

RE-INTERPRETING OSBORNE

MARTA WISZNIOWSKA

University of Silesia, Katowice

It has been over twenty years since John Osborne was hailed as an initiator of powerful themes in the theatre and a headfigure of a new movement. Since then Osborne has produced at least a dozen plays with varying degree of success, as his critics and reviewers maintain.

To-date heated discussions over Osborne are very much the thing of the past. The documentary value of *Look back in anger* has given way to historical appraisal. The shock over *A patriot for me* is long forgotten, too. Yet Osborne is a living and active playwright and not a monument of the not very remote past. The chief aim of this essay is to find out to what extent Osborne's dramaturgy is truly contemporary. The updatedness of such recent plays as *West of Suez* (1971) or *Sense of detachment* (1972) has established itself beyond doubt. So these plays are excluded from my study. Instead I propose to go back to the first decade of Osborne's dramaturgy in order to re-examine such plays as: *Look back in anger* (1956), *The entertainer* (1957), *A subject of scandal and concern* (1960), *Inadmissible evidence* (1964), *A patriot for me* (1965). The exclusion of *Epitaph for George Dillon*, *The world of Paul Slickey*, and *Plays for England* is due to their repetitiousness in comparison to the former plays. *Time present* and *Hotel in Amsterdam* (1968) are to my mind too commercial to be experimental and too old-fashioned, though they do possess certain qualities later developed in *West of Suez*. It is generally believed that the plays excluded are inferior to those I plan to deal with.

Some milestones in Osborne's criticism became almost as famous as the plays, to mention only Kenneth Tynan (in Taylor 1968). Critics tended to pick up various aspects of Osborne's writing. Thus Taborski (1967) remains descriptive and vaguely social, Kennedy (1975) deals with the language, which he finds novel but limited, and the form — that he finds old and naturalistic. Wellwarth (1972) is overtly critical of his plays, seeing in Osborne a victim of

his own critical popularity and suggesting that he tried to write as was expected of him. John R. Taylor (1969) gave a well balanced account of Osborne, hinting at the importance of character drawing. Characters are also the main concern of M. Anderson's essay on Osborne in his recently published *Anger and detachment* (1976). J. R. Brown (1972) and A. P. Hinchliffe (1972) concentrate on theatrical techniques used by Osborne.

In retrospect the socio-historical critics tend to sound unconvincing. It would be easy to push their 'home truths' to the limit of credulity, only to find out that they have lost their disturbing quality. Criticism that concentrates on such topics as the new intelligentsia and their rage over the middle class, the fates of provincial university graduates, man, wife, and a lover entanglements, sounds obsolete and does but ill justice to the plays under discussion. Nothing is very much wrong in regarding Osborne as a chief figure of the Angry 50's. Yet the relations between life and drama which used to stir up emotions can no longer do so with modern audiences. To stick solely to this approach means to limit one's experience and impoverish the appeal the plays can make. It also means that such plays as *A patriot for me* or *Luther* remain unsolved puzzles (Taylor 1969).

Stylistic approach to Osborne fares better with us nowadays. Such critics as J. R. Brown (1972), A. W. Kennedy (1975), M. Anderson (1976) practise 'close reading' in order to get more meaning out of Osborne. They compliment him on character drawing, the effectiveness of his monologue and the exceptional feeling for words.

All these recorded are valid interpretations, the only fault lying in the fact that they tend to leave unexplained considerable parts of the plays. This leads to a curious lack of balance in which the forcefulness of the language overshadows the characters, and verbal persuasiveness obliterates the basic truth that drama is a result of the interplay of numerous elements. Plays are what they are — this seems of capital importance put forward in Carter's study of Osborne (1974).

A newer trend in Osborne's criticism tends to focus on characters. From casual remarks of Dyson's (1968) on the tormenting and tormented in *Look back in anger*, or on Jimmy Porter's psychotic state (Wellwarth 1972:256), to calling the characters unable to cope but not wanting to give up (hence anger — Taborski, Carter). A full study of characters is presented by M. Anderson (1976) and A. Carter (1974). It is their criticism I am willing to accept as a starting point in my examination of Osborne.

In the huge amount of Osborne's criticism there are, however, some points I am most unwilling to accept. There is almost a conspiracy among the critics to condemn Osborne on the grounds of his plays lacking a consistent style, to castigate certain technicalities from the stand of a well made play. The objection here lies not in the apparently conservative taste of the critics but in their

ignoring the WHOLENESS of theatrical experience — including the idiosyncrasies of Osborne's plays. Easy labelling does more harm than good. Calling the plays 'social' and 'well made' is not enough.

Social hints often appear to the critics under the guise of Brechtian techniques. Osborne is believed to have borrowed from Brecht, but never to the success of his plays. Brechtian devices are as follows: the narrator, the cinematic technique, singling out one character at the expense of others, empolying stage directions to provide verisimilitude, exploring a wide variety of human doings which lack universal applications. J. R. Taylor (1969:54) adds that Brechtian techniques have been used without Brechtian purposes. Still it seems that for some critics 'Brechtian' invariably connotes with 'social'.

