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## THEATRE

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### Grousters, Male & Female

By John Weightman

MR. OSBORNE informed me last year that I should stay away from the theatre. He has, moreover, said such violent things about critics that when one sneaks in to see a play by him nowadays, one hardly dares confess to oneself what one thinks about it, still less air one's views in the public prints. Supposing one does not worship every word! What if one has *Reservations* or has *Not Understood*? One should, I imagine, just crawl under a stone and die. But how can one, if there is still a flicker of life in the old carcase? The theatre exists for people to go to. Once inside, they have certain experiences. It stands to reason that they might feel an urge to define those experiences in words, and if some editor is prepared to publish the words, should one deny oneself the pleasure of communication? Without being an Osborne hero, one may have an itch to talk. So, damn it all, here goes.

*Time Present* and *The Hotel in Amsterdam* constitute what some French research student will eventually call *un diptyque osbornien*. They are parallel treatments, in the feminine and the masculine, of the fundamental Osborne character—the paranoiac complainer, the bear with a sore head, the self-dramatising misfit, the irritable soul who refuses to find life tolerable. John Osborne became famous because, in *Look Back In Anger*, the grumbles of this character corresponded, as it turned out, to the inarticulate resentment of a whole generation. Even in those distant days I was too old fully to sympathise, because post-Second War England seemed to me to be so much better than the England of my childhood that I couldn't quite understand what such bitter resentment was about. However, I eventually grasped the point that each new generation has to be contemptuous and dissatisfied in its own way, and that Mr. Osborne was, in some measure, the voice of youth. Since then, the years have passed; Mr. Osborne's characters have gone on grumbling; they have risen in the social scale; no more talk about sweet-stalls, or ironing, or "the posh Sunday papers"; the discussion now refers to the acceptable brands of champagne, the virtues of expensive clothes as against cheap, the quality of Cutty Sark as opposed to Haig, the servant problem, the dreariness of the working-class, the psychological effect of having one's birthday mentioned (or not mentioned) in the *Times*, the awfulness of modern youth, and so

on. In so far as Mr. Osborne's central characters represent his own views—and they appear to do so to quite a large extent, if one compares the tone of the plays with that of the recent interviews published in the *Observer*—they now represent the voice of dissatisfied, self-hating, self-pitying middle-age.

I AM NOT SUGGESTING that this is necessarily a bad thing or that Mr. Osborne has changed sides as he has grown older. Playwrights are not required to be well-balanced, fair-minded people capable of acting in their spare time as justices of the peace. It is Mr. Osborne's strength that he has the courage of his grumbles. He is not the sort of author who writes to be successful and then is reconciled to society once he has got on. He is a genuine neurotic who will never be appeased by external applause and will always insult his audience rather than pander to it. If he happens to look rather like a young Colonel Blimp on the Royal Court posters and to sound rather like an old Colonel Blimp at times in the press, this is because, for the moment, he has honestly espoused Blimpish values. In any case, he never had a Left-Wing attitude, not even in *Look Back In Anger*, where the strongest positive emotion, as I remember, was a vague nostalgia for some lost gentlemanly society. The political content of the play, such as it was, like the reference to Suez in *The Entertainer*, arose from a desire to be *against*. Had the Colonel, who is presented so sympathetically at the end of *Look Back In Anger*, been brought into *The Entertainer*, one would not have been surprised to see him take the Right-Wing line about Suez. Mr. Osborne has never had any obvious political principles, nor indeed any organised general philosophy. He thinks and feels in lumps, like most artists, and the problem is: what pattern is he putting the lumps into and does it produce a satisfactory aesthetic effect on the spectator's mind, independently of such ideas as happen to be present?

