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David F. Curtis
Sacred Heart University

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Those Awful Orton Diaries

“ . . . yet there the nightingale
Filled all the desert with inviolable voice”

Not even his most ardent admirers would call Joe Orton a nightingale, no “light-winged Dryad of the trees” he. When it first burst upon the London theatre scene in the mid-sixties with *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* and *Loot*, the Orton voice was more likely to outrage than to soothe. That the voice was stylized (Wildean, in fact) in manner made it only more irritating to audiences, especially since the characters lent the voice were breezily chatting about sex, death, religion, and the most cherished institutions of England. That the voice eschewed Pinteresque obfuscation made it sound not just clear, but contemptuous. And it was. For Joe Orton was a *farceur*, an angry young *farceur*, who mocked the values of his audience with his plays, who stuck his tongue out and laughed at them. And somehow the Orton snicker was more disconcerting than the Osborne curse; the frank self-absorption of his characters more threatening than Pinter’s brooding mysterians. No, the Orton voice would not soothe or inspire. It simply made people angry.

Yet twenty years after Joe Orton’s death (August 1967) comes proof of the inviolability of his voice. *The Orton Diaries* — scrupulously edited and fully annotated by John Lahr (author of a full-length biography of Orton, *Prick Up Your Ears*) — suggests no compromise in that voice. Here the reader will find in Orton’s private, day-to-day writing the same unrelenting contempt for bourgeois complacency, the same boundless energy, the same lust for physical delight, the same joy in chaos that one finds in the published plays.

The *Diaries*, which cover the last eight months of Joe Orton’s life from 20 December 1966 to 1 August 1967 (Orton was murdered on 9 August 1967, but no one has ever discovered the entries for those last eight days, if there were any), have been divided into three units.

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The first, extending to early May, details Orton's newly-found, hard-won celebrity and his reactions to his mother's death and funeral; to his triumph with *Loot*, winner of the *Evening Standard* Award as Best Play of 1966; to his being commissioned by the Beatles to write the screenplay for their next movie; to house-hunting in Brighton; and finally to his deteriorating relationship with his roommate of seventeen years, Kenneth Halliwell. The second unit, comprising May and June, deals exclusively and exhaustively with Orton's Tangiers vacation, his sexcapades with several Arab youths, and the wit and wisdom of the English homosexual colony of that city. The last, brief unit chronicles Orton's return to London, the completion of his masterpiece, *What the Butler Saw*, and the misery he and Halliwell felt at being back in oppressive England. As the first diary is the most varied in its subjects and prompts the most interesting of Orton's responses, it is clearly the best and most entertaining part of the book. The Tangiers section suffers from a monotony of events, but is occasionally funny. The diary of July adds little new in terms of Orton's reactions, but provides the reader familiar with Orton's fate the thrill of an uncomfortable dramatic irony.

The subjects covered in *The Orton Diaries* can conveniently be grouped under four headings: 1) the Orton/Halliwell relationship; 2) Orton and his craft; 3) Orton on British society (Western civilization in the 20th century); and 4) Orton the promiscuous.

Joe Orton met Kenneth Halliwell while both were students at RADA in 1951. Soon after they were living together, the older Halliwell tutoring the barely literate Orton, the younger Orton admiring the unloved Halliwell. They collaborated on several projects — novels, poems, stories — none of which were accepted for publication. Initially, Orton merely typed. But eventually his contributions became more significant, until finally he was doing all the writing, with Halliwell's role reduced to criticism of Orton's work. Orton learned from their early failures, but Halliwell shriveled in defeat. Still they lived in relative happiness as long as they rebelled in tandem against a society they felt superior to. But by 1967 Orton was famous, acclaimed by people who would have despised their juvenile rebelliousness. The *Diaries* show us a Halliwell secluded in their claustrophobic flat, an Orton moving out and up in the world: All their friends were Orton's; Halliwell saw himself a hanger-on. As

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jealousy cooled their once hot friendship, bitter words became common currency between them. Orton professed loyalty, but prowled the public lavatories of London in search of sexual gratification. Halliwell becomes increasingly shrewish as the *Diaries* progress, as his despair increases:

Kenneth H. had long talk about our relationship. He threatens, or keeps saying, he will commit suicide. He says, "You'll learn then, won't you?" and "What will you be like without me?" We talked and talked until I was exhausted. Going round in circles.

