

Prick Up Your Ears

The highest praise must go to Gary Oldman; as Joe Orton he exudes warmth and unrepentant sexuality.

BY BRADY JENSEN

Director: Stephen Frears
Starring: Gary Oldman, Alfred Molina, Vanessa Redgrave
Playing at: The Movie House

If you read his diary all will be explained.
K.H.

P.S. Especially the latter part."

With these words, and nine cracks with a hammer, Kenneth Halliwell made himself equal to his lover, British playwright Joe Orton. On August 9, 1967, Halliwell bludgeoned his lover of sixteen years and took his own life with sleeping pills. Orton was 34 and, after just

Cinema

two full-length plays, his outrageous and irreverent humor had conquered London theater. Lost, as his lover achieved the fame he had always sought, Halliwell became a bitter, depressed and lonely man paralyzed with the fear that Orton would leave him.

Prick Up Your Ears, based on the biography of Orton by John Lahr, is the story of Orton and Halliwell, their life together and their tragic deaths. Like any film biography, it walks a thin line between faithfully portraying a life and sensitively depicting a dramatic story. It succeeds wonderfully at both. At another level, it is a giant step forward in the depiction of homosexuality through film. Orton and Halliwell were lovers for sixteen years, coupled at a time when homosexuality was still illegal in Britain and mostly carried out in public bathrooms ("Tea Rooms") and abandoned buildings. *Prick Up Your Ears* does not disguise this relationship, nor make apologies for it. There is no implication that the fact Orton and Halliwell were gay is in any way responsible for the grisly outcome.

At its heart, *Prick Up Your Ears* is an examination of a relationship put under the stress of success, more accurately, the popular and artistic success of one of the partners. In this sense, it almost seems like one of those old *Ladies' Home Journal* pieces, "Can this marriage be saved?" It is an all-too-read story of one partner's having "made it" and leaving the other behind. It is not too different from the wife who puts her husband through medical school only to be deserted because her interests are no longer his. The Orton-Halliwell relationship was founded on failure; as long as they were both failures—on stage or in writing—they were equals. Success of the one drove home all the more strongly the failure of the other.

There is another sub-text to *Prick Up Your Ears*, one unique to the gay experience. Orton and Halliwell were complete outcasts. They had no gay ghetto to provide support, no friends or peers. *Prick Up Your Ears* is, then, an examination of the gay relationship. Notwithstanding its brutal ending (due more to the issue of success than sexuality), this relationship worked for a very long time. There is no record of the first ten years, but it is clear in the film that this relationship met needs of both

partners during this time.

The film actually has two narrative threads. The first is the story of Joe Orton. The second, that of John Lahr and his research into Orton's life. The film weaves from one thread to the other, using the present-day story to amplify, analyze, and interpret the past. It is a very effective technique, vaguely reminiscent of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Screenwriter Alan Bennett captures Joe Orton—his anger and rage with society and his burning humor which was his revenge. Bennett draws heavily on Orton's diary, written over the last two years of his life, and the dialogue always rings true. The wholly fictionalized is kept to a minimum, and even where necessary, as in Halliwell's and Orton's final scene, Bennett is true to Orton's spirit.

Stephen Frears, director of *My Beautiful Laundrette*, does a masterful job with tone and atmosphere. The period details capture the sense of claustrophobic confinement in Orton's and Halliwell's room and the dark squalid world of anonymous sex. Frears balances this in neat counterpoint with the scenes in present day, which are nearly always shot in well-lit, open rooms. Visually, the film stresses the outlaw in Orton that popular and critical success could not erase.

Prick Up Your Ears succeeds principally, however, on the strength of its three main characters—Gary Oldman as Orton, Alfred Molina as Halliwell, and Vanessa Redgrave as Orton's powerful theatrical agent, Peggy Ramsay, Wallace Shawn, of *My Dinner With Andre* as Lahr, and Julie Walters (*Educating Rita*) as Orton's mother, Elise, lend firm support to the principals.

The highest praise must go to Oldman, whose only other film credit is as Sid Vicious in *Sid and Nancy*. Oldman exudes warmth and unrepentant sexuality. Even in photographs, Orton is magnetic—plain sexy. Critics of Orton's work believe the rage explicit in his work was the focused product of the rage he felt towards a society which harshly oppressed any overt sexuality, and homosexuality in particular. It is impossible, therefore, to separate Orton's sexuality from his work. Oldman captures this rage and the pleasure of sex well—better than could be described in words.

Prick Up Your Ears is a must-see film. Already it has become a major event. The movie was released simultaneously with the publishing of *The Orton Diaries* in England and the United States. A lengthy excerpt appears in the May *Vanity Fair*. *Loot*, Orton's award-winning second play, was revived successfully on Broadway last year, and Joseph Papp just optioned the Beatles movie screenplay, which was unfinished at Orton's death, for a new musical.

Twenty years after his death, interest in Orton has never been more keen. Ironically, despite Halliwell's reference to the diaries, Orton's death remains very much a tragic mystery. *Prick Up Your Ears* provides much in the way of explanation, but in the end, how much can ever be known about the life of two men who live and work for fifteen years in a single room?

And can we ever understand what would cause a man to brutally murder his lover and kill himself? These are the questions *Prick Up Your Ears* invite us to ask. I suspect we will be reflecting on the answers for a long time.



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