

# A Last Hurrah? Joe Orton's 'Until She Screams,' Oh! Calcutta! and the Permissive 1960s

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## **A Last Hurrah? Joe Orton's *Until She Screams, Oh! Calcutta!* And the Permissive 1960s.**

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In February 1967 Joe Orton submitted a sketch to Kenneth Tynan's erotic review *Oh! Calcutta!* Originally written in 1960 as *The Patient Dowager* and retitled *Until She Screams*, Orton would not live to see it performed in his lifetime, and it would not be until the show's London opening in July 1970 that audiences would get a chance to see this last 'new' work by Joe Orton.

Overlooked in existing studies on Orton, this article reassesses *Screams*, not only in terms of it being a precursor to some of the themes and ideas in *Entertaining Mr Sloane* (1964) and *Loot* (1966), but as an indicator for what a second redraft of Orton's final full-length play *What the Butler Saw* (1969) might have resembled, together with the style and tone of the next play he was planning, a historical farce provisionally entitled *Prick up Your Ears*. The article also assesses the extent to which Orton's sketch accommodated Tynan's aims for *Oh! Calcutta!* as being a celebration of sexual liberation at the end of the 1960s, and how far it subverted myths about the permissive society of the late 1960s that Orton did not live to see.

### **A Dedicited Follower of Fashion?**

Joe Orton's murder on 9 August 1967 came at a most inopportune moment: coinciding at the height of a summer that has since entered popular consciousness as the 'heady...unrepeatable [and irreducible]' (Aldgate et al 2000, 151) Summer of Love and the peak of what *Time* magazine has the previous had year dubbed 'swinging London', Orton was set on becoming one of its talismanic figures. On the morning his body was discovered Orton had been due to meet with film director Richard Lester to discuss his script of *Up Against It*, a project that had originally been mooted as a vehicle for The Beatles next film. Earlier that year Orton had also met Paul McCartney, where he heard a preview of the group's new double single, *Penny Lane* / *Strawberry Fields* and where he watched a television programme about 'the in crowd' and

‘swinging London’ (Lahr 1989, 74). Orton later completed this initiation by purchasing *Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* just over a month before he died (Lahr 1989, 230), and one of its songs, *A Day in the Life*, was played at his funeral (Lahr 1988, 336).

Orton’s death falls within the period Mark Donnelly has called the ‘high’ Sixties (Donnelly 2005, 13). Situated between 1964-7 and neatly coinciding with the trajectory of his playwriting career, Robert Hewison sees these three years as crucial in establishing the myths associated with that decade (Hewison 1986, xiii), using Arthur Marwick’s ‘long sixties’ as his chronological benchmark for the period. Starting around 1958 and ending between 1973 and 1974 (Marwick 1998, 7; Hewison, 1986, xiii), this period not only encompasses Orton’s early writing career (he first started writing around 1953), but provides an afterlife enabled by the posthumous 1969 production of *Butler*.

At the same time as completing what would be his final play, Orton had also submitted a sketch, written earlier, to Kenneth Tynan’s erotic revue *Oh! Calcutta!* that further extended his influence, right up to the boundary of Marwick’s ‘long sixties.’ This prolonged spectral reach also helps us understand why Orton’s death felt so premature at the time, in that it suddenly cut off any further influence he might carried in furthering the liberalization of sexual attitudes commonly associated with the later part of the 1960s.

### ***Oh! Calcutta! and Until She Screams***

Originally conceived in 1966 by Kenneth Tynan and Harold Pinter to be ‘elegantly but intensively sexy’ (Tynan, c.1967b), *Oh! Calcutta!* was originally meant to open in London, but owing to delays in legislation, theatre censorship in Britain was only finally abolished in September 1968. This, together with nagging concerns by West End producers over the threat of

prosecution for obscenity meant that *Oh! Calcutta!* opened off-Broadway on June 1969. Despite Tynan insisting to the show's American producer that it 'should retain its exotic British ingredients' (Tynan 1994, 436), Orton's sketch was not included in this production and had to wait until the following year when *Oh! Calcutta!* opened in London.<sup>1</sup>

Tynan had first started making overtures to potential contributors in late 1966 for 'reproductions of pet erotic fantasy...comments – ironic, satirical or what you will – on eroticism' (Tynan 1994, 371). Orton, not unsurprisingly was amongst the first to be approached, having already achieved a reputation for sexual frankness in *Sloane* and *Loot*. Orton was also amongst the first to submit a completed sketch, revising a short dramatic skit he had written in 1960 entitled *The Patient Dowager* (Charney 1984, 13; Lahr 1989, 90), renaming it *Until She Screams*.

*Screams*, according to Maurice Charney, is written in the style of a Restoration / Wildean comedy of manners (Charney 1984, 55). Set in the elegant Morning Room of Slane Abbey its inhabitants include the Dowager Lady Slane (Eliza); her niece Laura (Mrs Terrington); Laura's husband (Charles) and their daughter Lesbia. The sketch opens with aunt and niece discussing Lesbia's arrival home that morning in the early hours. Polite conversation quickly shifts to what John Lahr calls 'upstaging elegance with obscenity (Lahr 1986, 140), with Laura declaring that both her daughter and friend Myra Ticklesand 'are getting it too often' (Orton 1970, 51). To this, her venerable aunt mournfully replies, 'I can't get it enough' (Orton 1970, 51). From this point onwards the action concerns itself with the increasingly outlandish methods by which the elderly dowager attempts to achieve sexual satisfaction. Mrs Terrington even permits her husband Charles to service her aunt, an act she finds so arousing that it compels her to masturbation, utilizing a number of household items that are readily to hand including cotton reels, a pin

cushion (including the pins) and knitting needles. These items become lodged inside Mrs Terrington's capacious vagina until they are removed by the obliging family butler O'Dwyer, courtesy of his radioactive penis - the result of an accident at an atomic plant where he once worked. Meanwhile, Eliza climaxes 'to the strains of the Anvil Chorus from the immortal Verdi's *Il Travatore*' (Orton 1970, 52), that causes her dress to ignite into flames. However, we soon learn that the dowager is still not satiated. Lesbia appears 'wearing a gym slip' (Orton, 1970, 53) and is not only shocked to find her mother in *flagrante* with O'Dwyer, but also at having to fend off the sexual overtures of her great aunt. The sketch ends with Lesbia bursting into tears and declaring that she will grow up unbalanced.