IN THESE TWO PLAYS one can discern a common structure. In each case there is a central loquacious character—a resting actress in *Time Present*, a film-writer in *The Hotel in Amsterdam*—who grouses about life in general to a little court of admirers. Both characters have a Best Friend, who defers to them, says how splendid they are, fields for them, puts up with them and is a shade homosexual in his or her emotional attachment. In the case of the actress, Pamela, this is the Labour M.P., whose flat she is temporarily sharing; in that of the film-writer, Laurie, a film-editor working for the same tycoon. The grouser plus best friend was, of course, part of the original pattern in *Look Back In Anger*. A feature found in both

new plays is that the central character not only subjugates the Best Friend, but also wins the love of the Best Friend's official partner. Pamela has an affair with the Labour M.P.'s lover, and accidentally becomes pregnant. When Laurie confesses to his Best Friend's wife that he loves her, she proclaims her love in return. This device is clearly intended to add lustre to Pamela and Laurie; in spite of being difficult, edgy characters, they have that irresistible something which attracts other people, like moths to a flame. Where they are, other people become subordinate. Even so, curiously enough, the action in both plays is dominated by an absent character, operating mainly through Pamela and Laurie.

In *Time Present*, this is Pamela's father, a distinguished actor-manager who is dying in hospital and whose death-throes supposedly create the crisis behind the play. In *The Hotel in Amsterdam*, it is the tycoon, K.L., a tyrannical, scheming blood-sucker from whom the group of friends have escaped to spend a week-end in secret in Amsterdam. Incidentally, although I know nothing of the film-world, I find this tycoon-figure difficult to believe in, especially in the English context. Are English film people such wee, cowering, timorous beasties that they have to run off to Holland to escape psychological invasion by their boss? I suspect that this is again a dramatic device. Although Mr. Osborne's central characters are monuments of egotism and without any meta-physical interest that would serve as God or an Ideal, they need the relief of anchoring themselves to some loved or hated object. For Pamela, her father is a sort of God; he had style, artistry, greatness, and when he dies the light goes out of her life. She rejects the lover and goes off bravely to have an abortion and face the future on her own. K.L., on the other hand, is a Devil, whom Laurie and his cronies discuss at length with horrified fascination. At the end, the news comes through that K.L. has committed suicide; the tyrant was, presumably, a great big sentimental boob who really wanted to be loved and couldn't last out the week-end when he found that his slaves had given him the slip. The friends are left contemplating blankness; they have lost their Devil who gave a sort of negative interest to life.

BOTH PLAYS, I THINK, are meant to be rather more than dramas; they are tragedies that go off at half-cock. They cannot be true tragedies because the fate of the protagonists is not shown in any general light, in relation to life as a whole. Pamela and Laurie grumble endlessly about existence but do not see far enough beyond themselves to have what would amount to a destiny. Both centre their interest on the absent human being who has to act as an absolute: the actor-manager who represents style, which is bound up with the right brand of

champagne and a careless disdain for ordinary, humdrum living; the tycoon, K.L., who represents an extreme of hatred, the end of the grumbler's spectrum. Mr. Osborne takes care to surround Pamela and Laurie with admiration and is obviously implying that, although failures in one sense, they are superior beings in another. Neither, in fact, can bear the intellectual or human strain of this honour, because their only stock-in-trade is their formless dissatisfaction. Pamela is not much more than a rather pretentious person with a father-fixation, while Laurie, if he were as remarkable a man as Mr. Osborne keeps suggesting, would find something more general to attach his life to than his hatred for K.L. In my view, neither character is superior; they are both life-like bores, but whereas Pamela is on the whole a boring bore, Laurie is an interesting one.

This is to say that, in spite of the similarities of structure, the two halves of Mr. Osborne's diptych are very different in aesthetic quality. Not only has *Time Present* some obvious technical defects, such as a long and dreary exposition and a character who is brought in at the end to say hail and farewell, unhappily, in one breath; no one in the play, apart from Pamela, rings true, and the trouble with Pamela, in spite of the enormous skill and presence that Miss Jill Bennett brings to bear on the part, is that her truth is shoddy. Why should we be interested in her flatly stated opinions about spotty youths or the futility of politics? She is the sort of random, not very penetrating person we would find tedious in real life, and Mr. Osborne gives her tediousness no extra dimension on the stage. I have never heard the seats at the Royal Court creak so loudly as they did during *Time Present*, while the audience shifted uneasily under the dull spate of words.