Even if Osborne employs the same techniques as the German playwright their relations with other elements in his plays differ. Thus the outcome is never identical nor even similar. The quasi-Brechtian techniques do not enter into typically Brechtian relations in the plays. The illusion of the social content is heightened by the combination of the above-mentioned Brechtian components with ordinary surroundings, equally ordinary language, spiced with four-letter words, which create some semblance of mundane realism with social undertones.

Giving priority to such an interpretation comes naturally if one is lured by Osborne's gift of tongue. Numerous quotations could strengthen my point here:

Jimmy: There aren't any good, brave causes left (*Look back in anger*: 84).

Holyoake: I have injured no man's reputation, taken no man's property, attacked no man's person, violated no oath, taught no immorality. I was asked a question and answered it openly. I should feel myself degraded if I descended to finding out if my convictions suited every anonymous man in the audience before I uttered them. What is the morality of law which prohibits the free publication of an opinion? (*A subject of scandal and concern*: 31)

Billy: ...no use leaving it to the Government for them to hand out a lot of bleeders who haven't got the gumption to do anything for themselves (*Entertainer*: 21).

To my mind, the most overtly critical message to be recalled is contained in the final speech of the narrator in *A subject of scandal and concern*:

Narrator: If you are waiting for the commercial, it is probably this: you cannot live by bread alone. You must have jam — even if it is mixed with another man's blood.

....

That's all. You may retire now. And if a mini-car is your particular mini-dream, then dream it. When your turn comes you will be called. Good night (*A subject...*: 46—7).

However critical of affluent society this comment may sound, it gives more to think of than sneering at affluence. The danger of paying undue attention to quotations was also acknowledged by J. R. Brown (1972:140).

There are also a few elements in the plays which cannot be called social. One of them is the presentation of characters. The sympathies are weird here. In *Look back in anger*, Alison's father, a much ridiculed monument of Edwardian England, is treated sympathetically (Anderson 1976:29—30) though it looks as if he should not. More nostalgia for the past appears in *The entertainer* (1957: 60—1):

But if we all stand
By this dear old land
The battle will be won.

These lines are accompanied by the appearance of a nude Britannia. The whole play is full of this somewhat outdated patriotism. It is not pure sentimentalism. Sympathy is applied quite openly on Billy Rice (Anderson 1976:29—30). The nude Britannia provides a note of sentiment over the past and also symbolizes the liberties which music hall can take.

The world of the plays is not a sole presentation of social causes, there are too many facets which can hardly cohere as a slice of life. The plots refer to no social goals. Life and strife point to nothing specific in terms of social commentary. The opening scene of *A patriot for me* offers nothing by way of such comment, but it infallibly establishes our sympathies with the protagonist. Seemingly endless scenes in *Inadmissible evidence* aim at establishing the inner reality of the protagonist. Social drama proper never bothered to depict characters, to mention Galsworthy, Shaw, Wesker, Storey. The predominance of character is Osborne's original dramatic formula. Characters dominate over the plot, though M. Anderson pointed to the inter-relations between the two concepts (Anderson 1976:5—6).

The plays invariably depict the weird reality of social misfits. I would grant Osborne priority in taking up social freaks as protagonists. Osborne's dramatis personae fail in a number of ways, by being homosexuals, incestuous, failing as fathers, lovers, sons, etc. In majority they appear unable to cope. Maitland fails as husband, father, lover. He is no good as a boss or lawyer. Similar catalogues of vices can be laid out for other characters. And they are created to dwell alienated from others, family, friends, supervisors and opponents.

As M. Anderson observed (1976: 47—8), his characters are public men, actors or writers. A lawyer and a priest, to my mind, fall into the same category of public figures. Anderson, however, seems to have overlooked one common feature in Osborne's character drawing. If they are designed to be public figures they surely should have the least difficulty in communicating with others. By virtue of their respective professions, the ability to express themselves in words should be inherent to them. All professions mentioned above include very frequent contacts with other people and a necessity to use words

in order to say what they mean. Yet it seems to be their common flaw, that for all their presumed professional training they cannot do so. The nature of that flaw and the intensity with which it appears in respective characters differs from one another. Jimmy jeopardizes his marriage. Bill Maitland fails professionally by being unable to help his clients. He fails to come to terms with his wife, his permanent mistress and his occasional one. Yet the most poignant scene of all is the episode with his daughter, who by keeping silent makes him aware of the meaninglessness of his babbling (*Inadmissible evidence*: 102—107).

In consequence of this technique there is a distinct counter-labelling of characters. Thus Archie cannot make his audience laugh any more, nor can he be taken seriously by his family. Characters are not what they appear to be. Or even designed to be. No other term is appropriate here but the mastery of character drawing. Osborne escapes the danger of peopling his plays with stock characters. On the contrary, everything seems to be done to shake our confidence that we can predict what the characters are going to be like if we have some insight into their milieu and professional trappings.

