



JOE ORTON'S DEMOCRATIC LUNACY: *WHAT THE BUTLER SAW* AS A POLITICAL COMEDY*

Sena ŞAHİNİ**

Abstract

The purpose of this work is to analyse Joe Orton's play *What the Butler Saw* as a representation of political comedy in the post-war British theatre. The play gains its political attitude by blending the qualities of comedy of manners and farce. In the play, Orton questions the system in two ways. First he removes the line between sanity and madness; thus subverts the authority of the psychiatrists and their methods. He also implies that the mental hospital is a microcosm of the British society, or by extension, the modern world in which all the institutions are inoperative. Secondly, he foregrounds sexuality and the blurring line between the sexes and sexual identities. Furthermore, he calls the essential definitions of the traditional concepts of family and home into question. By subverting both genres, he presents his political standpoint with controversial subject matters like sexual orientation, adultery, and incest. Therefore he aims to alter the public opinion, to offer new ways of perception as well as to create awareness and sensibility for social and political problems. This article intends to delineate the mentioned political qualities by analysing the play from a critical perspective.

Key Words: *Comedy of manners, Farce, Political comedy, Sexuality, madness.*

JOE ORTON'UN DEMOKRATİK DELİLİĞİ: POLİTİK BİR KOMEDİ OLARAK *UŞAK NE GÖRDÜ*

Özet

Bu çalışmanın amacı Joe Orton'un *Uşak Ne Gördü* adlı oyununu İkinci Dünya Savaşı sonrası İngiliz tiyatrosunda politik komediyi temsil etmesi açısından incelemektir. Oyun politik tavrını, töre komedisi ve fars türlerini birleştirerek kazanmaktadır. Orton, bu oyunda, sistemi iki şekilde sorgular. İlkinde ruh sağlığı ve delilik arasındaki sınırı kaldırır; böylece psikiyatristlerin ve onların yöntemlerinin otoritesini sarsar. Bu şekilde, akıl hastanelerinin İngiliz toplumunun, dolayısıyla kurumları işlevsiz hale gelen modern dünyanın mikrokozmosu olduğunu öne sürer. İkinci olarak ise, cinselliği ve cinsel kimlikler arasındaki çizginin belirsizliğini vurgular. Buna ek olarak izleyicisine geleneksel ev ve aile kavramlarının bilinen tanımlarının doğruluğunu sorgular. Orton, iki komedi türüne de müdahale ederek, cinsel eğilimler, zina ve ensest gibi tartışmalı kavramlarla kendi politik bakış açısını açıkça ortaya koyar. Böylelikle, genel görüşü değiştirmeyi, yeni algı biçimleri önermeyi, toplumsal ve politik sorunlar için duyarlılık ve farkındalık sağlamayı amaçlar. Bu çalışma, oyunu eleştirel bir açıdan analiz ederek bahsi geçen politik özellikleri göz önüne sermeyi hedeflemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Töre komedisi, fars, politik komedi, cinsellik, delilik.*

* This article is an abridged version of the second and fourth chapters of my published PhD dissertation entitled "Comedy of Manners and the Politics of Postwar British Drama"

**Dr. Ege University, Faculty of Letters, Department of English Language and Literature,İZMİR.

e-posta:senasahini@gmail.com

Political art tries to shape the culture in which it was produced; it creates an awareness and receptivity on people's social/political consciousness. Political artists are aware of their function and role in society and they are also interested in using art to promote thinking and stimulate dialogue through asking questions. Those questions could be about the politics of a state, the institutions of a society in which characters live and are forced to confront, the class structure by which the lives of characters are defined, the gender roles or the problems of being a woman and a man in a society. Political artists also present questions and debates about issues such as education, economics, violence, sex, family, marriage, parenthood, and so forth. Therefore, to elicit critical questions related to these issues, to discuss conflicting ideas and ideologies, to offer solutions eventually lead to a heightened awareness which make the reader/audience politically more informed and active; and the theatre which aims to reach this point is called political theatre.

When theatre becomes a political instrument, it presents individuals in relation to their society. The individuals portrayed in a play cannot be separated from their social status and class. Even their moral, sexual or spiritual conflicts are always the conflicts with society. The aim of playwrights, as Michael Patterson asserts, is to help to change the way society is structured as well as to create a new way of thinking, to challenge old modes of thought, and to question economics as the fundamental organisation of society instead of social morality (2007: 1). To put it differently, theatre establishes connections between individuals, societies, and ideologies. It creates a unique way of communication between these forces and makes the invisible visible and the unheard heard. Thus, the major functions of political theatre, or theatre as a political medium, are to disturb its audience in order to make them aware, and to lead people to act or react internally or externally to change things.

