

The life and death of Joe Orton

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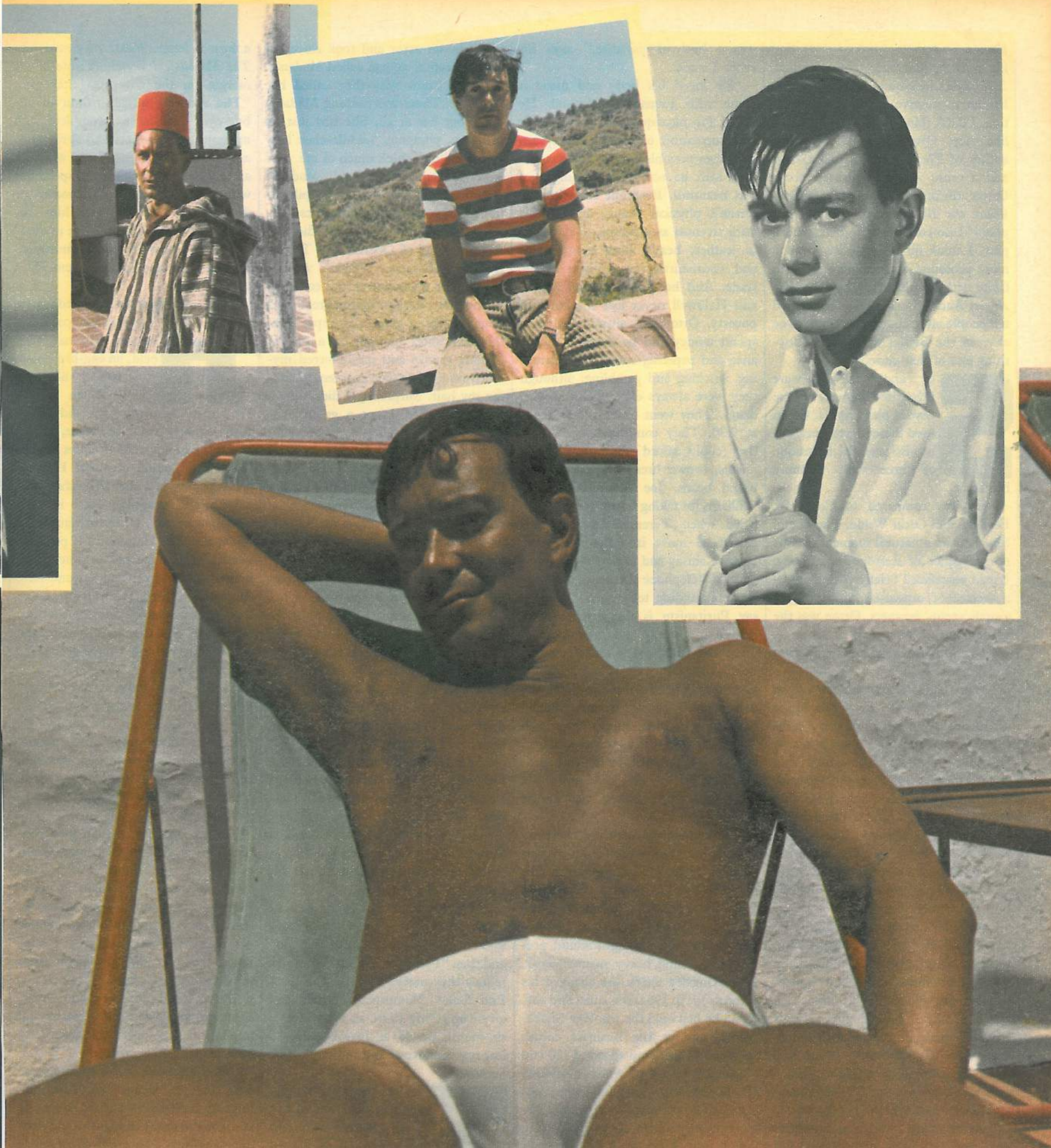
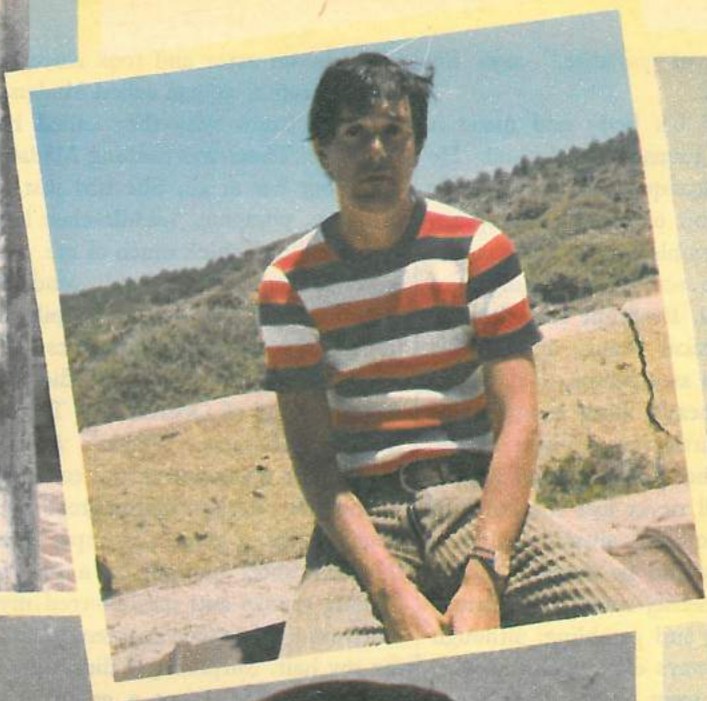
Joe Orton, author of *Entertaining Mr Sloane*, *Loot* and *What the Butler Saw*, was one of the most talented playwrights of his generation, whose anarchism shocked West End audiences but whose brilliant style won praise from critics. Orton – below left – and Kenneth Halliwell – below right – had lived together for 15 years. This photograph, with the actor Kenneth Williams in the centre, was taken on one of their expeditions to Morocco when Orton had started to become successful. But it was this sudden success that broke up the relationship. As he fell behind, Halliwell became depressed and paranoid. He beat Orton to death one morning in 1967 and then killed himself. Their extraordinary lives are recounted overleaf by *James Fox*

