

Thoughts on 'Epitaph for George Dillon' by John Osborne and Anthony Creighton

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There is something paradoxical in admiring an iconoclast; surely one's hero would prefer the logic of immolation to the more intuitive response of reverence.

It's a question any fan of John Osborne must consider and given what we know of his prickly character – particularly in his bitterly disappointed and vitriolic later years – we sense that awe would have been more happily received. And who can blame him; as Linus reminds us, there is no heavier burden than a great potential and what could be more impossible to live up to than the early promise of *Look Back In Anger*. An angry young prophet, with that one play Osborne overturned the tables in the temple of English theatre, causing a chain reaction that would smash the old sensibilities not only of the Edwardian writing that had been garrisoned in the West End for some decades but also its genteel trappings; the national anthem and the ban on blasphemy could not be long for this world after Jimmy Porter.

Revolutions, of course, are begun not by the desperate but by the half-content and today the insurgents and the privileged in *Look Back In Anger* appear more similar to each other than to ourselves. A Vaughan Williams fan who reads book reviews and uses the word 'pusillanimous' is unlikely nowadays to be seen – for better or worse – as a typical member of the British working classes.

But does this lessen the value of Osborne's writing? Kenneth Tynan was famously contemptuous of the emphasis placed on theatre to be relevant, in the sense of commenting upon a recognised and dominant characteristic of the society in which it is performed. (He was also, however, a staunch advocate of Osborne's.) It is true that a desire to be contemporary seems to suggest both that society consistently has an awareness of its own identity – which it almost certainly doesn't – and that timelessness and universality are of secondary worth – which they most definitely are not. Although the booming nostalgia industry would have us believe otherwise, human nature does not change promptly every decade. There was probably the same amount of moderation in the greed-fuelled '80s as there was conservatism in the decadent '60s.

Our innate impermeability is the very basis of artistic assumption; unlike scientists, for whom each generation picks up where the previous one left off, every single artist who ever lived is destined to start from the same point. Style and technique are simply acquired fashions – the favoured tools of the moment – but the task remains the same; to use those tools to gain a grasp on the elusive nature of humanity. And perhaps to condition its shape slightly.

Epitaph for George Dillon occupies a challenging place in the canon of Osborne's work. Collaborating on the script with Anthony Creighton, Osborne claimed that it was 'cobbled together in three weeks', a dismissive assertion that sits uneasily

with his observation that the best writing is done in a hurry. Likewise he maintained that he worked on the play 'without much enthusiasm', a view that, in marked contrast to most of Osborne's, mellowed somewhat with age; he later recalled the composition with fondness. Osborne once wrote of *George Dillon* that 'most Americans tell me that it is my best play'. With his usual pitiless dexterity it is not clear whether he was being backhanded about the play or the Americans.

Its relationship to *Look Back In Anger* is complicated, since although it was produced after his breakthrough play it was written earlier. In this way it presents a similar classification problem as 'Abbey Road' and 'Let It Be' to Beatles fans – the official chronology belies the internal development. This is not simply an academic puzzle of establishing the contradiction between the sequence of works in the artist's mind and the public's mind; it raises critical questions about the nature of influence and evolution and, in Osborne's case, it goes to the heart of what it means to be an artist working in isolation and an artist working amid tumultuous acclaim.

Fame, with its distorted reflections rendering it somewhere between Narnia and Alice's Looking Glass, is an entirely separate hemisphere from obscurity and for every new vista it opens up an old one proves suddenly concealed. What effect would these states have on a writer? Anyone used to relative anonymity in their earlier years (which, barring the upper echelons of royalty, Mozart and Michael Jackson, is surely everyone) is probably as ill-prepared for sudden glory as a ballet dancer is for combat.

Following the rapturous reception of *Look Back In Anger* Osborne was immediately elevated into the theatrical stratosphere and *George Dillon*, the perfectly preserved time-capsule from his former life, joined him soon afterwards with, no doubt, all the jolting shock of a forgotten lover. For the newly-admired artist, financial necessity might easily outweigh personal misgivings as the requests to plunder the back-catalogue increase in number and intensity. (A similar phenomenon occurred to Stoppard, whose breakthrough play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* later proved upon closer inspection to be his ninth.)

It is the reaction of the audience and the critics, however, that informs and affirms the direction of most artists, whether or not they are conscious of it. Who knows how different *Look Back...* would have been had *George Dillon* had a life before 1957.

Very different, one might imagine. Miles Davis's biographer Ian Carr observed that an undeserved good review does more harm to an artist than an undeserved bad review. A bad review forces an artist to urgently contemplate – and perhaps reconsider – her work, whereas glowing reviews can all too easily encourage a blasé playing to the gallery. We will never know what the critical response to 'George Dillon' would have been from critics freed from the necessity of viewing it through the prism of his more successful play. Nor will we know how that response might have shaped not only Osborne's subsequent work but also his subsequent character. To read any review of oneself is, as Norman Mailer

claimed, a fine balancing act; one must acquire a strength sufficient to withstand rejection and criticism without losing the sensitivity which is the only thing that can give one's work value. The necessary conditions for brilliance are subtle; if Osborne had experienced a slightly different career trajectory he might have found a more moderate voice or a more brittle rage. Either way we would be greatly impoverished.

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