

MEDIA RELEASE

Soulpepper presents Joe Orton's *What the Butler Saw*

Toronto, ON – July 19, 2010 – **Albert Schultz**, Founding Artistic Director of Soulpepper Theatre Company, today announced that the company's production of Joe Orton's *What the Butler Saw* will run August 19 - September 18, 2010, at the Young Centre for the Performing Arts.

With his trademark blend of wit and irreverence, Joe Orton combines sexual indiscretion and bureaucratic incompetence to create a seditious farcical romp. Joe Orton's witty dialogue and societal views are reminiscent of Oscar Wilde. Both men were ahead of their time, criticizing social convention and challenging authority with great satire. *What the Butler Saw* first opened in 1969 at the Queen's Theatre in London and is regarded as Orton's finest play.

Jim Warren directs **Oliver Dennis**, **Brandon McGibbon**, **Brenda Robins** and **Nicole Underhay** as well as **Graham Harley** and **Blair Williams** in their Soulpepper debuts. *What the Butler Saw* will be **Oliver Dennis'** fortieth production with Soulpepper.

What the Butler Saw previews August 19, 2010, opens August 25, and runs until September 18, 2010 at the Young Centre for the Performing Arts, located at 55 Mill Street, Building 49, in the Distillery Historic District. Tickets range from \$31.20 - \$75.33 (including 13% HST) and are available by calling the Young Centre box office at 416.866.8666 or by visiting soulpepper.ca. \$22 tickets are available for 21-30 year-olds at stageplay.ca. StagePlay is sponsored by TD Bank Financial Group.

This production is sponsored by MacDougall, MacDougall & MacTier Inc.

2010 Soulpepper Lead Sponsors are: Sun Life Financial, Scotiabank Group and TELUS. Soulpepper gratefully acknowledges annual operating support from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Toronto Arts Council.

Soulpepper Theatre Company is an artist-founded, classical repertory theatre company with a three-tiered mandate: to present the world's greatest stories in vital Canadian interpretations; to train a new generation of theatre artists; and to inspire and enrich youth through mentorship and access program

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Soulpepper's Production images for *What the Butler Saw* are available to download @:

http://www.soulpepper.ca/media/media_gallery.aspx

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BACKGROUND NOTES

"Surely we're all mad people, and they/Whom we think are, are not."

Joe Orton chose the above quotation from Thomas Middleton's Jacobean play *The Revenger's Tragedy* to preface this text, his last and (some say) greatest play. It might seem an odd choice, given that *What the Butler Saw* is a farce but the self-educated, ferociously intelligent Orton knew that farce in its original form was very close to tragedy. Both genres deal with the same themes: rape, madness, prostitution, lust for power. Both take their subject matter very seriously. In the midst of the hilarious chaos of his plays Orton took aim at pomposity and self-deception; his intentions were deadly serious and he always insisted that the actors not go for the laughs in his work but play it straight. He had clear targets and he believed, as Nietzsche said, that one does not kill by anger, but by laughter.

The first audience for this play did laugh at first but the production also caused the kind of sensation Orton loved to provoke. Unfortunately, the play premiered nearly two years after his death on March 5, 1969 at the Queen's Theatre in London. The anarchic mischief onstage so appalled the audience that they began yelling at the actors and destroying their programs in protest. Critics weren't kind. So for a while Orton's greatest play was also his most under-rated. It did not come into its own until a 1975 Royal Court production under the great director Lindsay Anderson.

The title of the play declares the writer's intentions in no uncertain terms. It comes from an Edwardian peepshow, a type of entertainment in which people viewed pictures, often erotic, through a small lens. The title makes it clear that we're going to be let in on the characters' private sexual conduct and no holds will be barred, no depravity unvisited. There will be no idol too sacred to be profaned. And that includes the iconic Winston Churchill. If you thought the dead woman's false teeth in *Loot* were outrageous, then brace yourself. Whatever we may think of Orton's views, we can't say he didn't warn us.

What the Butler Saw considers the deadly serious question: who is sane and who is insane? In our day it is psychiatrists who decide. In this wild farce Orton asks us to consider whether these doctors actually possess the moral integrity to make such determinations. But nothing escapes his wicked eye and he sends up everything from bourgeois society to the institution of marriage to the farce form itself.

"Why are there so many doors," the investigating Doctor Rance asks as he enters Doctor Prentice's office, "Was this house designed by a lunatic?"

BACKGROUND NOTES CONTINUED ...

A standard aspect of a farce stage set is two or more doors that facilitate the mayhem, so characters can appear and disappear, and exit lines can be punctuated by perfectly timed door-slamming. But this joke, like many Orton jokes, is double-barrelled: the "house" Doctor Rance refers to is in fact a psychiatric hospital, supposedly a refuge for lunatics. The glory of Orton's wit is that it stings, but it has an irresistible playfulness too. Later in the play Doctor Rance says: "The final chapters of my book are knitting together: incest, buggery, outrageous women and strange love-cults catering for depraved appetites." The line is witty but it's the insouciant capper that makes it truly orton-esque: "All the fashionable bric-a-brac."

