

The angry generation

Did Look Back in Anger usher in a revolutionary era in British postwar theatre, as myth would have it? As a new production opens at the National, Michael Billington takes a fresh look at the play's controversial legacy

When John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* opened at the Royal Court on May 8 1956, it had a momentous effect on its admirers. Kenneth Haigh, the original Jimmy Porter, once told me that Kenneth Tynan, the play's greatest advocate, went out and bought a trumpet in emulation of Osborne's hero, and asked Haigh to teach him how to play it. The latter hardly had the heart to tell Tynan that he was simply miming to off-stage music. Philip French, the Observer film critic and not a man given to idle hero-worship, went up to Osborne in the Royal Court foyer and thanked him for speaking for his generation.

I too was not immune. A sixth-form schoolboy at the time of the play's premiere, I solemnly gave a talk on *Angry Young Men* to my classmates and, when I finally got to London to see the play, I waited outside the theatre to scan the faces of the audience to see if they had been changed by the event. Blush-makingly naive perhaps; but a symptom of the play's iconic power.

Was there a revolution in postwar British drama? And, if so, was it triggered by *Look Back in Anger*? At the moment, revisionist theories abound. One argues that the so-called revolution is more myth than reality; that pre-Osborne 50s drama brimmed with vitality. The other, increasingly popular idea is that it was the first night of *Waiting For Godot* on August 3 1956, rather than the Osborne premiere, that was the real harbinger of change. So where does the truth lie?

It all depends on which book you read. Charles Duff's *The Lost Summer* (Nick Hern Books) is a nostalgic look back in languor to the West End heyday of the early 50s, whose playwrights "knew more about the human heart and wrote with greater literacy than many of their successors". Dan Rebellato's pugnacious 1956 and *All That* (Routledge)



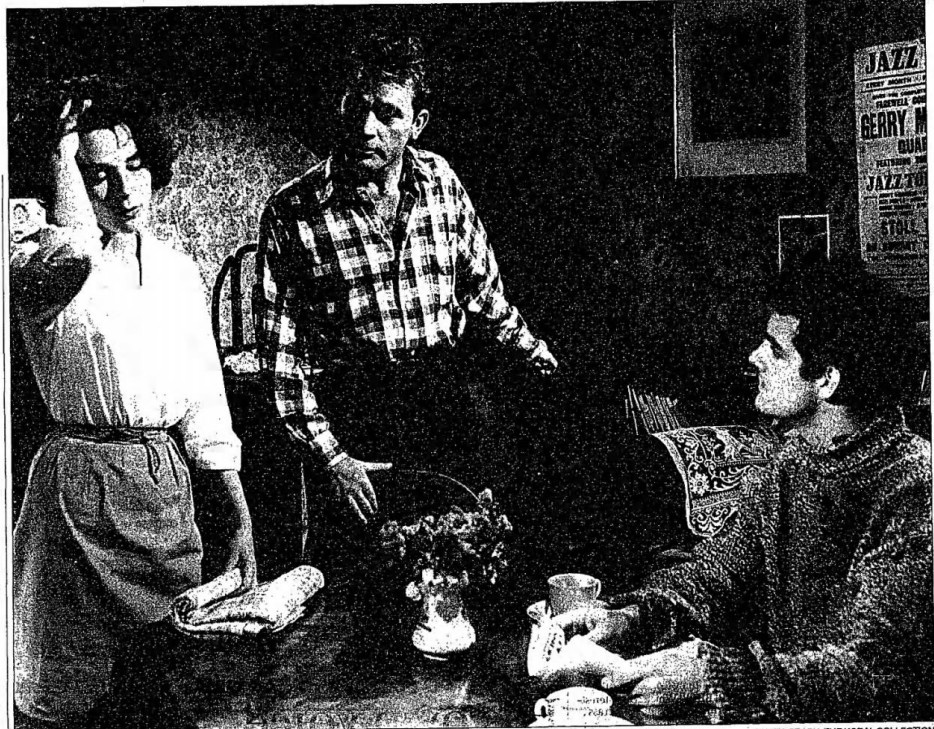
Quiet revolution... Mary Ure as Alison in the Royal Court premiere of Osborne's play, 1956
PHOTOGRAPH: MANDER & MITCHENEN