Whenever the audience recognize their own concerns on stage, they identify themselves with the characters and their dilemmas. Because they watch the play rather than live the experience, they objectify the problems portrayed on stage. Therefore, they begin to think about possible solutions or alternative actions (Prentki and Selman, 2003: 8). The empathetic involvement and observation as well as analysis and forming opinions create "*a condition where an audience both wants to think and has the opportunity to problem solve in a safe but vital environment*" (2003: 8). On the other hand, in certain situations, the audience is left without proper means to deal with these problems in realistic or naturalistic styles. Realism does not always lead the audience to react; on the contrary it sometimes leads them to accept the current situations, and thus restricts and controls their perception. At this particular point, comedy as a rather non-realistic genre could easily fit the requirements of political theatre as well as the other non-realistic types such as Epic theatre and even avant-garde examples like Futurist, Dadaist, Expressionist or the theatre of the Absurd.

Humour, therefore comedy, is a liberating force not only in terms of social mores but also in political constraints. It brings freedom to minds by breaking the rational order of things and by violating unchallengeable logic and reason. It works as an estrangement factor as well by forcing us to question the things that we often take for granted (Morreall, 1983: 103). Identical to *verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect), it destroys the illusion of reality which is imposed upon us by social and political authorities and provides critical objectivity. As a social phenomenon, humour functions best in theatres; particularly with the contagious nature of laughter, it unites people against the strain and tension. Laughter causes a kind of detachment, and this detachment is a significant part of the freedom in comedy as a principal value. As John Morreall points out, humour can even be directed to the people who laugh, but this does not destroy its unifying effect (1983: 115). Comedy has also been a more political genre than tragedy because of its distinguishing characteristic which attacks the conservatism and stability of ideologies. Maggie Andrews states that "*Comedy has potentially a unique ability to be political in that it operates so frequently by transgressing boundaries. . . Much of the*

comedy. . . owes its existence to saying the unsayable and doing the undoable of the hegemonic culture” (1998: 51). In that sense, William I. Thompson notes:

The comic hero recognizes a restraint upon his freedom, but he is no reforming philosopher. The restraint here is a metaphysical one in the sense that evil is in the very nature of things, and the closest evil thing to the comic hero is his own impotent and limited body. What then should the comic hero do? Obviously, create a new and better universe. (1965: 218)

This creation is generally done by a marriage at the end of the plays which celebrates the sexual joy of a new body in a better universe. However, this is the point where farce appears because farce rejects the old scheme of things; it only celebrates the new mechanism and curses the old one (1965: 219).

Farce is accepted as the purest form of comedy since it presents nothing artificial or synthetic. While comedy, as a distinct form, belongs to the civilized and polite society, farce is the style of the uncivilized and common people with its direct and less elaborate form. Another reason for its simplicity is its acceptance of everyday reality and everyday interpretations of this reality. Besides, in terms of content, even the least expected and the most foolish farce can be political because they reflect an ideology convenient to their purpose of being written. In this sense, Arnold P. Hinchliffe indicates that the divisions between genres or the mixture of them are always productive. He reminds that the Absurdist playwright Eugene Ionesco writes extremely serious farces; or he writes drawing room comedies but the drawing rooms are turned into dungeons, prisons or torture chambers (1974: 16). Accordingly, a deliberate addition of farce into a drawing room comedy might make a multi-layered play with a political perspective.

Thompson elaborates on the difference between high and low comedies by claiming that high comedies teach lessons. They show that the world is basically good; but the evil is brought to the world by human beings who have no social control (1965: 224). On the other hand, low comedies, such as farce or farcical comedies,

affirm the vitality of human activity when it is free of restraint. Here the restraint is a metaphysical one, a restraint inherent in that small, but crucial piece of universe, the body, with all its threats of sterility, old age, impotence and death. Farce is a strike for freedom, a strike against gods. (1965: 224)

In other words, it is against authority and order. When farce comes into question, the audience moves away from reality and enters another realm, a distorted one which was created for them. Yet this distorted realm does not have ground rules; it can be altered by our laughter and freedom, so that a change in the point of view, in ideology or understanding can be possible. Hinchliffe mentions Brecht’s observations about comedy and its political forms and he emphasizes that a drawing room comedy could not be that much political, however putting farce or farcical elements in a drawing room comedy makes it political because farce is the extreme exaggeration of parody. With farce and burlesque – another form of parody – the comic effects are firm, broad and outrageous. Therefore we achieve a theatre of violence with violently comic and violently dramatic scenes (1974: 15).

As a significant type of high comedy which was popular during the Restoration period, comedy of manners has neither been a political genre in the history of theatre nor assumed the responsibility of affecting and, as a result, leading the audience to a political position. The role and function of this genre have always been limited to the intention of entertainment and restricted with the characteristic elements such as setting, character types, techniques of misunderstandings and intrigue, without criticising or challenging anything serious. The major social and political issues like gender roles, sexual politics, class conflicts, or religious debates

have never been treated seriously throughout the centuries as social problems in comedy of manners although the concept of “manners” suggests a wider glance in theatrical sense. However, after the traumatic Second World War, the genre turned into a more serious example of drama which provides a harsh critique of society and challenges the power structures on a different level. It still had similar methods of representation of the action on stage; but the choice of social and cultural problems as subject matter, the handlings and presentations of these problems in theatre changed fundamentally especially in the 1960s.

