

PREFACE

John James Osborne (12 December, 1929 - 24 December, 1994) is a renowned English dramatist, screenwriter, actor and critic of the Establishment who helped initiate a new era in British theatre. He was born in Fulham, a Suburb of London. His father was Thomas Godfrey Osborne, a commercial artist and mother Nellie Beatrice, a bar-maid. The death of his father when Osborne was just twelve and his working-class background created a serious impact on Osborne's consciousness concerning the society and this manifested itself in several ways in his plays.

Osborne who had formed 'Viper Gang Club' at school repeatedly jeered at the Royal family which led the headmaster Mr. Eric to slap him. In retaliation, he slapped the headmaster and was expelled from the school at the age of sixteen, an incident which bears the testimony to the seeds of resistance to authority, non-conformist tendencies and a strong individuality sown in him at a tender age.

Osborne tried a series of odd jobs, worked as a journalist for the *Gas World* and *The Miller*. He left it to become an actor-cum-Asst. Stage Manager. He first acted in *No Room at the Inn*, a skilful example of music-hall drama staged at the Lyceum, Sheffield in 1948. In collaboration with Stella Linden he wrote his first play *Resting Deep* whose title was later changed to *The Devil Inside Him* (1950). He wrote two plays in collaboration with Anthony Creighton, *Personal Enemy* (1955), a fumbling work about a soldier who refuses to be repatriated from captivity in Korea, and *Epitaph for George Dillon* (1957) which is about George Dillon, a commercial artist who loses his integrity by compromising with his art.

Osborne's first popular work which established his reputation as an outstanding playwright beyond any doubt was *Look Back in Anger* (1956). It was staged under the aegis of The English Stage Company at The Royal Court Theatre on 8th May, 1956 and revolutionized the British Theatre and earned him

the title 'Angry Young Man', subsequently creating the creed and cult of the 'Angry Young'. *The Entertainer* (1957) centres round the Rice family and is the story of Archie Rice, an irascible vaudeville comedian whose emotional instability is mirrored in the deteriorating music-hall tradition to which he is closely allied. The failing state of the music hall has been viewed as a metaphor for England's decline in world power and loss of national identity.

The World of Paul Slickey (1959) is modeled on the style of the 'Comedy of Manners' and is a biting musical satire on the London Press and an attack on the individuals who allow themselves to be influenced and manipulated by mass media. His *Letter to my Fellow Country Men* (1961) exposes the hypocrisy in the English society. *Luther* (1961), a historical play which met critical and popular success, is about the historical and psychological portrait of Martin Luther, the leader of the Protestant Reformation. It follows the conventions of an 'Epic Drama' and employs several Expressionistic and Epic theatrical devices.

Osborne wrote two plays *The Blood of the Bambergs* (1962) and *Under Plain Cover* (1962) under the head 'Plays for England'. The former play is an attack on journalists and more importantly on the illicit liaisons, pompous marriages of the Royalty. The latter play is about the incestuous relation of a brother and sister Tim and Jenny who live as couple. It reflects the moral bankruptcy of the English society. His *Inadmissible Evidence* (1964) shows the disintegration and the disorientation of the personality of Bill Maitland, a lawyer who deals with criminal and divorce cases. *A Patriot for Me* (1965) based on facts covers a significant phase of history in its dramatization of the military career of Colonel Alfred Redl, a homosexual in the Austro-Hungarian Army, and his blackmail by a Russian Intelligence Unit led by Col. Oblensky, culminating in his suicide.

Time Present (1968) is about an ageing actress Pamela who turns bitter, scornful and cynical and abhors the artificial world. *The Hotel in Amsterdam* (1968) is an ensemble play - an uncharacteristic form for Osborne in which three

English couples escape the unwelcome presence of their boss for a weekend of rest. *West of Suez* (1971) examines the decline of England's colonial tradition through the experiences of an expatriate family on a former British colony in the Caribbean that is undergoing political upheaval. *Watch It Come Down* (1975) concerns an emotional crisis in the lives of a director, his novelist wife, his biographical historian father and his artist sister. They share a renovated railway station in the country. Unable to resolve their conflicts, they all meet tragic ends. *A Sense of Detachment* (1972), *The End of Me Old Cigar* (1973) are his other plays.

