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TheaterWeek

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Joe Orton's
*What the Butler
Saw* Revived

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Entertaining Mr. Orton

The men responsible for the noted revivals of Joe Orton's Entertaining Mr. Sloane and Loot now bring you What the Butler Saw

by Gerard Raymond

A

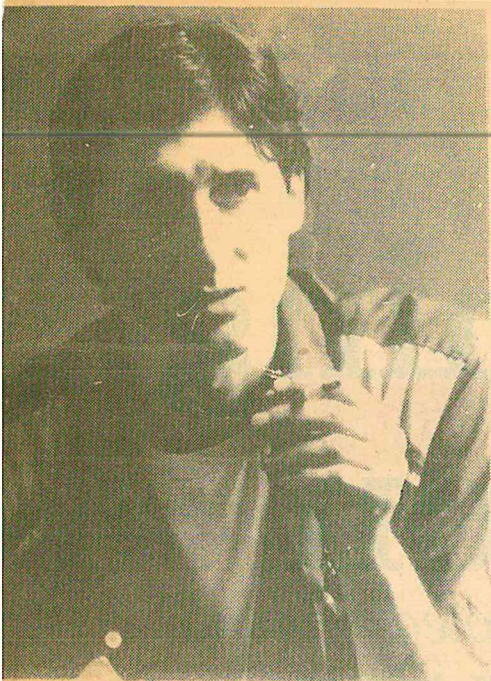
mong modern playwrights, few can match the late Joe Orton for his sustained assault on the middle class mores of postwar Britain. In *Entertaining Mr. Sloane*, a middle-aged brother and sister do vicious battle over the attentions of the handsome young hustler they take in; they eventually choose to share him, using blackmail to keep him in his place. *Loot* is a farce involving the search for a pile of stolen cash hidden inside a coffin containing the remains of the mother of one of the thieves. Orton's final full-length work is *What the Butler Saw*, about adultery and skullduggery in an insane asylum, a work which pushes the conventions of British sex farce to absurdist ends.

Manhattan Theater Club's production of Orton's *What the Butler Saw*, which opened March 8, brings together once again the three men who can claim to be the foremost interpreters of Orton in this country: director John Tillinger and actors Joseph Maher and Charles Keating.

Tillinger, who turns 50 this year, was born in Iran and raised in England. Beginning his career as an actor, he worked both in England and

America. In 1981 he established his reputation as a director with the New York revival of *Entertaining Mr. Sloane*, which marked the first time he worked with actor Joseph Maher. In 1986 he directed the Manhattan Theater Club's production of *Loot*, for which he received an Outer Critics' Circle Award and a Tony nomination. While pursuing his highly successful directing career, he also serves as a literary consultant at the Long Wharf Theater in New Haven, Connecticut.

Maher (pronounced Ma-harr) was born in Ireland 55 years ago. His Broadway credits include *Spokesong*, Stewart Parker's Irish play, and *Night and Day*, Tom Stoppard's Shavian comedy about the role of the press, both of which earned him Tony nominations. In *Entertaining Mr. Sloane*, he played Ed, the man who competes with his sister (Barbara Bryne) for the sexual favors of a totally amoral young man (Maxwell Caulfield, succeeded by Brad Davis). In *Loot*, Maher played the proto-fascist Inspector Truscott, hot on the trail of the money in the coffin. For this performance he received a Drama Desk Award and Tony and Outer Critics' Circle nomi-



David Cross

Topol in *Life and Limb*

on April 11 and 12.

★
The Willow Cabin Theater Company, in association with **Dina and Alexander Racolin**, will present the New York premiere of **Charlotte Delboe's** *Who Will Carry the Word?*, directed by **Edward Berkeley**, at the Intar II, 508 West 53rd Street, March 30 through April 16. The play, about life in a concentration camp for women who fought with the French Resistance during World War II, features 23 actresses.

★
An update on the cast changes reported last week for *Into the Woods*: **Pam Winslow** subbed for **Kim Crosby** as Cinderella while Crosby was filming *Tarzan in Manhattan*, a television movie and possible series pilot. Crosby has returned as Cinderella, leading a spokesman for the show to remark that she has gone from "the jungle to the woods." Stand-by **James Judy** played the role of Cinderella's Prince while **Robert Westenberg** took a vacation; Westenberg again plays Cinderella's Prince. **LuAnne Ponce** plays the role of Red Riding Hood, which she originated when the show premiered at San Diego's Old Globe Theater, replacing Broadway's original Little Red, **Danielle Ferland**. □

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The late Joe Orton



Gerry Goodstein

Joseph Maher and director John Tillinger

nations. In *What the Butler Saw* he plays Dr. Rance, who as a representative of the mental health branch of Her Majesty's Government proudly claims, "My brief is infinite. I'd have sway over a rabbit hutch if the inmates were mentally disturbed."