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Orton (right) as a schoolboy in Leicester





Violence had always been a part of Joe Orton's language as a playwright. It had been the constant danger of the rough trade, the homosexual subculture, that excited his tastes; and he had shocked West End audiences by making it flip in the mood of the times that he lived in and as commonplace as Dundee cake or doilies. In *Entertaining Mr Sloane*,

when the Dadda is dying upstairs of a kicking administered by the amoral Mr Sloane, his daughter Kath, genteel and cosy and sexually insatiable, says, "I'd take up a toffee, but he only gets them stuck round his teeth." But the final reckoning, when

Kenneth Halliwell beat Orton's brains out with a hammer early one August morning in 1967, was more macabre than anything Orton had put on stage. For the tabloids it was a salacious story of a homosexual slaying followed by suicide. This was a summer in which reckless forces seemed to be at work: within a few weeks of the death of Orton and Halliwell, Jayne Mansfield, Françoise Dorléac, Brian Epstein and

George Lincoln Rockwell all came to premature ends. Orton said in his diaries that catastrophe was stalking him, and in his mind danger was always present. *Ruffian on the Stair*, the title Orton gave his first radio play, comes from a W. A. Henley poem. *Madam Life's a piece in bloom*, *Death goes dogging everywhere*, *She's the tenant of the room*, *He's the ruffian on the stair*.

The room where it happened with Orton and Halliwell was an upstairs flat in Noel Road, Islington, where they had lived for eight of their 15 years together. They were a strange couple. Success had come to Joe Orton for only three out of the 15 years, and even then it hadn't changed their physical existence, except that at the rare tea parties they gave later the plates would be piled high with ABC cakes, Battenburgs,

doughnuts and custard tarts. They had lived like extremely puritanical hermits, as far as possible outside society. It was a close homosexual dependence solidified by years of failure, during which they were learning, painfully, how to write. "They read an enormous amount," says Peggy Ramsay, Orton's agent, "a lot of Wilde and Firbank and then they began polishing. It was a pure attempt to learn your craft which was very moving. And then Kenneth,

poor dear, tell behind." He had a long way to fall. Orton's success was a legend of the Sixties; he had touched the instant riches of the decade. When he died, royalties were beginning to earn him £6000 a year and the screen rights of *Loot* had been sold for a projected £100,000. It was the kind of success that their relationship couldn't contain. Orton had become one of the most talented playwrights of his generation; Halliwell

Orton's narcissism started early (top right). "He was a bird of paradise," says his sister Leonie. "He loved to oil his olive skin, pose for physique photographs, and dress in leather." was a failure, a depressive and an insomniac. Orton was outrageous and anarchistic, and as a writer a sharp and brilliant stylist. He has become a tradition; Ortonesque has become a form of classical English comedy. ➤➤➤

Harold Linter, a homosexual: "I find his work brilliant and truly original. As a stylist he's quite remarkable. He has an instinctive grasp of construction. I don't think anybody has written like Joe Orton." Frank Marcus, author of *The Killing of Sister George* and a critic who had written about Orton during his lifetime, says of *What the Butler Saw*, Orton's last play: "I do consider it to be a crucial play. I think for example it's a much more profound and serious play than *Chips with Everything* or *Look Back in Anger*. And I think it will survive and tell people more about what it felt to be alive in the Sixties than almost anything else of that period."

Sex and violence were favourite themes of the Sixties playwrights. Orton used these ingredients, but he also used the technique of farce with uncanny brilliance.

He was compared to Congreve, Feydeau and Oscar Wilde. The liberal Sixties were a natural moment for the re-emergence of Restoration comedy. It had resurfaced briefly with Wilde—a theatre of organised confusion, of morals versus manners. Orton was the natural farceur of an age of violence, when city life had alienated many from a common morality.

Many of his characters came from Leicester, his home, as if this nylon town, steeped in gentility, was a compression chamber for a pouring out of scorn on the whole of humanity. The city seemed to typify polite restraint and it was manners like these that Orton wanted to unfrock. "But unlike Osborne," says Harold Hobson, "he was not disturbed by what he found underneath, he was delighted." Orton said he found people "profoundly bad, but irresistibly funny".

