

Review: Prick Up Your Ears

Tragic, bawdy, funny film

by Ross West

Twenty years ago last week Kenneth Halliwell hammered British playwright Joe Orton to death, then killed himself. They had been lovers for 16 years.

The witty, sexy, and charming Orton seems always ahead of the game, and yet, like Guy Burgess (*In Another Country*), he is an eternal outsider because of his homosexuality. In one sense *Prick Up Your Ears* is about insiders and outsiders. By film's end the audience feels like insiders, privy to Orton's most intimate moments and the conflicts that rage both within and about him. The film is startling and well-told, tragic, bawdy and funny.

Based on John Lahr's biography of Orton, *Prick Up Your Ears* moves smartly through the rocky territory of the young writer's troubled life. One night he's presented with the London Evening Standard's Best Play of 1966 Award for his play *Loot*. Later that same evening, after eyeing some like-minded gents in a suburban public restroom, he sets the award beside a urinal, douses the

lights, and melts into the dark sea of anonymous, forbidden sex.

Director Stephen Frears brings to this film the same sensitivity he demonstrated in last year's low-budget gem, *My Beautiful Laundrette*. In *Laundrette* Frears captured two subcultures: gays and prosperous Indians living in an economically withered London. The central characters in *Prick Up Your Ears* are not only gay, but artists. In both films Frears' direction subtly denies the walls that could keep audiences from sympathy.

He draws lines separating his insiders and outsiders, however, then deftly places the audience in one camp or the other. The balding and dour Halliwell (Alfred Molina) is left standing in the rain while his lover rides off in a shimmering white Rolls with Paul McCartney. As the camera hangs on the sad-sack outsider, the audience becomes an embarrassed participant in his rejection and shame.

Beyond Frears' sure-handed direction, the film benefits greatly from fine performances by Molina and Gary Oldham as the radiant



Prick Up Your Ears, the story of playwright Joe Orton, is directed by Steven Frears who directed *My Beautiful Laundrette*.

Orton. Oldham's last—and first—starring role was Sid Vicious in last year's remarkable *Sid and Nancy*. Oldham's extensive theatrical background and natural talents have prepared him to take on almost any role although twice in a row he's been cast as a popular artist snuffed out early on.

(Should the success of *La Bamba* and *The Buddy Holly Story* give the Big Money in Hollywood the idea of making it three-for-three with something like *The Big Bopper: Boppin' Till He Dropped*, I'd advise Oldham to turn down the role.)

Wallace Shawn (*My Dinner With Andre*, *Radio Days*) plays Lahr,

the biographer whose investigation into Orton's life shapes the film. This device allows for direct interviews of Joe's friends and associates, interviews that conveniently melt into flashbacks. Not only is this easy, but it opens the door for the film's only uninteresting sub-plot, that of Shawn and his under-appreciated co-writer/wife. Their relationship is supposed to be an artsy reflection of Joe and Halliwell; I'd call it a missed bet.

Prick Up Your Ears is a fine and moving film, a backstage pass, an invitation to become an insider, a guided tour through ecstasy and torment.

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"Working class British playwright Joe Orton had a career with the trajectory of a Fourth-of-July rocket, fast, brilliant, astonishing, with a plunging drop-off when Orton was murdered by his male live-in lover. 'Prick Up Your Ears' was directed by Stephen Frears ('My Beautiful Laundrette') with Gary Oldman ('Sid & Nancy') as Orton and Alfred Molina as his roommate... there is no denying (the film's) bitchy appeal, nor the brilliance of its principal actors, along with Vanessa Redgrave as Orton's celebrated literary agent."
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