By the late 1950s, the new generation of British playwrights with working class origins started to show up and paved the way for a new wave of theatre reflecting the changing realities of the post-war era. Their plays provided a fresh viewpoint regarding the function of theatre other than a mere entertainment under the oppression of capitalist economy. Theatrical works became more political thanks to the abolition of censorship of theatre by the Lord Chamberlain in 1968. The playwrights were showing their discontent with contemporary Britain; especially the writers of comedy were attacking conservatism and stability of ideologies by producing laughter which functions as a social corrective and leads people to think rather than feel. Joe Orton was one of them.

Joe Orton’s life started to change after being sentenced to prison for six months. When he talked about the imprisonment, Orton said that,

Before, I had been vaguely conscious of something rotten somewhere; prison crystallized this. The old whore society lifted up her skirts, and the stench was pretty foul. Not that the actual prison treatment was bad; but it was a revelation of what really lies under the surface of our industrialized society. (Lahr, 1976: 15)

His detestation of the establishment and his way of revealing it by “*ridiculing prudery and the mental banality of fascistic authoritarianism*” (Lilly, 1993: 170) was strong enough to create his unique voice and an extraordinary language consciousness. John Lahr, who wrote Orton’s biography, identifies the term Ortonesque which entered the critical vocabulary to describe the scenes of “*macabre outrageousness*” (1976: 11). Maurice Charney defines the term Ortonesque as “*a peculiar mixture of farce and viciousness, especially as it expresses itself in the greed, lust and aggression that lie just beneath the surface of British middle-class properties*” (Lawson, 1996: 272). It is also described by Don Lawson as a combination of “*hilarity and seriousness, of wild violence or transgressive sexuality*” which is discussed by the characters who speak in a very polite and socially correct discourse (1996: 271). Therefore the term Ortonesque appears to be a blending of polite language of high comedy and farcical actions on stage which is a unique brand of comedy that Joe Orton used in his plays in order to mock the social values in a violent, anarchic, and sexually offensive way.

Grant Stirling argues that “*Orton’s drama invokes the conventions of farce only to violate those conventions*”; thus “*Orton creates the genre of farce anew*” (1997: 42). This Ortonesque farce is formed by two transgressive elements: the dark comic vision of his plays and their unquestionable political nature. As Stirling concludes, “*Both of these elements violate the traditional definition of farce as a ‘light entertainment designed solely to provoke laughter’*” (1997: 42). Besides, Joan F. Dean argues that, in modern drama, “*farce frequently crosses economic lines to acknowledge the mechanistic or animalistic nature potential in all men. Especially in the twentieth century, farce cuts across class barriers to show that any one might act barbarically*” (1982: 482). Dean also states that the setting and atmosphere of Orton’s plays generally suggest a kind of claustrophobia and entrapment since the characters find themselves shut in their own living rooms, or as in *What the Butler Saw*, confined in a straitjacket in mental institutions. The living rooms or the mental institutions are Orton’s portrayal of contemporary society which imprisons its own members. In these places, the characters are obsessed with

their own private fantasies and desires that can never be pursued in a polite society. Yet, for Orton, polite society is itself a deception (Dean, 1982: 486).

Orton's depiction of human nature in comedy of manners becomes neither attractive nor optimistic; but by embodying it with farce, he offers a sense of boundlessness and freedom. Therefore, he redefines the genres of comedy of manners and farce in order to provide a proper place for the unbound desires and energies of human beings (Dean, 1982: 492). The sense of equality, boundlessness, and freedom resound in his plays. While Dr. Rance guarantees that they have a democratic lunacy in *What the Butler Saw*, McCorquodale claims that they all live in an age of equality because all classes are criminal in *Funeral Games*. In his plays, there are common themes such as violence, selfishness, lust, and greed that all traditional farces include. However, Orton takes farce further by using incest instead of sexual accidents, rape instead of flirtation, or drug use instead of drunkenness. While the characters in traditional farce are driven to comic desperation, Orton's characters are driven to madness or death. With all these extremities, Orton disrupts apolitical nature of traditional farce and creates a political one (Stirling, 1997: 42).

