

JOHN OSBORNE



For a full decade from the mid-fifties to the mid-sixties,

John Osborne was—thanks to *Look Back In Anger*, *The Entertainer*, *Luther*, *Inadmissible Evidence* and *A Patriot For Me*—unquestionably the most important dramatist in Britain. He wrote films, too. In April 1964 he picked up an the Academy Award for his adaptation of Joseph Fielding’s 18th century novel *Tom Jones*, the Woodfall production which also won the Oscar for Best Picture. The following month *Luther* was named Best Play at the Tony awards in New York, cementing Osborne’s status as a truly international eminence, one whose radical voice had revitalised theatre and cinema alike.

But while Tony Richardson’s 1956 production of *Look Back In Anger* at the Royal Court Theatre in London—performed under the risk-embracing artistic supervision of George Devine at the English Stage Company—is now seen as an overnight sensation, the play actually took a little while to catch on.

BORN: FULHAM, LONDON,
12TH DECEMBER 1929

DIED: CLUN, SHROPSHIRE, 2
4TH DECEMBER 1994

Written in just over a fortnight while Osborne—at the time a struggling actor—lollid in deckchair on Morecambe pier (this would eventually become the fading provincial backdrop for his most formally daring work, *The Entertainer*), the autobiographical piece about the travails of a young couple in Derby initially found very little favour when submitted to London agents.

In an era dominated by the genteel likes of Terence Rattigan, all were very wary of the way Osborne so unapologetically brought “ordinary” provincial lives as his sole, unsparing focus. The opening night was tepidly received, the first reviews decidedly variable. But then a couple of days later *The Observer’s* hugely influential Kenneth Tynan delivered his verdict: “I could not love anyone who did not wish to see *Look Back In Anger*. It is the best young play of its decade.” The drama duly became a word-of-mouth sensation, a huge hit in the West End and later on Broadway, propelling 26-year-old Osborne to the status of a cultural superstar.

The success of the play inevitably led to talk of a film version. Osborne’s lawyer, the legendarily flamboyant Oscar Beuselink (father of actor Paul Nicholas), advised his client that the best means of bringing this about was by creating a new company, thus ensuring all legal Ts were crossed and Is dotted. Osborne at the time resided on Woodfall Street in Chelsea, a short cul-de-sac between Wellington Square and Burton Court, and it was during a meeting at

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this property that Richardson spotted the street-sign... and Woodfall Films was born. At first the company was a partnership between Richardson, producer Harry Saltzman and Osborne, although the latter's direct involvement effectively ended with its 1968 version of *Inadmissible Evidence*.

Osborne would nevertheless retain a prominent position in the public eye, at least in Britain, for the following decades until his untimely death aged 65. As another doyen of UK theatre-criticism Michael Billington wrote at the time, "Osborne was a congenital outsider: a truculent individualist with a gift for lacerating invective and with little time for political parties or handed-down truths. I always saw him as a somewhat Byronic figure, viewing the passing world with satirical disdain."

Osborne's reputation as a playwright oscillated through the 1970s—when, temporarily returning to his thespian roots, he popped up as a silky, self-amused gangland kingpin Cyril Kinnear, Machiavellian villain of Mike Hodges' enduringly popular *Get Carter*)—and the 1980s. Indeed, in the second half of his long career he received his warmest notices for two best-selling volumes of magnificently uncompromising autobiography—*A Better Class of Person* (1981) and *Almost a Gentleman* (1991)—in which surveys himself, his (five) wives and lovers, and his long-suffering family with a bracingly cruel, enormously witty and entertainingly illuminating eye.

As those superlative memoirs' titles indicate, class was—as with so many Britons of the 20th century—a continual preoccupation. His father worked in advertising and as a commercial artist; his mother, a born-and-bred Cockney, was a barmaid. The couple were never, it seems, close. As Alan Bennett observes in his review of *A Better Class of Person*, Osborne's mother Nellie "changed her job (and their accommodation) so often — thirty or forty times during the first seventeen years of the boy's life. Flitting flats, changing schools: Osborne's life was like a rep long before he became an actor."

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They moved to suburban Surrey in 1935, a stultifying environment for a bright, only child who was often afflicted by rheumatic fevers. After the father's traumatic death from pulmonary tuberculosis in 1941, an insurance settlement proved sufficient to enrol Osborne at Belmont College, a private boarding-school in Devon. He departed under a cloud: as Osborne tells it in his memoir, the headmaster caught him listening to Frank Sinatra on the "wireless" and administered summary corporal punishment; Osborne hit him back and was expelled for his pains.

Anti-authoritarian (*the Guardian* obituary dubbed him "a natural dissenter") and restless by nature, Osborne tried his hand at journalism (including *Gas World*) before finding his niche in 1948 as an assistant stage manager in travelling repertory theatre. He toured the country with old-school melodrama *No Room at the Inn* for an eleven-month stint, learning the ropes, meeting his first wife and settling with her for the spell in Derby which would later inspire *Look Back In Anger*.

According to theatrical lore, it was back-stage at Sunderland's cavernous Empire Theatre, during performances of *No Room at the Inn*, that Osborne started work on what would become his first performed play, *The Devil Inside Him* – although it would receive only a tiny handful of productions in the 1950s and 1960s and little acclaim. The title, however, could scarcely be a better fit for Osborne himself: an instinctive, mould-shattering iconoclast of diabolical daring and suavely satanic charisma.