*Screams* sits uncomfortably within existing Orton criticism, situated somewhere between bemusement, condescension and open hostility. Susan Rushinko calls it 'the most raffish of Orton's short pieces' (Rushinko 1995, 17); Maurice Charney dismisses it as 'a very slight pornographic skit' (Charney 1984, 45), while John Lahr expresses disappointment at the 'childish tameness in Orton's gross imaginings' (Lahr 1986, 141). Despite publication in the literary journal *Evergreen Review* in 1970, for reasons unexplained, *Screams* was not included in the 1976 edition of Orton's *Complete Plays*, nor has it been revived for professional performance since *Oh! Calcutta!*<sup>2</sup>

In the same vein, Tynan's erotic entertainment has largely been dismissed. For example, in their history of theatre censorship David Thomas, David Carlton and Anne Etienne see the revue as 'a celebration of slightly tacky eroticism' (Thomas et al 2007, 226), while John Sutherland in his history of offensive literature dismisses it as an 'irreverent university review' (Sutherland 1982, 96).

Yet, *Oh! Calcutta!* can claim a remarkable performance history, playing to over eighty million people in over one hundred and forty cities in fifteen countries worldwide (Nathan 1990, 35). On Broadway alone the show ran for 5852 performances (Lahr, 2001, 76) and following a revival in 1976 only finally closed in August 1989 (Rich 1989). The London show also enjoyed similar success with 3,918 performances between July 1970 and February 1980 (Lahr 2001, 76).

Orton's sketch and its relationship to *Oh! Calcutta!* also contains much of interest. John Russell Taylor has described *Screams* as an 'oddment' (Taylor 1971, 125), and it is unique in the Orton canon for being his only dramatic work not set within a recognizable 1960s milieu and the only instance where the upper classes are depicted (Rushinko 1995, 18). Despite being written early in his career, *Screams* also potentially offers indicators for the style and tone of the next play we know Orton was planning to write after *Butler* – a farce set in 1902 on the eve of the coronation of Edward VII, provisionally entitled *Prick Up Your Ears* (Lahr 1989, 242).

### ***Oh! Calcutta!* Joe Orton and the Permissive Society**

*Oh! Calcutta!* also represents one of the best known popular manifestations of the 'permissive society, a term that had entered into widespread use by 1968 (Green 1999, 51). Despite near unanimous critical hostility on both sides of the Atlantic, Jonathan Green argues that the real impact of Tynan's review came not from its artistic qualities, but rather its value as a cultural event (Green 1999, 347). David Allyn in his book *Make Love Not War*, on the rise of the permissive society in the 1960s, considers every scene in *Oh! Calcutta!* to be an exercise in provocation (Allyn, 2000, 119), although Jonathan Green more accurately locates this in the show's ability to provoke what he calls 'bourgeois sensibilities' (Green 1999, 348). Examples of this outrage were legion: for example, in the San Francisco and Los Angeles productions,

members of the cast were arrested for acts of public lewdness (Tyan 1994, 463), while in Britain the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Fisher had called for a law to be passed banning the exposure of genitalia on stage (Tynan, 1994, 491), Anglia Television had also prevented a screening of the arts programme *Aquarius* that featured a five-minute nude dance sequence from the show (Anonymous, 1970a). In other quarters a private prosecution was attempted by a Conservative local councillor Frank Smith and the strikingly named Dowager Lady Birdwood (who bore little resemblance to the dowager in Orton's sketch). Despite the Attorney General refusing to prosecute on the grounds of obscenity, Conservative MPs Sir Gerald Nabarro and Peter Rost both raised the matter of *Oh! Calcutta!* in parliament, with the latter calling for the repeal of Section 8 of the Theatre Act.

Orton had always relished stoking up public controversies over his own work, writing letters under the pseudonyms of Edna Welthorpe and Donald H. Hartley, who he used to simultaneously attack and defend his own plays. In comparison, the tumult associated with *Oh! Calcutta!* made the controversies associated with *Sloane* and *Loot* look miniscule in proportion, yet in this respect Tynan's erotic revue seemed the perfect habitat for Orton. Looking over the correspondence *Oh! Calcutta!* generated in the national press, a distinctly Ortonesque tone can be heard at times. For example, compare an article written by the Dowager Lady Birdwood, one of *Oh! Calcutta's!* most vociferous public critics, and Edna Welthorpe's condemnation of *Sloane* in 1964:

If you drag young (and old) minds down to the sewers you can reach out and readily pluck the flabby over-ripe body of Britain. A degraded nation, despising itself but unwilling to kill the canker at its heart, falls an easy prey to a rapacious harvester...and when the body takes presence over the mind and spirit of a nation, then it is time for the 'silent majority' to step squarely into the arena, exercise its collective right to be heard and call a halt (Birdwood 1970).

I myself was nauseated by this endless parade of mental and physical perversion. And to be told that such a disgusting piece of filth now passes for humour. Today's young playwrights take it upon themselves to flaunt their contempt for ordinary decent people. I hope that the ordinary decent people of this country will shortly strike back! (Lahr 1989, 283).