Orton fancied himself as Mr Sloane. "I originally saw him as small and rather stocky," he said. "What many people have found difficult to understand about Sloane is his innocence and amorality. The English always tend to equate innocence with ignorance, which is rubbish." Sloane is a muscular young thug with a face like a cherub. Orton was boyish-looking and amorality was his method of discovery, of staying as near to the truth about good and evil as possible. Sloane did press-ups on tombstones and gave his favours freely and in innocence. For Orton's generation of homosexuals especially, the dangers and the threat of violence and blackmail encouraged promiscuity and the cult of brief encounters and Orton frequented public lavatories and solicited rough trade, recording every detail in his diaries. His sexual generosity was unlimited, his appetite was round. He kept himself like a prizefighter. "He

was a bird of paradise," says his sister Leonie.

He loved his body and made it shine with Johnson's baby oil. He posed for physique photographs. He had impeccable olive skin, a deep tan whenever possible and his elfish round face with its scurrilous darting eyes was beautiful. Everyone remarked on Orton's physical beauty and on his attractiveness as a person. He dressed in leather, heavy black boots, jeans and sweatshirts, the uniform of the trade. And he was a puritan. Orton and Halliwell never lost the habit of poverty. Orton was always unable to spend money and he hated flamboyance and expense, restaurants, drinking, smoking and gambling, although they were always experimenting with drugs. They went to bed every night at 9.30. They continued, even after they could afford more, to live on raisins, brown bread and treacle and baked beans. Joe admired Kenneth Williams for taking buses. He was horrified when Terence Rattigan suggested he move into Eaton Square. Peggy Ramsay had to persuade him to have a telephone because she was tired of sending telegrams. "I would say Puritanism is the driving force behind my work," said Orton in an interview. "It's a very misunderstood word, like immoral. When someone says that so-and-so is immoral, he usually means he goes around seducing boys or girls, but morals go much deeper than sexual appetites and real immorality has little to do with promiscuity. If people had more sex there might be less real vice in the world."

He had started with the chest expanders early on, more for his asthma than his beauty. His mother, a machinist who died six months before him, sent him to a private technical college in Leicester after he failed the 11-plus. His asthma, she thought, would prevent him doing heavy manual work. John Kingsley Orton (he changed his name to Joe in 1964) was quiet and shy. By 15 he had read the whole of Shakespeare, and at the business course acquired a shorthand speed of 120 and a typing speed of 60 words a minute. His father, now in a blind home, was a gardener, earning £9 a week. "My mother and father were always having rows," says Orton's sister. "I can't say my childhood was happy. There was always nagging and bickering.

"John lived in his own environment, his own little world. He would dress himself up as something and stand in a little stage he'd made with sheets and then he'd pull the curtains back and start slobbering something about Shakespeare."

He joined the Leicester Little Theatre amateur dramatic group and played juvenile roles. He wanted above

all to be an actor and took elocution lessons from a woman called Madame. "I don't know why they called her Madame. There was nothing Madamish about her at all. She was just an ordinary, pompous, middle-class lady and she didn't think much of me. Just a job. I could tell that." Madame organised a show of her pupils to impress the education authorities.

Orton and a girl pupil did the quarrel scene of Oberon and Titania from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He thought up an outrageous costume. "I thought I'd play Oberon green, so I bought a lot of green distemper from the local shop and put on a pair of bathing trunks and just covered myself from head to foot in green, including my hair. Surprising I didn't get a skin rash; then I got a green bedspread from my mother's bed and wrapped that around me and appeared on stage in this fantastic outfit while the girl wore a conventional muslin ballet dress as Titania." Orton got the grant and then an audition for RADA, for which he played Captain Hook and Smee in *Peter Pan* simultaneously. Madame, he said, could hardly conceal her rage when he was accepted.

National Service would have wrecked his plans to go to London. So on the day of the medical examination he smoked through a packet of cigarettes and ran the two miles to the examination room, where he was duly discovered to have chronic asthma and high blood pressure.

At RADA between 1950 and 1953, the years of Sylvia Sims and Bernard Bresslaw, Orton met Halliwell. They were both lonely.

Halliwell was eight years older than Orton, a mother-suffocated homosexual, prematurely bald. Both his parents were dead. He had read a lot even by that time, and Orton became his pupil. The entry in Orton's diary says on successive days: "I said no" and then "I said yes". With Halliwell's money they moved into a flat in West End Lane, Hampstead. Orton had given up trying to be an actor after a six-month period at Ipswich rep. "I lost my confidence and my virginity," he said.

They began writing. Their plan was to live on Halliwell's money until it ran out, and then take jobs as labourers until they had saved enough money to write again. They made contact with a publisher. "In 1955 I was sent a short novella called *The Last Days of Sodom* by Kenneth Halliwell and John Orton. A very Firbankian squib as I remember," says the publisher. "It was set in Sodom before the wrath of God had descended upon it. Highly ornamental and artificial. It revolved around one joke." He returned

a formal letter. Next, they sent him *The Mechanical Womb*. A note in the margin on the covering letter says, "The reductio ad absurdum of the bug-eyed monster s.f. complete with mutants, ailing robots and spray guns and a lot of nonsense kept whirring around by sheer bewildering speed but without any claim to character or design." In 1956 they sent him *The Boy Hairdresser*, a camp satire in modern verse. The publisher was intrigued by this time and invited them for a drink at a hotel.

