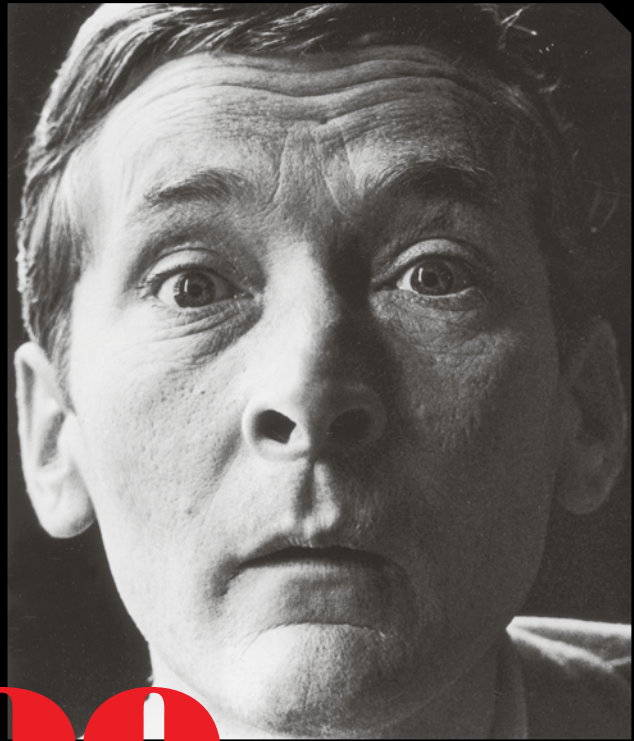


Ken

During their short but intimate friendship, Kenneth Williams was both thrilled and intrigued by the antics of playwright Joe Orton



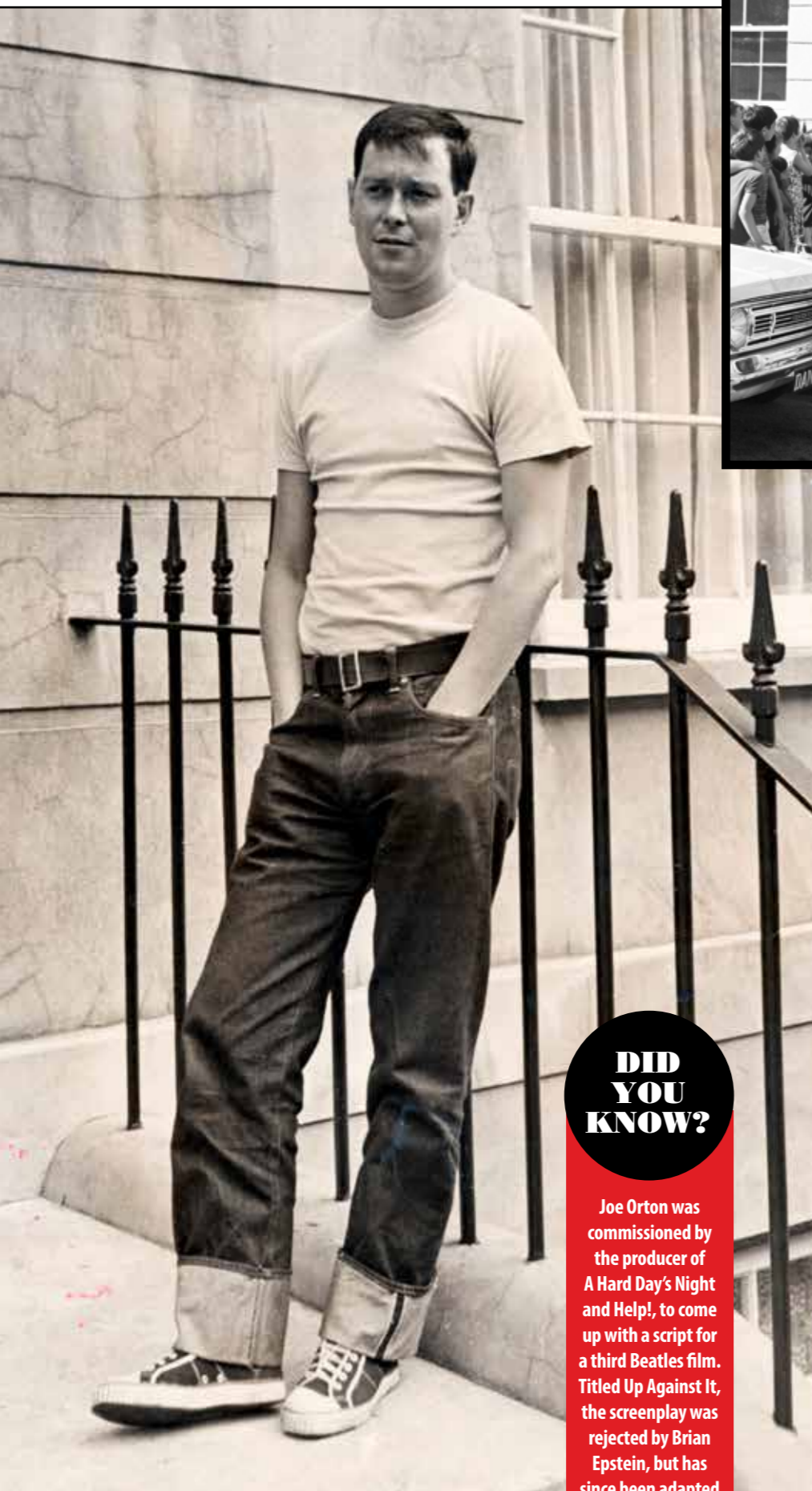
& Joe



A funny kind of friendship

In many ways, Kenneth Williams and Joe Orton were a spectacularly odd coupling. Oh, there were definite similarities between the fastidious, culturally voracious Carry On star and the impish, iconoclastic playwright - both could be brutally catty and delight in shocking those around them - but in terms of their attitudes towards their own sexuality, they couldn't have been more different.

