

Look Back in Anger

Class, gender and age are matters of concern to the public of today as much as they ever were. All three are examined in this, playwright John Osborne's most famous work.

Set in a Midland town in the 1950s *Look Back in Anger* revolves around Jimmy Porter and the people with whom he lives, the small cast being concentrated in one location throughout the play, and the leading man being representative of an entire generation of people who had recently returned from fighting a war and who had all the psychological baggage to prove it. Dominant and abrasive from the very start, he is enigmatic to say the least: working-class yet educated, angry with the whole world and the middle-class Alison most of all, yet still married to her. Jimmy is also influenced by the presence of his friend Cliff, who paradoxically both calms and inflames the situation with Alison. His interjections dampen the fiery exchanges between the married couple, though one cannot but wonder if his being there to witness their arguing is fuelling that fire in the first place.

The dynamic in the early stages is soon changed by the appearance of the play's other two characters. The arrival of Helena sees her friend Alison change from a combatant in the battle with Jimmy to the prize for which he and Helena will now fight, their war of words building to the dramatic climax of Act two. For me, though, the most memorable exchange in the play occurs between Alison and her father the Colonel when she tells him: 'You're hurt because everything is changed. Jimmy is hurt because everything is the same.' Not just a case of angry young men then, but an acknowledgement of the bitterness and frustration in all corners of contemporary society.

When I first read *Look Back in Anger*, I was surprised that unlike the great Shakespeare, who lets his dialogue speak for itself, Osborne includes a notable amount of stage directions in his script; as a result his work is far more readable as a narrative, which can only be a good thing. In one grotty flat and five people, Osborne offers us a snapshot of the concerns, feelings and passions of a whole nation, a freeze-frame of his Britain.

8 sausages out of 10

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