

# *What the Butler Saw*

by Joe Orton

Know-the-Show  
Audience Guide  
researched and written by  
the Education Department of

The  
**SHAKESPEARE**  
Theatre of  
New Jersey

Artwork by  
Scott McKowen







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# About Joe Orton



*Playwright Joe Orton in 1967.*

In the early morning hours of August 10, 1967, Kenneth Halliwell violently killed his lover and roommate, Joe Orton, by bludgeoning him with a hammer. Halliwell then took his own life by swallowing twenty-two sleeping pills. Theater critic and biographer, John Lahr, asserts: “No playwright in living memory had met a more gruesome end.” Just three months before his tragic and untimely death, Joe Orton eerily wrote in his diary: “Happiness couldn’t surely last. We’d have to pay for it. Or we’d be struck down from afar from disaster because we were, perhaps, too happy...I slept all night soundly and woke up at seven

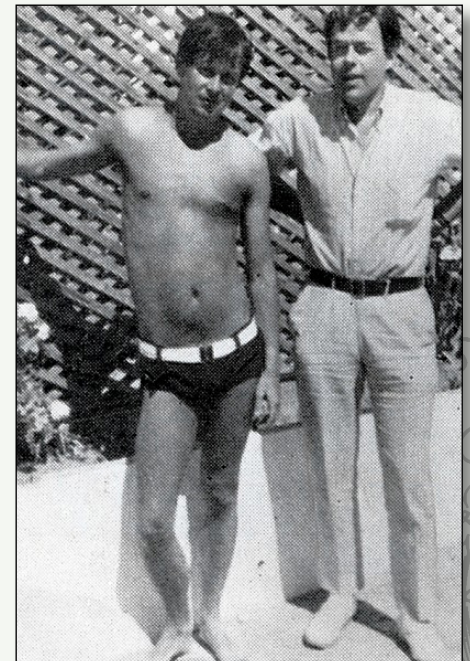
feeling as though the whole of creation was conspiring to make me happy. I hope no doom strikes.” At the time, Orton’s brutal murder proved more famous than his plays. With time, however, Orton would be praised for his provocative plays and his mastery of farce.

The first of four children, John (Joe) Kingsley Orton was born in Leicester, England on January 1, 1933. The Ortons lived meagerly in the Saffron Lane

Estates, which Orton described as “cramped, cold and dark.” His parents, Elsie and William Orton, could barely scrape a living. Elsie Orton worked in a factory where she stitched pants, vests and blouses. Her eyesight rapidly declined as a result of spending so much time on the sewing machines. William Orton, who previously worked as a shoe salesman, took a more regularly paying job as a gardener when his wife could no longer perform factory work. Joe Orton wrote that he felt exceedingly isolated from his “unaffectionate” parents.

Orton’s mother enrolled her fifteen-year-old son in Clark’s College, a secretarial school, where Joe learned short-hand and accounting. Orton’s teacher harshly labelled him as “semiliterate.” She recalls: “He spoke badly and had a lisp.” Determined to escape his mundane existence, Orton decided to educate himself by becoming an avid reader, listening to classical music, and entering the world of theatre by joining the Leicester Dramatic Society, the city’s oldest amateur theatre group. He finally felt a sense of belonging within the theatre community. Theatre also combined Orton’s three greatest fascinations – literature, music, and make-believe. Orton loved that theatre offered him the magic of transformation, and he aspired to one day play the Shakespearean roles of Ariel and Puck.

Joe Orton attended the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (RADA) in London for two years. Of it, Orton complained: “I actually expected to be taught something. It was complete rubbish.” After leaving RADA, Orton met and moved in with Kenneth Halliwell who was seven years Orton’s senior. Friends defined Halliwell



*Joe Orton and Kenneth Halliwell in Morocco in 1967.*



as “arrogant and egotistical.” A classics scholar at Wirral Grammar School, Halliwell, like Orton, quit his academic career to live “the artistic life.” Halliwell offered Orton his knowledge of literature and compelled Orton to share his writing aspirations. They soon became lovers, and their relationship lasted the remainder of their brief lifetimes.

Considered a “strange combination” by friends, Orton and Halliwell lived a hermetic and isolated existence. In his Orton biography, *Prick Up Your Ears*, author John Lahr stated his belief that their “hermetic existence was a united front against an untenable world. Orton and Halliwell lived and spoke as one.” They wrote in the mornings and read in the afternoons. To save electricity, they often awoke at sunrise and retired to bed at sunset.

Under Halliwell’s influence, Orton read the classics and “admired” Voltaire and Aristophanes. Their Islington flat was decorated floor to ceiling with illustrations stolen from library books.

