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Look Back In Anger



John Osborne
Look Back in Anger



Synopsis

In 1956 John Osborne's Look Back in Anger changed the course of English theatre.'Look Back in Anger presents post-war youth as it really is. To have done this at all would be a significant achievement; to have done it in a first play is a minor miracle. All the qualities are there, qualities one had despaired of ever seeing on stage - the drift towards anarchy, the instinctive leftishness, the automatic rejection of "official" attitudes, the surrealist sense of humour . . . the casual promiscuity, the sense of lacking a crusade worth fighting for and, underlying all these, the determination that no one who dies shall go unmourned.' Kenneth Tynan, Observer, 13 May 1956'Look Back in Anger . . . has its inarguable importance as the beginning of a revolution in the British theatre, and as the central and most immediately influential expression of the mood of its time, the mood of the "angry young man".' John Russell Taylor

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Customer Reviews

Writer John Osborne presents in Look Back in Anger an antithesis to the 'drawing room dramas' of the period by writers such as Noel Coward which were popular in the 1950's. These dramas often

featured polished and wealthy characters from the middle and upper classes, at their leisure within their homes and drawing rooms. Such plays fuelled what one newspaper reviewer from 'The Express' termed as the 'Illusion of Comfort' which pervaded the 50's. After reading or watching Osborne's play no one can argue that he was under such an 'illusion'. The play can be seen as a reaction both against the 'drawing room' dramas and the general society which they represent. Rather than a drawing room with wealthy characters, Osborne selected as his setting a cramped and dismal one attic apartment and filled it with rough down and out lower class characters that were in some cases seen as uncivil for the theatre. Their language was coarse, their setting was harsh but worst of all to the original audience of this play (which no doubt had drawing rooms of their own) these characters presented to them a world which was uncomfortably realistic. It is this realism which may account for the fact that many viewers initially did not like Osborne's play as they did not like the world that it presented. Jimmy Porter, the eternally angry young man who believes that he has life potential beyond being a sweets salesman is frustrated by the notion that he is never given the opportunity by society to fulfill this potential, he can never pull himself up from his social position, he is effectively 'stuck'.

"Look Back in Anger", first performed at London's Royal Court Theatre in 1956, is often cited as marking a theatrical revolution. The British theatre of the early fifties, dominated by playwrights like Noel Coward and Terence Rattigan, was widely regarded as genteel, well-mannered and middle-class. John Osborne's play can be seen as a deliberate reaction against those values. Its plot is conventional enough. It centres around the stormy marriage of a young couple, Jimmy and Alison Porter, who separate after a series of quarrels. Unknown to Jimmy, Alison is pregnant at the time, and he starts a relationship with her best friend Helena, an actress. Six months later Alison, having lost her baby, returns, and Helena ends her affair with Jimmy so as to allow the couple to be reunited. What was shocking about the play was its social setting and the attitudes displayed by the characters, especially Jimmy. He is from a working-class family and, although he has a university degree, has turned his back on the sort of well-paid white-collar job that such an educational background would normally have led to in the fifties, working as a trader in the local market, running a sweet stall with his friend Cliff. He and Alison, with Cliff as a lodger, live in a dingy bed-sit in a large Midlands town. Alison herself is from the wealthy upper middle classes (her father is a retired Indian Army officer) and her family resent her marriage to Jimmy. It was in the late fifties that the term "Angry Young Man" was coined by the critics to describe not only writers such as Osborne, Kingsley Amis and John Braine, but also their characters such as Jimmy Porter and Amis's Lucky

Jim, who were seen as the mouthpieces of their creators.

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