

TEACHER LITERARY AND CURRICULUM GUIDE

WHAT THE BUTLER SAW

By Joe Orton
Directed by Darko Tresnjak

STAFF

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DID YOU KNOW

When Orton was 15, he was semi-literate, spoke with a lisp, and he couldn't spell. Only through intensive self training did he overcome these obstacles.

Mrs. Edna Welthorpe was known as one of Joe Orton's greatest detractors. She wrote many letters to various publications about the horrors of Orton's plays. Mrs. Edna Welthorpe turned out to be Joe Orton himself.

Joe Orton once brought his dead mother's false teeth to a rehearsal of *Loot* to inspire the actors.

Orton was approached to do a film script for the Beatles but it was turned down by Brian Epstein because it wasn't suitable. Orton had the Beatles commit adultery, murder, dress in drag, go to prison, and seduce the niece of a priest.

50,000 pounds of lottery money was spent to refurbish London's underground public lavatories in Orton's honor, as he frequently visited them during his life.

Orton had willed his work to Halliwell, the man who murdered him, and whose family would have destroyed Orton's remaining work (including *What the Butler Saw*). The coroner, however, ruled that Orton actually died after Halliwell (because he had been in a coma for several hours after Halliwell took the pills) so Orton's work went to his family who saved his work.

Themes and Related Works

Themes

- individual struggle against society
- the nature of sanity vs. insanity
- institutional indifference
- sexual mores

Related Works Dealing With Madness, Gender Wars and Sexual Farce

Other Orton Plays

The Ruffian on the Stair (first performance 1964)

Entertaining Mr Sloane (first performance 1964)

Loot (first performance 1966)

The Erpingham Camp (first performance 1966)

The Good and Faithful Servant (first performance 1967)

Funeral Games (first performance 1968)

Plays

Twelfth Night

Hamlet

By William Shakespeare

The Revenger's Tragedy

By Cyril Tourneur and Thomas Middleton

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf

By Edward Albee

The Altruist

Fat Men in Skirts

By Nicky Silver

M-Butterfly

By David Hwang

Books

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

By Ken Kesey

Prick Up Your Ears (Orton's biography)

By John Lahr

The World According to Garp

By John Updike

Films

Prick Up Your Ears

Directed by Allan Bennett (1987)

La Cage Aux Folles

Directed by Eduoard Molinaro (1979)

Some Like it Hot

Directed by Billy Wilder (1959)

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf

Directed by Mike Nichols (1966)

Boeing, Boeing

Direct by John Rich (1965)

Everything You Wanted to Know About Sex but Were Afraid to Ask

Directed by Woody Allen (1972)

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

Directed by Milos Forman (1975)

Background & Objectives

In the world of Dr. Prentice – a private psychiatric clinic in England – Joe Orton props up our ideas of normal and shreds them into confetti. *What the Butler Saw* begins with an attempt by Dr. Prentice to seduce a potential employee, then turns into a frantic and frenetic farce populated with characters that bound and rebound off each other's misguided vision of themselves and their world. Relationships, family, marriage, sexual mores, societal norms, politics, death, and comedy mingle in what many would call an absurd reality, but what Joe Orton would simply call reality.

OBJECTIVES

Students will

1. Identify central themes in *What the Butler Saw*, including:
the survival of the individual in a chaotic world;
the struggle against societal restrictions;
the precarious nature of sanity;
the blindness of institutions.
2. Relate themes and issues of *What the Butler Saw* to their own lives.
3. Analyze the play's central themes and social issues.
4. Examine the changing views of "normal" in today's world and how these views have changed over time.
5. Examine how the view of sexuality has changed since the sexual revolution of the 60s.
6. Learn to recognize, find, and examine literary and historical allusions made in the play.
7. Recognize and examine the structure of farce and how it is used in *What the Butler Saw*.
8. Evaluate the Huntington Theatre production of *What the Butler Saw*.