Osborne also wrote plays for Television like *A Subject of Scandal and Concern* (1960), *The Right Prospectus* (1968), *Very Like a Whale* (1970), *The Gifts of Friendship* (1972). He also adapted Henry Fielding's novel *Tom Jones* (1964) for film. His other adaptations include Lope De Vega's *A Bond Honoured* (1966), Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* (1972), Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* adapted as *A Place Calling Itself Rome* (1973), Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1976). He gives deep insights into his personality through his two volumes of autobiography, *A Better Class of Person: Autobiography: 1929-1956* (1981) and *Almost a Gentleman* (1991). His final play was *Déjàvu* (1992) (literally, 'seen before', or the familiar in a new garb), a sequel to *Look Back in Anger*.

The three plays chosen for critical study are *Look Back in Anger* (1956), *The Entertainer* (1957) and *Luther* (1961) These plays have a misfit as their central character. The relationship of the protagonist with the people and the situations around him is complex in these plays. The protagonists of these plays, Jimmy Porter of *Look Back in Anger*, Archie Rice of *The Entertainer* and Martin Luther of *Luther* are personifications of the era and milieu in which they lived and as much the victims of it. They resist and struggle against the milieu which is stiflingly hostile. They suffer from troubled psychic states and display uninhibited emotions. Jimmy is frustrated and at times even disillusioned at the post-war scenario. Archie Rice is cynical and is miserable seeing the decadence

of music hall tradition in the Suez year whereas Luther is indignant and lashes out at the sixteenth century evils of Christianity. They stir up our demand for more concern, more response, more clarity and more purity in thoughts, words and deeds.

These three plays have a very articulate and ego-centric hero who occupies the centre of the stage for most of the time and so also the minds of the people with his lengthy monologues. Their effervescence is all Pervasive. They offer stiff emotional opposition to everything that is contemporary. Hence, they are 'Protest Plays'. Their personal convictions, life style and cherished value system are at loggerheads with the deficiencies of the world around them. They are narcissistic, non-conformists and resist adaptability. They may not be revolutionaries but certainly are good rebels. They are rebellious deviants.

They might not have achieved their desired ends; Jimmy merely deludes himself into the world of fantasy with his wife, playing the game of bears and squirrels, Archie Rice leaves the centre stage of the music hall along with his wife Phoebe saying that he is gone, finished and 'dead behind eyes', Luther is seen cuddling his child and relishing the delicacies of marital life with his wife Katherine Von Bora, far away from his hitherto rigours of monastic life, politics and the ills associated with Christianity, but all of them stimulate our conscience and create a deeper level of awareness that all was not proper with the milieu enveloping them, akin to the awareness created by the observation of Hamlet that 'something is rotten in the State of Denmark'.

In her *The Early Plays of John Osborne*, Meenal Agrawal, says with reference to these plays, "Osborne, anyway, is the first of the new playwrights to use creatively the language of anger and frustration in current speech habits and to project the new spirit before the theatre going of personal idealism in collision with institutional dogmas." The 'Self' and the 'Society' in these three plays are in stark opposition to each other but despite that they impact on each other and are inextricable.

Osborne was influenced by Oscar Wilde, Bernard Shaw, D.H.Lawrence, Jean Anouilh and the American playwrights, Tennessee Williams and Van Moody. He remains an iconic figure as much a cultural symbol of the 1950s. His AYM (Angry Young Man) became a potent metaphor for youth.

I have used the following editions for the three plays I have intensively worked on:

1. Osborne, John. *Look Back in Anger* (1956; New Delhi: Oxford University Press, Faber and Faber Ltd., 1992).
2. Osborne, John. *The Entertainer* (1957; London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1957).
3. Osborne, John. *Luther* (1961; London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1961).