In 1959, Orton and Halliwell began vandalizing library books to “take revenge on all the rubbish that was being published.” They doctored the books in an obscene and lewd fashion, and then stood in the corner of the library to witness the often horrified reactions of library patrons. On May 15, 1962, Orton and Halliwell were caught and both were charged with “malicious damage to 83 books.” Their prank earned them a six month stint in jail, and promptly placed them in the public eye.

Within a year of their release, the BBC accepted the radio version of Orton’s one-act play *The Ruffian on the Stair* (based on the novel *The Boy Hairdresser* written by Orton and Halliwell). The play centered on life in working-class England.

Immediately after Orton found success with *The Ruffian on the Stair*, he started writing his first full-length play entitled *Entertaining Mr. Sloane*, which

commented on the 1960s counter-culture movement. The play debuted in London at the New Arts Theatre on May 6, 1964 and at Wyndham’s Theatre on June 29, 1964. Critic Sir Terrance Rattigan called it the “best first play he’d seen in thirty odd years.” *The Times* critiqued that “*Entertaining Mr. Sloane* made more blood boil than any other British play in the past ten years.” *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* was performed all over the world, and later became a film and television play. Orton was seemingly an overnight success.

His next project, *The Good and Faithful Servant*, was first produced as a stage play in 1964, and later as a television play in 1967. This “poignant and angry” piece rallied against authority and viciously criticized society’s expectation that individuals must commit to a mundane work routine and existence.

Orton also completed *Loot* (originally entitled *Funeral Games*) in the latter part of 1964. He centered this farcical work on “culture’s superstitions about life and death.” Even though it featured an all-star cast, the original production of *Loot*

flopped. The 1966 revival, however, (at the Jeanetta Cochrane Theatre in London) changed everything and won the Evening Standard Award for “best play of the year,” making Orton 1966’s breakout star.

#### WHAT’S IN A NAME?

At the suggestion of Peggy Ramsay, his literary agent, John Orton used the pen-name “Joe Orton” in order to distinguish him from playwright John Osborne who wrote *Look Back in Anger* among other plays.



Joe Orton in his apartment in 1967.





Chris New (Orton) and Matt Lucas (Halliwell) in the 2009 play version of *Prick Up Your Ears*, Comedy Theatre, London.

On a professional level, “the balance of Orton and Halliwell’s relationship had been tipped irrevocably in Orton’s favor (John Lahr, *Prick Up Your Ears*). Halliwell, who felt invisible, became increasingly jealous of Orton’s success and celebrity. He had frequent episodes of severe depression throughout his life. As far back as his days in RADA, Halliwell had said, “I’ll end up just like my father and commit suicide.” Possibly in order to give him a sense that his life mattered, Halliwell kept a journal called “Diary of a Somebody.”

As Orton wrote *What the Butler Saw* in 1967, Halliwell’s mental health and stability rapidly deteriorated. Though he vigorously sought medical help, his psychiatrist only offered him psychoanalytic reasons for his condition, with no hope of a cure or relief. Between the hours of two and four a.m. on August 10, 1967, Halliwell killed Orton, and then took his own life.

*What the Butler Saw*, produced posthumously, placed Orton in the canon of great modern theatre. In showing us how we destroy ourselves, Orton’s plays are themselves a survival tactic. “Orton expected to die young, but he built his plays to last.” (John Lahr).

## THE WORKS OF JOE ORTON

*The Boy Hairdresser* (1963) - a novel written by Orton and Halliwell

*The Ruffian on the Stair* (1964) - a one-act play based on *The Boy Hairdresser*

*Entertaining Mr. Sloane* (1964)

*Loot* (1964, 1966)

*The Good and Faithful Servant* (1964, 1967)

*The Erpingham Camp* (1966)

*Up Against It* (unproduced film script for The Beatles) (1967)

*Funeral Games* (1968 – produced posthumously)

*What the Butler Saw* (1969 – produced posthumously)



Orton in rehearsal for *Entertaining Mr. Sloane*, 1964.



# What the Butler Saw

## A Synopsis

**Please note: Below is a full summary of the play. If you prefer not to spoil the plot, consider skipping this section.**

As a new day begins at the psychiatric clinic of Dr. Prentice, the doctor conducts an unscrupulous interview with short-hand typist, Geraldine Barclay, for a secretarial position at his practice. When he questions her about her family upbringing, Geraldine sadly confesses that her father abandoned her years ago after attacking her mother at the nearby Station Hotel. Geraldine, deserted by her mother after the traumatic incident, was raised by the recently deceased Mrs. Barclay.