Preparation for WHAT THE BUTLER SAW

Read the introduction to [Joe Orton: The Complete Plays](#) by his official biographer, John Lahr. After reading the introduction, consider some of the personal, literary, and historical forces that effect Orton's work. Possible areas to research are:

The mores of the 1960s, particularly
Sexual liberation
Antidisestablishmentarianism
Hedonism

Classical Theater, specifically the works of Euripides and Shakespeare
Take into consideration the definition of farce and then tragedy. After discussing the differences between these two dramatic forms, consider Orton's own words when he says that "*Loot* [another farce] is a serious play. Unless *Loot* is directed and acted perfectly seriously the play will fail."

Farce vs. Tragedy
Discuss how such intellectual considerations of farce and tragedy inform the writing of the play. Consider the Euripidean ending (deus ex machine) and how that speaks to Orton's mindset at the end of his play.

KEY ISSUES

Sanity vs. Insanity

The question of sanity is addressed immediately by Orton in his epigraph of the play from *The Revenger's Tragedy*: "Surely we're all mad people, and they/Whom we think are, are not." From the beginning of the play, it dawns on the audience that sanity can only be a relative term. Like Hamlet, it is not simply enough to act as though one were mad, nor is it even necessary to behave as a mad man. Rather, madness is simply a part of the human condition. As the play progresses, who is seen as "mad"?

Institutional Indifference

In the words of Dr. Rance, the government psychiatrist visiting Dr. Prentice's clinic, "I represent Her Majesty's Government. Your immediate superiors in madness." Orton meant this literally. He saw institutions, and particularly the psychiatrists of the world, as much nearer madness than the common folk from which he descended. Orton's run-ins with social and governmental institutions rarely provided any comfort for him. In fact, Orton spent six months in jail for "malicious damage to 83 books and removing 1,653 plates from library books". For three years Orton had used the library as a makeshift theatre, watching as people would peruse the books he had just defaced. What characters in his plays represent societal and governmental indifference? In what way are they "mad"? What institutions feel the brunt of Orton's anger? What social realities in Orton's life led him to feel such rancor toward these institutions?

Sexual Mores

Orton ranted, "Sex is the only way to infuriate them. Much more [sex] (expletive deleted) and they'll be screaming hysterics in next to no time." Such was the chant that Orton sang. "Them" are the West End theatre goers (or anyone else) who held that there were rules which needed to be followed. Orton despised rules. He spent six months in

jail for defacing books by juxtaposing crude images with generic captions. Ironically, his folly led to publicity which only helped his image as a counter-cultural revolutionary, and the separation from his work which gave him the objectivity necessary to write well. But sex is the vehicle which Orton drove, and he drove as if he were in a demolition derby. His characters have sex in the dark, in closets, in offices. They hide behind sex and they use it as a weapon. Orton's own experiences taught him that sex and intimacy are not the same thing, and in the hands of the misguided, sex can wield power or take it away. His characters are so removed from their own feelings, that not even the emotional significance of sex has meaning beyond the act itself. Which characters are most caught in the web of sexual confusion? Who represents the more conservative side of British society? How does each group see the world?

The Individual vs. Society

Orton always believed in the strength of the individual. He himself was brought up in a lower middle class family, and he saw his hope in his own willingness to survive. He once told one of his producers "I'm from the gutter and don't you ever forget it because I won't." His brash faith in himself never diminished. From his semi-literate youth, to his self-education in language, to his acceptance into the prestigious Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (RADA), Orton always found himself to be the last bastion of hope. He realized that as an artist, he had to live outside the conventional life. Lahr, his autobiographer said that, "The comedian is a marginal man, someone who lives outside the boundaries of conventional life and acquires power (and danger) precisely because he can't be controlled by society. Laughter is the message sent back from his cultivated isolation. Orton was a survivor whose brutal laughter was a vindictive triumph over a drab and quietly violent working class world." Who is the survivor in *What the Butler Saw*? Is there a survivor? Is there any hope in the world of this play? What single character has the strength of their own convictions?

