

Rafael Portillo  
Universidad de Sevilla

Although a good deal has been written about the role of the Music Hall in John Osborne's *The Entertainer* (first performed 1957), less attention has been paid to its influence on other plays of his first period. Yet, as some critics (1) have noted, it is precisely in *Look Back in Anger* (first performed 1956) that traces of Music Hall influence first appear. In fact in Act III, scene 1 (2), Jimmy Porter assisted by his friend Cliff improvises a little act with all the characteristics of a 'turn' on the bill of a traditional Variety Show. They sing, tell funny stories and do a scene-shifting performance, watched by Helena, who thus becomes the sole member of a hypothetical audience. What we see here is simply a digression within the play's action which both the characters and the public are fully aware of:

JYMMY: (rising). Thought of the title for a new song today. It's called «My mother's in the madhouse - that's why I'm in love with you». The lyrics are catchy too. I was thinking we might work it into the act (p. 79).

Jimmy even makes it plain that he is now pretending to be an entertainer:

JIMMY: Will you kindly stop interrupting, *perlease!* Can't you see I'm trying to entertain these ladies and gentlemen? (p. 80).

The audience is of course two-fold in this case, since the act is directed not only at Helena but also at the theatre audience itself. But just as if she were in a genuine Music Hall situation, Helena reacts in a quite spontaneous way:

HELENA: (not quite sure if this is really her cue). Hey! You down there!

JIMMY: Oh, it goes on for hours yet, but never mind. What is it, sir?

HELENA: (shouting). I think your sketch stinks! I say - I think your sketch stinks! (p. 81).

Audience participation — as in a real show — is thus achieved. All the same, the boundaries between reality and fiction are clearly defined since, at a given moment, Jimmy brings the 'game' to an end and everything reverts to the way it was before.

The case of *Epitaph for George Dillon* (first performed 1958) (3) is rather different. There is not such a clear distinction between the 'performance' and the rest of the play. The musical gag in Act II (4) is in fact much shorter than the 'act' in *Look Back in Anger*, but George's long speeches in his conversation with Ruth are treated as if they belonged to a previously rehearsed part. George Dillon is an unemployed professional actor and as such tends to put on a performance whenever possible. A commonplace object, such as Norah's cocktail cabinet, gives him the cue for a short musical turn. Again, as in *Look Back in Anger*, audience participation is instantly achieved:

(Encouraged by RUTH's laughter, he turns back and crashes away on the cocktail cabinet, pulling out the stops and singing):

«I fell in love with ye-ieuw!

While we were dancing

The Beethoven Waltz!...»

(A final flourish on the invisible keyboard; he turns and bows obsequiously. RUTH's response has exhilarated him...) (p. 55).

Ruth applauds rapturously at the end of the song, but this does not imply that she thinks the show is over. During the conversation which follows she interrupts him frequently, sometimes with applause (p. 56), sometimes to remind him that he is really giving a performance:

RUTH: Oh, a good delivery, George. You're brilliant, after all. (p. 59).

Eventually George ends by accepting the comedian's role which Ruth has assigned to him, and to please her goes into the song 'If you can't give a dollar, give me a lousy dime...' (p. 61). After this, he implicitly accepts that he has been putting on an act for her benefit:

RUTH: Oh yes, you are a character! I think your little performance has done me good.

GEORGE: You're a good audience. (pp. 61-62).

Jimmy and George have in common with a number of other Osborne characters a marked bent for theatrical improvisation. R. Hayman has pointed out that 'Especially in his earlier plays, all Osborne's heroes tend to be performers giving performances' (5). But the fact is that this characteristic is by no means exclusive to the protagonists; it appears in secondary characters as well, and it is not limited merely to the early plays. A. Kennedy in fact regards it as a recurrent feature of Osborne's entire production, and describes it as 'histrionic self-expression' (6). It takes the form of an instinctive impulse on the part of given characters to slip in a theatrical gag which is marginal to the action of the play. The problem for Osborne was to find the right formula to give free rein to this histrionic tendency in the actual context of the play itself. There can be no doubt, in our opinion, that for a period at least, it was the Music Hall which suggested to him the solution to the problem.

In *The Entertainer* (7) it was precisely the rational and systematic use of the Music Hall method which made possible a radical shift in technique compared to the earlier plays. The playwright himself clearly stated his aim in a prefatory note to the published text:

«I have not used some of the techniques of the music hall in order to exploit an affective 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. Not only has this technique its own traditions, its own convention and symbol, its own mystique, it cuts right across the restrictions of the so-called naturalistic stage. Its contact is immediate, vital, and direct.» (p. 7).

