

The angry young man has grown up. But

Theatre

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Look Back in Anger National Theatre, London SE1
Last Dance at Dum Dum New Ambassadors, WC2
Floyd Collins Bridewell, EC4

FORGET THE IDEA of angry young men. And forget the iconic status of the ironing-board in mid-twentieth-century drama. Forget the breaking of a Terence Rattigan-shaped theatrical mould. And forget Kenneth Tynan's declaration in this paper that he couldn't 'love anyone who did not wish to see *Look Back in Anger*'.

John Osborne instructed readers of his first play to disregard everything they'd heard about it, and his advice holds true for audiences who want to appreciate Gregory Hersov's stirring new production at the National. *Look Back in Anger* bursts into life as a conventionally shaped, richly expressed drama. It transmits not the rallying-cry of a generation, but something particular and subtle: a story of obsessional love and a story of self-hatred. The story, you might say, of John Osborne.

This is not, of course, a balanced account. It is Jimmy Porter's raging col-

oratura riffs that give the play its voice: even when he's off-stage, the snarl of his trumpet weaves its way into conversations. No one else – the two ironing-board-bound women, the doggy, doughy friend, the kindly, crusty father-in-law – comes near his baroque intricacies. Osborne (who presumably didn't want his own pronouncements on the play to be flung out with everyone else's) said that a performance of *Look Back in Anger* without laughs was like an opera without arias. There are plenty of laughs at the Lyttelton – even a simple visit to the lavatory sounded like a medieval siege'. They are nearly all prompted by Jimmy.

Hersov's production can't conceal the tedium of Jimmy's most maudlin rants. It doesn't try to conceal a misogynistic aspect. But it goes a long way to relieving the difficulty of the play's one-sidedness. Emma Fielding brilliantly reassembles and deepens the part of the put-upon wife: she is provoking as well as provoked, tinged with calculation. And, as Jimmy, Michael Sheen meets head-on another long-standing objection to the play.

What, people asked, was Porter so angry about? In Sheen's eloquent, volatile rendition, the question is beside the point: his fury is a goad and a defence. It may



Le Prevost and Jaffrey in *Last Dance*

shovel up anything it finds for fuel – bishops, the bomb and middle-class buffers – but it doesn't have a centre. It's a constant agitated way of being. Which is not to say that it lacks a motive. Before he launches into any big speech, or any string of insults, this Jimmy – tough-talking and wobbly-looking – glances towards his wife. She is his target. Together, Sheen and Fielding have created a new and urgent dynamic for Osborne's play.

At the New Ambassadors, a row of charming old sods potter around in front of a jasmine-smothered verandah in India. There's the feeble old biddy who is fuddled with drink and the eccentric one who goes around scooping up bits of abandoned