Orton was not only trying to make his audience laugh at the situations in his visually as well as verbally anarchic plays but he also wanted to confuse and even alarm them. For this effect Orton puts sex in the centre of events. He brings sexual matters onto stage in all their energetic, amoral, and ruthless excess; and he did not care about sexual categories. For example, in *What the Butler Saw*, When Dr. Prentice claims that he is heterosexual, Dr. Rance responds: "I wish you wouldn't use these Chaucerian words. It's most confusing" (Orton, 1971: 55); and a little later he advises, "Is it policemen or young boys you're after? At your age it's high time you came to a decision" (1971: 55-56). His characters even think that "transvestism is no longer held to be a dangerous debilitating vice" (1971: 77). Orton depicts sexual desire and desire for power in his works with the intention of perturbing his audience at all cost, allied with extreme violence that runs through his all works.

What the Butler Saw has an epigraph from Thomas Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* which summarizes one of the major themes of the play: the perception of madness: "Surely we're all mad people, and they / Whom we think are, are not." The title of the play comes from a famous Edwardian tool of entertainment, a machine of an erotic peepshow with which people see pornographic pictures. With its title, the play focuses on voyeurism, the sexual interest of spying on people; therefore, it turns its audience into the people who are peeping through a keyhole and watching the private lives of others. The setting of the play is the private mental clinic of Dr. Prentice, decorated with numerous doors opening to different other rooms. The abundance of doors provides play's one of the most significant characteristics of untimely entrances and exits. Especially in the second act, the characters chase each other or conceal themselves from their chasers by using these doors. When a government inspector, Dr. Rance, visits the clinic, his first criticism is about the room and its design: "Why are there so many doors. Was the house designed by a lunatic?" (1971: 20). The never-ending rush creates a chaos which is a crucial part of the play. As Mark Lilly specifies, the situational as well as linguistic chaos reigns in the world of farce: "The unexpected, the impossible and the outlandish are the stuff of which it is made" (1993: 171). Besides, this chaos and randomness provide Joe Orton a chance to create an incomprehensible, even a meaningless world as an absurdist dramatist would do.

The play starts with the psychiatrist Dr. Prentice's interview of Geraldine Barclay for a secretarial position. In order to seduce her, Prentice asks her to undress. Thinking this order is a part of her interview, naive and innocent Geraldine takes her clothes off; and this starts a chain of events which will culminate in the unexpected revelations at the very end of the play. While Geraldine is lying naked on the couch behind a curtain, Mrs. Prentice enters with Nicholas Beckett, a bell-boy from Station Hotel who is blackmailing her with pornographic photos he took the previous night. Nick needs a job and some place to hide because he assaulted a group

of schoolgirls in the hotel and is chased by the police. He thus blackmails Mrs. Prentice to find him a position in the clinic. When Mrs. Prentice confesses that she is naked under her fur coat and takes the dress left by Geraldine, the dressing problem starts for the young girl. In the rest of the play, Dr. Prentice first tries to hide naked Geraldine behind the curtain and find her some clothes, and then to explain the sexual confusion caused by the male and female clothes worn by certain characters. In addition, he tries to maintain his own respectability both as a man and a psychiatrist.

In the middle of this confusion, Dr. Rance arrives in order to investigate the clinic. He is an official who represents "Her Majesty's Government". Although he represents order and authority, he is the reason for the chaos and misjudgement surrounding the whole play. He immediately spots naked Geraldine; believing that she is a psychiatric patient, he certifies her insane and cuts her hair. Prentice convinces Geraldine and Nick separately to switch into each other's clothes as a strategy for escaping the clinic and returning to the outside world safely. However, this results in other complications regarding sexual preferences of Prentice himself. The last figure who enters the chaotic mental clinic is the police officer Sergeant Match who investigates both Nick's assault of the schoolgirls and Geraldine's lately deceased step-mother who has been killed by a recent explosion which also destroyed a statue of Sir Winston Churchill. The death of the woman is caused by a missing part of the statue "embedded in" her body. The missing part is certainly the phallus of the statue, which, according to Orton, is one of the major jokes of the play. Although there was no Lord Chamberlain to censor it in 1969 production of the play, Orton's phallic joke was edited by the actor Sir Ralph Richardson who played Dr. Rance, by turning the missing part of the statue into a cigar. The change soon found its place in the script, but it was restored in the 1975 production by Lindsay Anderson. Either way, Orton ridicules the reputation and power of Winston Churchill, the famous leader of the Conservative Party and the father figure of Britain who died in 1965, by symbolically castrating him. As Christopher Innes asserts in *Modern British Drama*, the father figure is actually one of the most important elements of middle class moral standards. They are the conventional symbols of authority. Hence, "*their removal, clearing the way for a celebration of a new (dis) order, projects the destruction of restrictive social norms that Orton hoped to achieve through his drama*" (1996: 272).

In the second act, the confusion reaches extreme points, including drug use, shootings, and several cross-dressings. By the final moment, the audience has already faced with numerous extraordinary concepts such as rape, double incest, transvestism, and fetishism. The anarchic situation reaches its peak point when the two psychiatrists, Prentice and Rance, attempt to certify each other insane at gun point. People are put in straitjackets, undressed and run about the stage naked, shot by a pistol and bleed, and unconsciously drugged. Finally, at the moment of recognition, an old brooch solves the problems and reveals the true identities of both Geraldine and Nick. They are the twin children of Mrs. and Dr. Prentice, the offspring of a rape which had taken place during a power-cut in the linen cupboard at the Station Hotel some time before they got married. After the happy union of the family, the play ends with Rance's last words: "*Let us put our clothes on and face the world*" (1971: 92).

