

CULTURAL CRITICISM IN JOHN OSBORNE'S PLAY: *THE ENTERTAINER*

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Abstract: John Osborne's *The Entertainer* documents the Britain of 1950s. As the country recovers from two World Wars and is faced with another incident that looks for a period as if it might lead to third World War, Suez Crisis (1956). The play breaks with the English tradition of playing middle class drama in theatres with middle class-patrons. In the theatre, the patrons stay largely the same although the new media of television is changing all that with televised drama aimed at a different socio-economic group. "Kitchen sink" drama, led by playwrights like Pinter and Wesker and Osborne, is new. Osborne has used *The Entertainer*, to emphasize the social, political and economic issues that have been taking place in Britain since 1945. He introduces his play, *The Entertainer*, "The music hall is dying, and, with it, a significant part of England. Some of the heart of England has gone; something has gone; something that once belonged to everyone, for this was truly a folk art. The paper aims to mark cultural criticism and commodification of culture in Osborne's Play, *The Entertainer*."

Key Words: Commodification, Kitchen Sink Drama, Music Hall, Industrial Revolution, Suez Crisis.

Introduction: *The Entertainer* is a three act Play of John Osborne, first performed on 10 April 1957 at Royal Court theatre, London. It is the theatre, known for its commitment to new and non traditional drama and inclusion of new star like Laurence Olivier. Olivier played the famous role of the entertainer on stage, directed by Tony Richardson. "It is both family tragedy and allegory for a declining post-war England" ("Amazon Reviews"). Playwright Osborne introduces the play:

The music hall is dying, and, with it, a significant part of England. Some of the heart of England has gone; something has gone; something that once belonged to everyone, for this was truly a folk art. In writing this play, I have not used some of the techniques of the music hall in order to exploit an effective trick, but because I believe that these can solve some of the eternal problems of time and space that face the dramatist, and, also, it has been relevant to the story and setting. (*The Entertainer*)

The story of the play is set against the background of the dying music hall tradition, symbolic of Britain's post-war decline of its loss of its imperialism, power, cultural belief, and identity. *The Entertainer* highlights the spirit of England that has been tattered because of the financial and moral breakdown during the period in England. The Entertainer is Archie Rice, a mediocre music hall artist upholding a dying tradition in an English seaside against a background of the '1956 Suez Crisis'. In an article, *The Last Laugh: Comedy as a political Touchstone in Britain from "The Entertainer" to "comedians"*, John Harrop writes:

As an institution the music hall has been dead some thirty years, but in that period it has become of interest to socialist, sociologists and some playwright as a symbol of the true working class heritage the new British society is seeking. In attempting to create an egalitarian social ethos free from bourgeois associations, there are those in Britain who look back

at the music hall an example of a truly popular cultural form. ("The Last Laugh")

Music hall in Britain was a popular form of entertainment founded in the expanding towns and cities of the nineteenth century. Its roots lay in the types of performance given in pleasure gardens, in 24 "song and supper" rooms, and in the amateur events held in some public houses. By the beginning of the twentieth century the music halls had largely been replaced by 'Variety' theatres. The roots of the modern musical theatre can be traced to 18th century stage of the London, when *The Beggar's Opera* was first produced at Covent Garden Theatre. Music hall continued during the interwar period, but no longer as the single dominant form of popular entertainment in Britain. "The improvement of cinema, the development of radio, and the cheapening of the gramophone damaged its popularity greatly. It now had to compete with Jazz, swing and Big Band dance music. Licensing restrictions also changed its character" ("Oxford Music"). The exemption of the theatres from this latter act prompted some critics to denounce this legislation as an attempt to deprive the working classes of their pleasures, as a form of social control, while sparing the supposedly more responsible upper classes who patronized the theatre. "After World War II, competition from television and other musical idioms, including Rock n Roll, caused the slow demise of the British music halls, despite some attempts to retain an audience by putting on striptease acts" ("Oxford music"). Billy discussed about this new disturbing development to Jean in theatre of music hall:

BILLY. . . . These nudes. They're killing the business . . . it's dead already. Has been for years. It is all over finished, dead when I got out of it. I saw it coming . . . They don't want real people any more.

JEAN. No, I suppose they don't.

BILLY. They don't want human- beings. Not any more . . . Gets half his posing girls in there if you ask me.

