

Introducing Orton

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Introduction: Introducing Orton: A history and a historiography

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Introducing Orton: a history and historiography

Introducing Orton: a history and a historiography – Kate Dorney

In his plays, Orton gleefully yanked the blinds on England's small-minded pieties and prurience, exposing hypocrisy and greed. And yet in a way it was the closet that got him: murdered in 1967 by his lover Kenneth Halliwell in a hammer-blow of shame and panic, a legacy of all those years in the shadows. (Laing 2017, n.p)

Do remember that Joe died thirteen years ago and if he had not been murdered there would not be this unseemly interest in him – HIS *PLAYS* remain *available* (Peggy Ramsay to Simon Shepherd, quoted in Shepherd 1989, 156).

Joe Orton (1933-1967) is no longer a household, or even industry, name, but one that emerges periodically as an example of a gay martyr or queer revolutionary like a twentieth century Oscar Wilde. Like Wilde, Orton understood the importance of a carefully constructed epigram and an equally constructed public persona, and his currency has fluctuated significantly since his death. As Stephen Farrier, one of the contributors to this special edition notes, Orton's life and work has been variously interpreted over the decades: from shock trooper to queer radical and now to the slightly dodgy 'Uncle Joe' whose pronouncements about women, pederasty and race are as embarrassing as they are distasteful (Farrier 2017, 17). His plays are infrequently staged professionally and are no longer the subject of sustained scholarship. Orton's professional reputation was established in the 1960s on the strength of three stage plays: *Entertaining Mr Sloane* (1964), *Loot* (1965/6) and *What the Butler Saw* (1969); three television plays: *The Erpingham Camp* (1966), *The Good and Faithful Servant* (1967) and *Funeral Games* (1968) and a radio play, *The Ruffian on the Stair* (1964). All of them draw on popular theatrical genres of the time - farce and comedy of menace - to create a comic universe in which the cheerfully amoral and guilty go unpunished while the morally upstanding suffer.

Now Orton and his partner Kenneth Halliwell have been dead for 50 years. Their work - the novels they co-wrote, library book covers they reimagined, the collages created by Halliwell, the plays written by Orton and edited with Halliwell - has long been overshadowed by the gory nature of their deaths. In their Islington flat Halliwell repeatedly hit Orton on the head with a hammer and then took an overdose of

tablets. Their bodies were discovered the next morning by a chauffeur who was coming to take Orton to a meeting about the script he'd written for the Beatles, with film director Richard Lester. 2017 also sees the 60th anniversary of the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in England and Wales and as this special issue of *Studies in Theatre and Performance* has been coming together there has been a constant stream of exhibitions and events marking the event and the progress made since then. Except, it often seems, that in the case of understanding Orton and Halliwell, the progress has been limited: the narrative ultimately returns to Halliwell's 'shame' and misery - the traditional attributes of the pre-liberation queer - and how it led to him extinguishing Orton and his artistic potential. One of the quotes that opened this introduction, from cultural critic Olivia Laing's *Guardian* feature on Tate Britain's *Queer British Art* exhibition, is a recent example of this recurring narrative. Another is a short interview feature with gay actor Russell Tovey – currently appearing in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* at the National Theatre in London – in which he refers to the plaque memorialising Orton on the outside of the Islington flat where he lived:

It's the house he wrote all his plays in and the one in which he got pummelled to death with his Evening Standard Award by his boyfriend Kenneth Halliwell. They stole pages from the library and decorated their flat with them. They ended up getting arrested but this little flat had the most incredible collage of stolen imagery (Tovey 2017, 58).

Tovey's version is both troubling and offers a ray of optimism. Being beaten to death with an award might appeal to Orton's black sense of humour, but substituting a domestic item (hammer) for the tangible proof of industry recognition of Orton's talent only serves to strengthen the idea that Halliwell's (still unknown) motive was jealousy – sexual and professional.

