

Court Theatre Study Guide

WHAT THE BUTLER SAW

**Written by Joe Orton
Directed by Sean Graney**

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**Composed and Compiled by
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SYNOPSIS

What the Butler Saw takes place in the consulting room of Dr. Prentice's mental health clinic. As the play opens, Dr. Prentice is interviewing Geraldine Barclay for a job as his secretary. When it becomes apparent that she is unqualified for the job, he decides to seduce her instead. He is interrupted by the entrance of his wife and Nicholas Beckett, a pageboy at the Station Hotel. Mrs. Prentice complains of being sexually attacked by Nick, who then reveals that he has photographs of their encounter and demands a job as Dr. Prentice's secretary in exchange for the photographs' return. To cover up his attempted seduction of Geraldine, Dr. Prentice allows his wife to put on Geraldine's dress, leaving the young woman without clothing. At this point, Dr. Rance, a government agent in charge of mental health, arrives to audit Dr. Prentice's clinic. He discovers the naked Geraldine, whom Dr. Prentice claims is a patient. Rance commits her to his own care and drugs her. He fabricates a backstory to her "mental illness" and takes her out of the room to have her hair cut off. Mrs. Prentice enters and interrupts Dr. Prentice in his attempt to hide Geraldine's underwear and shoes in his office. He feigns illness to distract her, and later she and Dr. Rance begin to suspect that Dr. Prentice himself is mad. Dr. Prentice is forced to interview Nick for the secretarial job, and Nick reveals that the police are after him for initiating an orgy with a class of schoolgirls staying at the Station Hotel. Dr. Prentice convinces Nick to put on a dress and wig belonging to Mrs. Prentice and pose as Geraldine. While Nick is changing, Sergeant Match enters to enquire about Nick, and about a missing piece of a statue of Sir Winston Churchill, which was last seen in the possession of Geraldine Barclay. Dr. Rance announces that Geraldine (whom he believes is a mental patient) has escaped the clinic, and sounds the alarm. Sergeant Match discovers Geraldine, dressed in Nick's pageboy uniform, and arrests her, believing her to be Nick.

Act Two opens with Sergeant Match interrogating Geraldine about Nick's crimes. She tries to accuse Dr. Prentice of attempting to seduce her, but Match misunderstands, believing her to be a boy. Mrs. Prentice, Dr. Rance, and Sergeant Match are now convinced that Prentice is insane. Geraldine and Nick, she in the pageboy uniform and he in Mrs. Prentice's dress, each fight off attempts by Dr. Rance to examine them. He certifies both of them insane, and relieves Dr. Prentice of his position as head of the clinic. At Nick's suggestion, Dr. Prentice gets Sergeant Match to undress and accidentally gives him an overdose of anti-psychotic drugs. Nick takes the Sergeant's uniform and he and Dr. Prentice put the Sergeant in Mrs. Prentice's dress. Mrs. Prentice walks in on the naked Sergeant, and then discovers Nick wearing only the policeman's helmet. When she tells Dr. Rance, he decides that she too is insane and that Sergeant Match and Nick are figments of her imagination. They see Dr. Prentice wheeling the

drugged Sergeant Match into the garden and decide that he has killed Geraldine and is attempting to hide her body. Nick enters in the Sergeant's uniform claiming to have arrested Nicholas Beckett, the sexually voracious pageboy. Dr. Rance tells him that Dr. Prentice murdered his secretary and Nick confesses his real identity. Dr. Rance and Mrs. Prentice leave with guns to search for Dr. Prentice, who then enters to find Nick, who tries to put him in a straightjacket. Dr. Prentice convinces Geraldine and Nick to change clothes with one another. They get only as far as taking off their clothes before Sergeant Match enters, drugged, wearing a dress, and bleeding, having been shot by Dr. Rance. Mrs. Prentice enters and tries to force Dr. Prentice to make love to her at gunpoint, but he escapes. She fires at him and brings the air conditioning duct crashing down to the floor. Nick tries to escape, but is shot by Dr. Rance, and then again by Mrs. Prentice. Geraldine attempts to confess the truth, but Rance refuses to believe her and instead puts her into a straight-jacket. He succeeds in convincing Mrs. Prentice that Nick and Sergeant Match are hallucinations brought on by her repressed sexual desires. He is putting her in a straight-jacket when Dr. Prentice enters, wrests Nick's gun away from him, and stands off against Dr. Rance. Rance presses the alarm, but it overloads and locks them all in the room. Dr. Rance gets the gun away from Dr. Prentice, who finally admits his attempt to seduce Geraldine, which set off the whole chain of events. Geraldine announces that she has lost her lucky elephant brooch, which Dr. Rance finds. Nick reveals that he has an identical piece of jewelry, and Mrs. Prentice admits that she gave the brooches to twin babies she abandoned when she was a young woman. Dr. Prentice reveals that he gave the brooches to a woman with whom he had a sexual encounter in a linen cupboard of the Station Hotel. So Dr. and Mrs. Prentice are Nick and Geraldine's parents. Dr. Rance is pleased, since his book about the case of Dr. Prentice hinged on Geraldine being the victim of an incestuous attack, which it turns out she has been (in the play's first scene). The family is reconciled, when Sergeant Match repels in from the skylight to again ask for the return of Sir Winston Churchill's missing piece. It is found in a box which Geraldine had had with her during her interview at the beginning of the play.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