For Further Exploration

1. Theater is fun, but comedy is serious business. Orton constantly struggled with directors, producers, and actors to take his works, not as absurdist or surreal, but as realistic plays. Though he understood that what he was writing was farce, he knew that if those in the productions of his shows took it as such, the plays themselves would fail. “People think I write fantasy,” Orton says, “but I don’t; some things may be exaggerated or distorted in the same way that painters distort and alter things, but they’re realistic figures.” Find other artists who also distorted and altered, but focused on the real world. Some artists whose work you may want to consider are Picasso, Dali, Van Gogh, William Burroughs, Jean Paul Sartre, Harold Pinter, Georgia O’Keefe.
2. As in all literary works, there are allusions to other literary works. In the case of *What the Butler Saw*, Orton refers to Chaucer, Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, and *The Revenger’s Tragedy*. Select any of these works (or authors) and research why these particular works (or authors) are cited in his work. How successful an allusion is it?
3. Besides being the title of the play, *What the Butler Saw* was also the title of a very popular Mutoscope reel. Mutoscopes were coin-in-the-slot devices by which an individual could view a short motion picture. What the butler saw, presumably through a keyhole, was a woman partially disrobing. Machines presenting this reel were so ubiquitous that in England they were known as *What-the-butler-saw machines*. The phrase became a byword or idiom for shameful secrets or voyeurism and was used in this sense as the title of other works. Research the history of these machines. Again, what point is Orton trying to make, not only about his plays, but about society and their morals.
4. Orton was called “The Oscar Wilde of Welfare State gentility”. Do some research into the life of Oscar Wilde. Why would Orton be so dubbed? What similarities are there between Oscar Wilde and Joe Orton? Look for artistic reasons and not only circumstantial reasons.

Mastery Assessment

Act I

1. Why are the entrances of the first two characters on stage so important? (set tone)
2. What is the purpose of having such an open set that includes a great many doors and windows? (practical: entrances-exits; metaphorical: openness)
3. What line creates the entrée into the play's farcical tone? (anyway miraculous)
4. What is the first institution to feel Orton's pen? (Catholic church)
5. What is the second institution to feel Orton's pen? (England)
6. Identify the series of paradoxical statements in Prentice's first long speech to Geraldine.
7. How do these paradoxes contribute to the mood and tone of the play?
8. Death is a favorite Orton topic. How is death addressed by the characters in the play?
9. How does Orton juxtapose tragedy and farce? To what end?
10. Why does Orton choose Winston Churchill (or more precisely, parts of Winston Churchill) as the play's "Holy Grail"?
11. How do your ideas of psychiatry mesh with Orton's presentation of a professional psychiatrist?
12. On what premise do all things go awry? What is the reason for the beginning of the farce? What is the reason for the continuation of the farce?
13. How does Orton present marriage in the play? How does his presentation of marriage reflect his personal experience with marriage?
14. Dr. Rance's name has an allegorical meaning. What does the meaning of his name have to do with his character?
15. Dr. Rance also embodies Orton's views of psychiatry. What are they?
16. How would you characterize Geraldine? How does she find herself in such a compromised position? How does she then relate to all the other characters?

17. Geraldine says, "I lived in a normal family. I had no love for my father." How does she reflect Orton's view of family?
18. How does the pacing of the first act proceed? How does it affect the audience? For what purpose is the plot organized in such a fashion?
19. Find evidence in the dialogue of the kind of relationship enjoyed by Dr. and Mrs. Prentice.
20. Rance sees "a definite pattern emerging" in just about everything. How does his need to organize things in a "psychiatric" fashion reflect Orton's distaste for the profession?
21. As the play progresses, each character's attempts to straighten out the confusion only creates more confusion. Why is clarity impossible for the characters? Why do each of the characters get themselves deeper into entanglements?
22. At the end of Act I, what would you say is the goal for each of the characters? Do you believe they will be achieved?

Act II

1. Act II begins with a confusion and the questioning of a character's gender. What theme does this confusion serve as a metaphor.
2. Match says, "Marriage excuses no one the freaks' roll-call." What does he mean? From what is Prentice assuming marriage should excuse him?
3. Rance tells Match that "We've no privileged class here. It's democratic lunacy we practice." How does this reflect Orton's own philosophy?
4. Rance tells Prentice, "Your attempts at a merger [of the sexes] can only end in heartbreak." What is Orton really stating through Rance's comment?
5. The fact that the play takes place in only one location allows the author to do things off stage that films would probably show. What does it add to the play that we only see what occurs in that one room?
6. Not God and religion nor the publishing industry escape Orton's pen. When Nick and Rance are speaking of the Bible as being an autographed copy Nick says this Bible is signed by W.H Smith & Sons. Rance replies, "Oh, they count as God." What is Orton saying of all the offended parties?
7. What does the Archbishop of Canterbury represent? Why would a mad person wish to be him?