Keating, 46, was born in London and has worked on both sides of the Atlantic. He received a Tony nomination for his performance in *Loot* as McLeavy, a recently-bereaved widower whose law-abiding morals count for nothing against the havoc wrought by the corrupt Truscott and the unscrupulous members of his household. In *What the Butler Saw*, he plays Dr. Prentice, a psychiatrist whose clumsy attempt at intercourse with a prospective secretary unleashes chaos in his clinic. As his nemesis, Dr. Rance, gleefully diagnoses: "As a transvestite, fetishist, bisexual murderer, Dr. Prentice displays considerable deviation

overlap. We may get necrophilia too. As a sort of bonus."

TheaterWeek was party to a conversation with these three Orton alumni recently. The scene: The lobby of Manhattan Theater Club's space at City Center, one week after *What the Butler Saw* began previews in February. The protagonists: Tillinger, Maher, and Keating, who obviously love playing off each other and have established an easy rapport that is evident in their work on stage. The key to their success lies in their collaborative approach and their enthusiasm for the work of the late Joe Orton.

John Tillinger: *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* was the genesis of our relationship; Charles came in later, on *Loot*. At the time we did *Sloane*, Joe Orton as simply not very well regarded. Joe Maher and I had read the play and loved it. We put it on with a shoestring budget—I think seven and a half thou-

sand dollars. When we were trying to raise money, people would say, "Why do you want to put on this play? These are awful people. It's horrible."

Joseph Maher: And they also said it was a terrible disaster when it was done originally on Broadway in 1965.

Tillinger: It was a huge flop. Nevertheless, we went ahead. I felt that America had moved on; Americans were able to hear and listen to the play.

Maher: It was certainly a rediscovering of Orton. The response was extraordinary.

Charles Keating: It's almost as if the American ear, what with television—

Tillinger: —and Monty Python—

Keating: —that we started to tune in on the brilliance of Orton.

Gerard Raymond: *In some ways this rediscovery parallels the situation in England, where, on their first round, Orton's plays were disasters.*

Gerry Goodstein



Zelko Ivanek and
Maher in the
Manhattan Theater
Club production of
Loot



Maher in *What the Butler Saw*

Gerry Goodstein

Tillinger: Not quite true, because *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* [1964], the only one of his plays I saw there, was a big hit immediately.

It was Loot, then, that had trouble and closed before it even came to London.

Tillinger: Right, because director Peter Wood did it in a non-naturalistic setting, all in black and white.

Keating: And it wasn't good casting either, was it? Kenneth Williams [camp comedian best known to Americans as the star of the *Carry On* comedy film series] starred in it.

Tillinger: He was actually a very good friend of Joe Orton's. It wasn't until a second version, in 1966, that the play succeeded. This was certainly true of *What the Butler Saw* as well. The original version [1969] was very bad, and Orton was dead by that time, so he didn't have any say on how it was cast and so on.

Maher: I saw *Sloane* the year before

we did it, in 1980, in London. It was a revival directed by Kenneth Williams. The part that I played, Ed, was played very camp and his sister was played by Barbara Windsor—a marvelous comedienne, but it was the worst casting of that play, I think, you could imagine. [To Tillinger] I remember saying to you after I saw this, "Why are we doing this? This is terrible." But we got a script together and we knew again that all we thought about it was still there. I always thought the secret to playing Ed was that he thought of himself as being absolutely straight and would never give himself away. I think that really was a good key to part of the play.

Keating: And indeed maybe to all the other plays as well.

Tillinger: Exactly. Orton says that you have to play this for reality, almost like Pinter rather than slapstick comedy. If it is at all knowing, you've had it.

Maher: I think it really is a mistake to cast comedians in comic parts.

Tillinger: I don't want to bring up another play, but there is a similarity, I feel, between this and *Waiting for Godot*. You can't cast comedians in that either. You should cast actors. [Lowering his voice] I shouldn't say any of this because of you know who! The thing about Orton is that you can go very wrong. I have been blessed each time with very good casts. Frankly, I just lock the door and leave them to it.

Keating: Bullshit!

Tillinger: So anyway, after the success of *Sloane*, the next thing was that we were here doing *Loot*. I was very nervous about it. It was—

Maher: —phenomenally difficult. All his plays are. It threw me for a loop because I had a real hard time with the very extreme character of Truscott. I hadn't really played something quite that extreme before. He talked

double-talk and it was hard even memorizing it. You'd say something and you'd think, Jesus, that can't be right at all.

Keating: It's grasping his reality.

Maher: It is, actually. And this play is the same bloody thing.