As Tovey and Laing's comments show, Orton's fame increased following his violent death and the publication of his biography, *Prick Up Your Ears* (1978), by American theatre critic John Lahr which sought to explain Orton's work and the motives for his murder. Lahr's account of Orton's life and work, was the product of an intensive round of interviews with friends, families and acquaintances of Orton and Halliwell, and scrutiny of all the work - including the novels and plays co-written with Halliwell - before fame and commercial success. Lahr also drew on Orton's unpublished diaries

and letters to construct Orton as a puckish provocateur doomed to meet a grisly end because of his ambition and enthusiastic pursuit of casual sex while living with Halliwell who is portrayed as a jealous, possessive, depressive frump. Having already edited the first collected edition of Orton's plays, published in 1976, Lahr followed *Prick Up Your Ears* with *The Orton Diaries* (1986), an edited version of the diaries Orton had originally written with a view to publication, but which continue to be read largely as a straightforward confessional rather than another example of Orton's meticulously crafted and edited prose. In 2012 a *Guardian* journalist described how Orton 'wrote jaw-dropping accounts of his gay sexual exploits in public toilets off London's Holloway Road', with no sense that journalists and the public Orton regularly sought to provoke might be the intended audience for the work, or at least one of them (Needham, 2012: n.p). Despite Lahr's stated intentions, the publication of the diaries shifted attention decisively away from the playwright's work to his life, particularly his sex life and 'the Orton industry' – Simon Shepherd's term for the products (films, plays, articles and books) about Orton's life and work – was born (Shepherd 1989). As Emma Parker pithily notes: 'as Orton's association with toilets continues to grow, his reputation as a playwright has started to dim' (Parker 2014, 2). Parker's contribution to this special edition - a detailed examination of the Arden Shakespeare covers creatively reimaged by Halliwell and Orton - is part of a concerted effort to broaden the focus of Orton scholarship beyond the personal and the published work.

Lahr's view has dominated public perceptions of Orton ever since the biography was published, partly because it was made into a film in 1987, also titled *Prick Up Your Ears*, and regularly televised throughout the 1990s reaching an audience far wider than the published version. But also because salacious stories about sex, jealousy and murder sell. Studies of Orton's work, books by Christopher Bigsby (1982) and Maurice Charney (1984) and a number of articles and chapters by Frances Gray and John Bull (one of the contributors to this issue), Christopher Innes and others were largely reliant on Lahr's edited versions of the plays, diaries and material from the Orton archive as well as their own experiences of seeing Orton's work. In 1989 Simon Shepherd (also a contributor to this issue) published *Because We're Queers: The Life and Crimes of Kenneth Halliwell* which sought to radically challenge and destabilise the primacy of Lahr's narrative and the control that Orton's agent Peggy

Ramsay exercised over Orton's unpublished work. The quotation at the top of this article is one of Ramsay's attempts at discouraging Shepherd from accessing Orton's papers and discovering how Lahr had edited the plays and the now infamous diaries.ⁱ Written when the UK and US were in the throes of a moral panic about AIDS and narratives of deadly and irresponsible queers proliferated, the book pointed out clearly and precisely the myriad ways in which Lahr and the Orton industry reinscribed the prevalent notion that 'deviancy leads to doom' (Shepherd 1989, 7). Shepherd questioned Lahr's editing, scrutinised his footnotes and his use of interview sources and questioned the depiction of Halliwell that emerged as a result. He offered a re-reading of the Halliwell-Orton relationship, a detailed contextualisation of the period in which they lived and a critique of the Orton industry to 'tell us not only about what non-homosexuals do to gays but about the power structures in this society' (Shepherd 1989, 152). This influential work was followed by that of other scholars, including Alan Sinfield (1990, 1999, 2003), David Van Leer (1995) and Francesca Coppa (1999, 2003), who also questioned the dominant narrative and offered their own re-readings of the extant work. Coppa edited and introduced Orton's early unperformed plays, *Fred and Madge* (1959) and *The Visitors* (1961) and the novel *Between Us Girls* (1957), all published for the first time in 1998.ⁱⁱ This was the first time someone other than Lahr had offered a first reading of Orton's work since the playwright's death.