In truth it is hard to separate which letter is an expression of genuine outrage and which is bogus.

*Oh! Calcutta's!* other significant claim comes from its contribution to the censorship battles of the 1960s. It has been through this association that the show has gained a reputation for being part of the 1960s counterculture. Kathleen Tynan for instance has claimed that her husband's review was 'a theatrical breakthrough... [in which] the sex barrier had been crashed once and for all' (Tynan 1994, 459). Yet such declarations for *Oh! Calcutta!* being at the forefront of the sexual revolution have been called into question. Jonathan Green sees the architects of the show, Kenneth Tynan and Michael White more as 'benevolent elders' of 1960s permissiveness, 'the "grown-ups" at the party, never to be formally involved in the "counter culture" but always on its fringes' (Green 1999, 129). Robert Hewison also reminds us of Tynan's earlier denouncement in 1963 of what has been credited as the first British 'happening'; here, during an Edinburgh drama conference a naked woman was wheeled into the conference hall to the sound of bagpipes, an event Tynan condemned as 'totalitarian' and 'apocalyptic' (Hewison 1986, 77).

Reviewers of *Oh! Calcutta!* also quickly started noticing that its audiences were not drawn from 'the beautiful people – who try to look long-haired pot-smoking and so on' but instead comprised mainly of 'the blazered grey-suited horde' (Anonymous, 1970c). By 1971 it was being reported that the London production was now drawing 'young marrieds from a Southend council estate, old people from a Portsmouth social club, a factory outing from Biggleswade and a coachload of lorry drivers Chelmsford' (Haddon 1971).



In turn, Orton's countercultural credentials might also be called into question: while on the one hand associated with 'swinging London', a telling incident from the diaries reveals that while he bought *Sergeant Pepper* some weeks before his death, Orton at first deferred, wanting to listen to the album first before committing himself. In preference he bought a number of distinctly un-swinging pop singles including *Peek-a-Boo* by the New Vaudeville Band, *Release Me* by Engelbert Humperdinck (which prevented *Penny Lane / Strawberry Fields* reaching number one - the same single Paul McCartney had played to Orton in January 1967) and *I was Kaiser Bill's Batman* by Whistling Jack Smith (Lahr 1989, 232). John Bull and Frances Grey also point to the contradiction between Orton's association at the time of his death in the public's mind with swinging London (Bull and Grey 1981, 71), and the plays themselves that continually revealed 'a bleak awareness of his past as an inescapable spectre' (Bull and Grey 1981, 74).

Yet, for some, *Oh! Calcutta!* (and by association Orton's *Screams*) were at the forefront of the sexual revolution. *Newsweek* in 1969 for example ran a major article entitled 'Sex in the Arts', arguing for the importance of the show over experimental groups like The Living Theatre by bringing the sexual revolution to culturally timid audiences (anon, 1969, 68). Kenneth Tynan was happy to accept this verdict, noting in a letter to his daughter that such commentators 'saw the point of what we were trying to do...that I had brought the sexual revolution to the middle classes for the first time!' (Tynan 1994, 453). Others, while making the same point, did so more in the spirit of mockery, such as Irving Wardle's review of the London production where he spoke about 'Kenneth Tynan and his team...tak[ing] the good news to the big middle class public', but pronouncing the show 'ill-written, juvenile and attention seeking' (Wardle, 1970).

The content of the sketches also reflected the constituency of its audience. Whereas other nude shows of the period such as *Hair* (1968), *Che!* (1969), *The Dirtiest Show in Town* (1970) and *Let*

*my People Come* (1974) had contemporary settings, *Oh! Calcutta!* occupied a conflicted position between contemporaneity and the past. *Screams* is a case in point, where despite the opening stage direction ‘In the Present’ (Orton 1970, 51) and references to vacuum cleaners and atomic power stations, stylistically Orton’s sketch resembles what Rushinko calls an ‘Edwardian skit’ (Rushinko 1995, 18). While this retreat into the past suited Tynan’s vision for the revue, it jarred with director Jacques Levy who had been given responsibility to conceive the look of the show. In a 1998 interview Levy spoke of how ‘Tynan had a sort of Victorian idea about what we were doing, you know, the gentleman taking his female companion to an erotic show kind of thing’, whereas Levy ‘saw it more as a way of opening up an area that had been closed off, not only to the performers, but to the society in general. I wanted to try to break through to that area, and to set an example for people to be inspired by...and to present those aspects that were very much repressed and suppressed in our society’ (Allyn, 2000, 122).

This uneasiness can be seen throughout the content of the show. While a number of sketches such as *Dick and Jane*, *Was it Good for You* and *Will Answer to All Sincere Replies* can be seen as 1960s comedies of sexual manners, a significant number are set in the past: these include *Jack and Jill* (set in a quasi-Victorian nursery), *Delicious Indignities* and *Who Whom* (also set in the Victorian period). As mentioned, this preoccupation with the past came at the behest of Kenneth Tynan who wrote several sketches for the show including *Suite in Five Letters* (correspondence set to song from the celebrated fetish magazine *London Life*, published between 1920 to 1950), *The Empress’s New Clothes* (a history of women’s underwear) and *St Dominic’s 1917* (set within a girl’s boarding school). Far from being the flagship for breaking 1960s sexual freedoms, at times *Oh! Calcutta!* bore the same repressive hall marks that its middle aged audiences were hoping the show would liberate them from.