Like in all comedies of manners, the major engine of the plot and of the action is the popular element of mistaken identity initiated by disguise; it causes not only personal but also sexual identity crises. All through the play, Geraldine runs between the identities of a secretary, a patient, Nick, and a fictional character Gerald Barclay – both female and male. She becomes the innocent victim of the play who, only at the end, proves her legitimate sex and identity. Nick changes his identity and sex as well; however he never becomes a victim of this situation since he uses the cross-dressing as a weapon to conceal himself from the police. Unlike Geraldine who is stripped, gets a haircut, put in a hospital night gown, then in a straitjacket, then a bell-boy uniform, and gets naked again, Nick first wears a leopard-spotted dress and a wig, and then a uniform belongs to Sergeant Match. Sergeant Match is drugged and dressed

with a leopard-spotted dress which he wears until the end. Yet his situation is more symbolic and satirical; as the representative of law and order, his emergence as drugged, stumbling across the stage in a leopard-spotted dress represents his move from the symbol of discipline and order to a picture of anarchy and disorder. Therefore Orton hilariously satirizes the state police by humiliating him in the hands of a criminal and a corrupt doctor. Moreover, Orton portrays the insufficiency of the authoritative control of the state over the joyful subversions of marginal characters.

The long lost siblings are a very popular element in the Plautine comedy, the Latin origin of the comedy of manners. The classical formula, also used by Oscar Wilde in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, is one of the basic plot movements of this genre. With this element, Orton ludicrously emphasises post-war social changes and government policies as well.

MRS. PRENTICE: (*Weeping, hugging NICK and GERALDINE.*) Oh children! I am your mother! Can you ever forgive me for what I did?

NICK: What kind of a mother must you have been to stay alone at the Station Hotel?

MRS. PRENTICE: I was employed as a chambermaid. I did it for a joke shortly after the war. The effect of a Labour Government on the middle-classes had to be seen to be believed. (1971: 89)

The two pieces of the brooch shared by Geraldine and Nick provide the evidence for their real identities as another popular classical plot element. The last minute discovery of the token guarantees establishing proper connections between the long lost characters and helps misunderstandings and mistaken identities to unravel. Moreover, close to the end of the play, Sergeant Match descends from the sky like a “*deus ex machina*” which brings the solution to a classical tragedy. Yet, he is far from being a god who brings solution for he has been drugged and stripped in front of the public. Orton gives these classical plot elements nonsensical qualities and turns his play into a hilarious and absurd farce.

Orton builds his comedy on a sharp irony where the expectations of the audience are not satisfied by the characters in rhetorical and situational sense. As Lawson illustrates, “*the incongruity between what the audience expects to happen and what actually does happen on stage is the very heart of the plays*” (2003: 15). Therefore, the key to Orton’s dramatic world can be found in the eccentric relationship between the happenings of his plays and the manner in which the characters talk about them. The happenings may be disgraceful in terms of morality and accepted conventions, but the decorum and mannerism of what is said never collapses as seen in Mrs. Prentice’s commentary on Labour Government. Martin Esslin righteously calls Orton’s comedy as “*high comedy of ill-manners*” (1981: 102) for his comedies represent a chaotic world with taboo topics such as homosexuality, incest, rape, necrophilia, and the collapse of family values.

Orton’s comedy of manners is full of paradoxical and epigrammatic language which covertly (or overtly) satirizes social norms and institutions. His characters speak in a very sophisticated way establishing witty dialogues and repartee full of surprises and sometimes nonsense. When Dr. Prentice claims that he is “*a rationalist*”, Dr. Rance answers “*You can’t be a rationalist in an irrational world. It isn’t rational. . . His belief in normality is quite abnormal*” (1971: 72). While Prentice first asks Geraldine to undress, Geraldine reacts:

GERALDINE: I’ve never undressed in front of a man before.

PRENTICE: I shall take account of your inexperience in these matters.

GERALDINE: I couldn’t allow a man to touch me while I was unclothed.