8. Rance eventually sees his opportunity to document the lunacy around him. What is wrong with his view of all that has happened? Again, what does this say about Orton's view of psychiatry?
9. Further into Act II, the play starts becoming more violent. Why do you think Orton resorts to bringing in violence? Who are the victims of the violence? What is he saying about his world?
10. At one point both psychiatrists face off and threaten to certify each other. What wonderfully ironic point is being made at that moment?
11. Rance, throughout the end of Act II, proclaims that even things he readily admits he sees are a figment of someone's imagination. Why? What role does Rance's belief in his own version over truth play in the vision of the play?
12. Nick and Geraldine were conceived "in the dark". How apt is that metaphor for the play? For the parents?
13. What is the deus ex machina used by Orton to remedy all the ills of the play?
14. How satisfying is the ending? Does it work? Does it matter?

Open Response & Writing

Open Response Assessment

Instructions for students: Please answer the following as thoroughly as possible in one well planned and carefully written paragraph. Remember to use a topic sentence and examples from the text.

1. Throughout the play, the Prentices are basically having a marital spat. Trace the arc of their tiff. What are the main points each is trying to make?
2. At one point, there are two psychiatrists pointing guns at each other, accusing each other of being mad. What is the irony in this situation?
3. Geraldine seems a sympathetic character caught in an awkward situation. How do you see her character? Does she seem to have any backbone at all? Is she simply a stock character, or does her character serve a more significant purpose to the play?
4. Nick and Match appear as archetypal opposites. How are these two characters different archetypal men? What does each of them represent?

Writing Assignments

1. At one point, Dr. Rance tells Dr. Prentice on his protestations that he is heterosexual, “I wish you wouldn’t use these Chaucerian words.” What does he mean by Chaucerian? If need be, read one of Chaucer’s tales (“The Wife of Bath Prologue” or “The Miller’s Tale” would be most appropriate) and compare the tale with the play.
2. Orton was called “The Oscar Wilde of Welfare State gentility”. If you have time, read *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Do a bit of research on both the play and Wilde. Compare the two plays and the two playwrights. What are their similarities and where do the playwrights and the plays diverge?
3. Madness in *Hamlet* and madness in *What the Butler Saw* certainly take different twists. At the root, however, there is an undeniable similarity. Do some research on *Hamlet* (and read it if you have the time) and find out the source and the purpose of madness. Then, do the same for Orton. Compare the two.
4. At a certain level, *What the Butler Saw* is simply a fun play to watch. It titillates the audience by poking fun at us, while at the same time it pokes fun at its characters. What is so much fun about *What the Butler Saw*? Why do we enjoy it so much, even though we, too, are the butt of the joke (pun intended)? Why do we laugh, even though the characters themselves are lost in a seemingly miserable world where madness is common and no one is spared the pen of the playwright?

Media Assessment

These questions and hands-on exercises are interactive challenges in Drama, Music, Dance, Visual Arts, and Design that inspire further consideration or understanding of the play.

Creating Characterization

Have each of your students choose a character from *What The Butler Saw* to portray. As though they were preparing for the role in rehearsal, have them answer the following questions about their characters:

- a. What do I want in the play? What is my overall objective?
- b. What stands in the way of what I want? What or who are my obstacles in the way of achieving my objective? Does what I want change throughout the course of the play? How?
- c. Does my character change during the course of the play? What is my character's journey or plot transformation?
- d. What are the contradictions inherent in my character?

