

Look forward in pleasure as Osborne's angry hero is redeemed

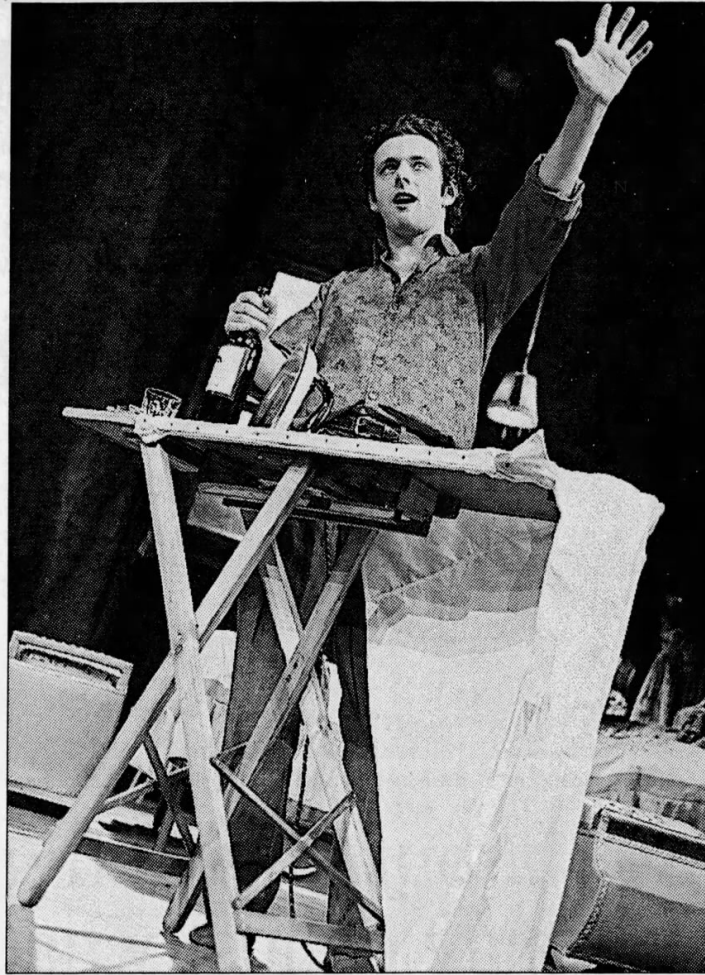
THERE has been much fuss about *Look Back In Anger* breaking the theatrical mould in Fifties theatre and paving the way for the post-war generation of playwrights. But it takes some kind of actor to redeem John Osborne's hero Jimmy Porter and Michael Sheen is certainly equal to the task. Not content with driving everyone to distraction with his endless self-pitying tirades, the biggest, most crashing bore in theatre passes the time blowing his own non-figurative trumpet offstage. But not only does Sheen manage to make this character likable, Emma Fielding manages to be more than just a mousy little push-over as his long suffering wife.

Osborne's critical mentor Kenneth Tynan generously described Jimmy Porter's exasperating solipsism as a "flair for introspection". But 43 years on it is more like a one man war of attrition. Jimmy's principal excuse for his relentless egotism is the fact that at the age of 10 he watched his father die a slow death. Cue further polemics about his being persistently misunderstood by those who hadn't experienced such suffering. Meanwhile the other characters fuel his indignation with more caffeine, iron his shirts and act as a captive audience.

The principal pleasure for the actual audience, however, is masochistic.

You wait and wait for Jimmy to become worn out with his own bile. But to be fair to Osborne, history has not been kind in appropriating his play as a political cause célèbre. His story now seems much more personal, as Jimmy Porter exorcises all kinds of Oedipal rage at the perceived emasculation of his circumstances. The trouble is that after all his Sturm und Drang, the play ends with a sentimental reconciliation negotiated with teddy bears and squirrels.

But if *Look Back In Anger* is a shameless one-man show, Michael Sheen tears off his clothes to surf the full operatic range of Jimmy's self-



Picture: ALASTAIR MUIR

Michael Sheen: surfs the full operatic range of Jimmy's self-absorption

FIRST NIGHT

by **PATRICK MARMION**

Look Back In Anger ★
Lyttelton Theatre

absorption. One minute he is Mr Belligerent, the next Mr Happy Go Lucky, the next Mr Righteous and the next merely Mr Sulky. Not only does he release himself into the role without ambivalence, he also seeks to amuse his fellow actors while taking in the Lyttelton audience with a conspiratorial wink.

Besides this cheeky flamboyance, Jason Hughes's Cliff, the moping flatmate, is chirpily up-beat without appearing thick. Matilda Ziegler, as the friend to Jimmy's wife Alison, toughs Jimmy out with finishing school deportment.

But perhaps most significantly Emma Fielding as the comparatively docile wife manages to pose an increasingly raw emotional

challenge. Designer Robert Jones has spotted how fashionable this period has become and he fills his cold mausoleum of a set with dusty period antiques. His peeling leather sofas, wooden ironing board and transistor radio would now fetch hundreds of pounds in Portobello market. But Gregory Hersov's direction also seems to recognise how self-absorption has become so à la mode. He focuses steadily on the struggle to escape the self-inflicted angst at the play's core. Even if the final reconciliation is figured in terms of squirrels and bears, it's a new start made possible by Sheen's emotionally naked central performance.

Nicholas de Jongh is away

Ratings: - ○ adequate
★ good, ★★ very good,
★★★ outstanding,
✗ poor

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