PRENTICE: I shall wear rubber gloves. (1971: 10-11)

When Nick blackmails Mrs. Prentice with her nude photographs and asks her to find a job for him, she protests, *"You put me in an impossible position"*; Nick responds: *"No position is impossible when you're young and healthy"* (1971: 14). When she mentions the adventures she lived the previous night, Dr. Prentice complains with a typical Wildean manner: *"Do you realize what would happen if your adventures became public? I'd be ruined. The doors of London society would be slammed in my face"* (1971: 18). The characters of the play are not of the genteel society. They are generally ill-mannered not only because they are driven to crimes like murder, rape, and blackmail, but their vulgarity extends to the more ordinary desires of polite society which are *"primarily motivated by the lower-to middle-class situation of the characters who aspire to and pretend higher class status"* (Stirling, 1997: 48). In order to speak for them, Orton gives the inarticulate members of the lower or middle class a polished form of Wildean aphorisms (Esslin, 1981: 96). As seen in Dr. Prentice's complaint, they imitate an empty politeness decorated with conventional rhetorical skills such as slogans, proverbs, and various verbal toys of a sophisticated and fashionable society. Their mannerisms are not only a deception of a higher social status, but a moral one. Therefore, the Ortonesque style profits from the difference between deception and reality, and between surface and essence (Stirling, 1997: 49).

Among the play's major targets are the mental institutions, the perception of insanity or madness and the authorities who decide on sanity or insanity. Orton plays with the conception of authority using the figure of Dr. Rance, who creates a real chaos as soon as he enters the play. He presents himself as the most able psychiatrist and the only authorised person in the clinic; but he appears to be the only true insane character of the play. Rance has a unique way of perceiving the incidents and explanations by interpreting them conversely. When he sees Geraldine, he believes that she is a mentally ill patient indisputably: *"Pull yourself together. Why have you been certified if you're sane? Even for a madwoman you're unusually dense"* (1971: 23). When she rejects that her father assaulted her, Rance comments on her reply: *"She may mean 'Yes' when she says 'No'. It's elementary feminine psychology. . . The vehemence of her denials is proof positive of guilt. It's a text-book case!"* (1971: 26-27). His insistence on the guilt and denial of Geraldine show how rigid and troubled figure he is; but ironically, his conclusions in the last example are somehow correct because Geraldine was attacked by her birth father, Dr. Prentice, a few minutes ago. Hence, this becomes one of the joyous dramatic ironies of the play.

Both Prentice and Rance utilize their powers as psychiatrists in order to manipulate others, and instead of bringing mental health to the people around them, they cause them to experience identity crises. Mrs. Prentice perfectly describes her husband's function in the institution: *"The purpose of my husband's clinic isn't to cure, but to liberate and exploit madness"* (1971: 32). However, she easily believes his mental imbalance and reacts: *"A woman doesn't like facing the fact that the man she loves is insane. It makes her look such a fool"* (1971: 35). In the second act, Sergeant Match finds the methods of Dr. Rance unusual. Rance reminds him: *"You're in a madhouse. Unusual behaviour is the order of the day"*. When Match claims that it is *"Only for patients"* Dr. Rance utters one of the most accurate conclusions of the play: *"We've no privileged class here. It's democratic lunacy we practice"* (1971: 56). In order to prove this assertion, most of the characters start to believe that they are insane at the end of this hectic day. Orton's disrespect and politically incorrect treatment of the delicate matter of mental illness turns assumptions upside down. Orton shows no respect or mercy for the authority in this field; he essentially accuses the authority of creating such an irrational society. As David Ian Rabey concludes, *"The play suggests that guardians of the normality are the most circuitous and hypocritical in the face of the disarmingly forthright anarchy of human appetites"* (2003: 90).

The movement in the play from sanity to insanity, from illusion to reality, and from perversion to normality provides absurdity in Orton's farce. With the subversive and anarchic

energy of farce, naked people are seen running in and out of the numerous doors, convincing the onlookers that the reality they see is a hallucination (Esslin, 1981: 105). The effect of hallucination is also provided by the excessive use of alcohol and drugs during the action of the play; while Mrs. Prentice and Dr. Prentice continuously drink whiskey, Geraldine, Sergeant Match, and even Dr. Rance are drugged. Therefore, it gives the audience "access to the unconscious mind and to sexual fantasies" (Smith, 1989: 129) easily. As Leslie Smith maintains, "Orton's achievement is to take us more deeply into the dreaming areas of the mind than is the case in traditional farce, but to use the tight control of the farcical structure to explore that area. An uninhibited sexuality, then, is central to the play" (1989: 129). Indeed, the most serious attack of the play is directed to sexual matters. The dressing/undressing/cross-dressing both creates and resolves sexual confusions. Here, sexuality is depicted as a natural force and one of the most important mechanisms which controls the lives of people. There are no more well-mannered latent sexual tensions depicted on stage; instead Orton reveals a wild and intricate world of sex where each character plays a part one way or another. With the new sexual revolution and freedom experienced in the 1960s, Orton foregrounds the vulgar and complex sexuality as the new liberty in theatre.