Role Playing/Improvisation

- a. Have students improvise an important moment from the play, *What The Butler Saw*. Students should test the effects of changing something about the performance, such as the tone of voice, character trait, or a vital remark. How does such a change affect the selected moment? How does the pacing or posturing of an actor affect the comic timing of the piece? Is it possible that a change in the tone of voice can turn a humorous moment into a serious one?
- b. Have students improvise a scene after the conclusion of the play. What happens to Dr. and Mrs. Prentice, Nick and Geraldine? This exercise will help students understand that creating a work always involves an interrupted process or a decision to stop what could be endlessly revised. Look to see if students have been able to identify some of Joe Orton's main points.
- c. Divide the students into three groups and assign each group to represent one act in the play. Students should create a tableaux or stage picture that represents the characters during that act of the play. Students should take turns looking at the each other's tableaux and be able to identify which part of the play it represents.

Acting

Have students act out a scene from *What The Butler Saw*. They should use props and elements of costumes, if possible. Have them consider their placement on the stage, blocking (who moves where and when), gestures, vocal tone, music, and the intended emotional impact of the scene.

Visual Art

Have students choose a character from the play. Create a collage out of paper, drawings, magazine and newspaper clippings that represent the character in her actions, relationships, attitudes, personality, etc. Include quotations from the play that reveal something about the character. These can be quotations from the character as well as quotations about the character. Encourage students to consider texture and color when making decisions about how best to represent the character. Have students share their work with the class. By picking out the qualities of each collage, have them guess which character in the play each collage represents.

Music/Dance

Have students bring in tapes or CDs of music that they feel represents a central theme in the play *What The Butler Saw*. Ask them to play an excerpt for the class and explain what mood the music creates, why they chose this particular piece, and how it relates to the play. The class should then select the piece of music that they feel best represents the play and create an interpretive dance for the class to perform. The dance along with the music should represent a key idea in the play. Allow time for students to talk about the process they used in creating, rehearsing, and performing their dance.

The Design Process

Students should research clothing styles from 1960s London and create costume designs which are appropriate for a production of *What The Butler Saw*. Encourage students to gather magazine and newspaper clippings from the time period, and to choose colors, textures and material which reflect London's fashion and style. Students should be able to defend their choices and explain how each design reflects the social, economic and political context of the production.

Lesson Plans

ONE-DAY LESSON PLAN introduces the students to the plot, character, author, and themes of the play. Requires one class period before viewing the play.

DAY ONE- Introducing the Play

Distribute **Master Assessment** for *What the Butler Saw* for students to read before and review after attending the performance.

Optional: Distribute Vocabulary Handout and ask students to define each word. A vocabulary test could be administered after viewing the play.

Read a synopsis of *What the Butler Saw* in the literary guide and discuss other works the students have studied that have similar themes and issues. Mention the roots of farce and Orton's study of Shakespeare.

Optional: Have the students write a paragraph or two answering how the plot might advance major themes in the play. Consider which of these themes are important to the understanding of the play.

Copy and distribute the information about the playwright, Joe Orton. In groups or individually, have students underline the highlights in the playwright's life and report to the class.

Optional: To save time, narrate highlights to students

Highlight key points or distribute copies of **Notes on the Original Productions** and discuss the production history of the play.

If time allows, read a scene from the play with students.

All assignments are suggestions. Only a teacher knows their class well enough to determine the level and depth to which any piece of literature may be approached.

FOUR-DAY LESSON PLAN – introduces students to the plot and themes of the play, and then, after viewing the performance, asks them to think more critically about it. Includes time for class discussion and individual assessment.

DAY ONE- Introducing the Play

Same as Day One above; completed before seeing the play.

Optional: Discuss the roots of farce and Orton's use of the Euripidean ending. Have the students identify the elements of farce in the first few pages of the script.

DAY TWO- The Play

Attend the performance at the Huntington Theater Company.

Homework: Students should answer a select number of the **Mastery Assessment** questions.

DAY THREE- Follow-up Discussion

Discuss **Mastery Assessment** answers in class and any of the following:

Their reaction to the play and what they saw as its single most important theme.

The major elements of the play: setting, plot, characterization, rising action, climax, ending, language; or the major elements of the production: set design, acting, lighting, direction, production values.

The importance of the setting (a 1960s mental institution) to the notion of sanity

Homework option #1: Have the students take any one element of the play and write a paragraph or two on its importance to the play as a whole.

Homework option #2: Have the students write a few paragraphs on the similarity between Shakespeare's questions of sanity in *Hamlet* with Orton's questions of sanity in *What the Butler Saw*. Consider each author's approach to the subject.