Dr. Prentice, in an attempt to seduce the young secretary, requests that Geraldine undress for “psychological reasons.” Mrs. Prentice, Dr. Prentice’s nymphomaniac wife, makes an unexpected appearance and interrupts Geraldine’s psychological “evaluation,” and Dr. Prentice clumsily conceals the naked Geraldine. When Mrs. Prentice discovers the prospective secretary’s dress, she accuses her husband of transvestitism. Mrs. Prentice then begs Dr. Prentice to hire Nicholas Beckett for the secretarial position instead of Geraldine. The previous evening, Mrs. Prentice and Nick engaged in illicit sexual relations at the Station Hotel. Post coital, Nick stole Mrs. Prentice’s clothes and money, and threatened to publicize the naked photographs of their encounter unless Dr. Prentice offered him employment.

Dr. Rance appears claiming to represent the mental health division of Her Majesty’s Government. Ambitious and hungry for prestige in the world of psychiatry, Rance demands to be given details of Dr. Prentice’s clinic in order to write a “fascinating thesis.”

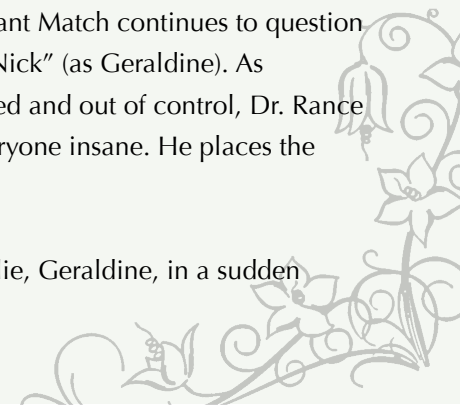
Without authorization, Dr. Rance takes charge of Dr. Prentice’s clinic. He finds Geraldine, immediately certifies her insane and administers an injection to sedate her. Meanwhile, Mrs. Prentice enters in search of the mystery secretarial candidate whom she has yet to meet. The fumbling Geraldine is unable to convince Mrs. Prentice of her true identity or Dr. Rance of her sanity; both revelations would challenge Dr. Rance’s diagnosis and expertise.

Mrs. Prentice deems Geraldine “missing,” and contacts Sergeant Match to find her.

In order to avoid blame for the disappearance of Geraldine, Dr. Prentice convinces Nick to impersonate her (in manner and garb). He then begs Geraldine to take on Nick’s identity. Exhausted from the mounting deceits and lies, they agree. Sergeant Match arrives and questions a confused “Geraldine” (Nick in disguise). As Act One ends, Sergeant Match harshly interrogates “Nick” (Geraldine in disguise) about the previous night’s sexual indiscretions with Mrs. Prentice and arrests “him.”

Ironically, Geraldine (as “Nick”) feels immense relief at being arrested because the idea of going to jail oddly comforts her. Sergeant Match continues to question Dr. Prentice about his sexual advances towards “Nick” (as Geraldine). As everything becomes increasingly more complicated and out of control, Dr. Rance takes over Dr. Prentice’s practice and certifies everyone insane. He places the clinic on lockdown for security purposes.

Unable to keep up with the immense pressure to lie, Geraldine, in a sudden







outburst, cries out in anguish, “I can’t go on doctor! I must tell the truth! I’m not a boy! I’m a girl!” Still, no one believes her.

Frantic to escape the madness, Nick wants Sergeant Match’s uniform “to arrest himself” and leave the clinic. Dr. Prentice astonishingly convinces the Sergeant to undress, and Nick takes his garments.

In the midst of all the chaos and confusion, Mrs. Prentice accuses her husband of murdering Geraldine. When questioned why he cannot produce her, a drained Dr. Prentice exclaims, “I can’t! You’re wearing her dress!” Mrs. Prentice, assuming her husband has ulterior motives, excitedly takes off her dress at her husband’s request.

As the events continue to escalate, Dr. Rance attempts to put Dr. Prentice in a straight-jacket; arming himself with a gun in order to protect him from the “mad” Dr. Prentice. In the end, a very feeble and weak Geraldine Barclay winds up in the straight-jacket.

Dr. Rance presses the alarm — a siren wails and metal grills fall, ensnaring them all in the ward. Unable to escape, Dr. Prentice and Geraldine tell everyone the truth. In all the pandemonium, she laments misplacing her sentimental brooch. Dr. Rance produces the brooch from his pocket. To Nick’s astonishment, Nick has the very same charm. “They make a pair!

Mrs. Prentice immediately recognizes the brooch, and tells everyone the story of being raped at the Station Hotel years ago. Before leaving her, the rapist placed the very same charm in her hand “as payment.” In the emotional denouement, Dr. and Mrs. Prentice realize that they are the parents of Nick and Geraldine! Dr. Rance gleefully declares that the story of double-incest is sure to “become a best-seller!” Like the adjoining pieces of Mrs. Prentice’ jewelry, the characters in *What the Butler Saw* seemingly feel whole.