(. . .) Well, why should a family man take his wife and kids to see a lot of third- class sluts standing about in a nude? . . . They're all skin and bone. (18)

The setting of the play is, "The house where the Rice family live is one of those tall ugly monuments built by prosperous business man at the beginning of the century" (II). This house is built by Billy, once prosperous and famous at music hall business. Now it is called, 'tall ugly monument' like 'dying music hall'. Billy is also a retired man of retired art of theatre. This is an impact of new age, derived essentially after industrial revolution. It is specifically the industrialization that turned this place ugly which, "holiday makers never see- or if they do, they decide to turn back to pleasure gardens" (II). The residence of Billy "is not residential, it is hardly industrial . . . full of dirty blank spaces, high black walls, a gas holder, tall chimney, a main road that shakes with dust and lorries. The shops are scattered at the corners of narrow streets" (II). This is the England, introduced by the playwright in the beginning of the play. These gloomy surroundings reflect the ruined condition of the people living in it as well as financial and emotional bankruptcy of the country as a whole. This is no more the age of the old man, Billy but a new age of industrial revolution. It led so many changes in England and one of the changes consequently attacks the territory of musical taste. Thus more professional forms of entertainment arose from traditional theatre in response to the rapid industrialization and urbanization of previously rural populations during the industrial revolution. The newly created urban communities cut off from their cultural roots, required new and readily accessible forms of entertainment. By the 1870s the songs were free of their folk music origins, and particular songs also started to become associated with particular singers, often with exclusive contracts with the songwriters, just as many pop songs are today. Towards the end of the style, the music became influenced by ragtime and jazz, before being overtaken by them. "Jazz is about freedom, movement and individual expression. Its break from musical tradition and emphasis on improvisation and innovation set it up as the backdrop to cultural changes, and it influences international culture today" ("Jazz"). Jazz is played, with its own local flair, on every continent. →During Prohibition and the economic prosperity of the 1920s, jazz became the soundtrack to parties in underground clubs, called "speakeasies," where pleasure ruled and outlawed liquor was consumed (2). Because of its roots in African-American culture, and the places, occasions and activities with which it was associated, jazz

initially bore the label of "low culture" (2). The free-spirited nature of jazz, spread throughout American culture. Women began to break out of traditional sexual roles, shunning conservative clothing and behaviour for a newfound freedom and independence from men and obligatory roles within families. Jazz made room for women to work as performers and provided many other jobs for women in the music industry.

Archie Rice pursued the business of his father and Billy had earned lots of fame and money as an artist of Music Hall. Unfortunately, this art is retired like the age of Billy, but Archie is not ready to give up like his father who is still wearing the same clothes of his old times, "probably twenty-five years old- including his pointed patent leather shoes- but well pressed and smart" (13). Billy's cloths show the temperament of Edwardian culture. Men used to "wear tall, stiff collar cloths as do women's broad hats and full Gibson girl hairstyles" ("1900"). Billy's gleaming "watch chain", "fixed collar with a tie- pin beneath the tightly knotted black tie" all reflect his age. Strangely both father and son do not resign from the Edwardian era (13). Music Halls were also the significant medium of entertainment during Edwardian period. It had its grace in times. Billy speaks, "with a dignified Edwardian diction". It has got "- a kind of repudiation of both Oxford and Cockney" "Indeed, it is not an accent of class but of period. One does not hear it often now" (13). There is an elegiac nostalgic note of protest in the play for the Edwardian era, in which music hall had flourished. Time has drastically changed and it is the emergence of new age. It is no more Edwardian and absolutely not of music halls. It is arrival of Jazz and Rock'n Roll, "Music. The latest, the loudest, the worst. A gauzed front- cloth. On it are painted enormous naked young ladies, waving brightly coloured fans, and kicking out gaily. Written across it in large letters are the words "ROCK'N ROLL NEW'D LOOK" (12). There is always an interference of society to make things popular and the failure of music hall in Britain can be understood from Adorno's theory of "Dialectic of Enlightenment" that says, "Everything has value only in so far as it can be exchanged, not in so far it is something in itself" (127). Zuidervaart, Lambert further opines that:

[T]he culture industry involves a change in the commodity character of art, such that art's commodity character is deliberately acknowledged and art "abjures its autonomy" (DE 127). With its emphasis on marketability, the culture industry dispenses entirely with the "purposelessness" that was central to art's autonomy. Once marketability becomes a total demand, the internal economic structure of cultural commodities shifts. Instead of promising freedom from socially dictated uses, and thereby having a genuine use value that people can

enjoy, products mediated by the culture industry have their use value replaced by exchange value. ("Theodor W. Adorno")