1998 was an important year for Orton scholars and enthusiasts, not just because of the publication of the hitherto unseen works, but also because it was the year that the Joe Orton Archive was catalogued by staff at the University of Leicester. Other scholars could now read the diaries, letters and scrapbooks that Shepherd and others had been denied access to. Shepherd had pointedly criticised Ramsay in the acknowledgments to *Because We're Queers*, comparing her unfavourably to the staff of Islington Central Library who 'had the foresight to establish and maintain an Orton archive before Orton became an industry, and who took pleasure in showing this material to readers' (Shepherd 1989, 7). The material in question is the collection of library book covers 'improved' or 'defaced', depending on your point of view, by Halliwell and Orton in protest at the library's provision. The pair were given a custodial sentence for this comparatively trivial crime – according to Orton 'because we were queers' (Shepherd 1989,14). Nearly twenty years later,

historian Matt Cook, who had access not only to Orton's archive but also to Lahr's and Ramsay's, offered a more sympathetic reading of Ramsay and Lahr's custodianship of the Orton industry:

The archives show – as I'll suggest – that Lahr and Ramsay acted in good faith for their client and subject (respectively). Their stewardship of the material interestingly reflects, nevertheless, the particular social and cultural climate in which they were operating (Cook 2008, 165).

Cook sees Ramsay as an agent desperately trying to promote Orton's work over the story of his life. He cites her frequently expressed dissatisfaction with Lahr and others trying to capitalise on Orton's spectacular death, and her fear that Orton and Halliwell would emerge as unsympathetic figures based on the diaries. The diaries themselves are literally, as well as figuratively, bound up in the mystery of Orton's death as Halliwell's 'suicide note' suggests that the last few pages of the diary explain his actions. However those pages were never seen by the Coroner and have apparently always been missing. The mystery of the missing diaries is well detailed by Cook and more recently by Leonie Orton (2016) in her autobiography, so a brief summary will suffice here. The diaries moved from Orton's flat to the offices of solicitors Harbottle & Lewis, and one portion to the Coroner. The diaries in the possession of the Solicitor and the Coroner's were transferred to Ramsay some time after the inquest and she offered them to Orton's family who demurred so she retained possession of them and got copies typed up for Lahr when he began work. Lahr never saw the missing pages, neither did Harbottle and when the diaries were returned to the Orton family as they began to gather materials together for an archive, a further section (the Tangier diary) was found missing and eventually found among Ramsay's papers after her death. The final pages have never been found, and speculation about who took them and why has abounded ever since.

Having access to Ramsay and Lahr's papers as well as Orton's allows Cook a view of the workings of the Orton industry up close, but also affords him an insight into the curation of Orton's legacy and the role of the archive in this. Like many other researchers, Cook admits to expecting a charge from exploring a personal archive, a frisson, an encounter of some kind with the long dead Orton. What he finds instead is a meta-archive, a collection of documents of which a substantial part detail the

handling of Orton and Halliwell's effects, including the famous diaries, a lot of typed correspondence and a fair few photocopies or duplicates of material already familiar to him from Lahr's book. Cook concludes:

the playwright often slips from view in the posthumous controversies documented at Boston University and the British Library, and amidst his own evasions in the material held at the University of Leicester. My notion of encountering Orton felt largely unfulfilled – except perhaps in the tiny collection in Islington that was open well before the others (Cook 2008, 176).