Halliwell seemed to be the dominant partner," he said. "He was totally bald, an egg-like dome. He looked like the young Orson Welles. He had a big jowly chin and talked with a slightly ponderous voice, whereas Orton in his mid-twenties looked like a little gamin of about 17, very good-looking in a slightly urchin way, very bright, snapping eyes. He had obviously spent a lot of time sunbathing at the lido. Halliwell was pale. He wore a beret most of the time. They invited me to go to the flat and have supper with them. It was that evening that I got a glimpse into the life they led which was the most bizarre and extraordinary thing I have ever come across in my life."

Their two rooms were deeply gloomy. Halliwell had painted around the damp patches on the ceiling. To economise they never used electric light. They got up when it was light and went to bed when it got dark. Their diet consisted of rice, fish and golden syrup.

In the summer of 1956 they both took jobs at Cadbury's factory, Orton as a packer and Halliwell as a clerk. The publisher invited them to a party. "First I was genuinely fascinated by them—they wrote with considerable wit and style—and secondly I supposed that one day they might write rather a brilliant piece of work. Halliwell was the creative one and Orton, although he was always bright and intelligent, was very much the pretty boyfriend.

"But my guess is that during these long periods Orton was educating himself. He read an awful lot. But he was not the one I thought would produce anything. His novels were worse than Halliwell's (at times they had written separately) and Halliwell supplied the main motive power in their endeavours."

The party was a disaster. They arrived with a present: a long cylindrical container of chocolates stolen from Cadbury's factory and sat side by side on a sofa, never talking to anyone and radiating shyness. "I never felt tempted to repeat the experience," said the publisher.



Orton's family: his sister Leonie (left) with her husband George Barnett and Aunt Luce Cox in Leicester, the town from which Joe drew much of the background for his plays. Orton's brother Douglas drives a new Rover but still works as a plumber on building sites. "They tell me

at work, 'Your brother made his money out of his ... I don't care. I've got it,' he says. Joe's father, William Orton (right) was once a gardener and is now in a home for the blind in Leicester. Joe bought him a gas fire and gave his mother £80 so she could pay off her debts

They continued to write and to read books to each other. Voltaire, Swift and Lewis Carroll were influences. They sent the publisher *Priapus in the Shrubbery*. Orton wrote *The Vision of Gombold Proval*, and they moved to Noel Road, buying a lease on the flat with money saved, incredibly, from their labouring at Cadbury's.

In 1961, Halliwell wrote a despairing letter to the publisher. "I don't know if you have any convictions about the way life is run; its inexorable rules and so on. Personally I am convinced that what you lose on the swings, you gain on the roundabouts and vice versa. So it wouldn't quite frankly be in the logic of things for John and I to have too much success in any sphere. We live much too comfortably and pleasantly in our peculiar little way." It seems now like a remark of eerie perception, that success would be a threat to their cosy dependence on each other.

But then came the turning-point, a breaking of the spell which shocked them both. In 1962 they were arrested for stealing and defacing books from the public library. They were "dull, badly written books", they said, and they had ripped out the plates and used them as raw material for Kenneth's beautiful collages, mounted on the wall at Noel Road. A colour plate of a sunflower would have a monkey's head peering from the centre, obscenities would be written in margins and author's photographs would be dese-

crated. By the time the police caught up with them there were seven joint charges filed against them. They had stolen 72 books valued at £48; there was £15 damage to books alone and £143 damage to books "caused by the removal of 1463 plates". Their activities, as Orton said, had been going on for some time. "I once pasted a picture of a naked tattooed man over the photograph of John Betjeman; I think the book was *Summoned by Bells*. And another time I pasted a picture of a female nude over a photo of Lady Lewisham. It was some book on etiquette."

They went to Wormwood Scrubs and Eastchurch on the Isle of Sheppey for six months. For Orton it was a source of inspiration, but Halliwell was badly affected. He tried to commit suicide in prison.

"Being in the nick brought detachment to my writing," said Orton in an interview. "I wasn't involved any more and it worked."

Before I had been vaguely conscious of something rotting somewhere: prison crystallised this. The old whore society really lifted up her skirts and the stench was pretty foul." *Sloane* was the second play Orton wrote, after *Ruffian on the Stair*, but the first to be produced. It was derivative of Pinter in its use of demotic clichés for funny lines and in its theme of an alien intruder, the blonde thug Sloane, who comes to stay with

an old gardener and his son and daughter. But there were beginnings of the Ortonesque epigrammatic wit. John Mortimer dubbed the language South Ruislip Mandarin. "To be present at the conception is all a reasonable child can expect of his father"; "Your youth pleads for leniency," says the predatory brother to Sloane, "and by God you're going to get it"; "My teeth, since you mention them, Mr Sloane, are in the kitchen in Stergene"; "I loved that place, the air around Twickenham is like wine."

