

'Prick Up Your Ears' is a soft-core, sleazy toilet tour of playwright's life

By Scott Harrah,
Senior Editor

"Prick Up Your Ears," (Britain, 1987). Showing at the Sheldon Film Theater Thursday through Saturday. Screenings are at 7 and 9 p.m. with matinees Saturday at 3 p.m.

British playwright Joe Orton was the Oscar Wilde of the 1960s, an irreverent working-class bad boy whose personal life mirrored the energetic farces that brought him fame.

His plays broke theatrical barriers and set new standards for social satire. One would think he would be remembered for that alone.

But director Stephen Frears and screenwriter Alan Bennett instead chose to mock and sensationalize Orton's salacious lifestyle in their docudrama "Prick Up Your Ears."

Orton, like his 19th-century counterpart Wilde, was a flamboyant

Standard award. Little is explained about the reasons behind his unconventional life. We are forced to sit through numerous travels through the gutter that the film glorifies.

Orton's angst stems from his bleak childhood, but all the audience sees are a few fights he had with his mother (Julie "Educating Rita" Walters) over his career choice and a penchant for masturbating on her "good bedspreads."

Of course, when his mother dies and Orton goes to his hometown for the funeral there's an inevitable scene in which he picks up a beer-swilling factory worker for a quickie.

"Prick Up Your Ears," in its incessant pursuit of unbuttoned jeans, fails to capture the "mod" scene that embraced Orton. He was asked by the Beatles' manager, Brian Epstein, to write a screenplay for a Fab Four film, and we see Orton triumphantly enter Paul McCartney's limousine to discuss details. But the "hip" London that nurtured the author's revolutionary zeal is shown as a mere backdrop for satyric activity. England evidently thought a person endorsed by the Beatle empire was more than a member of the after-dark urinal set.

Based on John Lahr's biography, the film uses a "Citizen Kane" framework to move in and out of Orton's life, showing his literary agent Peggy Ramsey (wonderfully portrayed by Vanessa Redgrave) finding Halliwell's and Orton's corpses in the beginning.

The remainder of the film vacillates between Orton's life, and Ramsey and Lahr discussing the biography. The final murder scene, in which Halliwell, overcome with jealousy, axes Orton and then swallows a bottle of pills, is intentionally depicted flippantly. Halliwell gazes at Orton's sliced-up body, then eyes the heavy London Evening Standard award statue and crudely simpers, "Maybe I should've used that. . . . It would've been more dramatic."

It seems Frears and Bennett couldn't decide whether they were making a serious drama, a farce or a skin flick, so they created a combination of the three. Frears pioneered gay realism in "My Beautiful Laundrette," showing the inequities the working class and sexual infidels suffer in Thatcher's draconian Britain. But here he's done the opposite. He's guilty of drumming stereotypes in the name of shock value while maligning a major voice of the '60s by exposing his weaknesses. The thematic homophobia of "Prick Up Your Ears" is affronting and sickening. Why should the world care what Joe Orton did in his spare time and how he stained his mommy's bedspread with early depravity? The film closely resembles the Paul Cameron/Anita Bryant notion: "See! This is how they ALL live!"

The talented, renowned cast seems to be unjustly in the center of this cesspool, dusting dime-novel dialogue with ardor and effort it hardly deserves.

Gary Oldman is especially effective, giving Orton a scurrilous passion and warmth that begs to be spared from the Frears/Bennett sleaze



Courtesy of Samuel Goldwyn Co.
Orton and Halliwell

sledgehammer.

Frears established himself as a radical auteur with "Laundrette," but "Prick Up Your Ears" puts him back in the cinematic dark ages. The audience cannot help but feel they've been caught with their pants down, too embarrassed to identify with the superficial bugger in a raincoat Orton hardly resembled in life.

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homosexual. Although he maintained a grisly relationship with his lover, Kenneth Halliwell, for 16 years, he lived for nightly sojourns into the world of "tearooms," men's public restrooms where anonymous sex abounds.