It is fitting that Cook, then writing in *History Workshop Journal* – which grew out of determined efforts to interrogate working class life and culture, and popular culture – now director of the Raphael Samuel History Centre, whose mission is to promote the 'widest possible participation in historical research and debate', should have his most satisfying encounter with Orton (and Halliwell) in a freely available public collection. Particularly as that material was created by his subject of enquiry as a protest about what the quality of library provision. Cook's experience is also a salutary one in terms of reminding us about how we negotiate the impulses we have as scholars to re-examine and reassess the life and work of marginalised and/or forgotten figures. As a feminist theatre historian I have spent a number of years researching and writing about lost and/or forgotten figures, asking *why* they have been lost and re-examining their work. More recently I have been working, with a number of other scholars, to re-evaluate the life and work of actress Vivien Leigh, another twentieth century figure cast as a tragic victim of love who also died in 1967ⁱⁱⁱ. Leigh can hardly be described as a forgotten or unknown figure, but narrative emphasis is always on her life, rather than her work. The more I examined the way she had been written about, the more I felt the need to leap to her defence and the harder I had to work not to exaggerate the way she had been treated or indeed the extent of her talents. Orton is a similar figure in many respects. Mostly written about in the same way, over and over again. Biographer Hermione Lee has described the way in which: 'untruths gather weight by being repeated and can congeal into the received version of a life, repeated in biography after biography until or unless unpicked' (Lee 2009, 7), and even if there are no untruths, just suppositions, the congealing effect is the same. As scholars it is our duty to question and unpick, to ask why, what and how.

My own essay in this issue focusses on processes of questioning and unpicking. It looks at images of Orton created by photographers and artists and advocates a methodology of *looking closely and looking again*, in this case at Orton's involvement and collaboration with the artists who photographed him, at what he was wearing, at how he presented himself in interviews, as well as what Halliwell was wearing, where they bought their clothes and what they said about their clothes, and other peoples in the diaries and letters. Looking closely and looking again might not sound like a complex and sophisticated methodology, but it is the basis of the informed study of material culture. When applied to the study of fashion and dress it requires detailed knowledge of fabrics, finishes and fashion, but also of modes of production and consumption. It's not enough to say Orton wore a black leather jacket, for it to have any meaning, then and now, we also need to know the style, quality and what everyone else was wearing. The other contributors to this volume are also looking closely and looking again at various aspects of Orton's work, life and death, and in the case of Shepherd and Farrier, also proposing alternative methodologies for engaging with Orton. We wanted to use the anniversary of his death to make an intervention into the still congealed received version of Orton begun by Lahr and perpetuated by others and this volume is the result.

Writing in *The Times*, John Russell Taylor eloquently describes how Orton's death changed perceptions of him from 'guilt-free iconoclast' to 'oh-the-tragedy-of-it all', and the extent to which Lahr's detailed account reinforces the new narrative.

The homosexual writers who have been taken to the hearts of the straight world nearly all belong, one way or another, to the oh-the-tragedy-of-it-all classes; Joe Orton always seemed to be the exception, the guilt-free iconoclast who cheerily cocked a snook at the word of the norm. But the manner of his death, like that of Pasolini's, let the patronisers in, and now John Lahr's exhaustively and exhaustingly detailed biography provides chapter and verse (Russell Taylor 1978, 19).

This is his opening paragraph. Even more striking is his closing one questioning Orton's fitness as a subject of biography: 'An interesting story, then – morbidly interesting, perhaps – and rather well told by Mr Lahr. But surely at excessive length? [...] Is Orton finally an important enough writer to rate so much detail?' (Russell Taylor 1978, 19). His objection is that Lahr dwells at length on the life and quotes long extracts from the diary, but doesn't pay enough attention to the work.

