

EVERYBODY'S GOT ONE

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LOOT

Odyssey Theatre Ensemble

Appearing in London in *Hello, Dolly!* in the late 1960s, an era of typically complacent and commercially safe theatrical offerings that appealed to the rigid other-Pondly sensibilities of Brits some 50-plus years ago, we were characteristically welcomed with gracious open arms. Soon, however, the West End was abuzz with talk about a shocking newcomer transferred to the Criterion Theatre after playing and bombing bigtime in several continuously rewritten provincial productions.

The play was the second controversial “off-West End” mounting of an irreverent solidly black comedy by Joe Orton, the then-current upstart badboy of the quickly-evolving English stage. It was called *Loot* and, like the best in the traditions of Moliere and Comedia dell’arte, it skewered the English establishment with sharply critical accuracy. I, of course, couldn’t wait to see it.

Now being presented as the kickoff production of “Circa ‘69!,” the Odyssey Theatre Ensemble’s 50th anniversary season offering an 18-month retrospective of plays that rocked the world of theatrical literature at the time of the company’s inception, *Loot* has been lovingly revived under the leadership of director Bart DeLorenzo.

At the encouragement and mentorship of his lover Kenneth Halliwell, who had given his then-rough-around-the-edges workingclass RADA classmate his first typewriter in 1951 and encouraged him to put his outrageously crude sense of humor into essays and, eventually, playwrighting, Orton took on the conservatism of 1960s British society with a vengeance. Gratefully, none of the play’s original shock value has been compromised here—in fact, thanks to DeLorenzo, some of the elements have instead been significantly heightened and expanded upon.

As one Mr. McLeavy (Nicholas Hormann) mourns the recent death of his wife, whose body lies in state in the living room of his London home, her nurse Fay (Elizabeth Arends) is right there with him—about four feet from Mrs. McLeavy’s open casket—whispering sweet little nothings in his ear about the future. “It’s been three days,” she reminds him. “Have you thought about a second marriage yet?”

Fay, of course, who is also schtupping the randy undertaker’s assistant Dennis (Alex James-Phelps), would be more than willing to fill the role as the next Mrs. McLeavy, especially since she has a long and sorted history of marrying well-off older gentlemen who somehow soon after seem to shuffle off their mortal coil at an alarming rate.

McLeavy seems oblivious to her machinations, only glad that his late wife dropped dead during the right season for some nice plump roses to festoon her funereal tributes and worrying that his son Hal (Robbie Jarvis), who is also schtupping Dennis, is getting off on the wrong track.

As Fay pleads her case for her companionship utilizing her obvious feminine wiles (“I am a woman—and only half the population can say that without contradiction”), Dennis and Hal are trying to decide where to hide the bundles of money they have acquired from robbing the bank located next to Dennis’ place of employment. Temporarily locked in a cupboard near poor Mrs. McLeavy’s remains, they hatch a brilliant plan: replacing her corpse with the piles of cash and burying it instead of her, while unceremoniously stuffing her body headfirst into the cupboard for a woody and less ceremonious burial later.

Along the way and weaving through Orton’s wickedly outrageous farce, which manages to lift the genre beyond mistaken identities and slamming doors, he brilliantly satirizes what he saw as the unspoken hypocrisies of stuffy British mores, conventional attitudes, and unending politeness, taking on not only governmental corruption but the saintly Catholic Church and the country’s double-standard in dealing with something close to his own heart: homosexuality.

Of course, it was his country’s unwillingness to recognize and accept his own “deviant” lifestyle, something his handlers worked diligently to suppress as his fame grew, that led to the untimely death of the playwright himself, who 17 months after *Loot* debuted in London was bludgeoned to death with a hammer at age 34 by his own overlooked and severely depressed partner Kenneth Halliwell.