Osborne evidently wished to break new ground, and in fact the characters in this play enjoy far more liberty of action, since the whole thing is treated as if it were a 'real' performance. Domestic scenes can therefore alternate with Music Hall interludes since, as a stage direction puts it, 'The scenes and interludes must in fact be lit as if they were simply turns on the bill. Furniture and props are as basic as they would be for a short sketch'. (p. 12).

The family scenes in which the Rices are involved are part of one and the same show-bill and in consequence are offered as mere variations on the Entertainer's turns. The effect produced, therefore, is that of a permanent 'play within a play', but not that of digressions because the whole thing is in fact a digression from itself.

The protagonist, since he is in this case a genuine entertainer, can address the public directly without any need for stage subterfuges. The hypothetical 'fourth wall' tumbles down at last thanks to the Music Hall:

ARCHIE: Good evening, ladies and gentlemen — Archie Rice is the name.  
Archie Rice. Mrs. Rice's favourite boy. (p. 24).

Like George Dillon, Archie is a professional actor. As such, he does not limit his performances to the stage but takes full advantage of every opportunity to give free rein to his histrionic temperament. In familiar conversation he never overlooks a word or phrase which can provide him with a cue:

PHOEBE: Be quiet, Dad. You've had too much to drink.

BILLY: I could drink you lot under the table.

ARCHIE: Oh dear, he's getting religious now.

BILLY: I used to have half a bottle of three star brandy for breakfast.

ARCHIE: And a pound of steak and a couple of chorus girls. He'll tell you the whole story at the drop of a hat. (p. 37).

Archie hardly listens to the others, whom he simply regards as part of a permanent audience which is there to listen to his gags and patter. In a stage direction Osborne points out the fact that whatever he says to anyone is almost very carefully 'thrown away'. Apparently absentminded, it is a comedian's technique, it absolves him from seeming committed to anyone or anything.» (p. 34). Every verbal excess is thereby completely justified, given Archie's personality and profession. By this means Osborne succeeds in synthesising in the speeches of the central figure two styles as different from one another as natural conversational dialogue and the Entertainer's lengthy monologues.

In his solo performances Archie's language becomes an artificial jargon which conveys very little information. It is simply a collection of catchphrases and commonplace clichés borrowed from other comedians. The pattern is that of a series of short repetitive statements, preceded and/or followed by rhetorical questions supposed to be aimed at the audience and intended to make them laugh:

ARCHIE: Did I tell you about the wife? Did I? My wife — not only is she stupid, not only is she stupid, but she's cold as well. Oh yes, cold. She may look sweet, but she's a very cold woman, my wife. Very cold. Cold and stupid. (p. 59).

One such phrase becomes a commonplace in several of his 'turns' and constitutes a good example of his clumsiness and the staleness of his humour:

ARCHIE: You wouldn't think I was sexy to look at me, would you) No, lady. To look at me you wouldn't think I was sexy, would you) (p. 32).

His songs, his never-ending patter and his verbosity on and off the stage are justified by the fact that they form part of the hypothetical 'show' which the play is intended to represent. The formula is brilliantly conceived and Osborne cleverly exploits it to the limit.

However, when a few years after the success of *The Entertainer* he wrote the book and lyrics for a true musical, *The World of Paul Slickey* (1959), which he also directed himself, the result was a total failure. This is perhaps the reason why he has never used again the full-scale Music Hall formula. In more recent years he has limited himself to incorporating a few of the isolated Music Hall elements tried out with such success in *The Entertainer*.

In *Luther* for example (first performed 1961), two figures appear who repeat certain traits of Archie Rice. One of them is Hans, Martin's father, whom we meet in Act III, scene 3 (8) in the refectory of the monastery. Hans acts from time to time like a genuine performer, only too ready to put on a show for the benefit of his improvised audience, the monks. Like Archie, he enjoys listening to himself and being listened to by others; all he needs is the right cue:

HANS: Now, you're an educated man, you understand Latin and Greek and Hebrew.

BRO. WEINAND: Only Latin, I'm afraid, and a very little Greek.

HANS: (having planted his cue for a quick, innocent boast). Oh, really. Martin knows Latin and Greek, and now he's halfway through Hebrew... (p. 32).

On occasions he uses patter not unlike Archie's, even following Archie's sentence pattern quite closely:

HANS: Me? Oh, I'm all right. I'm all right, aren't I, Lucas? Nothing ever wrong with me. Your old man's strong enough. But then that's because we've got to be, people like Lucas and me. (p. 35).