Another clog preventing *Oh! Calcutta!* from becoming an evening of unbridled erotic entertainment came from its literary pretensions. Orton had immediately seen this as a problem, noting in his diary: 'Kenneth Tynan apparently said the revue was to be straight forward and no phoney 'artistic' shit. Since the review is called *Oh, Calcutta!* [sic] it begins with an artistic title' (Lahr 1989, 91). Early correspondence at the planning stages of the revue also reveal Tynan's disingenuousness, where initial ideas included, 'An [Aubrey] Beardsley ballet, based on Aubrey's erotic drawings... [and] A French 18<sup>th</sup>-century ballet, based on the erotic paintings of Boucher and Fragonard' (Tynan 1994, 355). At the opening of the London production, its director Clifford Williams was also keen to downplay any hint of sensationalism, promoting the show as a 'a literary piece, full of text and good text at that. It is a piece to listen to as well as see. And it's not about nudity. It is about many entertaining, profound and serious aspects of life between people, particularly the sexual aspects in the twentieth century' (Anonymous 1970d).

Yet, if *Oh! Calcutta!* had little to recommend itself beyond a lukewarm induction to the sexual revolution for the comb-over and panty girdle generation, for Orton it provided just the right fertile conditions for his drama. Bourgeois values had always been a primary target ever since the days when his mischievous energies were spent in Islington Library, tampering with its book collection. Here, special attention was paid to authors and dramatists whose work most appealed to respectable tastes such as Emyln Williams and Dorothy L. Sayers. By taking up playwriting Orton shifted his target from the great British reading public to its theatregoers.

In this vein Simon Shepherd believes Orton submitted *Screams* to Tynan's review in order to 'challenge the type of hippy liberal porn that characterized the rest of *Oh! Calcutta!*' (Shepherd 1989, 126). As discussed, the extent to which the show actually exhibited such values might be called into question, and Orton's premature death would have made it impossible for him to

know any of its prior content. Yet, Shepherd proposes something important – namely that *Screams* was a deliberate rebuttal against the values of swinging London, values to which Orton’s work supposedly ascribed. Alan Sinfield lends weight to this argument, drawing attention to Orton’s lack of interest in early 1960s countercultural stirrings, observing that the diaries reveal ‘virtually no interest in other gay plays, or in the new “fringe” companies, or in moves to abolish stage censorship, or even in the legalization of male homosexuality’ (Sinfield 1990, 267). This assessment is supported in a letter in the Joe Orton Archive between Orton and Michael Kustow, who at the time was running the Institute of Contemporary Arts, a hub for everything considered radical in 1967. Kustow had written to Orton and a number of other prominent figures in the arts asking for financial support to send a group of French filmmakers to North Vietnam to make two films about the war. Orton’s response - ‘Anyone who is unconverted to your cause (and I am not) is unlikely to be converted by a film which, at best, will be shown at the Academy or the Everyman’ (Orton, 1967b) - demonstrates something of Orton’s scepticism towards the same rejection of fashionable ‘hippy liberal’ values that Shepherd sees Orton wanting to sabotage in *Oh! Calcutta!*

### **The Dirty Plays Controversy**

Another indicative clue behind Orton’s decision to submit an early apprentice piece to *Oh! Calcutta!* can be found in the covering letter sent to his agent Margaret Ramsay. Orton comments that the sketch is ‘supposed to be a parody of the school of playwriting beloved by Emile Littler(sic) and Peter Cadbury’ (Orton 1967a). Both men at the time were highly influential within British theatre. Littler was a major theatre producer while Peter Cadbury was Chairman of Keith Prowse, London’s largest ticket agency. Orton had long harboured a grudge against the

two men ever since 1964 when *Sloane* had been included in their so-called ‘dirty plays’ campaign. This had started when Cadbury, at a shareholder’s meeting used his address as Chairman to denounce recent work at the RSC such as David Rudkin’s *Afore Night Come* (1962) and Peter Brook’s production of Peter Weiss’s *Marat Sade* (1964). Littler, who sat on the governing board of the RSC also accused it of producing ‘a programme of dirt plays’ (cited in Nicholson 2012, 57). Support was also given by Peter Saunders, a former president of the Society of West End Managers, interventions that have led Colin Chambers to surmise that the attack on the RSC was less about ‘dirty plays’ and more an attempt by West End interests to prevent Peter Hall’s company gaining a toehold into their territory through its London base at the Aldwych (Chambers 1997, 159).

Mention of *Sloane* in Cadbury’s speech prompted Orton to characteristically join in the attack publicly through the letters pages of the national press, simultaneously condemning and defending his own play under various pseudonyms (Lahr 1989 283-4). The Wyndham’s theatre, where *Sloane* was playing at the time, exploited the controversy in their publicity, but Chambers believes that privately Orton was furious over the matter, blaming Cadbury and Littler for the failure of *Sloane* to win Best Play that year (Chambers 1997, 159).

Orton’s diaries also expose his preoccupation over the matter in an entry on 11 February 1967. In a discussion with Mark Linford, *Loot*’s stage manager over why posters for the show were not being displayed in prominently, Linford explains, ‘[Keith] Prowse and Peter Cadbury are sworn enemies of yours’ (Lahr 1989, 84). Orton’s retaliation was swift: twelve days later he had submitted *Screams to Oh! Calcutta!*, spelling out in the covering letter that Cadbury and Littler were its principal targets. Early the next month Orton also gave an interview to the *Sun* newspaper where he took another swipe. Peter Cadbury was the grandson of George Cadbury,

the chocolate manufacturer and in the interview Orton discloses that prior to success, 'For four years I unloaded chocolate at Cadbury's. And one of the strongest critics of the alleged obscenity in my plays is Peter Cadbury' (Lahr 1986, 84). Cadbury saw the interview and in a spirit of reconciliation invited Orton to lunch. On the surface Orton's reply sounds assuaging:

It's nice to know that I've one enemy less in the world. I based my remarks in the *Sun* on your (reported) 1964 attitude to *Entertaining Mr Sloane*. I'm sorry if you were misrepresented. I'd like to meet you...I don't think we'll see eye to eye on Drama. We might talk about less dangerous subjects: religion and politics (Lahr 1986, 84).