It seems like there are parallels between the characters of Dr. Rance and Dr. Prentice in this play, and Inspector Truscott and McLeavy, the characters you [Maher and Keating] played in Loot.

Tillinger: There is a difference between Dr. Prentice and McLeavy [played by Keating]—

Maher:—because McLeavy is the one good man in *Loot*, whereas Prentice is far from it. The one good element in *What the Butler Saw* is the girl played by Joanne Whalley-Kilmer.

Tillinger: The girl is the innocent. She has everything done to her.

Keating: Innocence in Orton is always stupid, isn't it?

Maher: Oh yes, yes.

Keating: The innocent character gets carted off to prison or an asylum or whatever.

Tillinger: I think the plays work because there is an incredible humanity to his characters. Maybe if Orton was alive he'd say fuck off and that we didn't know what we were talking about. But in *Sloane*, for instance, I noticed that everybody did finally care about the predicament. That this guy loved this boy and so did the woman and they decided to share him. I think he holds up the mirror to the world and says if you can laugh at this, there is hope, but if you don't, it's over.

Keating [to Maher]: My favorite line and moment in *What the Butler Saw* is where you say, "Love must bring greater joy than violence."

Tillinger: And that, I think, was his message. You hope there is this love.

Maher: What I love is the sexuality that is in all Orton's plays. Everything is totally accepted. If you are screwing a man or a duck it's all the same.

Tillinger: As long as the duck doesn't mind!

We lucked out having Charles in *Loot*. He played the part of McLeavy in a way that had never been done before. It has always been played with

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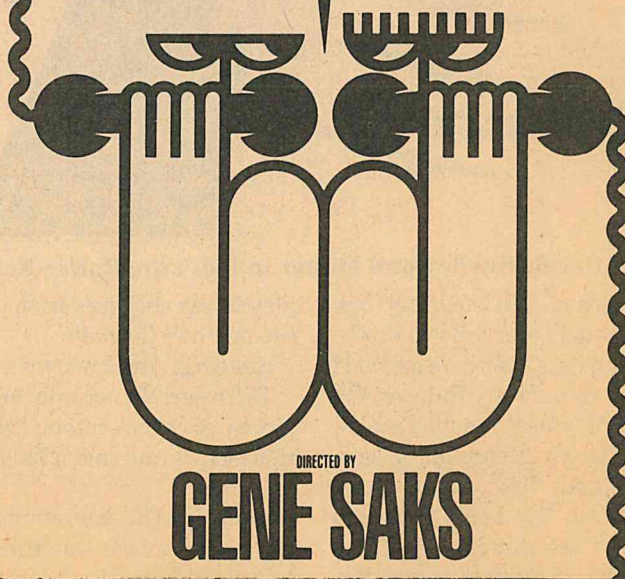
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Carole Shelley and Maher in *What the Butler Saw*

an Irish accent. [To Keating] You never knew—did I ever tell you this?—but about ten days before we opened I got this call from Peggy Ramsay, Orton's agent: "I've heard that he is playing it not as an Irishman." I said, "Yes." She said, "No, no, that's absolutely wrong. You can't do it that way." I said, "Not only can I do it, but I really think it's working much better this way." My God, it was the first time that I'd heard that part work.

Maher: I come from Ireland and I looked through it and said, "I can find nothing Irish in the phrasing." It made total sense that he be an Englishman. There is nothing in the

play to say that he's Irish other than the fact he's Catholic.

Keating: And his name.

Tillinger: We actually based it on a picture of Orton's father. I showed him this picture and said, "This is who the man is."

Keating: The interesting discovery we made in *Loot* was that here you had four fantastic characters and a drone instrument [McLeavy]. What happened in the past, I think, is that you had five exotic instruments playing and no drone. I think it's too much. I remember saying, "I've got to risk boring them." As an actor you normally go out thinking, how can I entertain

them? As Ralph Richardson said, "The definition of good acting is keeping the largest number of people from coughing."

You mentioned Peggy Ramsay. Does she still involve herself in Orton productions?

Tillinger: She is getting on in years and doesn't like to fly. I talk to her quite a lot though, and yes, she is involved.

Is she very protective towards Orton's works?

Tillinger: No, she isn't. Just before *Loot*, I told her I was very nervous about this play and I didn't seem to have a handle on it. She said to me, "Well, do it dear, and if it doesn't work out, that's fine." She has a kind of lyrical attitude toward Orton, because, I suppose, she knows he will survive. I haven't talked to her a lot about this play. The one thing she asked was, "What are you going to do about the ending?" I said I was going to do it exactly as written. She said, "It's a mess, isn't it?" I said, "Well, it's a mess and yet it isn't a mess. If I could go with a red pencil I would remove one or two lines here and there, but it is what it is, and it's very surrealist." And she said, "Well, I think you are making the right decision, because what else can you do?" And indeed not a word has been cut.