The film unfairly exploits Orton's desperate search for the ultimate five-minute "trick" and winds up looking more like soft-core gay porn than a biography about a great writer.

Gary "Sid and Nancy" Oldman brilliantly plays Orton, a snide, devil-may-care rebel caught up in the unprecedented cross-currents of "mod" '60s London. Orton meets his lover Kenneth (Alfred Molina) at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, and the pair's zest for the perverse and the socially offensive helps them form a quirky, tragic bond.

Their favorite activity is borrowing library books so they can change the jacket covers and rewrite them as dirty porno plot summaries. At first it is Halliwell who wants to be the writer — Orton unsuccessfully pursues acting. The two spend 10 years together co-writing novels no publisher will touch. They cover the walls of their grim North London flat with collages of photos culled from defaced books.

But when they are imprisoned for defacing the books, they are separated. Orton pours out his anger in the diary he has kept since childhood. During his six-month prison term Orton hones his writing skills and pens a one-act radio play the BBC broadcasts after he is released.

Orton soars into the limelight shortly afterward with his plays "Entertaining Mr. Sloane" and "Loot," which is awarded Best Play of 1966 by the London Evening Standard.

Halliwell is bitterly jealous of Orton's notoriety, claiming he came up with many ideas for the plays. He wallows in domestic hell while Orton soaks up stardom and continues to chronicle his nightly restroom sleaze romps in his diary.

And the film camera follows him from trick to trick. We see Orton have a toilet orgy on the night he wins the

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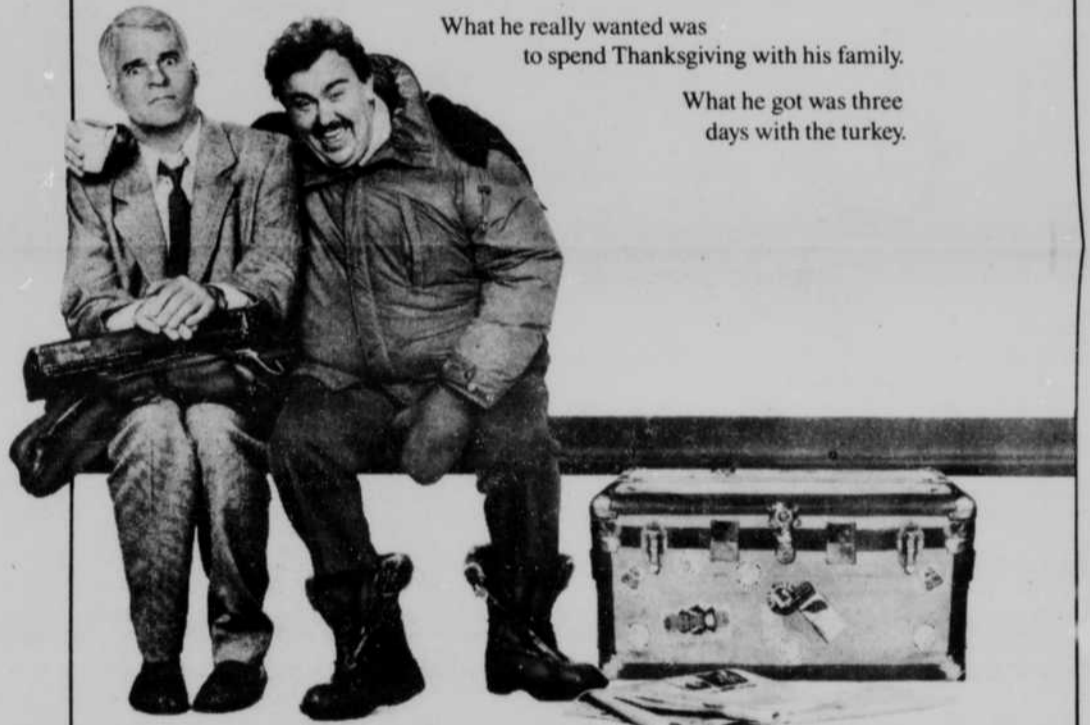
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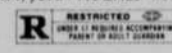
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