He had sent the script to Peggy Ramsay. She wrote back, "I was very pleased to receive your *Entertaining Mr Sloane*, which I think very fresh and interesting."

"I didn't know who he was, of course," she says, "but I liked it enough to see the author. I said I didn't terribly like the play because it was somehow derivative and he said well, if you don't like it I'll write you a better one, as long as you like my talent. I then rang up Michael Codron, who is marvellous at accepting plays when they are written by talented young people. And I said to him, do this at once. You won't make any money but you'll make a reputation. And within five weeks it was rehearsed and it was on."

It opened at the New Arts Theatre Club on May 6, 1964. Orton had changed his first name to Joe, to avoid confusion with John Osborne. Patrick Dromgoole directed. Margaret Lockwood read for the part but didn't want

her teeth coming out on stage. This was an insoluble problem when a French impresario tried to get *Sloane* cast in Paris. *Sloane* struggled for survival at the New Arts for two-and-a-half weeks. Then one night Terence Rattigan went to see it with Vivien Leigh.

He called it the best first play he had ever seen, put money into the production and it transferred to Wyndham's. But *Sloane* was the target for the great dirty play backlash of 1965, organised by Peter Cadbury and Emile Littler. "Aunt Edna Revolt Rocks the West End", ran one headline, and invective poured forth even on television news bulletins between impresarios and critics. It killed *Sloane*, although Orton had made £2500 on the five-month run, and he was upset not to have won the *Evening Standard* Award, which was suspended for that year with Orton as front runner. But he was partly delighted with the storm of indignation. Headlines are pasted diagonally across his scrapbook: "filthy tradition", "dirty plays," "violent art". He had created a fictitious character called Edna Welthorpe, and he wrote to newspapers, vicars and hotel managers under her name. She joined the controversy in a letter to the *New Statesman*, headed "Nauseated." "I myself was nauseated by this endless parade of mental and physical perversion. And to be told that such a disgusting piece of filth now passes for humour! Today's young playwrights take it upon themselves to flaunt their contempt for ordinary, decent people. I hope that the ordinary decent people of this country will shortly strike back." It started a flow of correspondence.

A few weeks after the fire had gone out of the debate, Godfrey Winn made a belated appearance. "I have stood aside till this moment from the theatre controversy concerning plays fit for the whole family to see..." And then, amazed that Rattigan could have recommended the play, he wrote, "I know that he has called this the best first play he has ever seen. I am utterly astonished and bewildered that the author of such a classic of our times as the infinitely compassionate and brilliantly constructed *The Deep Blue Sea* could have come out with such a statement. However it does encourage me to stick my neck out, too." In return, Godfrey Winn recommended a play called *Season of Goodwill*, by Arthur Marshall, as the best first play he had seen.

Both *Sloane* and *Loot* fared badly in America. Orton didn't have much hope for a sensitive interpretation of his work over there. In a letter to producer Michael White, he said: "I don't think American actors can understand the parts. And I don't want there to be anything queer or camp or odd about the relationship of Hal and >>>



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Dennis. Americans see homosexuality in terms of fag and drag. This isn't my vision of the universal brotherhood... I won't have the Great American Queen brought into it. I hope I make myself plain on that point."

Loot opened in England in 1965 and came to a halt in Wimbledon mainly because it contained every variety of bad taste that could be crammed into a play. Truscott, played by Kenneth Williams, is the archetypal corrupted cop. He is brutal, stupid, ludicrous and venal. The father, McLeavy, is the innocent party, a devout Catholic, a law-abiding citizen, and Orton makes sure he gets it in the neck. It mocks at religion and death; it is about larceny, perversion, murder, and above all it is an attack on the Force. It was all taboo, but Orton's talent was that he made it seem commonplace and extremely funny, if it was played the right way. He reworked clichés and syllogisms with an accurate ear for English genteelness, and put them into anarchistic, psychopathic contexts. He spiced his language with eloquent epigrams. It was oiled and slick. The clichés seem to control the characters and give them their logic. "I'm not in favour of private grief: show your emotions in public or not at all." "He says you spend your time thieving from slot machines and deflowering the daughters of better men than yourself. Is this a fact?"

His plays were verbal, above all, which was in the tradition of Wilde, Fry, Coward, rather than the new "serious" writers like Osborne and Pinter. Because of this and because Orton wanted to antagonise, and wrote for laughs, many critics could never commit themselves to say that Orton wrote anything more than high class "entertainment".

The trouble was, most of the things Orton felt seriously about were bad taste in the theatre. "I suppose I'm in the stream of modern playwrights," he said, "but I want to start a new movement completely." All it needed was a change in public taste. There was no reason why a form of farce shouldn't be as legitimate a vehicle as anything else for the airing of "serious" ideas.