## ABOUT *WHAT THE BUTLER SAW*

While Halliwell battled loneliness and depression, Orton was writing what critics considered his “best” and most “ambitious” play, *What the Butler Saw*. Like *Loot*, *What the Butler Saw* featured a star-studded cast, and was panned by the critics when it debuted at the Queen’s Theatre in March 1969. Lindsay Anderson’s revival, however, at the Court Theatre, London (as part of the Joe Orton Festival) in 1975 established *What the Butler Saw* as Orton’s “farce masterpiece.” In this “daring and inventive” work, Orton parodied farce and himself. He stated, “As I understand it, farce was originally very close to tragedy and differed only in the treatment of its themes – themes like rape, bastardy, prostitution.” With *What the Butler Saw*, Orton raised the stakes of the farce genre. Critics praised *Butler* for its remarkable achievements in both movement and wit.

Biographer John Lahr believes much of *What the Butler Saw* relates directly to Joe Orton’s troubled life. Kenneth Halliwell, like Geraldine Barclay, feels invisible and like a non-entity. Just like Dr. and Mrs. Prentice, Halliwell and Orton refused to see one another as active participants in each other’s difficulties. As Orton wrote *What the Butler Saw*, Halliwell suffered a crippling depression. Orton, through some of his journal entries, seemed to feel indifference to Halliwell’s declining emotional state. Perhaps his indifference indicated he wanted out of the relationship. Just like the cage that ensnares the characters at the end, Orton might have felt trapped by Halliwell.

Ironically, the ending of *What the Butler Saw* offers hope as “the nightmare of disorder transforms into a fairytale of harmony.” (John Lahr)

**BROOCH:** a decorative closure for a garment, like something used on a cloak; usually metal (silver, gold, or bronze), and often bejewelled.





# Who's Who in the Play

**DR. PRENTICE:** A psychiatrist who runs his own private clinic; unorthodox and unethical in his approach to psychiatry.  
*"I've been too long among the mad to know what sanity is."*

**GERALDINE BARCLAY:** A short-hand typist from the Friendly Faces Employment Bureau; applies for a secretarial position at Dr. Prentice's clinic.  
*"I lived in a normal family. I had no love for my father."*

**MRS. PRENTICE:** Dr. Prentice's nymphomaniac wife. She had sexual relations with a hotel page at the Station Hotel.  
*"Whose fault is it if our marriage is on the rocks? You're selfish and inconsiderate. Don't push me too far. I might sleep with someone else."*

**NICHOLAS BECKETT:** Hotel page from the Station Hotel who had sexual relations with Mrs. Prentice.  
*"No position is impossible when you're young and healthy."*

Select costume research for *What the Butler Saw* compiled by Costume Designer, Kristin Isola.



**DR. RANCE:** A psychiatrist who represents the mental health branch of Her Majesty's Government; demands to be given details of Dr. Prentice's clinic.

*"Civilizations have been founded and maintained on theories which refused to obey facts."*

**SERGEANT MATCH:** A police sergeant; investigates the "missing" Geraldine and her association with the "missing parts" of a Sir Winston Churchill statue.

*"I must ask you to produce or cause to be produced, the missing parts of Sir Winston Churchill."*





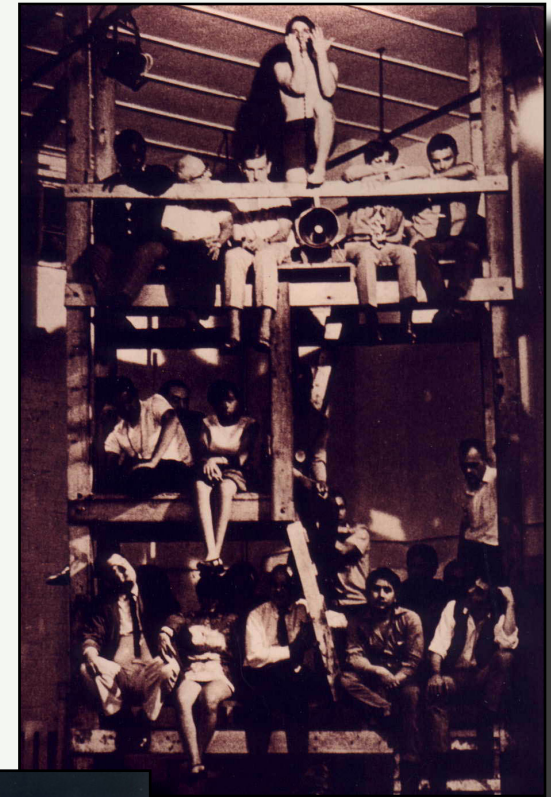
# The Changing Face of Theatre in the 60s

Political and racial unrest defined the culture of the 1960s. The Vietnam conflict provoked passionate protests and resistance throughout the country. Citizens also peacefully marched alongside Martin Luther King, Jr. to express the urgent necessity for racial equality and justice. In addition, the senseless and violent assassinations of President John Kennedy, Malcolm X, Senator Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. filled the decade with sorrow and alarm.