Billy consistently instructs Archie, "These nudes. They're killing the business . . . it's dead already" (18). The society becomes totally commercial where everything is designed according to market's needs, as in Billy's views, "[t]hey don't want real people any more" (18). Market fancies business to attain profit and business does not require human but material to formulate material. To sustain in the market the human is reshaped into material. A material or machine does not have any emotions so can be used for any purpose to yield money. "Naked young ladies, waving brightly coloured fans" are not human anymore but have been transformed into machines (12). Transformation of human into machine is practically not possible but it is the consequence of mechanical age as a result of which human being has become a victim to survive in these dehumanized circumstances. Billy is business minded and believes to invest money from where he can earn profit; it is usual practice for any ordinary man of this age. He feels regretful for Archie who is fruitlessly involved with the business of loss. Even as a true businessman he feels himself at loss as he has spent money on the education of Archie, in turn wastes in dead business. While conversing with Jean, Billy expresses remorse on it:

JEAN. With this new show you mean. Has he really put money into it?

BILLY. Put money into it! Don't make me laugh! He hasn't got two halfpennies for a penny. It's all credit. Credit, if you please! . . . Do you know, I spent thousands of pounds on his education...Thousands of pounds. . . . And where's it got 'em? (. . .) that Rockcliffe. They should close the place. Someone should write the Council about it. . . . There's a lot of gentry here . . . Retired people. They don't want that kind of thing going on. (19) Archie is trapped in the clutches of surrounding conditions. In the view of Andrew Wyllie, in an article, 'The Entertainer', "Archie is trapped. He is a man out of his time - too young for music hall and too old for politics. In a more complex way he is also a man out of his class" ("The Entertainer"). So as a victim, he is helpless to perform in variety theatre whose hallmark is a sort of shallow cheapness, most memorably and symbolically embodied in the person of a nude Britannia. Whereas the obsolete nature of music hall is pointed up by the neatness and uprightness, variety theatre is popular for "striptease acts" ("The Entertainer"). Archie's father, Billy got out of the business in time,

We're all out for good old number one,
Number one's the only one for me!
Good old England, you're my cup of tea,
The National Health won't bring you wealth

leaving Archie to struggle in a decaying milieu. Billy shows his apprehensions towards the miserable condition of Jean and Archie. He talks about the prosperous and happy past of Archie as a child, "He was a smart little boy himself. Used to dress them in sailor suits then" (23). But he is struggling now against the present misery. He as well as all his children has become the culprits of the mean society. Showing his apprehensions against the present status of people, he expresses, "I feel sorry for you people. You don't know what it's really like. You haven't lived, most of you. You've never known what it was like, you're all miserable really. You don't know what life can be like" (23).

Archie is in tremendous pressure while performing on the corrupted stage. He has become the victim of commodification of culture on stage. He, moreover, questions the poor condition of the present status of theatre and feels his worthlessness in it, "I don't know what we're coming to. Look at the songs they sing! . . . it's all rubbish, isn't it?"(32). Instead of honest realization, he is cheating himself behind the curtains. It is one of the favorite features of the playwright to portray 'sufferers'. Archie is a lost person in a state of alienation, "[a]n armless man trying to reach out eventually grasps the comedy of his falling down every time" (Harold ferrar 21). Archie feels his futility among the sexy ladies on the stage all the time to attract the attention of the audiences. He compares him with "these posing girls" get more value on stage than him. He understands the unwanted place of him on stage, "I wouldn't think I was sexy to look at me would you!" (32). It is a slow death for Archie which this mean society has chosen for him. It is an "objective discharge of business primarily means that business is discharged according to *calculable* rules and without regard for persons is also the watchword of the market and, in general of all pursuit of naked economic interest" (Alienation" 25). So he pushes himself to make some place in this cruel world, where he is no more than an unsuccessful, dumb, and unfortunate, not to look sexy. Archie mostly performs in a spotlight in front of the stage curtain. He is not compatible with the needs of the present society. It is a competitive age, greedy for the money and Archie is one of the dying parts of dying music halls left behind in the race. Archie as well as Britain is far behind which was called as number one in the past. With the following song it seems that Archie reminds of his failure in the country's failure. Britain has seen the pleasant and prosperous Imperialist Past. Archie is pursuing for the glorious past of Billy at present.

Those wigs and blooming spectacles are
bought by you and me.
The Army, the Navy and the Air Force,
Are all we need to make the blighters see
It still belongs to you, the old red, white and
Those bits of red still on the map
We won't give up without a scrap.
What we've got left back
We'll keep- and blow you, Jack!
God bless you!

Number one's the only one for me! (32- 33).