DAY FOUR - Test

Individual Assessment: Chose either several questions from the **Open Response Assessment** or one question from **Writing Assignments** for students to answer in one class period.

*Optional: Students may choose one of the **For Further Exploration** or **Media Assessment** tasks to complete for extra credit.*

SEVEN DAY LESSON PLAN completely integrates *What the Butler Saw* into your schedule. Within seven school days, you can introduce the play, assign reading and vocabulary, and assess your students on both a group and individual level. Allows students to closely study *What the Butler Saw*, reflect on its central metaphors, and determine their relationship to the major themes presented in the play.

Homework: The day before, have the students read the introduction to *Joe Orton: The Complete Plays*.

DAY ONE- Introducing the Play

Same as Day One above

Discuss the sexual and comic nature of the play. Focus on its entertainment value and its use as a social commentary.

*Optional: Distribute **Vocabulary Handout** due on Day Four.*

Homework: Read Act One of *What the Butler Saw* and answer the corresponding **Mastery Assessment** questions.

DAY TWO- Act One

Discuss Act One and answers to the questions.

Discuss the elements of farce, the role of ironic dialogue and the similarities/differences between farce and tragedy.

*Optional Assignment: Have the students write a paragraph on the differences and similarities between Shakespeare's serious approach to insanity in *Hamlet*, and Orton's comic approach in *What the Butler Saw*.*

Homework: Read Act Two of *What the Butler Saw* and answer the corresponding **Mastery Assessment** questions.

DAY THREE- Act Two

Discuss Act Two and answers to questions; assign parts to students and read/act out scenes.

Discuss the major elements of the play: setting, plot, characterization, rising action, climax, ending (Deus et Machina), language.

Optional Assignment: Have the students take any one element of the play and write a paragraph or two on its importance to the play as a whole.

Homework: Have the students answer a select number of questions from the **Mastery Assessment**.

Day Four- Performance

Attend

HANDOUT #1 VOCABULARY

Before the Play

Farce

Tragedy

The Play

Aberration

Acolyte

Apparitions

Archetypal

Asylum

Bric-a-brac

Brooch

Buggery

Cabbalistic (cabalistic)

Chaucerian

Conservative Party (England)

Coquette

Coven

Depraved

Dispensary

Eugenics

Exhumation

Febrile

Fraternity

Frugal

Gaol

Howdah

Ignominy

Incubus

Indiscretions

Iniquity

Lobelia

Metaphysical

Necrophilia

Neuritis

Neurosis

Nom-de-folie (look up “nom-de-plume” and “folie a deux”)

Nymphomaniac

Paederast

Paranoia

Peccadilloes

Propitiate

Psychiatry

Puerile

Scandalous

Skulduggery (skullduggery)

Socialism

Tentative

Transvestism

Unionist Party (England)

Unorthodox

Unpalatable

Unsavoury (unsavory)

Vestiges

HANDOUT #2

FUN WITH FARCE

What makes farce so much fun to watch is that everything that happens is unexpected. What is often at the root of the unexpected is that all the characters are trying to achieve a goal, and these goals are all in conflict with other characters' goals. Finally, there is a hurdle that each character must overcome to achieve that goal.

For this next activity, select four students. Identify a setting. On different pieces of paper, identify a goal and a hurdle. To begin, hand out the pieces of paper with the goal and hurdle to the actors. Everyone should be made aware of the setting. To start the activity, put two of the characters on "stage" and whenever it is least convenient, introduce a new character. Here's an example.

Let's identify the setting: A Boston T-Station

Here are the four characters and their goals and hurdles:

	Character	Goal	Hurdle
Character 1:	Man	to ask a girl to dinner	He just lost his voice
Character 2:	Man or woman	to borrow \$1	Can't look anyone in the eyes.
Character 3:	Man or woman	Steal something	Can't avoid guilt
Character 4:	Woman	Realizes one of the other characters is her brother/sister.	She faked her death to hide from her family.

Start with any two, introduce the other characters at the most awkward moment and see what happens!

Feel free to change the settings, characters' goals and hurdles to suit your classroom and your students.