

NEW ENGLISH DRAMATISTS

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HENRY LIVINGS

Stop It, Whoever You Are

LUN OWEN

Progress to the Park

JOHN WHITING

Arching Song

PENGUIN PLAYS

PL42

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INTRODUCED BY ALAN BRIEN

EDITED BY TOM MASCHLER

STOP IT, WHOEVER YOU ARE

*Henry Livings*

PROGRESS TO THE PARK

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MARCHING SONG

*John Whiting*

PENGUIN BOOKS

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## INTRODUCTION

CRITICS are also journalists – all dressed up with only one place to go. Their motto sometimes seems to be ‘Have dinner jacket, will cavil.’ But it is their job to be readable as well as right, and part of their function is to identify, for readers who are often only occasional theatregoers, new trends in the drama with brisk, snappy, shorthand slogans. Thus the spread of such portmanteau terms as ‘dustbin drama’, ‘kitchen-sink realism’, and ‘chamberpot comedy’ for the kind of play which has bobbed up in the wake of *LOOK BACK IN ANGER*.

Some of the catch-phrases are older than they sound. That censorious moralist of the Victorian *derrière-garde*, Clement Scott, invented ‘the drama of the dustbin’ as long ago as 1900, to denounce Frank Harris’s *MR AND MRS DAVENTRY*. What apparently aroused his indignation was the scene in which a lecherous gentleman forced his unwelcome attentions on a pure lady in a locked drawing-room. The whole thing was impeccably upper middle class, and the dustbin was metaphorical. But metaphors in controversial journalism have a dangerous habit of taking themselves literally. If Mr Scott had remained the *Daily Telegraph* critic until 1959, he would have seen his dustbins physically present on stage in Beckett’s *END GAME* where they were the homes of the two legless, abandoned parents.

The kitchen-sink tag was probably borrowed from the art criticism of the fifties, when it was coined to describe John Bratby’s paintings. Here the description was quite precise, and Arnold Wesker’s *ROOTS* included a sink as a necessary prop. There was also the disconnected gas stove in *THE CARETAKER* and the attic water-tank in *LOOK BACK IN ANGER*.

Some partisans of the new drama have felt that the more traditionalist critics were unfair in continually pointing out how the stage was becoming cluttered with domestic paraphernalia. But they were simply reporting the facts. The mass-observers at the Royal Court

Theatre and Stratford East have almost always framed their people in a still-life of things. What some of the critics didn't realize was that the sauce bottle, the fried liver, the ironing-board, the case of light ale, the drying-up cloth, and the old newspapers under the moquette cushion were objects as emotive of a way of life and a habit of mind as the whisky decanter, the cold grouse, the french windows, the rose garden, the fur stole, and the first edition bound in calf.

In the plays of today, notably in the Brechtian productions of the Berliner Ensemble, the objects themselves can take on a positive, almost speaking, part in the action. They are at once symbols and totems, prizes and stigmas, precariously won and sometimes capriciously sacrificed.

The final despairing epithet, popularized only in the last couple of years, was 'chamberpot', though at the time no unfriendly critic proved able to produce a concrete (or china) example. In 1961, however, Henry Livings obliged by setting two of his five scenes in *STOP IT, WHOEVER YOU ARE* in a factory lavatory. To those who have neither seen nor read the play, this is the nadir of pointless vulgarity. Such an opinion is unlikely to survive exposure to the play itself. '*The factory washroom and lavatories*' is no more outrageous or for that matter more fascinating a stage direction than '*Before Pomfret Castle*', or '*Sebastian's Room in Albany*'. Mr Livings knows, just as his critics know when they stop protesting, that in any small world where one sex is temporarily segregated this is often the only place in which the inmates can retire to smoke, gossip, plot, slack, quarrel, and relax, away from authority.

Both he and his characters use the lavatories naturally and unashamedly. The pub, the canteen, the factory yard, or the street would not satisfy his dramatic need for a site where his worm could turn. His working men find themselves there far more plausibly than many a stage duke finds himself in his library full of painted books.

What is unexpected about this play is that it is a work of propaganda for the beetle and against the boot, for the worm and against the spade, which does not caricature Them while sentimentalizing Us, as did the

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Party-line satires of the thirties. All Mr Livings's people are just one remove from the traditional butts and butties of the seaside postcard and the music-hall sketch. In other words, they appear exactly as ludicrous, messy, bewildered, selfish, pitiable, and sinister as would any one of us if the fourth wall of his house turned transparent and revealed him in a posture guaranteed to make sensational copy for the *News of the World*.