The first production of *Loot* failed because it was played as stylised farce without any moral dimension. It was too artistic, unfunny and therefore offensive. The same thing happened to *What the Butler Saw*, produced after Orton's death with a star cast, Sir Ralph Richardson, Coral Browne and Stanley Baxter. It was booed so loudly by gallery first nighters that the critics could not hear the lines. Charles Marowitz, who directed the successful

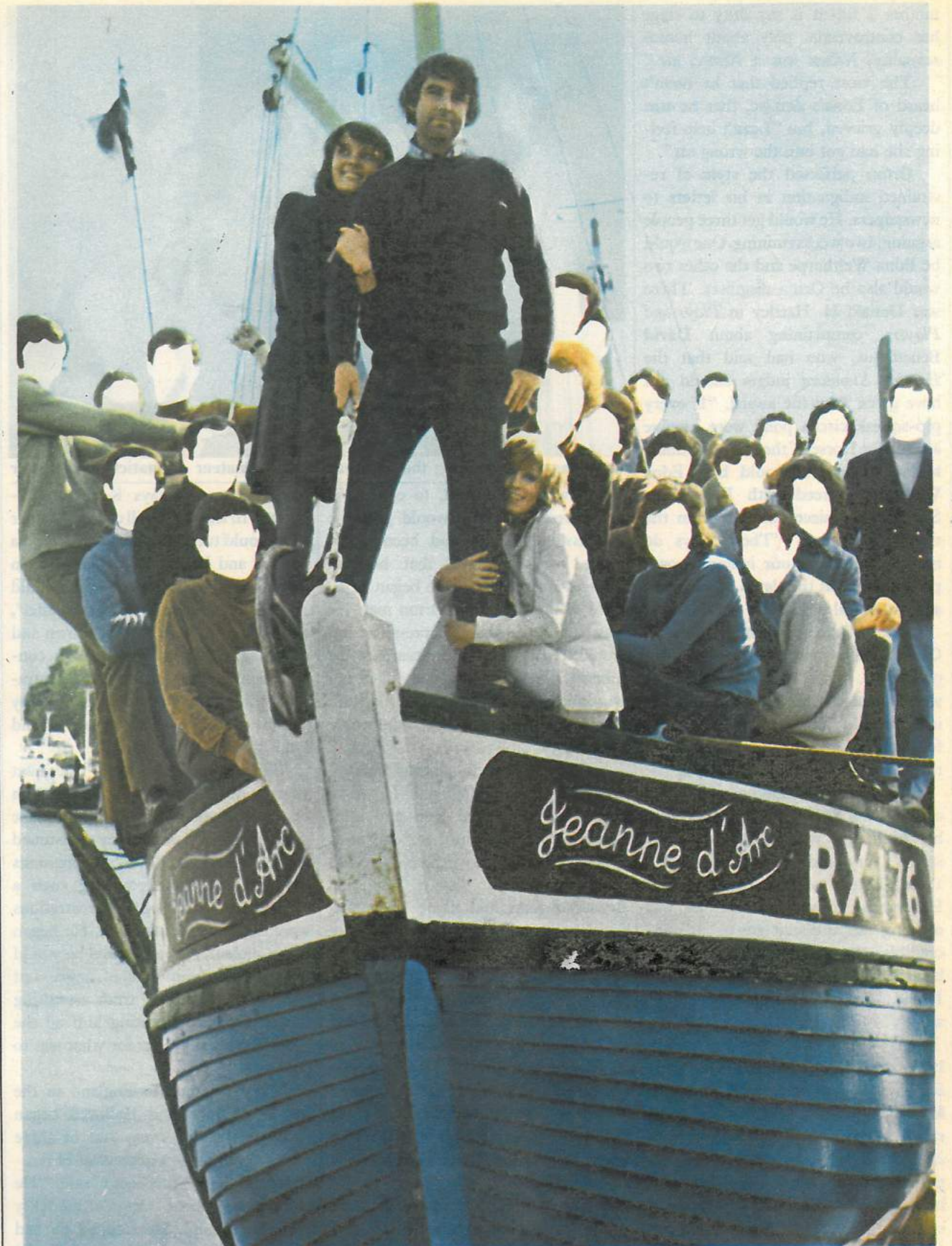
production of *Loot* says, "The first thing I said was that it had to be played absolutely straight. One must try to make the characters utterly believable." It was this realism about Orton's monstrous caricatures which made them disturbing.

Beyond the sharp moral criticism Orton certainly wanted to shock. There was a boyish, immature streak in him.

He was outrageous on the Eamonn Andrews show; he wore his roughest clothes to parties and talked about his sexual adventures. He wrote sketches about pornographic Duchesses - one appeared in *Oh Calcutta!* - and he put Edna Welthorpe to work to write to the manager of the Ritz Hotel. "Dear Sir. I had tea in your palatial establishment last Wednesday. I must congratulate you on your décor. I was with my friend Mrs Sullivan. You'll remember her. She was the one in the fur coat. Unfortunately I left behind a brown Moroccan leather handbag which contained a Boots folder holding snapshots of myself and Mrs Sullivan in risqué poses. There was also a pair of gloves made of sticky vegetable matter. If you could recover these, Mrs Sullivan and I will be enormously grateful and relieved. Yours sincerely, Edna Welthorpe." The manager of the Ritz replied that an exhaustive search by the staff had failed to reveal the objects, and Edna wrote back, "I feel you are not being open with me. If you have found this bag and are secretly enjoying its contents I can only say that your behaviour is reprehensible. Why don't you come out into the open and admit that your curiosity has got the better of you."