It was 1964 when Kenneth Williams was first introduced to the young playwright who was taking the West End by storm. Orton's first stage play, the gleefully scandalous *Entertaining Mr Sloane*, had opened in the May of that year and Williams was bowled over by its dark, scabrous ➔



DID YOU KNOW?

Joe Orton was commissioned by the producer of *A Hard Day's Night and Help!*, to come up with a script for a third Beatles film. Titled *Up Against It*, the screenplay was rejected by Brian Epstein, but has since been adapted for the stage and radio.



Far left: 25 Noel Road, Islington, where Joe Orton was killed by his lover in 1967.

Left: Joe Orton with Kenneth Williams and Kenneth Halliwell on holiday in Tangier.



conscience." In his diary entry dated July 23, 1967, Orton recounts telling Williams about a particularly lustful encounter.

wit. He raved about the play to his friend Michael Codron, who told the star that its writer was a fan of Williams and suggested the two should meet. "I warn you," Codron told him, "we'll have to have the friend as well - they're practically inseparable."

The 'friend' in question was Kenneth Halliwell, Orton's long-time lover. Though Williams found Halliwell an off-putting presence, mainly due to his tendency to interrupt Orton's conversation with a barrage of pedantic corrections, he immediately warmed to Joe, who was seven years his junior. "His mixture of naivety and sophistication was a constant delight," he wrote in his 1985 autobiography *Just Williams*.

SETTING OUT TO SHOCK

Orton was, at the time, theatre's enfant terrible. He not only looked different to most of the stuffy theatre elite (he rarely wore suits, instead preferring to attend meetings in a T-shirt, jeans, army boots and a dustman's jacket), but behaved differently too. Homosexuality had not yet been legalised in the UK, yet the promiscuous Orton peacocked his sexuality in a way that the repressed Kenneth Williams found both thrilling and bewildering. So much so that Williams was eager to show off his new friend, even introducing Orton to his mother, who regaled the elderly, apparently unshockable lady with torrid tales of his sexual misbehaviour. After one anecdote about an encounter in a Leicester doorway, Mrs Williams

exclaimed, "Joe! You might have caught your death of cold!"

For his part, Orton was so wowed by Williams that, when planning his next play, the even more taboo-busting *Loot*, he wrote the leading part of Inspector Truscott specially for the actor. Sadly, the resulting production, in which Williams co-starred alongside a young Ian McShane, was a critical and commercial dud, with the *London Evening News*' reviewer calling it "one of the most revolting things I've ever seen".

FUN IN THE SUN

After the curtain was drawn on *Loot*, Orton and Halliwell invited a dejected Williams to join them on holiday in Tangier. Male prostitution was common in the Moroccan city, while gay bars were dotted along its waterfront, making it a go-to destination for gay men keen to sow their oats. Williams said no that first time, but on their return and hearing their stories, his interest was piqued. In June 1966, he finally joined Orton and Halliwell in the sun. Unlike Joe and Kenneth H, Williams did not take advantage of the sexual freedoms in the city. Instead he took up residence in its bars, gossiping loudly and, on one day, lunching with a vacationing Warren Beatty.

While Orton was shameless in his sexual escapades, Williams was, by his own admission, queasy about sex. "I derived vicarious pleasure from Joe's erotic dalliances," Williams later wrote. "[I fear] the recrimination of my own

"Kenneth viewed the story," Joe wrote, "with that strange mixture of excitement and disapproval that marks his character."

Orton's glee in recounting his countless sexual hook-ups weren't even spared from his partner. Orton would often write about them in his diary in unblushingly, anatomical detail, leaving its pages open for Halliwell to see.

No-one knows for sure exactly what triggered Kenneth Halliwell that fateful night in 1967, but on the morning of August 9 Joe Orton was found dead, having been bludgeoned to death by his partner, who'd then taken his own life. "I was stunned," Williams later wrote. "There was something so dark and horrible about the circumstances." He was inundated with requests from the BBC and ITN to go on TV and talk about his murdered friend, but turned them all down.

"When I think of the generosity of Joe," Williams wrote in his diary that night, "his warmth and affection, his kindness to me when I was so depressed, I just want to cry."

In many ways, the friendship between Kenneth Williams and Joe Orton was a kind of mutual appreciation society, and Williams never quite recovered from Orton's murder. "I'm the only one apart from KH who really knew Joe," Williams wrote in 1970, and it's clear that Williams not only lost a friend that day, but an ally in waspish put-downs and saucy tales. Britain is a duller place without them.

FRIENDS OF KEN

GORDON JACKSON: Williams first met the future *Professionals* star in 1955 and they remained friends until Williams' death in 1988. "He loved to be with Gordon Jackson and his wife Rona and their children," wrote Gyles Brandreth, who knew them both. "With the Jacksons, probably more than anywhere, he felt secure."



JOAN SIMS: Williams had few friends among the *Carry On* team, but was fond of Joan, who'd first starred with him in 1959's *Carry On Nurse*. Unmarried, she once declined an invitation from Williams for a marriage of convenience.



STANLEY BAXTER: Now 94, Baxter came out as gay last year, but confirmed that



he was never intimate with Williams, whom he first met in 1946. "We became close, without it ever being more than friendship," he said.

MAGGIE SMITH: They first met in August 1957 in a West End revue called *Share My Lettuce*. The two would remain close for the rest of Williams' life and Smith's biographer Michael Coveney believes her most famous character is inspired by Ken: "I sometimes think Smith is a reincarnation of the furious *Carry On* pixie Williams, particularly in *Downton Abbey*," he wrote in 2015.