*The Hotel in Amsterdam*, on the contrary, is excellently constructed. The six characters, shut in the hotel room and filling the vacancy with deliberate chat, create a nice little *Huis Clos*, which is variegated in the usual way by the arrival of waiters and an unexpected and excruciating visit. The quality of a certain type of group friendship, with its pecking order and its currents of unease and sexual ambiguity, is quite delicately rendered. And above all, the central loud-mouth sees himself up to a point as a figure of fun. He builds up his complaints with fanciful abandon, as if he knew that to bitch about everything on the assumption that other people are always to blame is just a way of letting off steam, because one is oneself a grumbling, uncertain, whisky-dependent little boy of dubious sexuality, who finds the world too awful to grow up in. The part, with its pathos and great streaks of vulgarity, is so written that Paul Scofield can take it with both hands and, in spite of some *longueurs*, turn it into a memorable experience.

## Clio on the Couch

*Prolegomena to Psycho-history — By BRUCE MAZLISH*

SOME BOOKS, by their very success, illuminate the end of a road. Such a book is Victor Wolfenstein's *The Revolutionary Personality*.<sup>1</sup> It is the best exemplification of Harold Lasswell's famous dictum—political men displace their private motives on to public objects—enunciated over thirty years ago in *Psychopathology and Politics*, that we are likely to have for a long time. Its analyses of Lenin, Trotsky, and Gandhi are very Freudian, and very good—much, much better than the Freud-Bullitt analysis of Wilson that has occasioned so much recent comment. Yet, its successes (unlike the Freud-Bullitt fiasco) cast into bold and useful relief the failures and limitations of the orthodox Freudian-Lasswellian approach, an approach that has hitherto dominated so much of the work in the area of history, political science, and psycho-analysis. Rather, however, than reading this as a pointer to despair, I would emphasise the book's positive value in directing our attention to other possibilities in the emerging field of psycho-historical inquiry.

Let me consider Wolfenstein's book first, on its own merits. His primary aim is "to generate a set of useful psycho-political propositions about revolutionary involvement and leadership." This takes the form of an effort to work out the model of a "revolutionary personality." The basic psychological inspiration is Freud (mediated through Wolfenstein's distinguished aunt, Dr. Martha Wolfenstein, which gives an authenticity and professional insight to the analyses missing from the work of less lucky social scientists). The application of Freud's findings to politics, he acknowledges to have been best done by Dr. Lasswell and Erik H. Erikson.

Wolfenstein's method is to develop his notion of a "revolutionary personality" from three life histories: Lenin, Trotsky, and Gandhi. Repeatedly, we are told that Wolfenstein is only erecting "hypotheses" on these case studies, which other empirical studies will confirm or disconfirm. Wolfenstein's hypotheses concerning the "revolutionary personality" are as follows. He is a man who "had an unusually ambivalent relationship with his father." Two more conditions, however, are necessary to turn him into a revolutionary: "The conflict with paternal authority must be alive and unresolvable in the family context as adolescence draws to a close" (i.e., the father has just died, or the son leaves the family); and "There must exist a political context in terms of which the conflict can be expressed." This last is made more specific by Wolfenstein's shrewd observation that the precipitant factor is when "established political authority acts with unexpected aggressiveness towards the potential revolutionist" (e.g., executing Lenin's brother, imprisoning Trotsky, etc.). As stated, this may sound like naive Freudianism. As worked out, I can assure the reader that it is most soberly and persuasively handled. (The problem of whether Wolfenstein is using a "fair sample" is, of course, another matter, to which I shall have to refer later.)

What of Erikson in all this? Wolfenstein does make substantial outward gestures to Erikson's theory of psycho-genetic development stages, trying to apply them to his three revolutionaries. At the end of this effort, Wolfenstein concludes that there are no common characteristics to be derived from Erikson for the model of a "revolutionary personality." We are left, then, with the shared conditions as stated earlier. And I, for one, find the spirit of Erikson's work almost entirely missing. I am not persuaded that Wolfenstein has made the Eriksonian interpretation, with its essential stress on the corres-

<sup>1</sup>E. Victor Wolfenstein, *The Revolutionary Personality: Lenin, Trotsky, Gandhi*. Princeton University Press, \$7.50 and 69s.