First, the marriage institution is held under the microscope and is ridiculed in various ways. The marriage of Prentices represents a modern attitude in sexual life. The wife and husband deceive each other at the beginning of the play with younger partners. Besides, they accuse each other of incompetence or excessiveness in sexual action. We learn that Mrs. Prentice attends a club of lesbians; yet, although she is married to a man, Mrs. Prentice is exempt from the club rule because her husband "count[s] as a woman" (1971: 13). Moreover, when she threatens her husband by sleeping with an Indian student in New Delhi, Dr. Prentice's objection is not the one that the audience expected: "You can't take lovers in Asia! The air fare would be crippling" (1971: 37). Yet ironically, when Dr. Rance offers her to find a young man whom she could call in times of stress, she protests heartily: "I'm a married woman, doctor! Your suggestion is in the worst of taste" (1971: 75). The humour comes from the inconsistency of her attitude as an ignored and mistreated woman, especially when she threatens her husband with a gun: "Unless you make love to me I shall shoot you" (1971: 80). The marriage presented by Orton is nothing like the marriages that respectable families embody and support in a conservative society. This is the marriage of a new era, 1960s, when sexual consciousness was heightened by the crucial social changes in Britain. Yet it is difficult to say that the middle class society is ready to adopt these changes; therefore the marriage depicted on Orton's stage was attacked and condemned by its first spectators. Nevertheless, Orton challenges the expectations of his audience and subverts the current conceptions about the nature of family and marriage. The double incest which is revealed by the help of the recognition scene does not bother or disturb any of the characters; therefore Orton seems to suggest his audience with a cheerful and happy ending to accept those seeming anomalies as the normalities of the time.

The second sexual discussion in the play is the perception of sexual identities and their unclear nature. This creates the most important challenge to sexual norms and normative values. By means of undressing and cross-dressing, the gender confusion is unleashed which also causes a deceptive blurring of sexual distinctions. Yet, *What the Butler Saw* does not provide an answer to the discussion about the true sexual identity. As a matter of fact, this is the major point of the play. Orton rekindles the discussion about sexual identities by presenting the issue as an ordinary situation. When the characters disguise as the opposite sex, their assumed sexual identities are taken for granted. The incongruity which is created by this effortless acceptance is one of the most farcical elements of the play. The interchangeability of gender is first provided by Nick's wearing a leopard-spotted dress and a blonde wig, impersonating Geraldine. Even Mrs. Prentice, who knows him from the previous night, does not recognize Nick's real identity. But Dr. Rance notices an important detail:

RANCE: Do you realize the woman uses a razor?

PRENTICE: I see nothing remarkable in that. Mrs. Prentice has occasion sometimes to remove unwanted hair.

RANCE: From her chin? There are two sexes. The unpalatable truth must be faced. Your attempts at a merger can end only in heartbreak. (1971: 59)

In another example, Geraldine appears disguised as Nick by wearing his bell-boy uniform. The gender confusion and her suffering in order to act normal create the following scene.

RANCE: Do you think of yourself as a girl?

GERALDINE: No.

RANCE: Why not?

GERALDINE: I'm a boy.

RANCE: Do you have the evidence about you?

GERALDINE: (*her eyes flashing an appeal to DR. PRENTICE*) I must be a boy. I like girls.

RANCE: (*aside, to DR. PRENTICE*) I can't quite follow the reasoning there.

PRENTICE: Many men imagine that a preference for women, is *ipso facto*, a proof of virility.

RANCE: (*nodding, sagely*) Someone should really write a book on these folk-myths. (*To GERALDINE*) Take your trousers down. I'll tell you which sex you belong to. (1971: 57)

Rance's reactions to both situations are significant; in the first conversation he emphasizes that, even though the idea would be revolting, there are only two sexes and the merging of them causes trouble. In the second one, he could not understand the assertions about manhood and implies that preference for women as the sexual partner does not guarantee masculinity. There is only one option to decide on the sex of a person which is the physical facts. Therefore, the inclination for the opposite sex does not confirm the sexual identity because it is normal to desire a person of the same sex. Orton, through his rhetoric full of innuendo, double entendre, and euphemism, plays with the known assumptions on sexual orientation and offers sexual freedom.

When Dr. Prentice is found with female clothes and shoes in his possession, he is accused of being a transvestite. In order to conceal Geraldine's clothes that would reveal her own identity, he admits of having a habit of wearing women's clothes, and says in Joe Orton's own voice "[m]y private life is my own. Society must not be too harsh in its judgements" (1971: 36). In another instance, Rance questions Nick, (disguised as Geraldine) about an "unnatural treatment", a supposed homoerotic bond between Dr. Prentice and Nick (actually Geraldine in disguise), and forces the audience to confront any prejudice toward homosexuality. When Nick asks "what is unnatural?" Rance answers: "a gross violation of the order of things" (1971: 60). However, throughout the play, the order is never preserved and the audience never observes "normality". The person who is responsible for this disorder is actually Rance himself. His insistence on preserving assumptions defined by conventional morality in certain scenes seems absurd and irrelevant. Ironically, Rance summarises the major events of the day as "incest, buggery, outrageous women and strange love-cults catering for depraved appetites" and defines them with an understatement as "fashionable bric-a-brac" by adding "We may get necrophilia too. As a sort of bonus" (1971: 72).