For Russell Taylor this seems perverse given Lahr's role as drama critic of the *New Yorker*, but, as his closing sentence acknowledges – the balance reflects the shift in public interest from work to life. In 2014 I was part of an unsuccessful collaborative research bid to re-examine Orton's work. Our main aims were to investigate the significance and legacy of Orton's plays on page, stage and screen 50 years after their first production, to assess their continuing relevance to 21st century culture through a series of public events and exhibitions; to revitalise Orton scholarship by considering overlooked aspects of his life and work in a series of new outputs; to create a new catalogue of Orton's archive and to digitise key materials from that archive to make them available to a wider public. One of the peer-reviewers questioned whether Orton was 'significant' enough to justify funding the project. Perhaps they'd read the end of Russell Brown's review rather than the whole thing. The project wasn't funded, but the team behind the application made a decision to do the research and produce as many of the events and publications as we could.^{iv} We thought Orton was significant enough for a number of reasons: the resonance of the themes of age versus youth and power and powerlessness in his work; the challenge and inversion of norms and the chance this offered to engage with a working-class writer of the period whose principal works were written for, and largely produced in, the commercial sector. The exceptions are his first radio play, *The Ruffian on the Stair*, produced by the BBC and the Crimes of Passion double-bill produced at the Royal Court which comprised the stage version of *Ruffian* and *The Erpingham Camp*. He was consciously directing his work to a large mainstream audience and challenging their expectations of a nice evening's entertainment and was actively critical of those who: 'judge artistic success by commercial failure. There is no intrinsic merit in a flop' (Orton 1964, n.p). Although, as several contributors to this volume note, there is a wealth of scholarship on the Sixties and on post-war British theatre, the *commercial* theatre that Orton was writing for is still under-researched. The peer-reviewers query on the original research proposal provided two additional questions for our research: how significant is Joe Orton and what is the significance of researching his work and life? This special issue addresses those questions through a range of perspectives and by drawing on a variety of materials from the book covers that got Orton and Halliwell imprisoned to the various versions of playscripts for stage, screen and radio, to the published and unpublished diaries and photographs and the newspaper reviews and features

responding to their lives and work. It seeks to evaluate Orton and Halliwell as artists and their engagement with, and responses to, classical theatre and literature, the work of their contemporaries and their attitude towards and understanding of high culture, queer culture and popular culture. This collection also interrogates the continued appetite for the 'deviancy leads to doom' trope.

Simon Shepherd's eloquent and provocative contribution '9 August 1967' takes as its object of focus the starting point for John Lahr's biography and the film adaptation: the scene of the crime and its impact on all subsequent accounts of Orton and Halliwell's life and work. 'This being declared its anniversary', he notes, 'it seems proper to look front-on at what we think we're commemorating, and indeed scrutinise what is quite literally the site of memory' (Shepherd 2017, 1). He is concerned to 'try and understand how the story has become as it is, how the shapes have set hard'; the role of Orton's gatekeepers in the shaping of the story and also, how his own sustained attempts to challenge or retell the story have been received (Shepherd 2017, 5). Stephen Farrier considers Orton's 'queer dramaturgy' and the changing resonance and popularity of his work with queer audiences from the 1960s to the present. He explores Orton's use of farce to challenge normativity, but also challenges accounts of Orton as a consistently progressive and liberal figure making an analogy between Orton and a 'funny uncle' whose offensive views on 'women, race, child abuse etc. need to be challenged' (Farrier 2017, 17). Farrier concludes by outlining the challenge as: 'to account for any resonance his writing might have for contemporary queerness without allowing for the stickiness of the past to be wiped away, the bumpiness to be smoothed over' (Farrier 2017, 18). John Bull's article considers Orton's development as a dramatic writer through an in-depth study of iterations of *The Erpingham Camp*, first written for, and seen on, television before being re-written by Orton for the stage. Bull's careful examination of the variant versions has led him to discover that 'the printed script has erroneously been identified with that of the televised play' (Bull 2017, 8) in existing scholarship of *The Erpingham Camp*, leading to some misunderstanding about the extent to which the television version shocked audiences. Bull also examines Orton's keen awareness of the writers who had gone before him - Brecht, Euripides and Shakespeare in this case - and his equivocal attitude towards television as well as his unequivocal desire to be commercially successful.

Although he wanted to disturb audiences, and to open up new and shocking developments, particularly in the deployment of farce, he was impatient for his plays and himself to be recognised as of value to an audience that was not just part of a self-proclaimed intellectual avant-garde (Bull 2017, 3).