Edna Welthorpe was a copious letter-writer. She existed on a level of fatuity that Orton found hilarious. She was always taken seriously and she revealed the basic reality of Orton's most exaggerated characterisation. One of her classics was a four part correspondence with Orton's local vicar. "I am secretary of this local drama group," she wrote, "and we wish to present our controversial play about homosexuality, *Nelson was a Nance*, at your local church hall. Knowing the church's tolerant attitude in this matter we feel sure you will give it your consideration." The vicar wrote back and said the letting of the church hall was in the hands of the elders, who met once a quarter. Unfortunately they had already met. Anyway, he said, he did not approve of lampooning national heroes.

Edna's mother wrote back: "You will doubtless have read of the demise of my daughter Edna Welthorpe. It's been a tragic loss to me but in a cupboard under the stairs I found her letters and other correspondence relating to her drama activities. As her ➤➤➤



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mother I feel it is my duty to stage her controversial play about homosexuality, *Nelson was a Nance*, etc."

The vicar replied that he hadn't heard of Edna's demise, that he was deeply grieved, but "I can't help feeling she had got into the wrong set".

Orton perfected the style of restrained indignation in his letters to newspapers. He would get three people arguing, two weeks running. One would be Edna Welthorpe and the other two would also be Orton disguises. There was Donald H. Hartley in *Plays and Players*, complaining about David Benedictus, who had said that the *Evening Standard* judges should not have given *Loot* the award. "If every pip-squeak circus pony were to give awards for Horse of the Year, goodness knows where we should be." Edna Welthorpe agreed with Benedictus. She and her niece had fled from the theatre in horror. "These plays do nothing but harm our image abroad, presenting us as the slaves of sensation and unnatural practice."

Much of the outrageous content in Orton's plays came from his own obsessions. When his mother died, he was fascinated to see her body wrapped in a shroud. "I have a great reverence for death," he said, "but no particular reverence for the dust of a corpse."

"He nearly had mother out of her coffin," says Leonie. "He was picking her head up. 'What's all this brown stuff?'; 'try and get her rings off.' I said, 'I don't want to.' He said 'I do.' He wanted to see her feet, he was opening her dressing gown. 'It's incredible,' he said, 'doesn't she look bizarre.' The kids were screaming and I said 'For Christ's sake leave her alone.'"

His young characters are always being raped and corrupted, and Orton felt continually persecuted and violated by authority. It is always recurring in his plays. Charles Marowitz says: "When I got to know Joe I noticed he had a muscle in his forehead, and when under stress it clenched tight. I can remember times when it was clenched like mad and it fitted in with the paranoid young boy suppressed by the authorities, the convict. These two things were continually in balance. Under the boyish charm the convict mentality expressed itself."

While writing *Loot* he had said to Kenneth Williams: "I'm writing a play to show all the inanities and stupidities I've undergone." He meant, particularly, in prison.

Kenneth Williams became a close friend of Orton. Leonie says he was about the only person he really liked and admired. He had met Orton and Halliwell at the time when their relationship was showing signs of tension. Halliwell had begun to interrupt



Orton aged 15, wearing the Tyrolean hat, in amateur dramatics at Leicester

Orton when he talked, to contradict and correct him. He would give the impression that he had been a co-author of the plays, that he had thought up the titles. He began to be disliked by the people Orton met. He was having bad fits of depression, and would create paranoid situations for himself. He had bought an ill-fitting wig which didn't grade into his skin, and gave him an odd, unlovable appearance.

"They were so extraordinary," said Williams. "Halliwell served a thick slice of tinned ham and said, 'What do you think of that?' It was as if you were discussing a sturgeon. Halliwell said it was a very fine flavoured ham and came from this special shop of which there was only one in the area. I said I couldn't discern much of any kind of flavour. As far as I was concerned it was just a very nasty ham sandwich. Halliwell said, 'We enjoy a good sandwich.'"

Walking to the bus stop on that evening, Orton had told Kenneth Williams that he would never leave Halliwell. "When you've been through adversities like we have, it makes for a lasting bond."

In May 1966 the two had gone to Morocco together to give their lives over to total promiscuity for three months. They had a bare apartment with two rusty beds in the Rue Dr Meuchama in Tangier, where Arab boys came and went and Joe filled his diary with details of the escapades. Never was there a mention of the theatre, of writing, not even the weather unless the temperature affected the sexual climate. Halliwell took part equally, and his orgasms were as carefully catalogued as Joe's. They fell in with the homosexual set and the exiled English aristocrats, and Joe bronzed himself all day. They had a wonderful time, although their habits differed little from Noel Road. "They

were so funny," says Kenneth Williams. "In the Windmill café in Tangier they would turn up with an apple and a banana and lie on the vast terrace in deck chairs. Then one of them would go in and say 'Give us a glass of water', and they'd sit there getting brown and engaging all kinds of people in conversation. They ignored the remonstrations of the café proprietor. They would rub oil all over themselves and hold court."

They went back again the next year in May. They took with them a dozen Mary Baker cake mixes to bake their hashish in, and they consumed large amounts. Halliwell's depressions by this time were reaching such a pitch that his stored up frustrations were no longer containable. He began to get violent. At restaurants he would have sudden outbursts of anger and had to be prevented from assaulting Orton. He began beating him on the head, a dress rehearsal for what was to come.