(1 May 1967)

Of course the problem was that Orton was successful without Halliwell, and Halliwell knew it. He had become totally dependent upon Orton's fidelity and that in turn had become a function of pity. Yet pity formed no large part of Orton's personality. He wanted Kenneth to have a success, because he knew that Halliwell had no life apart from his. In Tangiers when Orton left Halliwell in a café and was delayed in returning, he was stunned by Kenneth's reaction:

I went back and faced Kenneth in such a rage at The Windmill. "Where've you been? You have been gone an hour and a half. I was nearly out of my mind with worry." With that, on the terrace of The Windmill, he burst into tears, to my own embarrassment. "My nerves can't stand you going off without my knowing where you are."

(12 May 1967)

If such possessiveness had ever been acceptable, it couldn't be now, for Orton — "a voluptuary of fiasco," in Lahr's fine phrase — needed freedom as never before, freedom to experience new kinds of life. His creative spirit required adventure; his art depended on new experience.

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But newness terrified Halliwell. The *Diaries* present a history of the nasty, peevish rows between the two friends who had lived so long together, shared so much. Finally, the picture the reader is left with is that of a relationship that had become a trap, leaving Halliwell a physical and nervous wreck and Orton exhausted and looking for a way out:

Took a walk. Nobody around to pick up. Only a lot of disgusting old men. I shall be a disgusting old man myself one day, I thought, mournfully. Only I have high hopes of dying in my prime.

(14 July 1967)

This last sentence is a typical Orton flippancy. But the mournful thought is genuine and inescapable. On August 9th Kenneth Halliwell bashed in Joe Orton's skull and then committed suicide. *The Orton Diaries* can't be said to predict the murder, but they do show the logic of it.

The human drama of the *Diaries* fascinates and appalls, but the best entertainment can be found in Orton's remarks about the theatre of his day. This is Orton's element and in it he allows his mischievous voice full range. When a friend noted the similarity between Pinter's *The Homecoming* and *Entertaining Mr. Sloane*, Orton agreed, but emphasized a difference in honesty:

The Homecoming couldn't have been written without *Sloane*. And, you know, in a way the second act — although I admire it very much — isn't true; Harold, I'm sure, would never share anyone sexually. I would. And so *Sloane* springs from the way I think. *The Homecoming* doesn't spring from the way Harold thinks.

(11 July 1967)

When Michael Redgrave was suggested for a role in an Orton drama,

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the playwright demurred: "I thought he made a poor caterpillar in *Alice* . . . he might be better at portraying human beings" (9 January 1967). Nor did the great names of English literature fare any better. Orton examined Fielding's *The Author's Farce*, remarking with characteristic glee, "got the impression that it was rubbish. Like most classical drama. Not worth the paper it was printed on. I'd like to have a burning of the books" (15 February 1967).

The plain truth is that Orton thought so highly of his own talent that he continually denigrates other undoubted talents. It was a shortcoming that he recognized and from time to time regretted. When two of his fellow dramatists praised his plays, Orton mused:

I can't be generous. I've never liked anything either of them has written. It's like Rattigan's eulogies: I can't return them with any degree of conviction. I'd like to think I'd be as nice to somebody if I admired their writing. But who could it be?

(14 March 1967)

Orton's inability to praise derives partially from his background—"I'm from the gutter. . . . And don't you ever forget it because I won't" (9 January 1967) — and partially from a pose calculated to maintain his status as the outsider. And although he is usually more puckish than mean-spirited, Orton can be brutal towards the insiders:

Kenneth and I went to see the film of Olivier's *Othello*. . . . I went in a sceptical spirit . . . prepared to hate it. The opening scene . . . I found very good. Then, when Olivier came on, I was staggered. . . . He looked perfect. . . . Came the senate scene . . . and I realised that although he looked Othello . . . he couldn't play Othello. He mangled the verse. He should be called "Butcher" Olivier. When Maggie Smith entered as Desdemona,

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one felt cheated. After all that build-up about her youth and beauty to find a thirty-seven year old spinster entering! The feeling that they were playing some other play of their own invention grew and grew. Olivier entered on Cyprus dressed in the full gear of Islam looking like a Turk. Yet it's quite clear that he's a Christian and a general of a Christian power. Olivier had a scimitar. Why? Nobody else in the play did. And Olivier's costumes were just fashionable beachwear and lounging clothes. A selection of "shortie" nighties and dressing-gowns. I found myself cursing Shakespeare for his stupid plot. And then, with a feeling of guilt, realising that the production and acting were at fault and I was blaming the play. Like people had blamed my own plays.