Beyond all the issues stuffed into *Loot*, Orton also took on the ineptitude of English law enforcement, something he and Halliwell knew only too well after being dogged by the local Islington police relentlessly and having survived six months in prison in 1962 for theft and malicious damage after defacing library books with obscene mottos and images, including adding an enormous fully-erect phallus to a photo of literary icon Dame Agatha Christie—a crime Orton firmly believed was dealt with so harshly “because we’re queers.”

And so to the chaos of the mildly grief stricken McLeary household comes one of Orton’s most endearingly beloved characters, the blustery and bumbling Inspector Truscott “from the Yard” (Ron Bottitta). Patterned as an amalgam of an infamous real-life London Metropolitan Police sergeant named Harold Challenor and the homophobic detective who pursued he and Halliwell relentlessly—at one point, Truscott even says to Dennis and Hal, “You’re bloody well nicked, my little beauties,” the same thing the couples’ nemesis copper actually said when arresting them—Truscott is the comedic gem that, upon his entrance, suddenly elevates the play from funny to downright hilarious.

Although seeming to fumble a bit and get a little tongue-tied by Truscott’s laughingly officious and often impenetrable speeches, Bottitta is the quintessential Truscott, a character I often have speculated might have been the inspiration for Peter Seller’s iconic Inspector Clouseau. Bottitta expertly delivers his juiciest lines simultaneously from within the “three walls” of the McLeary living room, as a character notes of the place in a crafty Ortonian inside joke, and directly out to the audience with equal ease.

As refreshing as it is whenever Bottitta reenters and takes over the stage, the less-flashy performance of Hormann is the most impressive here. His oft-overlooked McLeavy is hugely saucy and deadly serious, while at the same time demonstrating the most perfect comic timing Orton could have ever desired to deliver his eventually doomed character’s scathingly witty and terminally British dialogue.

Among the production’s actual Brits, Arends as the deceitful Fay and Jarvis as the socially rebellious Hal, clearly the embodiment of the playwright himself as he delights in his own degeneracy, are both great assets to the tight ensemble, while James-Phelps, so like a young English James Cagney that I

half-expected him to launch into a chorus of “Yankee Doodle Dandy” at any moment, is well cast as the sexually-insatiable cockney lad everybody wants to fuck—although if he tempered his facial overreactions whenever other characters should be the focus, he’d be even better.

DeLorenzo’s kinetic staging pays respectful homage to the legacy of Orton and the history of this play, adding all the signature craftiness of which he is such a master. Making the late Mrs. McLeavy an actual actor (Selina Woolery Smith, who also doubles as Police Officer Meadows) rather than using the traditional dummy, is a stroke of genius, as is heightening the physical sexual tomfoolery between Dennis and Hal, who here can’t keep their hands off one another and even get to occasionally share a brazen kiss.

I must admit I did miss some of the raucous rat-a-tat-tat and stylistically broad delivery of the original production, where lines and physical outrageousness came so fast and at such a fevered pace that audience members almost didn’t have time to react for fear of missing out on the next ridiculously silly *bon mot*.

Whether the more to-the-bone and less over-the-top nature of this otherwise excellent revival was intentional, or if instead it simply shows that *Loot* has lost some of its shock value a half-century later, I know not. It is an inevitable question in our modern world where governmental corruption, the decidedly unsaintly history of organized religion, and fiercely divided attitudes toward same sex and gender issues are explored in literature, on stages, film, television, and on the evening news, are a given and no longer verboten to discuss.

“Wake up! Stop dreaming!” the ballbusting Fay yells to McLeavy at the opening of *Loot* as he sits vigil at his wife’s coffin, her dainty yet dead little nose peeping out from the pillows. Perhaps this was Joe Orton’s most fervent warning to playgoers during his tragically short stay on our perilous and precarious planet not long before he left it with so much still to say. Would that people had been bright enough to listen when the laughter finally ended.

THROUGH AUG. 10: Odyssey Theatre, 2055 N. Sepulveda Blvd., West LA. 310.477.2055 or www.OdysseyTheatre.com