"National Health won't bring you wealth" reveals the frustration of Archie towards Government's policies which are unable to improve the weird condition of common man like his. Glamorous- policies of government are nothing but show case to impress the people. But in reality it is doing nothing but working to victimize more citizens of the country. Archie is one of the victims of mechanical age. He acknowledges their present status as the victims of the society as well as the society, victimizing them: "We're all a bit slewed, which means that we're a bit more sub- human even than we usually are . . . I'll bet the patients in that hospital all freeze to death - he must be saving the National Health thousands" (58). Archie and people like him are being treated as failures and society is treating them as disasters, having "problems that nobody believes in . . . something that people makes jokes about, because we're so remote from the rest of ordinary everyday, human experience"(54). It is undoubtedly hypocrisy of the British politics which on the one hand receiving appraisalment of 'welfare society' but on the real side doing nothing for the people, like Archie who are in need of welfare. Archie, as a victim is facing the mean realism of present time. This victim is appealing to people to stop mocking on his failure. He clarifies the condition of people like him: "We're not really funny. We're too boring. Simply because we're not like anybody who ever lived. We don't get on with anything. We don't ever succeed in anything" (54). 'Welfare' has just become another tool for politicians to attract the voters. Phoebe, too mocks at the over expenditure on welfare which is in no way deriving any wellbeing to her countrymen.

PHOEBE. . . . I didn't have my Beecham's Pills yesterday. Do' you know my mother never had a doctor in her life. . . .

JEAN. Peroxide?

FRANK. She used to drink it like Guinness.

PHOEBE. Well, she lived to be ninety- three and never cost the Government a penny. (63)

In the mechanical age, man like a machine works relentlessly to produce money. Archie is also one of the transformed men into machine. But he is an outdated machine and so waste in the society. He fails to fulfil the demands of the present society. He

aspires to the theatre that society rejects to see. Being an unproductive and unwanted machine, he is most often insulted by the people around him. Even his daughter, Jean insults him frequently. On that his simple answer is, "Go on insult me. I don't mind. . . . Whole lot of people make a whole lot of money out of that principle" (77). It seems beside of his failure he denies to adapt and compromise in the present condition. And here a question arises that how long can Archie survive in the present situation? In the questionable state of Archie, he simulates his misery to a poor and pathetic old lady. The old lady like an old machine disable to work. So, Archie raises the issue of poor and unemployed people in machine age. However it seems impossible for the audiences to feel poor man's misery as their motive is to get entertained in any cost. It is like an unattached relation of machine to machine where human does not share any feeling to other human. And Archie's effort to convince his audience seems futile:

All the time we're trying to draw someone's attention to our nasty, sordid, unlikely little problems. Like that poor, pathetic old thing there. Look at her. What has she got to do with people like you? People of intellect and sophistication. She's very drunk, and just now her muzzy, under- developed, untrained mind is racing because her blood is full of alcohol I can't afford to give her, and she's going to force us to listen to all sorts of dreary embarrassing things we've all heard a hundred time before. She's getting old, and she's worried about who's going to keep her when she can't work any longer. (54- 55)

Archie worked the way he wanted like a free bird. But now he is captured in the cage of mechanical world where he has lost his real self. He expresses his present deprived state, "Look at me- it's all real, you know. Me- all real, nothing shoddy. You don't think I'm real, do you? Well, I'm not (*Stumbling.*)"(60). Archie's condition seems more miserable when he starts realizing his irrelevant presence on the stage as well in the society. Archie is one of his fellowmen who did not compromise or, in real terms, 'change' himself according to new world. He still strives and struggles to retain in his real self and in order to assert this, he proclaims himself to be as normal as

any ordinary man of Britain, "I'm just like the rest of you chaps, decent and full of good sense" (61). In fact, he manages himself against the stream of social pressures. He is like the other countrymen who are still stand with deteriorating state of their country in the hope that Britain will retrieve its old position one day.

A younger generation is represented on-stage by Archie's son Frank and daughter Jean, and off-stage by his son Mick, a soldier whose death in action is announced in the course of the play. Unlike Archie and Frank, Billy is somehow hopeful for Jean that she has the ability to sustain in the struggling atmosphere of England. But still, he anxiously talks about the present status of the job of Jean, "Probably, don't give you much in that job, do they? You tell'em what you're worth, they're robbers" (20). Billy accuses the employers of Jean, and calls them 'robbers'. According to him, Jean deserves better place, and he says, "You're a good girl and I know you'll do something with your life, you'll be somebody. You won't waste it away and be silly" (21). Jean is forced to pursue the things to generate money, which she does not desire to do. She was rather desperate to teach painting but her instinct towards creativity was absolutely useless to her people only because "[t]here wasn't any money in it. Just a few shillings for a few nights a week" (28). Less money means valueless work. Graham was earlier doing the same thing and probably Jean was attracted towards him for this quality, but now he is fed up with this and, thus, more interested in something which can produce money. Jean is compulsive to paint; she is the only person in the play, cares for feelings and emotions. She expresses her deepest desire besides of protest: "I'd never been good enough to paint myself, but I thought this was something I really could do. Even if it was just battling a gang of moronic of teenagers. The club leader thought I was mad, and so did Graham" (29).