argues that pre-Osborne theatre was both sexually and emotionally subversive and that the Royal Court "revolution" concealed dreams of national supremacy and imperialist longing. Even Dominic Straker's less contentious British Theatre Since the War (Yale University Press) suggests that London theatre from 1948 to 1961 enjoyed a period of rich diversity.

I'd agree it's an historic fallacy to suggest that no good British plays were written in the postwar period. John Whiting's *Saint's Day*, now totally ignored, Rodney Ackland's *Absolute Hell*, Terence Rattigan's *The Browning Version* and *The Deep Blue Sea* are all first rate. I'd also endorse Rebellato's point that pre-Osborne British drama was less emotionally anemic than people claim. Tight-lipped, middle-class restraint often contains a potent charge.

But, although it's daft to pretend that nothing of worth existed before 1956, I would argue that the Royal Court revolution was real, radical and urgently necessary. Which makes me impatient with Rebellato's provocative but perverse book. He argues, for instance, that the Royal Court, confronted by Britain's declining world influence, was imbued with a "dubious imperial nostalgia". But a few sentences in which Osborne laments the passing of the twilit Edwardian era hardly prove the point: no mention of a work such as Nigel Dennis's *The Making of Moo*, in which religion is seen as a malign instrument of colonial power, of the Court's staging of plays by black writers such as Barry Reckord or Errol John or one-off works of protest such as Keith Johnstone's *Eleven Men Dead at Holk Camp*.

Like most semiologists, Rebellato invests random signs with an unearned historical weight. He is on equally dubious ground in suggesting the whole Royal Court revolution was a response to the coded queerness of British theatre. He accurately lists the number of gay men who occupied positions of power in postwar theatre. He wittily shows *Plays and Players* to have been a pre-eminently queer publication. And he brilliantly records the experience of the Lord Chamberlain's office at attempts to subvert its homophobic censorious power, describing the panic of one of the Lord Chamberlain's readers dispatched to check out a drag revue. We're no Ladies, at a club theatre in Westbourne Grove. Like all smut-bounds, the reader sees innuendo everywhere so that when a performer with faulty, electrically lit earrings quips: "I've got a bad connection" some improbably is suspected. The reader even perpetrates his own unconscious double-entendre: he proposes



Newer look back... Claire Bloom (Helena), Richard Burton (Jimmy) and Gary Raymond (Cliff) in the 1959 film of *Look Back in Anger*

PHOTOGRAPH: THE KOBAL COLLECTION

to the show's creator that the female impersonators, instead of subversively singing the National Anthem should simply let the orchestra play while themselves "standing to attention". But, while there was an undeniably coded gay element in 40s and 50s theatre, Rebellato's conclusion is staggering. "The whole revolution in British theatre can be seen as responding to the linguistic perversity of a homosexuality which seemed on the point of constituting itself as an oppositional subculture."

This is to over-pitch camp by suggesting that its denial was the main force behind the Royal Court revolution. It is perfectly true that the Court favoured openness over obliqueness and visual austerity over the decorative flamboyance of gay designers such as Oliver Messel and Cecil Beaton. But to suggest that the New Wave was largely a reaction against the subversive queerness of Shaftesbury Avenue – even *Salad Days* here becomes a metaphor for dangerously unlicensed instinct – is to put sex before common sense.