He ends by speculating on where Orton's Dionysiac impulse, evident in the early drafts of *The Erpingham Camp*, might have taken him had he lived to see the Lord Chamberlain's censorship role abolished in 1968: 'there remained whole areas of gender politics and queer culture just waiting to be discovered, celebrated and confronted' (Bull, 2017, 14).

Graham Saunders' article also considers the future direction of Orton's style in his detailed analysis of *Until She Screams*, the sketch Orton contributed to the erotic revue *Oh! Calcutta!*. Hitherto largely overlooked or dismissed in scholarship on Orton and on theatre censorship, Saunders draws on the archives of Peggy Ramsay, Kenneth Tynan and Michael White, as well as Orton's own archive, to consider the claims made for Orton as an agent of the permissive society. He also explores what the sketch tells us about Orton's planned farce set in 1902 provisionally titled *Prick Up Your Ears* (a title suggested by Kenneth Halliwell). Like Farrier and Bull, Saunders finds conservative, as well as radical, elements in Orton's persona and work. Emma Parker's contribution, lavishly illustrated thanks to Islington Library's foresight in retaining the 'defaced' library book covers, investigates an entirely unexplored and subversive aspect of Orton and Halliwell's work: the collage covers they made for the Arden Shakespeare editions. These covers, as Parker shows, require looking at and looking at again. At first glance they could now be mistaken for authentic covers but as Parker's careful scrutiny shows, a second, more penetrating glance reveals the pair's deep knowledge of Shakespeare, Biblical stories and art history and their determination to challenge Shakespeare's cultural supremacy. Parker's essay not only offers a refreshingly original take on the library book covers, it also offers a careful consideration of Orton and Halliwell's creative partnership. The final contribution to the special issue is my own article, 'Through the Closet with Ken and Joe: A Close Look at Clothes, Poses and Exposure,' drawing on recent work in queer histories of fashion and material culture to re-read Orton and Halliwell's relationship and self-presentation. As I noted earlier, it advocates a methodology of 'looking closely, and looking again' at posed photographs of Orton,

his stance, what he wears and the interviews and commentary accompanying the photographs, to discern an invitation and challenge to audiences able to recognise the queer connotations of the clothes and poses or the interviews that accompanied them. Alongside this I consider Halliwell and Orton's clothes and their own understandings of the semiotics of clothing, how they deployed these in their life and work, and how we might re-evaluate their relationship, and indeed Kenneth Halliwell, in the light of this.

This collection of essays is offered not as a last word on Orton, or as a final corrective to Lahr's version of him, but as an invitation to reconsider the work, his life and its legacy and in turn the methodologies we use for engaging with theatre history and biography.

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ⁱ Lahr subsequently deposited his papers, including a marked up copy of the diary, at the Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Centre, Boston University in 1991.

ⁱⁱ Given the timing of the publication of the novels it seems probably that Ramsay's death in 1991 was one of the factors in the 'freeing' of Orton and Halliwell from Ramsay and Lahr's desire, by no means always united, to control Orton's posthumous rendering. Matt Cook's podcast, "Losing Orton in the Archives", acknowledges the change in attitude in the Orton family and Lahr after Ramsay's death.

<http://media.nationalarchives.gov.uk/index.php/losing-orton-in-the-archives/> accessed 2 March 2017

ⁱⁱⁱ *Vivien Leigh: Actress and Icon*, Kate Dorney and Maggie B. Gale (eds) 2017 Manchester University Press

^{iv} This includes one exhibition, *What the Artist Saw: Art Inspired by the Life and Work of Joe Orton*, staged at the Museum of Contemporary Art London and New Walk Museum and Art Gallery, Leicester, and another in the process of development, *Crimes of Passion: The Story of Joe Orton*, for the Galleries of Justice, Nottingham; and a series of events and talks.

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