Jean's coming back to home gives impression of leaving Graham. She now seeks out a new path through political resolve and action. In contrast everybody is against her, Phoebe comments at the disapproval of Graham for her career option, "I can't say I blame him really. It doesn't sound very nice job at all. Not for a young girl like you, Jean" (29). Jean is confronting against all the fellows around her. Her demand is worthy enough to call it right of every human that is, to live life of one's choice. She has decided her way and leading towards it also, but with so many constraints. She is suffering as painter and helpless to take, voluntarily, "obligatory class" of painting. She does what she loves to do against the trend of present age as the art of painting is not in vogue in the present society. Jean consistently fights against the adamant age and adverse conditions of

the age and, so suffers as a victim. She screams for her rights as a human being:

Most of the time I've loathed it, and loathed them. I pretended to be myself that I didn't, but I did. I hated them, but I think I was getting somewhere. You know, I hadn't realized- it just hadn't occurred to me that you could love somebody, that you could want them, and want them twenty four hours of the day and then suddenly find that you're neither of you even living in the same world. I don't understand that . . . I wish I could understand it. It's frightening. (29)

The mechanical age needs youth who can present themselves and can be exploited for materialistic gains. Billy is old now and is not worthwhile for the needs of the mechanical society. Though it is inhuman and cruel, it is the existing culture. "It makes," confesses Billy, "sad-sometimes" (22). But then, with the shrewd looks at Jean, he consoles himself and tries to empathize with the customs of emotionless people of commercial age. Expecting sympathy or help from a machine is futile. He genuinely recognizes, more than any vice in the society, his uselessness in it. He is a weak old man of the new time, as his words reveal: "I suppose you've no right to expect people to listen to you. Just because you've had your life. It's all over for you. Why should anyone listen to you?"(22). On the other side, it is not the fault of any of the people around Billy. It is a new development which has assaulted human-life. Billy also recognizes this change in the present society: "[t]hat's the trouble nowadays. Everybody's too busy answering back and tacking liberties" reveals old Entertainer (78). Billy feels that there is no originality left in the present society. Archie, with artificiality, himself dances in nudity in front of artificial audiences. Jean wonders in vain for her lost art and expecting little sympathy from derivative people. Phoebe is standing like a pillar alone to hold the burden of the family. Billy talks about Charlie who is still cashing his art, "earning a thousand a week for twenty- five years and just the same"(81), and it is not just out of his art but his originality. "He is a sort of in- between. He wasn't one of us real old timers, and he wasn't one of these new five- minute wonders with a microphone" (81). Billy feels that Charlie understands to maintain the balance with his art without losing his original self, unlike Archie but fails to see reality anywhere. According to him, it was significantly there in the lives of Billy and his contemporary. Billy expresses the originality of the people and their art that have come to an end:

They've got no real personality now. He always had style, Eddie, and never any real suggestion of offence in anything he did. We all had our own style, our own songs- and we were all English. What's more, we spoke English. It was different. We all knew what the rules were . . . and if we spent half our time

making people laugh . . . A real pro is a real man, all he needs is an old backcloth behind him and he can hold them on his own for an hour. . . . I should say he's probably the last. (82)

Hence Osborne's play, *The Entertainer* is deeply rooted in the soil of prevailing circumstances. The play seems to have formed a microcosm of the life-cultural as well individual – of Britain. Britain of 1950s witness various social, political, economic and cultural issues which created the oceanic climate in the play, however these manifestations are not passive, inert and apathetic; the playwright seems to

be in a state of constant battle against the deadening culture through dying music hall during this period. Apart from being a playwright, Osborne, in his play, appears to have taken the position of a distinguished social critic and thinker. He shows a serious concern for changing cultural trend of his country not merely for the sake of aesthetic pleasure, or to entertain, but primarily in order to reveal the hidden ambiguities and anguishes and, in this effort, *The Entertainer* seems to have succeeded, to a great extent, in conveying the message in tune with the general ethos of his time.

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