Combining the alienation with the stand of a public figure brings to my mind the plays of John Whiting, one of the predecessors of contemporary theatre.

Fragmentation of the world is yet another element of the plays. Moving from place to place is conducted through a series of non-conclusive scenes. Maitland's talks to his clients are painfully non-conclusive for those who seek his help. Martin Luther cannot be reconciled with the authority, no matter what amount of persuasion goes into it. The weakness of the authority is shown through a series of open-ended encounters with (or concerning) the protagonist. In *A patriot for me*, a mad run from place to place serves to single out Redl as a lonely figure heading towards destruction. The tragic irony of the wheel of fortune emerges through the sequence of encounters with officials, spies and homosexuals. The arrangement of places and people point to the upward movement of the protagonist, while some hints and machinations point to the opposite motion being already in progress. Outwardly Redl goes up in the official hierarchy. He gains money, confidence and position. Apparently his homosexual inclinations do not harm his career in the army. The undercurrent of episodes hinted at first is vaguely suggestive of the changing fortunes of the protagonist. Finally, the situation resolves itself according to the pattern of which we had been made aware already.

Sometimes a variation is introduced concerning the nature of the flaw within the character. Luther's is made embarrassing. Redl's used to be so, especially in the eyes of Lord Chamberlain, before censorship was abolished in 1968. Whatever the motivation behind the particular drawback, it is hardly

possible to get rid of it. Luther and Redl try to cope with theirs. In other characters the will to cope seems much weaker. Archie Rice in *The entertainer*, Wyatt Gilman in *West of Suez* do not seem to try very hard to overcome their inner difficulties. They go to pieces and so does their world. The audience watches them through a number of scenes in which their failure becomes more and more real.

The plays convey the image of a private and public world of the characters, with the first coming into the limelight. The public world, however, was the one in which we may hope to find some evidence of social interest. Osborne's critics unanimously agree that there were too many targets to make his plays effective as criticism. Too many blows were administered at random, which minimizes their presupposed effectiveness (Anderson 1976:33—4). One can easily admit that no social evil had been exposed sufficiently by Osborne's attacks. The dénouement of *Look back in anger*, where the individuals withdraw into their private world of bears and squirrels, can be interpreted as a resignation from the public world in favour of the private one.

All characters had been engaged in an agonizing fight with some code they refuse to accept. Luther and Holyoake defy religion, Redl — heterosexuality, Maitland — accepted morality, Jimmy and Archie defy 'it all'. Their attitude brings about further alienation which tends to spread until the sense of bleakness and defeat prevails:

Archie: I suppose you've never sat lonely and half slewed in some bar among strangers a thousand miles from anything you understand... (*The entertainer*:71).

Jimmy: Was I really wrong to believe that there's a kind of — burning virility of mind and spirit that looks for something as powerful as itself? The heaviest, strongest creatures in this world seem to be the loneliest. Like the old bear, following his own breath in the dark forest. There's no warm pack, no herd to comfort him. That voice that cries out doesn't have to be a weakling's, does it? (*Look back in anger*: 94).

Loneliness, the failure to understand the world around them, seems to be the fate of these characters. They are amazed at the circumstances they are confronted with. Maitland finds it profoundly disturbing to realize that taxis fail to stop at his waving:

Bill: I couldn't get a taxi. That's the first time I've never got one. All got their bloody lights on and all going home. I don't know what they're doing (*Inadmissible evidence*: 21).

In *Inadmissible evidence* and *The entertainer* the most was made of the cinematic technique of putting the protagonist against always changing, flickery scenes. This confuses them even more. Doomed to final failure, the characters suffer more when brought together with other people. The quality of inflicting pain is evident in the fates of Holyoake, Luther, Jimmy and Archie. They

cause pain but they also suffer. The plays end up with defeat which can be occasionally as final as death itself. Though death always carries an element of release (Brown 1972:153), yet the critic maintains that death was never popular with Osborne as a means of resolving conflicts. On the contrary, some affirmation emerges from the plays.

Concluding, I would like to speak in favour of an enlarged view on Osborne, enlarged with the theme of loneliness and defeat, with well developed characters, and with a presentation of the complex world in which they dwell. On examination, the plays reveal at least two elements of Osborne's technique: they present characters that are complex and individual. They are built according to a recurrent principle of making use of their profession and anti-professional features. Another element is a neatly structured plot which is closely linked with the fortunes of the characters. Structural elements in the plays go beyond the mere well-made play technique in variety and complexity.

TEXTS

- Osborne, J. 1956. *Look back in anger*
 ,, 1957. *The entertainer*
 ,, 1961. *Luther*
 ,, 1961. *A subject of scandal and concern*
 ,, 1965. *Inadmissible evidence*
 ,, 1966. *A patriot for me*
 ,, 1971. *West of Suez*

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