The prejudicial treatment of Native Americans and the oppression of women and minority groups were the hot topics of the day. People also experimented with mind-altering drugs and the notion of "free love."

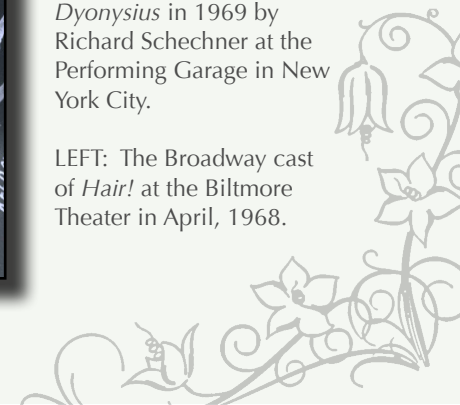
In response to the disorder and chaos of the 1960s, the Arts unleashed a powerful wave of new artistic works. The collapse of play licensing laws in England made censorship almost unenforceable. In America, controversial pieces like *MacBird* accused Lyndon Johnson of murder, while *Paradise Now* ended with the audience undressing and marching into the streets naked. The provocative *Dionysius in 1969*, adapted from *The Bacchae* by Euripides, found actors engaging in sexual activity with other actors and even members of the audience during the show.

1968, in particular, was a watershed year in the United States theatre scene. On Broadway, an (almost) all-nude review called *Oh! Calcutta!* made its premiere. Galt McDermott, Gerome Ragni and James Rado brought a new type of musical to the American theatre with their anti-establishment piece, *Hair!*. *The Living Theatre*, an experimental theatre group, amplified their message of anarchy and revolution in 1968.



ABOVE: The Performance Group's production of *Dionysius* in 1969 by Richard Schechner at the Performing Garage in New York City.

LEFT: The Broadway cast of *Hair!* at the Biltmore Theater in April, 1968.



## JOE ORTON'S CONTEMPORARIES

The spirit of revolution and resistance trickled over to the Arts in England. It seems the angst-ridden spirit of the 1960s inspired the writing of Joe Orton the most. Helping to usher in the new theatrical movement of the turbulent 60s was the original “angry young man”, John Osborne, who penned *Look Back in Anger* in 1956. He was also known for his gritty works *The Entertainer* (1959) and *Tom Jones* (1963). Orton's contemporaries also included the Czech-born, British playwright Tom Stoppard who wrote *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* in 1965. This popular and well-known play showcased at the Edinburgh Festival in 1966 to glowing reviews. British playwright, Harold Pinter, author of *The Lover* (1962) and *The Homecoming* (1964), admired the work of Joe Orton and called Orton a “bloody marvelous writer” for his work on *The Ruffian on the Stair*. Orton openly reciprocated Pinter's admiration, and confessed the only two playwrights he enjoyed and respected were Pinter and the eccentric absurdist Samuel Beckett.

In America, Arthur Miller remained a powerful theatrical influence with works like *A View from the Bridge* (1955), *After the Fall* (1964), and *Incident at Vichy* (1964). Critics considered Neil Simon, who authored *Barefoot in the Park* (1963) and *The Odd Couple* (1965), “the most [popularly] successful playwright after 1960.” Critics also coined Edward Albee the most prestigious playwright of the 1960s, in part for his work on *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1962) and *A Delicate Balance* (1966).



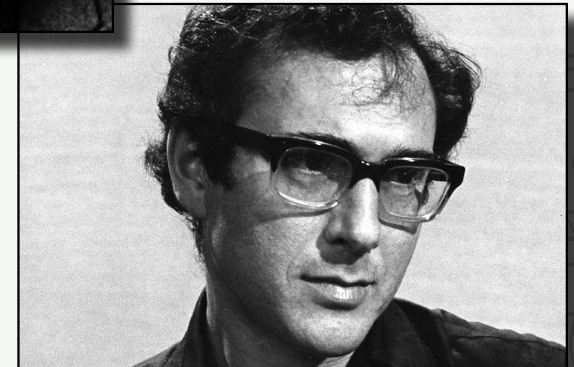
ABOVE: Arthur Miller with then wife Marilyn Monroe — *The Happy Sitting* by Richard Avedon 1957.



RIGHT: John Osborne, 1959.



ABOVE: Tom Stoppard in a 1967 photo from *The Guardian News*.