(10 March 1967)

That people were blaming his own plays for half-empty houses, hisses from the gallery, scathing reviews — could that be the cause of the venom of the *Diaries*? By all accounts Orton was a charming, delightful sprite, but why should his writing, his plays be blamed for the faults of the actors or directors — "The play disappeared under a welter of tricks. God's curse light upon all directors" (6 February 1967); or the sets — "the advantage of sound radio was that no idiot designer got in the way" (27 December 1966); or most of all because the public didn't know genius when it saw it:

Much of the play's lack of success must be put down to the theme and to the undoubted fact that the general public are, where plays are concerned, ignorant shits.

(18 February 1967)

Still,¹ in writing about his craft — writing — in the *Diaries*, Orton is free from the self-protective instinct of striking out. Then the

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reader sees his delight in making a plot move, in patterning his plays on Wilde or Euripides, in polishing and repolishing his prose. We see the discipline of the *farceur* at work:

Hard at work on *What the Butler Saw* all day. I wrote a scene where Geraldine disguises herself as an Indian nurse. Cut it though after laughing a lot. Held up the action. And whenever anything makes me roar with laughter it's a sure sign it must be cut.

(28 December 1967)

We hear the satisfaction in Orton's voice when a performance of *Loot* achieves the delicate balance he is always seeking — "Saw the performance which was excellent. Audience reaction v. good. Shocked and delighted in the right quantities" (25 March 1967). We note his critical acumen in discussing a production of Feydeau's *A Flea in Her Ear*.

[I]n farce everything (the externals) must be believed. The actors were dressed as though they were period equivalent of Mick Jagger. Now it wouldn't be funny if Mick Jagger were caught in a brothel, but if Harold Wilson were caught in a brothel it would be extremely funny.

(7 June 1967)

Though he had come from the "gutter," Orton was by 1967 a complete artist.

But Orton was right, nevertheless, about never forgetting his background. The "gutter" is ever-present in the subjects and themes of his plays, if not in their style. And in the *Diaries* the "gutter" is on frequent display. We see it in the sad and lonely people of London. Usually elderly, they find themselves abandoned to the whims of fate. When told of an old woman who died in a house fire, Orton

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remarked in his diary, "How awful to be alone in a house knowing that no one cared when you died." Significantly, the next sentence of that same entry reads, "We talked of slavery and masturbation during tea" (28 February 1967); for Orton uses humor as a stay against sentimentality. Just as often the perfect detachment of a trained observer saves him, a seeming indifference bestowing a poignancy that outrage cannot achieve:

While we were waiting for the bus an old man, thin, ragged and shaking with the cold came up and began to play an accordion. After a few moments he started to sing, "Once I had a Secret Love."
(26 December 1966)

The high point of detachment in the *Diaries* occurs in the entry for 29 December 1966, when Orton recounts his return to Leicester, his own particular "gutter," for the funeral of his mother. Here he is beset first by his sister-in-law, who worries him about being cheated by the undertaker:

The coffin lid propped up against the wall . . . said "Elsie Mary Orton, aged 62 years." Betty said, "They got her age wrong, see. Your mum was 63. You should tell them about that. Put in a complaint." I said, "Why? It doesn't matter now." "Well," said Betty, "you want it done right, don't you? It's what you pay for."

But bourgeois fatuousness finds its complement in institutional unctuousness when the undertaker tries to present the family with the nightgown Elsie Orton died in:

Nobody wanted it. So the undertaker kept it. Not

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for himself. "We pass it on to the old folks," he said.
"Many are grateful, you know."

Orton's comment on Leicester that day seems appropriate: "Mud all over the place."

When the misery of the "gutter" gives way to the stupidity of the "gutter," the detached observer yields to the satirist. Christmas — festival of the middle classes — seems to have annoyed Orton especially:

West End v. awful. Drunken people behaving in a foolish way. Singing and shouting. What for, I'd like to know. They've nothing to celebrate.
(23 December 1966)

Of course, the institutions of church and state would try to convince the populace otherwise:

Usual messages from the heads of the establishment.
The Queen from Windsor, the Pope from Rome:
Pilate and Caiaphas celebrating the birth of Christ.
(25 December 1966)

