

How does look back
in anger engage the
audience essay
sample



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John Osbourn is regarded by many as having revolutionised British theatre with his 1950's composition of 'Look Back In Anger'. Prior to this most plays took the subject of perfect problems in perfect lives and dwelled upon upper class relationships in a comical and fairy tale manner. Oscar Wild's 'The importance of being Earnest' being a key example of this. In the end all issues would be resolved and the audience would feel satisfied that everyone was to live happily ever after.

Osborn shocked his 50's audience with his masterpiece based upon lower class relationships being entwined with violence and challenging the then widely accepted issue of masculine supremacy. Since 'Look Back In Anger' it is a new style of play, it needs to engage the audience from the very beginning. This is done in a number of ways, most challenging the audiences idea of what a good play should include and makes an equally brilliant play with totally original material. The first abnormal thing an audience would become aware of is the set, a large one roomed flat.

Although being big there is a long list of furniture in place leaving the living space rather small thus creating a feeling of claustrophobia. This is accentuated by having only two small low windows. This apprehension of the outside world would reflect upon the audiences expectations of the characters making them think they will be held back with their feelings and emotions. The second irregular observation the audience would make is the closeness of the double bed to the actual living area.

This would shock an audience of the time as the bed, which starkly reflects sex, should be kept to ones self and not protrude into daily life. This also

contrasts with the first point about the characters holding back their emotions. It makes the environment contradict the expectations of the characters and makes them seem forthcoming. The audience would want to watch on to find out which one is true. It also draws parallels with the confusion and irregularity in the lives of the characters.

In the film the set is very contrasting to the one room in the play. It is still a flat but it has three or four rooms. This lowers the sense of claustrophobia. I think this has been done purely for the fact that the film was made years after the play and this would have been the equivalent to a one roomed flat in 1950. If a new version of the film was to be made today it may be set in a small council house. Down right of the stage is a heavy chest of draws with a 'tattered toy teddy bear and soft woolly squirrel' on it.

These are significant as they are direct links with childhood, the tattered teddy being Jimmy's rather rough upbringing and the squirrel being Alison's well structured youth in her upper class life. We can tell that at one time in her past she was upper class as the stage directions say that she is wearing a 'grubby but expensive dress'. She also hangs on to some of her upper class values as the script also states that she 'Manages to somehow look quite elegant'. Cliff on the other hand has 'The natural intelligence of the self taught kind' meaning that he did not go to school.

This points us to the fact that he probably came from a lower class family who did not care about his education. His presence in the house is shrouded in mystery as there does not appear to be a bed for him, and why is he needed in Alison's and Jimmy's relationship. These questions would keep the

audiences attention as they would seek answers. As the first scene progresses we find that coterie to prior doubts, Cliff actually plays an important role in keeping their marriage stable.

He acts as a buffer between Jimmy and Alison by protecting Alison from Jimmy's verbal abuse and then letting Jimmy Direct it at him. For example when Jimmy starts shouting at Alison cliff steps in turns it onto him: Cliff: Leave her alone, I said. Jimmy: (Shouting) All right, dear go back to sleep. It was only me talking. You know? Talking? Remember? I'm sorry. Cliff: Stop yelling I am trying to read. Jimmy: Why do you bother? You can't understand a word of it.

Cliff: Uh huh This theory is also backed up by a conversation that takes place between Alison and Cliff: Cliff: I'm wondering how much longer I can go on watching you two tearing the insides out of each other. It looks pretty ugly sometimes. Alison You wouldn't seriously think of leaving us, would you? Cliff: I suppose not. Alison I think I'am frightened. If only I knew what was going to happen. This shows that Cliff does divert abuse away from Alison but at the same time he is also finding it hard work and some of Jimmy's comments re starting to get to him.

It is Jimmy who seems to be the main protagonist in the play and who has bought both Cliff and Alison into his lower-middle class home. The reason for his misconduct towards Alison can not fully be explained in act one or the rest of the play for that matter. Even though this would keep the audience engaged trying to find a reason. Some of the things said, mostly by Jimmy would have been very controversial at the time but the audience would

probably enjoyed this as they would have realised that it did not hurt anyone and could be quite entertaining, in a sinister way.

Jimmy's lines at the end of act one, where he says that he hopes Alison will have a baby and then it will die. This still remains shocking even today so in 1950 this would have put the play on a knife edge. Again, capturing the audience and making them want to know what else will happen. Today though, times have moved on and the content of plays is virtually unlimited. This makes 'Look Back In Anger' seem rather customary. But what must be remembered is that it is this play that made today's theatre normal.