Some of the sentences of the above passage can in fact even be arranged as if they were lines of verse:

Nothing ever wrong with me  
Your old man's strong enough  
But that's because we've got to be  
People like Lucas and me.

The predominant four-stress line shows clearly the recitative manner of this and the other speeches by Hans throughout the scene. The similarity between Hans on the one hand Archie and other characters of *The Entertainer* on the other is such as to produce elements of dialogue which are in turn closely similar:

MARTIN: You're drinking too much wine — and I'm...

HAND: Drinking too much wine! I could drink this convent piss from here till Gabriel's horn... (p. 39). (Cf. the very similar one from *The Entertainer* above.)

One could call this a 'comedian's technique' in just the same way, though there is no device in the play to justify Hans' behaviour — he has no connection whatever with the performing arts.

The case of Tetzal during the sermon on the sale of indulgences — Act II, scene 1 — is of a different kind. The whole thing is conceived as an authentic 'show', since there is a deliberate intention to identify the indulgence-seller with a comedian. Tetzal acts the part of a genuine trouper, solely concerned with getting on the right side of the public. His patter too is not specially different from Archie's:

TETZEL: Don't try to work it out for yourself because I'm going to tell you now, this very minute. I am John Tetzal, Dominican, inquisitor, sub-commissioner, (p. 48).

The rest of the speech, though fulfilling an important informative function, none the less contains phraseology which is also quite similar to Archie's. From time to time there is a short pause in his endless sales-talk, and we perceive again the characteristic sentence pattern referred to above. We hear sentences like 'You think that's bragging, do you? Well, listen a little more carefully, my friend...' (p. 48), or again in a style even closer to Archie's 'You think I'm exaggerating? You do, do you? Well, I'm authorized to go even further than that' (p. 49). The use of Music Hall technique comes off perfectly in this context, where the deliberate intention is to underline Tetzal's histrionic personality and the stagy nature of his performance.

We see the same sort of technique emerge again in *Under Plair Cover* (9) (first performed 1962), though for quite different reasons. In this case the use of Archie Rice-type phraseology is used simply to provide a necessary pause in the Reporter's long speech describing a newspaper story in considerable detail. Archie's catch-phrases appear here as an undisguised digression in the main speech:

REPORTER: At that time I was very successful indeed. Yes, and that didn't really endear me. That's what the game's like. Fleet Street loves a failure, and I certainly wasn't a failure then. Why, if you take the trouble — *I suppose you'd think it a bore, wouldn't you? You're a bit bloody grand, aren't you? You think I can't afford to pay for a round of drinks, don't you! Well, you're bloody right, I can't.* But if you had the ordinary human interest to look through the paper files... (p. 50, italics mine).

In reality there is not the slightest connection between the sentences in italics and the rest of the speech. The striking difference in the style, however, helps us to realize that the non-italicised part of the speech is based on a documentary source. This is in fact Harry Procter's autobiography *The Street of Disillusion* (10), from which Osborne takes the rest of the speech almost word for word.

Reminiscences of the Music Hall can thus be seen to be present in almost all the early plays of Osborne. But it is only after the first performance of *The Entertainer* that the material begins to be organized along the lines laid down by Archie in that play. The effect produced by the use of this technique varies from play to play. But it always responds to a fixed desire on the author's part to free his characters sporadically or consistently from the naturalistic frame in which they normally operate, and to bring out the innate showmanship which is one of the hallmarks of Osborne's people.

#### NOTAS

- (1) See G. E. Brown, «Music Hall References in John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*», *Notes and Queries*, vol. 23 (July 1976), p. 310.
- (2) J. Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, Faber (London, 1969), pp. 79-82.
- (3) Written in collaboration with A. Creighton some time before *Look Back in Anger*.
- (4) J. Osborne and A. Creighton, *Epitaph for George Dillon*, Faber (London, 1958), pp. 54-55.
- (5) R. Hayman, *John Osborne*, Heinemann (London, 1971), p. 16.
- (6) A. Kennedy, *Six Dramatists in Search of a Language*, Cambridge University Press (London, 1975), p. 194.
- (7) All references to *The Entertainer* are to the Faber (1969) edition.
- (8) J. Osborne, *Luther*, Faber (London, 1974), pp. 31-45.
- (9) - J. Osborne, *Under Plain Cover*, Faber (London, 1972), pp. 49-50.
- (10) Cf. H. Procter, *The Street of Disillusion*, Allan Wingate (London, 1958), esp. chapter 15, pp. 144-156, and J. Osborne's *Under Plain Cover*, ed. cit., pp. 49-64.