The diaries and archival correspondence do not mention whether the pair actually got to meet to patch up their differences, but Orton's decision to submit *Screams* to *Oh! Calcutta!* was clearly motivated as an act of calculated revenge.

Yet it should be remembered that long before this, Kenneth Tynan had mercilessly parodied the kind of theatre Littler and Cadbury promoted in a celebrated 1954 article for the *Observer* entitled 'Apathy'. In it he outlined the common features of plays set in a fictional county he called 'Loamshire':

Its setting is a country house...Except when someone must sneeze, or be murdered, the sun invariably shines. The inhabitants belong to a social class derived partly from romantic novels. Joys and sorrows are giggles and whimpers: the crash of denunciation dwindles into 'Oh stuff, Mummy!' and 'Oh, really Daddy!' (Tynan 2007, 36-7).

The opening stage directions of *Screams* enact Tynan's description almost exactly: 'The bright morning sunshine streams through the elegant French windows of Shane Abbey creating an atmosphere of ease and comfort' (Orton, 1970, 51). Elsewhere, several references are made to décor, such as 'the magnificent eighteenth century fireplace from which hangs a priceless renaissance portrait' (Orton 1970, 51).

Here, Orton is not only parodying the performance style and high production values associated with Cadbury and Littler's theatre, (where attention to ornamentation was often inversely proportional to the quality of the drama), but more importantly to the form and genre of what has come to be known as the well-made play. While Maurice Charney sees Orton working comfortably within this tradition (Charney 1984, 109-110), *Screams* more resembles S.E. Lawson's observation that Orton's major plays explode the comfortable expectations the form provides. In *Sloane* for example, Orton deliberately fails to resolve the mystery of Sloane's parentage, despite hinting in the best traditions of the well-made play that he is Kath's illegitimate son (Lawson, 2003, 17).

Like Eliza's perpetual sexual frustration, *Screams* also refuses to satiate its audience by providing an ending in the expected tradition. Instead, the sketch ends abruptly with the appearance of Lesbia, who in Orton's dislocation of Loamshire declares, 'Mummy, mummy! How could you...I come down to breakfast and find you – being fucked by the Butler. Mummy, mummy! I can't stand it. I'll grow up unbalanced! Oh... (BURSTS INTO TEARS) ...this'll give me a complex (HYSTERICAL SOBBING FROM LESBIA) (Orton, 1970, 53).

Orton's deliberate refusal to provide a typically Loamshire resolution ironically became a shortcoming for its architect Kenneth Tynan. In a memo to producers Hilliard Elkins and Michael White, Tynan proposed a highly unconventional remedy: 'I would like to give [Orton's] script to Peter Shaffer, an excellent [script] doctor, and ask him to provide a funny ending. Have I anybody's permission on this?' (Tynan 1969). The prospect of Shaffer, whose plays including *Equus* (1973) and *Amadeus* (1979) are themselves masterful examples of the well-made play, imposing a suitable ending to Orton's sketch is an intriguing prospect, but perhaps fortunately this 'collaboration' came to nothing.

## A Worm at the Heart of the West End

As has been established, an attack on the values of West End theatre, personified by Cadbury and Littler, was clearly on Orton's mind in the final weeks before his death. Just as *Screams* acquired a subversive edge once *Oh! Calcutta!* transferred to a West End theatre, *Butler* was preconceived to do so on a far grander and more elaborate scale. The germination of this idea can be found in a diary entry where Orton responds enthusiastically to producer Oscar Lewenstein's suggestion that *Butler* might be produced by Binkie Beaumont's H.M Tennant group:

'That'd be wonderful,' I said, 'it'd be a sort of joke even putting *What the Butler Saw* on at the Haymarket – Theatre of Perfection.' We discussed the set. 'It should be beautiful. Nothing extraordinary. A lovely set. When the curtain goes up one should feel that we're right back in the old theatre of reassurance – roses, French windows, middle-class characters (Lahr 1989, 256).

John Bull also quotes from this diary entry to suggest that Orton was planning to wrong-foot audience expectations: 'having reassured them that nothing untoward was to be viewed, it would present a view of life in the grand house far beyond the imaginations of the Edwardian originators of the [*What the Butler Saw*] device' (Bull 2003, 54-55). Dr Prentice's clinic, with its 'French windows open[ing] on to pleasant gardens and shrubberies' (Orton 1985, 363) comes from exactly the same tradition outlined in the opening stage direction of *Screams*. In both plays the reassuring carapace is only a prelude before the outbreak of sexual anarchy.

Yet, far from appearing to regard the West End as a Trojan horse, Alan Sinfield sees Orton quite readily adjusting himself into this gilded world (Sinfield 2003, 87-88). Such criticisms perhaps explain Orton's anger concerning John Russell Taylor's introduction to Penguin's *New Dramatist's 8*, where he described Orton as a commercial dramatist (Taylor 1965, 12). Taylor responded in a letter to Orton's agent about her client's displeasure: 'Your Mr Orton is a bit



hypersensitive. I'm sorry he takes exception to my introduction, especially as his is the only play in the collection that I really like...As you well know, "commercial" is a term of praise in my book, and what I try to say in the introduction is that we have at present more than enough entirely uncommercial dramatists' (Taylor 1964). What seemed to annoy Orton most was the association Taylor made between being a commercial dramatist and with it the assumption of passive acceptance over the standards set by the drama. That Orton rejected those standards can be seen in his dairies where he is unable to reciprocate in kind when fellow dramatists Terence Rattigan and Bill Naughton write to praise his work (Lahr 1989, 113-4).