[In the original London production, Sir Ralph Richardson, who played Rance, was embarrassed and shocked by the stage direction which called for the display of Winston Churchill's most impressive personal attribute, followed by the lines: "How much more inspiring if, in those dark days, we'd seen what we see now. Instead we had to be content with a cigar—the symbol falling far short, as we all realize, of the object itself." The phallic finale, complete with its surrealistic *deus-ex-machina* climax, was deleted, as it was in the first New York production. This is the first time *What the Butler Saw* will be performed in New York in its entirety.]

*I understand the first production of *What the Butler Saw* in New York was terribly bowdlerized, although it won an Obie Award for Best Foreign Play in 1970.*

Maher: Have you read that version? It's unrecognizable. I was in Samuel

Gerry Goodstein

French's [bookstore] in Los Angeles, after I was asked to do the play, and I saw this single edition of *What the Butler Saw*. I didn't know it had been changed. I got to about the tenth page and phoned Lynne Meadow [artistic director of Manhattan Theater Club]. I was hysterical about it because, first of all, my part barely exists in it and it had nothing to do with the play we had been reading! It was all switched around—they didn't do the ending at all.

Tillinger: We've had a couple of people who find the penis at the end a little offensive. I said, "Well, I think it's supposed to be!" It's a tradition that goes back to commedia dell'arte with the erect phallus and all that. If they are shocked—that's actually their problem and not mine.

Keating: Over the weekend, culminating on Sunday night, we had an enormous breakthrough between ourselves, which I think we will take back with us this week. We got a smell of the roll, the crescendo, of laughter.

Maher: It was bouncing off the walls.

Keating: Then suddenly we thought, oh my God, this is how it rides.

Tillinger: That happens because Orton doesn't write for cinema or television. He really writes for audience participation and when you've got a boring audience the lines fall flat.

Maher: Somebody said, "They're smiling," and I said, "They are not smiling loud enough!"

Keating: We did have that extraordinary experience with *Loot*, didn't we? It took us exactly through the first week of previews before we felt, not necessarily completely in charge, but we knew which way to go with it, what we were supposed to feel. And I don't know of any plays other than Orton's that need as many previews. It is a huge act of faith. We left the rehearsal room knowing we were going to be floundering for a little bit with the first audiences and knowing we wouldn't discover the piece until it was in front of them.

Maher: And having that experience behind us has helped us on this a lot, I think, because we knew not to get dismayed about it.

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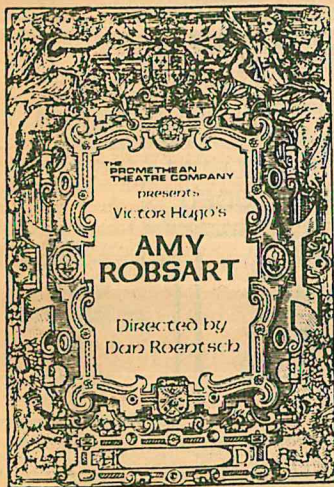
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Tillinger: That's the nice thing about us having done Joe Orton's work before—you all find it out together. Maybe I don't know what I am doing, but if somebody says, "I'll move left and I'll take my hat off," and that seems to work, we'll do it.

You [Tillinger] have spoken before about working with Maher, about an instinct for the rhythms of Orton's language.

Tillinger: I don't have to teach them, you know. I sort of hear it, but they both hear it better than I do. Each writer obviously has his own music. Orton's is very specific. It is very English and there is a vaudevillian aspect to it, what we call dadum-dah! If you build it the right way you'll get the laugh better.

Keating: What is wonderful is that Orton, just like Wilde, says: These are special lines. Don't I have fun with language? Aren't they quite wonderful? We find their truth and root it out, but nonetheless there is this self-consciousness of language, not in a bad way but in a glorious way.

Maher: Just to get to say some of this stuff—sometimes I do one of those long speeches and go offstage and just for half a second and I think, Jesus, that's amazing stuff!

Keating: It is surprisingly lyrical in places. [To Maher] I mean, look at that peculiar thing I say to you when you ask me, "What of her father?" I say, "He appears to have been an unpleasant fellow. He made her mother pregnant at her place of employment." I always think, what a rhythm that has. It's almost poetry.

Tillinger: His language is extraordinary.

Maher: There are several of those lines. You say them and you think it's like a gift somebody gave you. It was the same in *Loot*. Somebody said something to me about Truscott being a role. I said, "It's not a role, it's a gift that you get only once or twice in your career, and only if you are very fortunate. And now I have had three of them.

Tillinger: Our only ambition now is to take all three plays to London and show them how to do it! They always come to America and show us how to do Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams. □