William Perkin Warbeck is as much one of the wounded veterans of the ant-hill war as Beatie Bryant or Jimmy Porter. He is in many ways a more difficult combatant to dramatize because his rank is more obscure and his armament more feeble. Warbeck is the lowest brick in the base of the social pyramid. His only possible form of protest is to move suddenly to one side and hope that part of the roof will fall in. His heroism, like that of the Good Soldier Schweik, consists in being cowardly enough to run away.

STOP IT, WHOEVER YOU ARE invites laughter – the straightforward, unsophisticated belly-laughter of the mass audience as they recognize sudden incongruities, the primitive slapstick, the familiar reiterations and confusions and embarrassments of everyday existence. But it is also an experimental play – much more unorthodox in form than ROOTS and LOOK BACK IN ANGER – which tumbles over the edge of farce into fantasy. And it ends up as a plea for love between human beings, for the naked lonely creatures beneath the panoply of petty power or the livery of base employment.

PROGRESS TO THE PARK is superficially a Romeo and Juliet story of young lovers torn apart by the religious antagonisms of middle-aged Papes and Prods in working-class Liverpool. The author, Alun Owen, has guided his play through three different productions (and one radio performance), unveiling it in turn at each of the key theatrical shrines, the Royal Court, Stratford East, and Shaftesbury Avenue. With each version, the balance of forces has shifted slightly.

Finally, Mag has become more of a Cressida than a Juliet. A warm-blooded creature, whose promiscuities are cosily affectionate rather than sensually passionate, her tragedy is not so much the opposition of

fanatical parents as the moral disapproval of an amoral gang of her schoolfellows. She discovers that love is a four-letter word in a world of casual sex.

Bobby, the Romeo of Mr Owen's *Liverpool*, never matches her in spirit or individuality. Instead, Teifion, the bawdy, tart, mocking Welsh Mercutio, supplies the steam power which drives street-corner and park-bench courtship to its climax. Originally, he was a kind of chorus who inspected the squabbling clans from the outside. By the last revision, he had become the hub and centre upon which the whole drama turns. His summing up is not 'a plague on both your houses', but 'I cherish the differences: they mean people are alive'.

PROGRESS TO THE PARK exists beyond, and to some extent in spite of, its plot. Its value lies in that meaty Liverpool-Irish stew which Alun Owen has mixed with honesty and compassion, of boasts and confessions, ambitions and fears, when the gang are alone together. It is a first-class scouse.

John Whiting's *MARCHING SONG* is a deliberately denuded, bone-bare skeleton of a play, in style and theme very far from the working-class drama of most of the new post-war playwrights. Its affinities are rather with John Arden in his *SERGEANT MUSGRAVE'S DANCE* vein than with Livings, Wesker, or Owen. Mr Whiting has deprived himself of all the warmth and realism obtainable by reproducing contemporary speech idioms and living habits.

The setting is described as 'a house set on the heights above a capital city in Europe', but the action takes place in the timeless, faceless world of the Either/Or choice, where each man defines himself by his deeds and becomes his own epitaph, where no example furnishes a pattern for imitation, and the summing-up is: 'It isn't what he was, it was what he did.' This is the best manifestation so far of English existentialism. But where Sartre would have particularized the political beliefs of his characters, and heightened the emotions to produce philosophical melodrama, Mr Whiting has concentrated on what he has called 'formality of pattern and austerity of movement'. It is, in fact, anti-theatrical in its cold asceticism.

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In some ways, I think this is a mistake. Now that Mr Whiting has shown us in *THE DEVILS* that he realizes what an intoxicant language can be, *MARCHING SONG* has a flatness which is almost too sobering. What is impressive and interesting about the play is the shaping intelligence and chiselled craftsmanship of the playmaking, which refuses to botch and scamp under the pretence that inspiration excuses all shoddiness. John Whiting has had a rougher critical reception for some of his early plays than any other serious writer in the theatre except perhaps Harold Pinter. It is a welcome sign that the British stage is now reaching maturity when the supporters of one genre no longer feel obliged to mass forces and drive their rivals off the boards, so that Whiting, Livings, and Owen can appear within the covers of a series which has already included Osborne, Lessing, Kops, Wesker, and Arden.

