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**SEX AND VIOLENCE
IN THE PLAYS OF
JOE ORTON
A GAY PERSPECTIVE**

by

Ian WILLIAMS

Thesis for Master's Degree in English Literature

Massey University, Palmerston North, 1993

Supervisor: Dr John Dawick

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INTRODUCTION

I bring my own biases into this thesis. As a man who has also had sex in toilets with other men, as Orton frequently did, I cannot help drawing on my own experiences and the feelings these generated.

These are mostly to do with guilt and shame but, unlike Orton, I did not take drugs prior to the encounters so I was fully aware of what was going on for me.

Eventually I became aware of *why* I was doing what I was doing and stopped. I discovered that for me, sex on a casual basis was not an empowering process, although being human it happens occasionally, and when it does I try to stop those condemning voices in my head.

I also began this thesis believing that since I could write fairly wittily, I was a similar sort of character to Orton. But the more I read, the more I realised that I was closer to his partner, Halliwell, in terms of my personality and behaviour, and certainly in terms of being in touch with my sexuality. Whatever one thinks of the *form* Orton's sexual expression took, one has to admire his single minded and seemingly confident pursuit of it, a far cry from the timid insecurity of his partner, on whose behalf, Orton was always trying to make sexual contacts. But Halliwell wanted only Orton, which was a dilemma that only death could solve.

But I do identify with Orton's upbringing in a working class, mother dominated environment. My mother was not a powerful, sometimes violent matriarch like Orton's mother, Elsie; mine wielded her power by adopting a different kind of persona. But like Orton, I was my mother's husband substitute, fulfilling her emotional and to some extent her sexual needs.

I believe it is this aspect of Orton's life which sowed the seeds for the sex and violence in his plays, and which this thesis will be discussing. It also sowed the seeds for his genius and unique contribution to the theatre and English literature. For without Elsie Orton, and the dynamics that existed in the Orton family, there would be no Kath Kemp, "in the rude," practically raping her young lodger, Sloane. No Joyce, more upset about her dead goldfish than the young man who has just died on her floor. No Mrs Vealfoy, disseminating advice on sex and parenthood, not from her own experiences, but from some manual of the mind. No Nurse Fay, murderer of eight patients and prepared to sacrifice everything for money. No Mrs Prentice, screwed by her son in a dark closet. No dead woman's fingers in biscuit tins. No monstrous fun at the expense of an audience that often bayed for Orton's blood, while happily making him rich in the process.

How did this unique talent end up dead with his head smashed in? Probably because he swapped one controlling mother figure for another. The archetypal monstrous mum

may well manifest itself in the figure of certain homosexual men. Why not? Such men are obviously cross gendered.

Halliwell was described thus: "He had visions of grandeur. He was always so selfish and preoccupied about himself. Constant talking of self, ego, ambition. He was a great egotist," writes John Lahr, Orton's biographer, quoting a fellow student of Halliwell's at RADA. (*Diaries*, 25) Lahr also quotes G.K. Chesterton on the artistic temperament, the disease that effects amateurs. "The great tragedy of the artistic temperament is that it cannot produce any art," wrote Chesterton. (*Diaries*, 25).

That statement sent a prickle of fear up my spine, as I remembered the times I had given vent to my "artistic temperament." Was I too a poseur? My outbursts of anger sometimes took on the aspects of the rage that Halliwell manifested towards others and his partner. And like Halliwell, at times I was dependent and had few friends.

Such a personality lives in a world of make-believe, putting on varying false fronts to cope with varying situations. The persona that would have sustained Halliwell most would have been that of teacher and older, wealthier friend of a lad from the provinces. Consequently, it would have been a terrible blow to Halliwell's pride when his pupil, Orton, became the

successful writer and celebrity, and then began to build a life which largely excluded him.

But we are all products of our genes, upbringing and environment, and what is clear is that both Orton and Halliwell were shaped by their warped childhood and adolescent experiences which, in Orton's case produced genius, and in Halliwell's produced an individual who was unable to function alone in the world. Letting go of one's only friend and companion of sixteen years would have been almost an impossibility. He must have often thought of the loneliness of such an option and decided that life without Orton would be too painful to contemplate.

So while condemning him, I understand, Projecting one's anger against the world onto those we love is a common practice amongst abused and damaged individuals. It is just a pity that Halliwell never knew what he was doing.

However, Orton lives on in his diaries, plays and photographs, forever thirty-four, his last play, *What the Butler Saw*, forever a flawed masterpiece awaiting a critical rewrite.

We can imagine him bent over the typewriter in his bed-sit in Noel Road, Islington, checking himself over in a mirror prior to an excursion to the gent's toilets, or romping on the beaches of Tangier with teenaged

Moroccan boys. I might even have passed him on the street one day, because during the 1950's I too lived in London, and often used buses and underground stations mentioned in his diaries.

Now I pass by him once again; and with the experience, hopefully learn something of his literature and life.

THE BOY WITH BEADS

You'd drop in on your way home - once a month, something like that, a slender, dapper man, dark hair sleeked back, black shoes polished. You could almost have been a jockey, but you were a draper, saddled with German in-laws, and now and then you'd escape to your sister's, my mum's.

Before calling you'd visit a west-end club where girls wearing beads dance close to the customers. Did you ever go back stage when they asked? A good way to forget Gerda, Fritz, or whatever their names were. Sitting in our front room dropping crumbs of your night into my lap,

Thick blood stirred in my young pants and shame rushed to my head. Didn't you know your sister was German too? And sex was not a subject she talked about, except with me. I was her boy with beads, turning her naked body under the light, she danced especially for me.

Ian Williams