As vile as the institutions which serve and direct the common herd are, it is the individuals that make up the great middle class who earn Orton's keenest disparagement. They are too timid and nervous to live, he writes, and by living he means the full enjoyment of all life's pleasures, uninhibited by concern for safety or propriety. Orton's philosophy of life is simple — take the most pleasure you can without hurting anyone. But Orton recognizes that the essential nastiness of people militates against a "live and let live" world. And since one's nearest neighbors are liable to be small of soul and self-absorbed, one is always in danger of pollution:

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Miss Boynes, full of the Christmas spirit, said, when I met her on the stairs that "the Cordens are the filthiest people" she'd ever met. She said, "I had to do Mrs. Corden's hair for her appearance at the Savoy. And you know I can't stand touching other people's hair. But I did it for the goodwill. . . . She'd bought herself a type of fur hat. . . . I was quite put out by it. . . . But really, you know, she looked a sight. I had a little laugh to myself as she drove off. If only she could see herself as others see her."

(25 December 1966)

One of the many quarrels with Halliwell ended with Orton expressing an unwonted vulnerability: "The inference that I don't know how cruel, despicable and senseless life is hurt me" (2 May 1967). Because Orton did know, he fled to chance sexual encounters whenever he could. His promiscuity was a badge of pride for him, for he refused to be guilt-ridden about his homosexuality. And when a friend told him that he was guilty, Orton rebuked him and advised him to "reject all the values of society" (23 July 1967). Sex could and should be used as a weapon to destroy the smug middle class, because it is pure pleasure, undignified, unrestrictive. So Orton haunted London's public toilets and made love to fifteen-year-old boys in Tangiers, and he coupled sex with art to startle Mrs. Grundy:

Kenneth . . . tells me of the latest way-out group in America — complete sexual license. "It's the only way to smash the wretched civilisation," I said, making a mental note to hot-up *What the Butler Saw* when I came to rewrite. . . . Sex is the only way to infuriate them."

(26 March 1967)

Orton wishes to vex them in payment for the misery inflicted upon all outcasts. He describes in the *Diaries* an occasion in Tangiers when he

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deliberately offended a heterosexual couple by detailing his pederasty loudly and graphically. When his companions trying to quiet him reminded him that Tangiers needed tourists, Orton screamed,

Not that kind it doesn't. . . . This is *our* country,
our town, *our* civilisation. I want nothing to do with
the civilisation they made.

(25 May 1967)

Finally the Tangiers section of the *Diaries* is meant to infuriate "them." Like all pornography it succumbs to repetition. It batters the reader with explicit details in the commonest language; it is filled with outrageous "queens," and indecent jokes. It serves Orton's purpose, but it is not representative of his authentic voice. It omits the wit that is Orton's art, wit that describes a friend's apparel as "a nondescript suit and tie that wasn't exactly quiet, more mumbling" (11 March 1967); wit that captures the vapid conversations between Londoners riding their buses to and from their meaningless jobs:

On the way home a man behind me on the bus sat next to a young woman and said, "It's sevenpence to where I'm going, my dear. I remember when it was twopence." "Do you really?" she said, looking most unimpressed. "You don't mind my speaking to you without your permission, do you?" The man seemed extremely nervous. "No," the girl said. "I usually travel by underground. I'm a railway official. We travel free of charge. As I expect you've read." Pause, and then, heavily, "When I get in my four-footed friend will run to greet me." He added, "My dog" as though she might imagine he meant his donkey.

(13 January 1967)

And it is a wit that laughs at itself, at pretense, pomposity. When Orton had been kept waiting by the Beatles he attempted to leave

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their offices in a great huff, but instead “left almost tripping over the carpet and crashing into the secretary who gave a squeal of surprise as I hurtled past her. This I never mention when re-telling the story. I always end on a note of hurt dignity” (24 January 1967).

Orton, in short, used sex for pleasure, but told tales about it to shock. Similarly, he makes us laugh for pleasure, but makes us think about our laughter in order to shake us up. In a world that is “cruel, despicable and senseless,” Orton urges us to grab all the pleasure, all the laughter we can. But he also insists that because we live in such a world, we must examine values and assumptions and change those that injure. *The Orton Diaries* hold out the hope that we can change our world by adopting new perspectives on life, living for neither meanness nor self-promotion, but proportionally and joyfully.

To me that hope represents the authentic Orton voice — insouciant yet cynical, irreverent yet irresistible. But for many, a single off-color phrase, a single iconoclastic idea will blast so loudly that the roulades of joy and sanity will never reach their ears. For them *The Orton Diaries* will yield but one strain:

“Jug jug jug jug jug jug.”