They returned to England in the middle of July, and Halliwell began seeing his doctor every two or three days. "There was a great deal of frustration in him," the doctor said. "He complained about Orton's infidelity and promiscuity. He claimed he had influenced Orton in his writing and Orton depended on him for some of the inspiration and the phrasing, and that nobody knew about this or appreciated him. He had a central depression, a personality disorder relating to a child-parent relationship. He had a tremendous amount of anger and violence turned inwards. The feelings in this case are so extreme that you dare not go out and attack, and lethargy and lassitude take over. But if it goes too far the anger can simply break out of the depression."

Towards the end of July they went to stay with the producer Oscar Lewenstein in Brighton.

It was a moment of great success for

Orton. Charles Marowitz's production of *Loot* at the Criterion was a brilliant success. The film rights had made him rich; he had just finished *What the Butler Saw*, his third major play; he had won the *Evening Standard* Drama Award and *Crimes of Passion* had been a critical success at the Royal Court. Orton loved success more than anything. He wrote in his diary that for the first time in his life he was feeling supremely happy. And that it couldn't last. There was bound to be some catastrophe. "There was a certain amount of needling going on," said Lewenstein of the weekend, "and the situation was at times uncomfortable. But I never felt it was so difficult I wanted to get out of the way."

The week before, there had been an incident which may have hastened Halliwell's suicidal intentions. A producer, suddenly irritated at seeing Halliwell wearing an Old Etonian tie at his party, told Halliwell that he was unwanted, that he was a nobody and why was he hanging around Joe Orton. Joe went away the next week to see a production of *Loot* in Leicester, and Halliwell got worse. An exhibition of his collages had been a failure. He was suicidal. He hung around the Criterion where *Loot* was playing and talked to anyone, including the doorman, who would listen to him. He paid a visit to the Samaritans, who gave him a cup of tea. He began to justify himself wildly. He was sleeping badly, and popping purple hearts.

On Saturday, August 5, four days before the murder, Joe went to the Chelsea Potter pub in the King's Road. He met a friend he had known some years ago, Peter Nolan, a one-time club owner. Nolan later gave evidence at the inquest. Orton told Nolan that he had another boyfriend, that he wanted finally to get rid of Halliwell but didn't know how to go about it. He asked Nolan whether he would be prepared to manage a gay bar in the country, preferably in Devon, which Orton wanted to buy. He would install Halliwell there and work in London, he said. "That Saturday," says Nolan, "he'd had a few drinks and he wasn't his real happy self. He talked about his boyfriend and said he'd come to the stage in his life when he could give somebody the things he hadn't had. Halliwell, he said, held him down. He didn't want to break with him but he was a very jealous person and there were flare-ups. It got to the stage where it would be embarrassing for anyone coming round, or for Joe to go out anywhere. Halliwell had threatened him with suicide. He told him if Joe ever left him he would kill himself."

It's a story that has never been told,

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although it is also true that Orton had a plan to buy a villa in Marrakesh for Halliwell. "They made that plan," says Peggy Ramsay, "because they were quarrelling so much and getting on each other's nerves. Kenneth was becoming a bully, and trying to tell Joe what to do."

The last person to speak to Halliwell was his doctor. He had realised how serious Halliwell's state of health had become, and was trying to get him admitted to a psychiatric hospital. He had arranged for a psychiatrist to see him the following morning. He spoke to Halliwell three times on the telephone. The last call was at 10 o'clock. Halliwell took the psychiatrist's address and said, "Don't worry, I'm feeling better now. I'll go and see the doctor tomorrow morning."

But at 4 a.m., leaving a note for the coroner on Orton's diary, which simply said that the contents would explain everything, Halliwell picked up a hammer and beat Orton to death. He then emptied 50 pentobarbitone tablets into a glass of fruit juice and died almost instantly. He knew the required overdose; he had failed at suicide at least twice before. His naked body lay across the door. Orton's was in the bed and his brains and blood covered the ceiling and walls, so violent was the attack. Halliwell knew that he'd come to the end of the road, and he couldn't let Orton live without him.

Dick Lester and Oscar Lewenstein were waiting to have lunch with Orton at Twickenham studios. Lewenstein's chauffeur, Derek Taylor, had gone to collect him from Noel Road. Getting no answer he rang Peggy Ramsay. She told him to look through the letter box. The first time he saw nothing. The second time he saw Halliwell's bald head on the floor and rang Peggy Ramsay to say he thought something dreadful had happened. By the time she got there the police were inside the flat.

Orton had made a will in Halliwell's favour; but after it had been established that Halliwell had died first, the money went to Orton's family.

The funeral of Joe Orton was perhaps the most bizarre that Golder Green has seen. Stage-managed by Rediffusion and Peter Willes, Orton's body was cremated to a recording of *A Day in the Life* from the Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper* album. Even the crematorium attendant managed an Orton line. "Are you the 12.30 or the 12.45?" Harold Pinter was there, so was Donald Pleasence, and the whole cast of *Loot* which was still running at the time. Donald Pleasence read a poem. Halliwell was buried at Enfield, without ceremony. Two of his relations had come, and Peggy Ramsay ●