ALAN BRIEN



HENRY LIVINGS

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*Stop It, Whoever You Are*

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## STOP IT, WHOEVER YOU ARE

First produced at the Arts Theatre Club, London, on Wednesday  
15 February 1961 with the following cast:

WILLIAM PERKIN WARBECK	Wilfred Brambell
ROSE WARBECK, <i>his wife</i>	Rosamund Greenwood
MR HARBUCKLE	John Rutland
MARILYN HARBUCKLE, <i>his daughter</i>	Sydonie Platt
LES WARD, <i>his friend and lodger</i>	Ray Mort
CAPTAIN BOOTLE	Brian Oulton
ALDERMAN MICHAEL OGLETHORPE	Arthur Lowe
POLICE CONSTABLE (Syd)	Edmond Bennet
TWO APPRENTICES	Roger Kemp and Ronald Lacey
HIS EXCELLENCY	John Saunders
(REPORTER	This part was later cut)

Directed by Vida Hope  
Settings and lighting by Brian Currah

SCENE: The parlour of Mr Warbeck's house or its tiny front garden;  
and Mr Warbeck's place of work, the washplace and lavatory of a  
factory.

## SCENE ONE

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*The tiny patch of garden in front of Warbeck's house, looking from the outside. On one side a narrow arched passage between houses. A straggly hedge, which WARBECK is at this moment supposed to be trimming, i.e. he has the clippers in his hands and occasionally gives a dispirited click with them. He is quite bald and very insignificant.*

[MARILYN HARBUCKLE, a buxom fourteen-year-old, is outside the garden. She has her arms wrapped round her and, unaware that WARBECK is there, sings to herself.]

MARILYN [*sings*]:

I've got a song, for the winter weather.  
We two belong, we're warm in the frost –  
The street is empty, and the wind turns the leaves,  
But in our blood there runs along  
Runs a sweet warm longing.

The mills are still, and their fires are dampened –  
Out on the hills, the sheep hug the wall –  
The wind is driving and the curlew's alone,  
But in our bodies moves a thrill, moves a tender thrilling.

[*She finishes the song and cuddles herself.*]

Ooh, darling, will you hold me as close as this always?

Darling, darling, darling. It's wonderful to be with you alone.

[MARILYN sees Perkin Warbeck peering at her over the hedge, and begins very seriously to hop in a complicated child's game, earnestly scoring for herself.]

WARBECK: Marilyn, where did you pick up that song?

MARILYN: Wireless.

WARBECK: Well I never. Makes you think, doesn't it? She's nobbut fourteen, though you wouldn't think it. Ahem. My name's William

Perkin Warbeck. William after my father, and Perkin after the famous revolutionary. If it's all the same to you, I'd prefer to be called Perkin. It's a good name. Perkin. Or else Mr Warbeck. I'm getting on now, though you wouldn't think it to look at me. I retired five year ago. It's true. I was in packing and dispatch. Of course you can't go on doing that sort of work for ever. I had twenty-five year in the same job. But you can't go on humping them boxes. No. Fifty-six pounds in the boxes, and up to sixteen stone in the bags. Tins of fruit and jam, and beans and such – Mm.

MARILYN: Mr Warbeck, do you get into the same bed with Mrs Warbeck every night?

WARBECK: Oh yes, my dear. Eh?

MARILYN: You're not retired, anyway. I don't care what you say.

WARBECK: Oh yes I am, Marilyn, my love.

MARILYN: You're not.

WARBECK: I am.

MARILYN: Not, not, not. You go out to work every day, I've seen you. And I've seen you empty the cat's dirt-tray in the dustbin every morning as you go. I can see you when I get up, and I'm taking my nightie off. You go to work, you go to work, you go to work – [*She goes back to her hopping.*]

WARBECK: My work in the sanitary is a personal favour to Captain Bootle. And I can leave any time I want, and have my pension back. I've still got my tobacco coupons, look.

[*She ignores most of this. Leans back against the hedge, lifting her head impudently to look into Warbeck's astonished eyes. After a pause, she speaks again.*]

MARILYN: Won't you cop it, when Mrs Warbeck comes back and sees how much hedge you've clipped?

WARBECK [*jumps, and then recovers*]: Why, you little monkey.

[*He comes purposefully out of the garden, hoping she'll run off. She stands her ground. He pretends that he came out to clip the outside of the hedge.*]