a member of the Chartist and Owenite movements (two early English forms of Socialism), and who, in 1842, became the last Englishman to be tried, condemned and imprisoned for blasphemy (or 'taking God's name in vain'), under a law which has never been applied since. The play is chiefly interesting as a recreation of Victorian atmosphere, ironically commented upon by a present-day 'narrator'.

The historical series continues in 1961 with *Luther*, 'a play about physical and spiritual purgatory on earth', stressing Martin Luther's parallel preoccupations with the evacuation of the bowels (owing to his chronic constipation) and the purification of the Christian Church; it is also a play 'full of

argument and invective, of ideas thrown at the audience like hand-grenades'.

It presents some similarities with the epic-dramatic, episodic structure of Bertolt Brecht's historical plays (e.g. *Galileo*), but its substance is typical Osborne, and its theme, the isolation of a man, is analogous to that of most of Osborne's plays. In this case it is the desperate but victorious struggle of the colossus of German Protestantism against Rome, in spite of formidable obstacles of every kind, from the beginnings of his theological doubts to the ninety-six Wittenberg theses of 1517, his excommunication by the Diet of Worms in 1521, his marriage to an ex-nun in 1525, and his final, settled days.

The action of *A Patriot for Me* (1965) also develops in an historical setting (Vienna towards the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire) and covers a period of twenty-three years; its subject is the difficult problem of traditional society's attitude towards the homosexual (in this case Alfred Redl, an officer who has the added disadvantage of being a Jew); its end is tragic (suicide); its structure and technique are boldly experimental. The play enjoyed a sort of *succés de scandale*, for in 1965 theatrical censorship was still in force in England, and the play had to be presented as a 'club' production.[8]

Another kind of historical production is *A Bond Honoured* (1966), a free adaptation of *La Fianza Satisfecha* by Lope de Vega, the extraordinary Spanish author who produced over one thousand plays and twenty volumes of poems in the period between 1580 and 1630.

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[8] Plays which were not approved by the Censor (the 'Lord Chamberlain', as he was called) could be produced in England in private 'clubs' i.e. in theatres to which the public was admitted not by buying a ticket, but by paying a fee (which cost the same) and becoming club members. A typical example of English hypocrisy – or intelligent compromise, which in a similar form is used even now to allow people to drink when 'pubs' are closed. Theatrical censorship has now been abolished in England (as in Italy, at least theoretically); films however are still subject to control, though also in this case there is a way of escaping censorship (which is, rather strangely, connected with the regulations against the danger of fire) by using non-flammable film.

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Osborne's real strength, however, lies in 'problem' plays which present tormented characters in a contemporary setting: such a play is *Inadmissible Evidence* (1964), thought by many critics to be Osborne's best work, at least from the standpoint of living theatre (while *Look Back in Anger* has in some ways become a myth, or a piece of folklore, and *Luther* is excessively overlaid with 'cultural', historical interest, and is on the way to becoming a kind of textbook for higher education).

The central character, Bill Maitland, a solicitor (or lawyer), is as typical a representative of the sixties as Jimmy Porter was of the fifties, and Osborne examines his personality and feelings with absolute honesty and with great compassion at the same time. Maitland goes through a crisis of 'identity', which involves at the same time the problem of existence itself; he has progressively lost contact with reality, and in the short period of days covered by the play reaches total isolation and alienation.

He is compelled to re-examine (partly in the form of nightmares, or incubi, involving his own trial in a surrealistic court) the whole of his life, the entire body of his experiences, as well as the accumulation of his disappointments, and is forced to the conclusion that it is all a mass of 'inadmissible evidence', a legal term meaning the kind of irrelevant, non-pertinent information that by English law cannot be presented and discussed in court.

It has justly been said that the situation at the end of the play is exactly what might have come before the beginning of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

Another play in the same vein is *Time Present* (1967), which presents two women. Pamela and Constance (respectively an actress and a political intellectual), abrasively living together in a London flat (the audience is made to feel that the relationship may have a Lesbian character), and explores their complex relations with a number of other characters (predominantly female).

The Hotel in Amsterdam (1968) is unusually quiet and subdued; it is a play in which there is no real conflict, and nothing seems to happen: a film director, simply called K. L., does commit suicide, but he dies off-stage, while three married couples, trying to escape his heavy authority and influence, have ended up at a hotel in Amsterdam, where they plan to spend a quietly ordinary weekend; there they hear of the suicide, and try somehow to adjust themselves, each in his or her own way, to the new situation.

In *West of Suez* (1971) we see a group of British people living on a Caribbean island (formerly a colony, now independent); there are Wyatt Gillman, an elderly writer, his four daughters and their husbands, and others; all of them go on living their empty lives, some resigned and inert, others ashamed or spiteful: a melancholy microcosm showing the decline of imperialism and the decay of Western civilization.

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With *A Sense of Detachment* (1972) Osborne has tried an experiment in 'improvisational' theatre: no plot, no structure, no story, no clear aim, no long speeches; in their stead there are half a dozen actors on a bare stage, discussing the evening's programme with a 'chairman', arguing with other actors who are part of the audience, alternating romantic poetry and vulgar pornography, songs and dances, funny stories and other apparently irrelevant activities.

The hidden message seems to be that man, in his preoccupation with the glittering surface of living, is forgetting how to really live and love – but the reaction of the London audience has often been angry and rebellious.

This may be a subtly ironic conclusion to Osborne's journey through the theatre: starting from *Look Back in Anger*, in which he hurled his fury at an apathetic public, he has now reached a 'sense of detachment', which is precisely what the present-day public seems to lack.