As mentioned, residual fears by London producers that *Oh! Calcutta!* might still face prosecution for obscenity, despite the abolition of the Lord Chamberlain, meant opening outside the environs of the West End. For Orton, it would have been reminiscent of the start of his career when *Sloane* had opened at the small Arts Theatre Club. Tynan and Orton were alike on this occasion in their belief that in order to make any significant impact, only the West End mattered. This is why, on learning that *Oh! Calcutta!* was to transfer to the Royalty Theatre in the West End, Tynan wrote in a spikey memo to producer Michael White and director Clifford Evans: 'Up in Chalk Farm audiences will tolerate sloppiness and rough edges that they would never accept in the West End. We are going to the West End next week and I believe we are in exceptionally bad shape' (Tynan 1994, 476).

Yet, despite knowing Orton's attraction to the West End, the original idea for *Oh! Calcutta!* to be staged at the Roundhouse, a fringe venue, surprisingly appeared to come from his own agent. In a letter to Michael White in June 1968, Margaret Ramsay proposes the Roundhouse, partly because a recent show there by The Living Theatre that featured nudity had escaped the Lord Chamberlain's attentions; yet more significantly, she rejects a West End venue for exactly the

same reasons that it had attracted Orton: 'Have you considered this theatre [the Roundhouse] for CALCUTTA or are you going to one of the plush and gilt houses? It would be nice to see something like CALCUTTA in an informal way rather than usherettes walking you down the aisles and showing you into a plush seat' (Ramsay, 1968).

Ramsay's attitude is all the more puzzling given the position she took during negotiations for the posthumous production of *Butler*. In response to a letter from Michael White demanding to know why Orton's estate had broken from his agency, (having previously produced *Sloane* and *Loot*), to go instead with Binkie Beaumont's H.M Tennant's organization, Ramsay replies: 'Had WHAT THE BUTLER SAW been an art play, Joe wouldn't have wanted Binkie, but in this case he very specially wanted it to look like an H.M Tennant production. I'm very sorry about this, but I've carried out Joe's wishes' (Ramsay, 1967). This makes Ramsay's preference for *Oh! Calcutta!* being staged at the Roundhouse all the more puzzling given her agreement for the Queen's Theatre on Shaftesbury Avenue to be the choice of venue for *Butler*. However, carrying out a client's wishes and fully understanding them is a different matter. Later, in a letter to Oscar Lewenstein reflecting on why *Butler* was struggling at its West End venue Ramsay writes, 'You did everything which Joe asked, and though I think he was possibly mistaken in wanting a big West End success in the Haymarket / Tennent manner, he was after all, more keen on success in the theatre than anywhere else' (Ramsay 1969a).

Correspondence at the time also suggests that *Butler's* assault on the West End was undermined by the values of the West End itself – namely the mannered style of acting that it demanded. In another letter to Lewenstein Ramsay makes mention of 'the danger of over-stylisation and over decoration' (Ramsay 1969b), while John Tydeman, who had produced Orton's first wireless play *The Ruffian on the Stair* (1963), got to the nub of the problem in a

letter he wrote to Ramsay: ‘Sure the essence of his style is that it must be played for real, underplayed almost – the wit, the “literary” quality looks after itself, and gets its own laughs. But all that dreadful striving, that terrible overpitched Shaftesbury avenue (sic) aping of some notion of Boulevard farce’ (Tydeman, 1969).

Part of the failure of the 1969 production of *Butler* has been attributed to speculation that Orton was never able to provide a final draft. Commentary from the diaries suggest that had he lived, the next draft would have been far stronger meat:

‘It’s the only way to smash the wretched civilization’ I said, making a mental note to hot-up *What the Butler Saw* when I came to rewrite... Yes. Sex is the only way to infuriate them. Much more fucking and they’ll be screaming hysterics in next to no time (Lahr 1989, 125).

That he was prevented from doing so makes *Screams*, written without any thought of public performance,<sup>3</sup> perhaps comes nearest to what a revised draft of *Butler* might have resembled. In this respect *Screams* succeeded where *Butler* failed. Certainly for Alan Sinfield, *Butler* fell short of being a radical coda, where its failure came not through factors such as location or mannered West End acting dissipating any shock affect, but rather, ‘In 1969, for many people, the concern in *Butler* with adultery and nakedness was merely quaint’ (Sinfield 1990, 269).

### **A Spectre at the Orgy**

*Butler*’s passé sexuality is brought into even sharper focus when compared to *Screams* through its references to intergenerational sex, paedophilia (Lady Slane’s most memorable sexual experience takes place at the age of two when she is ‘taken aboard the Victory and fingered by the ratings. And then soundly done by the captain’, (Orton 1970, 52)), incest (between aunt and niece, and later Lady Slane making sexual overtures to her great niece) and bestiality (O’Dwyer

refers to Lady Slane's frequent request, 'Send me my collie dog and a glass of milk', (Orton 1970, 53)). Here, audiences got to see the very kind of material Orton had promised himself to include in the next draft of *Butler*.

This more combative last hurrah is also indicative of a remark Orton made in 1964 to *Plays and Players* after *Sloane* had transferred to the West End: 'Before, I had been vaguely conscious of something rotten somewhere: prison really crystallized this. The old whore society really lifted up her skirts, and the stench was pretty foul' (Trussler 1964). Whereas the skirts in *Oh! Calcutta!* were being lifted with the intention of fumigating sexual taboos, it is telling that in Orton's sketch Lady Slane's skirt goes one step further and catches fire. Albeit unwittingly, *Screams*'s target became the very values that *Oh! Calcutta!* sought to promote. Far from celebrating the sexual revolution, Orton's sketch becomes a cynical expression of its deficiencies.