At the very end of the play, Dr. Rance's suggestion of putting their clothes on to face the outside world indicates that their hypocritical behaviour will remain the same. This idea that the society consists of those people whose stories reflected on stage is the crucial message for the audience. Orton manages to accomplish the mission of questioning and thus subverting the

society's perspective of cultural constructions of gender, along with the dominant ideologies about sexual, domestic or institutional issues. In this sense, *What the Butler Saw* presents an alternating world order as a possible substitute to "normality". Orton's world is metaphorically an amusement park where everyone lives an alternative reality. The characters live a life with ups and downs like in a roller coaster. This explicit dynamism and the assertion of "normalized" anomalies in the play somehow widen the perceptions and understandings of the audience. The ending of the play seems more traditional when the nuclear family reunites after long years. However, it is still perplexing because of the previous attempts of adultery and double incest experienced on stage. The audience is inevitably concerned about the future of this family whose members effortlessly ignore the shameful facts about their recent past. Orton experiments with a new kind of comedy of manners which does not let the audience forget the corruption and shame prevalent in society. The new order presented at the end of the play, even though approved by the act of laughter, still distresses the audience. With the integration of comedy of manners and farce, Joe Orton creates an artificial yet antiauthoritarian atmosphere in which he delineates a critique of conventional values and the language of the high class; and he exposes as well as ridicules the irrationality of British life with its absurdity, hypocrisy, and disorder. By using farce, he challenges and subverts the expectations of the audience with delicate subjects and taboos like marriage, family structures, incest, and madness and diminishes the values of each and every class among which his core audience also exists. When the mental clinic becomes a microcosm of Britain in which madness is liberated and sexual chaos prevails, the audience who has no chance but to spy on the action on stage, takes part in it by an appreciative laughter. Otherwise, they would become a part of the rigid and authoritarian culture ridiculed and satirized by Orton. Laughter becomes a powerful tool and enhances the political quality of the play. For, the politics of comedy stems from its capability of mocking and subverting the power structures and prevailing institutional authority.

REFERENCES

- Andrews, M. (1998). "Butterflies and Caustic Asides: Housewives, Comedy and the Feminist Movement". **Because I Tell a Joke or Two: Comedy, Politics and Social Difference**, (Ed: Stephen Wagg), Routledge, New York.
- Charney, M. (1991). **Comedy High and Low: An Introduction to the Experience of Comedy**, Peter Lang, New York.
- Dean, J. F. (1982). "Joe Orton and the Redefinition of Farce". **Theatre Journal**, 34/4, 481-492.
- Esslin, M. (1981). "Joe Orton: The Comedy of (Ill) Manners". **Contemporary English Drama**, (Ed: C.W.E. Bigsby), Holmes & Meier Publishers, New York.
- Hinchcliffe, A. P. (1974). **British Theatre 1950-70**. Basil Blackwell, Oxford.
- Innes, C. D. (1996). **Modern British Drama 1890-1990**. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Lahr, J. (1976). Introduction. **The Complete Plays**. Methuen, London.
- Lawson, D. (1996). "Joe Orton". **British Playwrights 1956-1995: A Research and Production Sourcebook**, (Ed: William W. Demastes), Greenwood Press, Westport.
- Lawson, D. (2003). "The Creation of Comedy in Joe Orton's Entertaining Mr. Sloane". **Joe Orton: A Casebook**, (Ed: Francesca Coppa), Routledge, London.
- Lilly, M. (1993). **Gay Men's Literature in the Twentieth Century**, The MacMillan Press, London.
- Morreall, J. (1983). **Taking Laughter Seriously**, State University of New York Press, Albany.
- Orton, J. (1971). **What the Butler Saw**, Methuen, London.
- Patterson, M. (2007). **Strategies of Political Theatre: Post-War British Playwrights**. Cambridge University Press, New York.
- Prentki, T. and Selman, J. (2003). **Popular Theatre and Political Culture: Britain and Canada in Focus**, Intellect Books, Bristol.
- Rabey, D. I. (2003). **English Drama since 1940**. Longman, London.
- Smith, L. (1989). **Modern British Farce: A Selective Study of British Farce from Pinero to the Present Day**, Macmillan Press, London.
- Stirling, G. (1997). "Ortonesque/Carnavalesque: The Grotesque Realism of Joe Orton". **Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism**, 11/2, 41-64.
- Stott, A. (2005). **Comedy**, Routledge, New York.
- Thompson, W. I. (1965). "Freedom and Comedy". **The Tulane Drama Review**, 9/3, 216-230.
- Worthen, W.B. (1992). **Modern Drama and the Rhetoric of Theatre**. University of California Press, Berkeley.