RIGHT: Harold Pinter from a BBC interview in 1969



# Farce:

## an Overview

**farce** (n): a light dramatic composition marked by broadly satirical comedy and improbable plot — *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*

“In high comedy we are usually laughing at ourselves; in farce, at somebody else.” — *Joseph Wood Krutch, theatre scholar*

Now considered one of the silliest and most enjoyable forms of comedy, the word “farce” actually originates from a French culinary word meaning “stuffed, or padded,” and referred to the small comedic acts that were crammed into larger theatrical works as a respite from more somber events. Deliberately absurd scenarios, baffled characters, buffoonery, and a lightning-quick tempo are all hallmarks of farce. On a deeper level, the genre can provide satiric examinations of individuals or society.

The seeds of farce can be seen in the works of ancient Greek and Roman playwrights like Aristophanes (*Lysistrata*, *The Frogs*, *The Birds*) and Plautus (*Menaechmi* – source for Shakespeare’s *The Comedy of Errors*). Over the centuries that followed, elements of these broad comedies were refined. Notably, the rowdy and unruly fundamentals of farce were used to create short intervals between the more serious acts of the Mystery and Miracle plays of the Middle Ages. The church frowned on these often irreverent performances and squelched them. Later, the stock characters and improvised situations at the core of *commedia dell-arte* revived many of the elements of farce.

By the end of the 1600s, the comedic styles of farce had been well established. Two primary approaches evolved during this era. The older Italian influenced

farce was identified by its very broad humor, physical comedy (including slapsticks), and often acrobatic feats. The French style focused more on verbal acrobatics and quick wit to explore the absurd situations of the farcical plots. Playwrights such as Shakespeare (*The Comedy of Errors*), Moliere (*The School for Wives*, *The Learned Ladies*, *Tartuffe*, *The Imaginary Invalid*), Goldoni (*Servant of Two Masters*), Wilde (*The Importance of Being Earnest*), and others all used major elements of farce in the comedic works.

In the early 1900s, the broad and bawdy elements of farce could be seen in the slapstick comedy of Charlie Chaplin, the Keystone Kops, and the Marx Brothers. Later, existentialist and absurdist playwrights like Jean Paul Sartre (*Nekrassov*), Eugene Ionesco (*The Chairs*, *Exit the King*), and Harold Pinter (*The Birthday Party*, *The Dumb Waiter*, *The Homecoming*) inserted darker and more tragic visions of farce into their plays.

Farce has continued to evolve and thrive in every generation. On stage, one can look plays such as Ken Ludwig’s *Lend Me a Tenor*, Stephen Sondheim’s musical *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, or Michael Frayn’s *Noises Off*, as well as newer works like *One Man, Two Guvnors*, and *Boeing, Boeing*. On television and film one need only look back to *I Love Lucy*, *Scooby Doo*, or *Seinfeld* to see what an influence farce has had on our culture.



LEFT: Zero Mostell in the 1962 Broadway production of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, Alvin Theatre.  
BELOW: Kate Fabel, Andrew Weems, Harriet Harris, and Laila Robins in the 2009 STNJ production of Michael Frayne’s *Noises Off*, directed by Paul Mullins.



# Orton & Farce

*Loot* and *What the Butler Saw* catapulted Joe Orton to “Master” of the farce genre. Often referred to as the “Connoisseur of Chaos,” bedlam ruled the worlds of all his plays. Farce, truly, was the only vehicle where Orton could “make a spectacle of disintegration.” His darker vision of farce allowed him to brilliantly and succinctly speak the unspeakable. Critics, however, frequently complained that his edgy work was completely void of basic human values.

Much of the language in his plays was borrowed directly from 1960s popular culture (i.e. advertising jargon, tabloid journalism and B movies.) Though Orton was only a working playwright from 1964-1967, his work had a distinctive and macabre tone immediately identified as “Ortonesque.”

Called the “Modern Lord of Misrule,” Orton used his plays to rebel against the establishment. He realized early in his writing career that there had to be a murder “in order for society to be reborn.” In his opinion, comedies had the capacity to “kill and renew.” He aligned himself with the harsh philosophies of Nietzsche, who wrote “Without cruelty, no feast.”

Behind all of Orton’s comedies there also lies a “Dionysian” intention. In Greek mythology, Dionysius was the god of fertility and wine;

embodying the duality of joyous ecstasy and brutal rage. Sergeant Match in *What the Butler Saw* perfectly exemplifies these contrasting Dionysian qualities.

Consistent with his affinity for contrasting values and contradictory views, Joe Orton considered himself both a satirist and realist. He said, “People think I write fantasy, but I don’t; some things may be exaggerated or distorted in the same way that painters distort and alter things, but they’re realistic figures.”