*Screams* also does much to expose *Oh! Calcutta!*'s contradictions. For example, Orton's sketch is a deliberate rebuttal of Tynan's 'primary aim to titillate' (Tynan 1994, 370)<sup>4</sup>; yet exactly the same could also be said for *Oh! Calcutta!* itself. While it is now difficult to watch the video of the production, or read the sketches after more thirty years on with the same attitudes that audiences in 1970 might have done, yet it is striking just how bleak many of the sketches are: either they display a profound scepticism towards the new permissiveness (for example, in *Will Answer to All Sincere Replies* wife swapping between a younger and older couple ends disastrously with the young man ejaculating prematurely), or misogyny (in *Jack and Jill* a young girl is raped, rendering her catatonic). Rather than being a celebration of a new sexual openness, *Oh! Calcutta!* resembles more the observation Julia makes of her society in George Orwell's

*Nineteen Eighty-Four*: ‘All this marching up and down and cheering and waving flags is simply sex gone sour’ (Orwell 1968, 109).

### **No Homosexuals Please, We’re British**

Another pervasive form of repression that ran throughout *Oh! Calcutta!* - one that might in theory have risked Orton being excluded altogether from the review - was Kenneth Tynan’s embargo on sketches that featured homosexuality. This remarkable decision was made early on in the proceedings and vigorously enforced by Tynan, whose stipulations on the subject sometimes bordered on obsession. As far back as 1966 in a letter to a potential producer, Tynan had insisted the show be ‘choreographed by a non-queer’ (Tynan 1994, 353) and in a letter to novelist Mary McCarthy later that year requesting her as a potential contributor, Tynan explained that ‘In order to exclude the rather boring area of theatrical camp, we have decided to rule out male homosexuality as a theme’ (Tynan 1994, 371). By imposing this stricture, Tynan was able to confidently announce that *Oh! Calcutta!* would be the type of show ‘where a fellow can take a girl he is trying to woo’ (anon, 1970b).

Despite the revue’s compulsory heterosexuality, a convenient loophole existed for lesbianism. In notes to the show’s American producer, Tynan commented that one scene where two actresses stroked one another was ‘far the sexiest thing in the show so far. At least it is for me and the men I’ve talked to’, and goes on to suggest how this sexual aberration might be turned into an opportunity: ‘If we need an extra number, it should be a female love-making dance designed by Margo [Sappington] for three girls or more’ (Tynan 1994, 443).

Tynan’s policing of effeminacy lends credence to Dan Rebellato’s identification of a similar intolerance within British theatre during the mid-1950s and the supplanting of homosexual

Establishment figures such as Noel Coward and Terence Rattigan by a more vigorous, masculine style of theatre that succeeded in sweeping away an effete West End theatre culture (Rebellato 1999, 155-226). One of the most vocal champions of this new sensibility was Kenneth Tynan in his capacity as theatre critic of the *Observer*. Tynan's preoccupation over this issue can be seen in a 1967 letter to the editor of *Playboy* magazine, outlining potential ideas for articles: one of these, provisionally entitled 'The Homosexual Mafia', would be 'a study of the faggot influence on the arts with historical evidence tending to assure the American public that there is no cause for panic, since the arts have always been havens for sexual misfits' (Tynan 1994, 407). This idea was eventually taken up as panel discussion in 1971, with Tynan as one of its contributors (Tynan 1994, 407). Writing in his diary the following year, Tynan muses further on the question:

One major difference between the London theatre today and twenty years ago is: the relative paucity of queers. In the heyday of Noël C [oward]. and John G[ielgud]., a high proportion of the best young actors, directors and playwrights was queer. Nowadays: it's hard to think of more than a handful- Ian McKellen, Robin Philips, Alec McCowan, the late Joe Orton (Tynan 2001, 103).

While this follows Rebellato's line of thinking in *1956 and All That*, Tynan does not look to the theatre culture of the 1950s, but rather the permissive society of the late 1960s that has brought 'wider sexual opportunities to adolescents [and] allowed many "don't knows" to opt for heterosexuality instead of homosexuality.' Tynan also considers that greater egalitarianism 'has swelled the upper ranks of West End actors with alumni of state schools where queers are relatively uncommon' (Tynan 2001, 103). It is little wonder that in her memoir as a performer in *Oh! Calcutta!* Raina Barrett reports of one gay actor who managed to fool Tynan and the producers into thinking he was straight, describing them as 'Heterosexual bigots! All of them!' (Barrett 1973, 14). Yet it seems ironic that as an elder statesman of the permissive society, Tynan

promoted *Oh! Calcutta!* as a gateway towards a new sexual openness, while at the same time actively excluding this same attitude openness when it came to representations of homosexuality onstage.

Yet, Tynan had approached a number of these ‘sexual misfits’ including Orton, Tennessee Williams and Jean Genet for sketches. Moreover, Orton shared Tynan’s prejudice when it came to displays of effeminacy onstage. For instance, during the New York production of *Sloane*, Orton had upbraided its director Alan Schneider over a signet ring that the actor playing Eddie was wearing in rehearsals: ‘I don’t think Eddie would wear a ring on his little finger. Queers have been doing that for years. Ed would know this and be self-conscious enough not to wear one (Lahr 1986, 189). While it has been pointed out that Orton’s contribution to gay drama was the introduction of characters who behave in a masculine way, whose homosexuality does not define their behaviour (Coppa, 1999, 97; Sinfield 2003, 89), John Clum identifies his characters as bisexual rather than homosexual, but not from any pioneering spirit on Orton’s part, but more a ‘fear that audiences would tie homosexuality to the effeminacy he despised’ (Clum 1992, 126).