To match the zing of his lines, Orton added in this final gift to us a more developed sense of stagecraft, an inventiveness he hadn't shown in his previous work. The jolt of his jokes is now matched by scenic surprises too – none of which I'll give away here. That delicious pleasure awaits you in the theatre.

Tidbits

- John Lahr wrote a meticulously researched biography of Orton in 1978 called *Prick Up Your Ears*. Some, among them Orton's friend, agent and fierce protector Peggy Ramsay, accused Lahr of highlighting the more scandalous parts of Orton's life and misunderstanding the role Halliwell played in Orton's life. Lahr went on to edit Orton's diaries for publication.
- In 1987 the film version of *Prick Up Your Ears* came out. It was written by Alan Bennett and directed by Stephen Frears. Orton, Halliwell and Ramsay were played by Gary Oldman, Alfred Molina, and Vanessa Redgrave respectively.
- Though Orton and Halliwell went to jail for defacing books at the Islington Library, their mischievous handiwork is now the most famous part of the Islington Library Collection. YouTube has a really entertaining clip from a documentary called "The Crimes of Joe Orton", in which two librarians, among others, get quite excited over this notorious vandalism.
- In 1984 during a performance of *Loot* at the Lyric Theatre in London, actor Leonard Rossiter died in his dressing room while waiting to go onstage of an apparent heart attack.

PLAYWRIGHT BIO

1933 - On New Years Day John Kingsley Orton is born in Leicester, the first of four children, to William, a gardener, and Elsie, a machinist. Young John is his mother's favourite.

1947 - He graduates from a secretarial course at Clark's College Leicester and begins working as a junior clerk. He does not find gainful employment to be congenial.

1949 - Orton becomes interested in theatre and embarks on a plan of self-improvement that includes body-building, elocution lessons to rid him of his East Midlands accent, and voracious reading to fill the gaps in his cultural knowledge.

1950 - He applies for a scholarship to RADA and is accepted, though a bout of appendicitis keeps him from attending until the following year.

1951 - Orton meets Kenneth Halliwell, seven years his senior, at RADA and the two quickly move in together. They will remain profoundly connected for the rest of their lives.

1955 - Upon graduation Orton spends some months at Ipswich Rep as an assistant stage manager. This work too proves to be uncongenial and he and Halliwell move to London to become writers. Fortunately, Halliwell has an inheritance on which they can - barely - subsist.

1955-57 - The two collaborate on a series of unpublished novels (a sample title: The Last Days of So-dom).

1957-59 - They work in six-month stints at the Cadbury Factory to earn enough money to buy a very small flat in the Noel Road, Islington. They discontinue their artistic collaboration.

1959 - 61 - To entertain themselves, they take books out of the local Islington Library and alter the cover art, or the blurbs before returning them. (For example: a book of John Betjemen's poetry is given a cover with a heavily tattooed and nearly naked middle-aged man.) Sometimes they cut art prints (more than 1,600 apparently) out of these library books to decorate their flat.

1962 - They become locally notorious when they are charged with five counts of theft and malicious damage. They are fined and each serve a term of six months in jail. Orton later writes that being "in the nick" (HM Prison East Church, Kent) brought detachment to his writing.

1963 - The BBC produces Orton's first radio drama: The Ruffian on the Stair. Buoyed by this taste of success he completes his first full-length play, Entertaining Mr. Sloane, which is promptly snapped up by the top London agent, Peggy Ramsay.

PLAYWRIGHT BIO CONTINUED...

1964 - Ramsay persuades Orton to change his first name to "Joe" to distinguish himself from John Osborne. Sloane is produced by the New Arts Theatre in May. Both praise and outrage greet the production. From June to October Orton works on Loot.

1965 - The first production of Loot is plagued with difficulty and closes early: a spectacular flop. Orton and Halliwell run off to Tangier to lick their wounds. Orton works on The Erpingham Camp for television and later in the year Sloane opens on Broadway.

1966 - Orton rewrites Loot and Ramsay gets it another production in London, where it is an immediate and smashing success. It goes on to win the Evening Standard Award for Best New Play. He starts work on his masterpiece What the Butler Saw.

1967 - Two one-act plays, The Ruffian on the Stair and The Erpingham Camp are staged at the Royal Court Theatre. He writes a screenplay for the Beatles (Up Against It), which is rejected. On August 9th, Joe Orton is murdered by Kenneth Halliwell in their flat in Islington. Halliwell takes his own life the same night. At Orton's funeral in Leicester only Peggy Ramsay and three Orton relatives are in attendance. At the "theatre" funeral in London, Harold Pinter gives the eulogy.

2008 - A square is named for Orton in his home town of Leicester. Turgenev and Chekhov?

Notes by

Soulpepper Associate Artist Paula Wing