Orton had a distinctive voice and point of view, and lived to provoke and incite his audience. In his posthumously published novel, *Head to Toe*, Orton stated, “Print is less effective than the spoken word because the blast is greater; eyes cannot ignore, slide past, dangerous verbs or nouns.”



*Joe Orton's Loot at the Jeanetta Cochrane Theatre, London. 1966.*



# Commentary & Criticism

"*What the Butler Saw* is a demented madhouse farce in which there are no patients on the premises... The comedy is footloose and tongue-tripping, accelerating to an eccentric epiphany."

-Mel Gussow, Review in *New York Times*

"*What the Butler Saw*, the late Joe Orton's final play, is a comic assault on on rigidly conservative sexual attitudes and pretenses. Like his earlier work, then, the play is energized by Orton's aggressive challenge of a bourgeois, heterosexual status quo... The acceleration of the farcical mishaps gives weight to Orton's controlling metaphor of the world as a madhouse. As the plot moves frantically toward its wacky conclusion, Orton includes within his madhouse framework ironic attacks on politics, psychoanalysis, the church, law, and, of course, heterosexuality. Through the refracted mirror of farce, tradition and order are turned upside down, and then shakily restored at the end."

-Foster Hirsch, Review in *Educational Theatre Journal*

"Orton's last play is his masterpiece, a bawdy farce and satire of social proprieties that ranks among the best comedies of the century."

-Charles Isherwood, Review in *Variety*

"Polymorphous perversity is the guiding principle of *What the Butler Saw*, and imaginative variety defines sexual value. The question of identity that is so crucial in tragedy is now translated into its farcical equivalent: sexual identity. The characters try vainly to establish their maleness or femaleness, only to discover that it hardly matters in view of the madly incestuous climax that is being prepared... As an avowed homosexual, Orton could mercilessly twit both

the gay and the straight worlds, and sexuality in his plays becomes a synonym for the imagination."

-Maurice Charney, "What Did the Butler See in Orton's *What the Butler Saw?*"

"Clothes off, clothes on, rapid exits and entrances, mistaken identities, deftly delivered dialogue—this show has it all... Orton leaves few institutions off his list as he pokes fun at marriage, sex, gender, psychiatry, and government bureaucracy."

-Melinda Schupmann, Review in *Back Stage West*

"It's as if Orton were literally undressing *The Importance of Being Earnest* even as he anatomized Wilde's structure, which is here revised to incorporate sedation, gunshots and delusions on a grand scale—grand and grimly funny, too."

-Matt Wolf, Review in *Variety*

"The play, agreed on generally by critics and scholars as Orton's best, is yet another parody, both in its subject matter and style. Having dealt with the hypocrisy of sexual taboos in *Entertaining Mr. Sloane*, the corruption of law enforcement in *Loot*, institutionalized entertainment in *The Erpingham Camp*, corporate paternalism in *The Good and Faithful Servant*, and religion in *Funeral Games*, Orton aimed his most devastating and hilarious wit at the new religion—psychiatry—in *What the Butler Saw*."

-Susan Rusinko, essay on *What the Butler Saw*

"As in all past writing, he maintains his firm understanding of mannered comedy through the convulsive syntax that he applies to his characters, but in [*What the Butler Saw*], Orton reaches beyond himself again, this time bridging High Comedy with dizzying, door-slamming Farce... He invents a style which aims to destroy the characters' lives as the audience looks on in shock and riotous horror."