Although heterosexual congress features prominently in *Screams*, a more complicated, or in Maurice Charney’s phrase, ‘polymorphous perversity’ (Charney 1984, 113) operates throughout. That the errant homosexuality in *Screams* seemed to have escaped Tynan’s vigilance is reminiscent of how Orton had smuggled homosexual innuendo past the Lord Chamberlain in *Sloane* and *Loot*. In *Screams*, Charles’s return to potency is achieved through recourse to a boyhood recollection:

I used to hang around outside the Headmaster’s study in the hope of getting a good thrashing. Other boys used to be caned, some used to be slapped and some used to be whipped. I got nothing (Orton 1970).

This homoerotic memory is enough to stir Charles's loins, and once Lady Slane has added her own reminiscence of 'being lightly caned with a horsehair' (Orton 1970) for being insolent to her nurse, Charles becomes rampant. Tynan's well known predilection for corporal punishment might have been the reason why the latent pederasty in Charles story was overlooked, yet his bisexuality is hinted at again later when O'Dwyer, summoned by Charles asks, 'For the usual reason, I suppose sir' (Orton 1970, 53). O'Dwyer too, when not called upon to retrieve household objects from his mistress's vagina with his radioactive penis, also has 'polymorphous' tastes: here we learn that he 'generally fingertickles cook every Thursday. And then there's young Bude the gardener's boy – when I fancies a bit of bum' (Orton, 1970, 53).

## **Conclusion**

Peter Buse has observed that 'although Orton lived through and participated in the rumblings of disquiet that heralded the [sexual] revolution...he did not survive to enjoy the shackles of oppression being finally thrown off' (Buse 2001, 69). While this is true, *Screams* provides indications of how Orton might have participated in the bacchanalia had he lived.

There are also signs in Orton criticism of a reappraisal for this early sketch. In the last major study on Orton's work, Susan Rushinko merits it for inclusion within subsidiary work which she categorizes as the four shorter plays, the film script *Up Against it* (1967) and the diaries (Rushinko 1995, x). Even detractors like John Lahr still detect in *Screams* 'an energy which never got into his early writings' (Lahr 1986, 141), while for Maurice Charney it 'suggests the bold farces that Orton would be writing in the next three or four years' (Charney 1984, 56). Despite Tynan's policy of individual authorship not being accredited to the sketches, fellow playwright and theatre critic for the *Sunday Telegraph* Frank Marcus immediately guessed Orton



was behind ‘Until she Screams’ (Marcus 1970), indicating that this early piece already bore many distinctive hallmarks of the major plays. These stylistic and thematic indicators range from the incongruity between refinement and crudity in language (Lahr 1989, 141; Lawson 2003, 16; Taylor 1971, 129); the deconstruction and parody of hackneyed theatrical forms; the theme of sexual sharing and what John Lahr calls, ‘the gloss of refinement imposed on unrefined sexual frustration (Lahr 1986, 141). Direct echoes can also be found in later work such as the snatches of classical music to underscore dramatic action in *The Erpingham Camp* (1966).

In 1964 Terence Rattigan hailed *Sloane* as the first new play that had caught the tone of the sixties in what he called ‘a society diminished by telly technology’ (Lahr 1986, 184). *Screams*, acting through the intermediary of *Oh Calcutta!* and albeit unwittingly, became a spikey barb that not only cut against Kenneth Tynan’s ‘evening of elegant erotica’ (anon 1970b), but more significantly against myths that had already consolidated around the sexual revolution of the late 1960s.

Orton’s harsh, pessimistic sketch is also a last hurrah in terms of being his final original dramatic work to claim any subversive legitimacy on the grounds of taste. While the 1975 Orton season at the Royal Court undoubtedly restored his critical standing after the poor reception of *Butler* in 1969, Christopher Innes rightly observes that it also marked the point where Orton’s reputation as provocateur significantly diminished (Innes 2002, 295). In Britain it also began the process of popularizing and canonizing Orton’s work, where afterwards he became incorporated into the school and university curricula as well as a frequent programming choice at regional theatres. While this can be seen as a highly positive development, it also has the simultaneous effect of blunting anything that might be considered subversive in his work.

For John Sutherland *Oh! Calcutta!* was also a last hurrah as ‘a moment of significant provocation’ (Sutherland 1982, 99), but one with a sting in its tail. Sutherland argues that had the show attracted less publicity, Britain might have quietly moved towards a system of more tolerant censorship in accord with the Scandinavian model (Sutherland 1982, 103). Instead, due to the hysteria it drew to itself *Oh! Calcutta!* became the means by which the moral backlash of the 1970s (being cited for example in Lord Longford’s 1972 report on pornography), was able to establish itself in the 1980s (Sutherland 1982, 98).

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> In her memoir of *Oh! Calcutta!* Raina Barrett, one of the original cast members' comments that during rehearsals Tynan and the producers nervousness about the show being closed down for obscenity meant that material deemed radical was cut in favour of less offensive material (Barrett 1973, 50). Orton's sketch would have undoubtedly fallen into the former camp.

<sup>2</sup> Writing in a letter to Michael White in September 1969, Orton's agent reports that Anthony Page, one of the Royal Court's Associate Directors wanted to include *Screams* in a season of Orton's work (Ramsay 1969). This interesting historical footnote reveals that long before the celebrated 1975 Royal Court Orton season, plans were already being mooted for a season to take place in the same year as the ill-fated West End production of *Butler*.

<sup>3</sup> Lahr mentions that Orton and Haliwell performed the sketch together, recording it on audio tape (Lahr 1986, 141).

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Beckett, one of the contributors to *Oh! Calcutta!* remarked in a letter (no doubt with tongue in cheek) on his sketch *Breath* 'If this fails to titillate I hand in my aprob' (Knowlson 1996, 566).