I suspect the real reasons why 1956 was a landmark year have more to do with the enclosed, class-ridden nature of British – theatre and with crucial shifts in the cultural and social landscape. Glance down the London playbills in the immediate pre-Osborne era and you find a theatre, in Arthur Miller's famous phrase,

"hermetically sealed off from life". William Douglas Home's *The Reluctant Debutante* dealt with a harassed mother's concern over her obstinate daughter's coming out. Arnold Ridley and Mary Cathcart Borer's *Tabiha* concerned three impoverished gentlemen who consider murdering their landlady. And Noel Coward's *South Sea Bubble* was a piece of imperialist claptrap about a colony's refusal of independence on the grounds it was too young and irresponsible to survive without its nanny. Indeed watching Coward's snobbish philistine *Nude With Violin*, also dating from 1956, the other day, you began to see precisely why it was necessary to overthrow the ancient regime.

True, by May 1956, *Godot* had already arrived, Anouilh was at the Arts, and Theatre Workshop's *The Good Soldier Schweik* had moved into the West End. But this was still a fundamentally frivolous theatre dominated by arbitrary comedies, feeble farces and suspenseless thrillers; as Kenneth Tynan said, to qualify as a dramatic hero you either had to possess an income of £2,000 a year or be murdered in the house of someone who did.

In some ways the British theatre's complacency may have seemed an accurate echo of Britain itself in its fifth year of Tory rule. What that overlooked, however, was the parallel existence of a disaffected younger generation growingly

impatient with established authority. It was partly the result of the 1944 Education Act, which liberated children of the working class and gave them access to higher education. A suspicion of authority was also fostered by National Service with its organised pointlessness and confrontation with the officer class – the theme of Arnold Wesker's subsequent *Chips with Everything*.

Two key cultural events also symbolised the shifting spirit of the times. One was the publication of Kingsley Amis's junior-lecturer hero, with his repertory of grimaces of rage and disgust, was instantly recognisable. And the 1955 movie of *Rock Around the Clock*, with Bill Haley and the Comets, expressed the energy of American popular culture and led to scenes of Bacchic abandon; even in sedate Leamington Spa, where I was brought up, teenagers danced in the aisles and tore up the cinema seats. Britain in the mid-50s was like a wobbly pressure-cooker in the frustrated energy of youth was simply waiting to erupt.

Lately, a debate has broken out over whether it was *Waiting For Godot* in 1955 rather than *Look Back in Anger* in 1956 that was the real source of revolution. David Edgar, in a programme-note, recently linked the two plays. Both

changed its content. He showed that drama was no longer the private province of the middle classes. He demonstrated, by putting a large slice of contemporary Britain on stage, its capacity to take the moral temperature of the times. He reaffirmed that a character's social stance was indivisible from his or her sexuality. And, even though I suspect many of today's dramatists view his romantic rage with suspicion, he made the future possible: you can draw a line through postwar British drama linking *Look Back in Anger* with *Shopping and Picking*.

Undoubtedly injustices were done in the course of the revolution and one very fine playwright, Terence Rattigan, was mercilessly sacrificed in the process. But I believe the revisionists have got it wrong. The British theatre of the early 50s was hopelessly detached from the real world: it was only the work of George Devine at the Royal Court and Joan Littlewood at Stratford East that re-established its link with society. Osborne's landmark play may be the victim of its own mystique, and its strengths and weaknesses as a play somewhat obscured. Reality, in short, collides with myth. But when the two come into conflict the only answer, as a character says in John Ford's *The Man who Shot Liberty Valance*, is "to print the legend".

But if Beckett influenced the form of drama, Osborne radically changed its content. He showed that drama was no longer the private province of the middle classes. He demonstrated, by putting a large slice of contemporary Britain on stage, its capacity to take the moral temperature of the times. He reaffirmed that a character's social stance was indivisible from his or her sexuality. And, even though I suspect many of today's dramatists view his romantic rage with suspicion, he made the future possible: you can draw a line through postwar British drama linking *Look Back in Anger* with *Shopping and Picking*.

Look Back in Anger is at the National Theatre, London (0171-428 3000), till September 11.