-Joel Greenberg, *A High Comedy of Bad Manners*

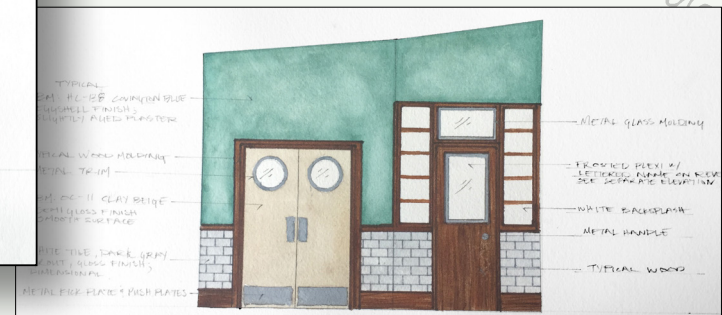
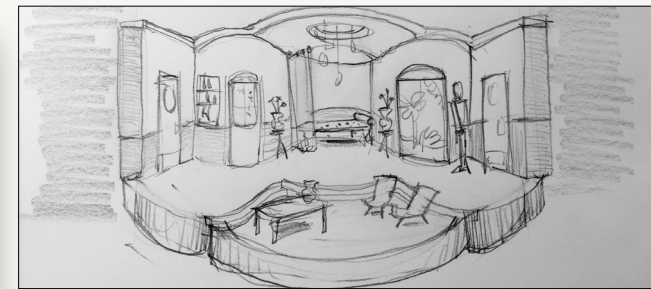
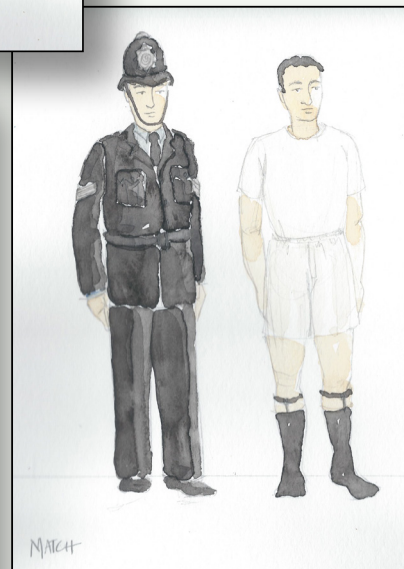
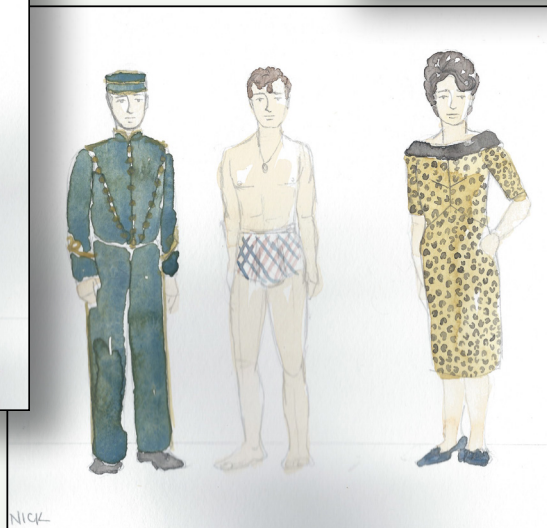
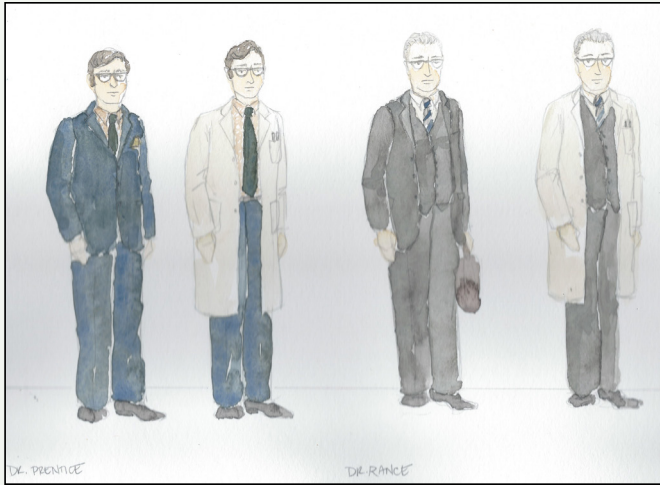
# In this Production



ABOVE: Model of the set design by Brittany Vasta ©2017.

LEFT & BELOW LEFT: Costume design renderings by Kristin Isola ©2017.

BELOW RIGHT: Preliminary sketch of set and paint elevations by Brittany Vasta ©2017.







# Explore Online

View Stephen Frears' 1987 film *Prick Up Your Ears* about the life and death of Joe Orton. The film stars Gary Oldman as Joe Orton and Alfred Molina as Kenneth Halliwell.

<http://beamosmovie.com/en/movies/65025/Prick-Up-Your-Ears-1987.html>



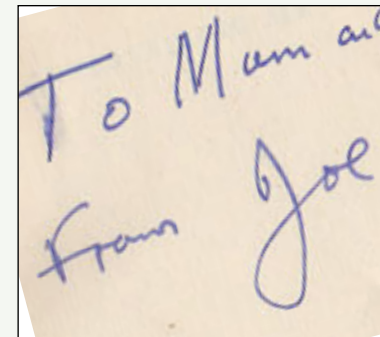
View Pamela Brighton's 1982 documentary entitled *Joe Orton: A Genius Like Us*. This BBC Arena film focuses on the peak of Joe Orton's career in 1967.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6p9gjoWHuuM>



Explore Joe Orton Online – a website completely devoted to everything Joe Orton. It includes intimate and interesting details about his personal life, literary works, and features the troubled playwright's life in photographs.

[www.joeorton.org](http://www.joeorton.org)





# Sources & Further Reading

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LEFT: Joe Orton pictured outside on Noel Road, Islington in 1964.

BELOW: Orton with Geraldine McEwan and Kenneth William in rehearsals for *Loot* in 1965.