What the Butler Saw—The title of a popular pornographic film made for viewing in the Mutoscope machine, an 1894 invention. The Mutoscope became known as the “What the Butler Saw Machine”.



Winston Churchill: Prime Minister of Great Britain from 1940 to 1945, and again from 1951 to 1955. Led the British war effort against the Nazis.



The George Medal: A British award for courageous or gallant behavior—comparable to the Congressional Medal of Honor.

20 words a minute: An obscenely slow shorthand speed. Beginning secretaries were often required to meet a speed of at least 80 w.p.m.

Febrile: Of or pertaining to fever. (Dr. Prentice’s line “You’ve a *febrile* condition of the calves” means “Your legs are hot.”)

Tess of the D’Urbervilles: 1891 novel by Thomas Hardy, which was censored for its challenging of Victorian sexual morality.

Lobelia: A flowering plant which has been used as a sedative by various cultures around the world. It can be inferred that the “lobelia-growing classes” are the idle rich with a taste for narcotics.

Christmas cracker: A popular holiday novelty in England and Australia, consisting of a paper-wrapped cardboard tube which, when pulled apart, produces a small bang and contains a cheap prize.



Yardley’s: A popular perfume.

Alfa Romeo: An Italian manufacturer of luxury automobiles.

Nom-de-folie: A French expression meaning ‘madness name.’

Duke of Edinburgh’s Award scheme: Award for personal achievement that can be won by anyone aged 14 to 25. Established 1956.

WH Smith and Sons: British bookshop chain founded in 1790. Notable for a profound sense of upper-class entitlement in shop appearance, personnel attitude, and marketing tone.

Neuritis: General inflammation of the peripheral nervous system (nerves located outside the brain and spinal cord). Symptoms include pain, numbness, and paralysis of a given area of the body. One can guess in which areas Mrs. Prentice’s occurs.

peccadilloes: A very minor or slight sin or offense; a trifling fault.

THE PLAY'S SOCIAL IMPORTANCE

When Joe Orton wrote *What the Butler Saw* in 1967, he was reacting to a pair of obsessions in British culture, which he saw as detrimental to Britain's development as a society and the personal development of individuals. The first of these was a resurgent interest in psychoanalysis, a system of study invented by Sigmund Freud at the turn of the century. In the 1960s, Freud's theories were being used to explain away all personal problems and acts of anti-social behavior as the result of traumatic upbringing and childhood abuse. Dr. Rance's bizarre theory that Geraldine was molested by her father, leading her to attack Dr. Prentice and drive him insane in turn is a parody of this sort of popular misconception of psychology.

The second social problem Orton attacks is that of sexual repression. While in America the sexual revolution was well underway, British society was still ruled by an extremely severe moral code which was scandalized by the existence of homosexuality, adolescent sexual behavior, and even sex outside of marriage. Orton, who had a vast sexual history which included anonymous encounters in public parks and restrooms, believed that these social restrictions (and the laws which required gay men and women to engage in sexual activity secretly for fear of arrest) were extremely damaging to the psyches of individuals and to the society he lived in. The hilarious conclusion of *What the Butler Saw*, in which Dr. and Mrs. Prentice joyfully come to terms with their mutual love of linen-closet sex, expresses the play's central theme by magnifying it for comedic effect: If you release yourself from guilt and repression, you will have a chance at happiness and fulfillment.

However, the audiences who saw the first production of *What the Butler Saw* were not ready for Orton's outrageous images of a family brought together by incest or the missing genitals of one of England's most beloved public figures. Many who saw the play's first production tore their programs up and left in a fury. Initial reviews lamented Orton's wasting of his talent on a lewd farce. But the public imagination has finally caught up to what Joe Orton knew all along, and the play is now considered a classic of modern British comedy.

STUDY QUESTIONS

Think about these questions as you watch *What the Butler Saw*.

1. In 1967, the images of a doctor sleeping with his secretary or a young man in his underwear were quite scandalous. These days, you can see much more explicit material just by turning on the TV. Do you think the play is outdated, or do the problems Orton's making fun of still exist today?
2. Is anyone in *What the Butler Saw* actually insane? Why are the characters so quick to accept Dr. Rance's explanations?
3. Joe Orton is merciless in his attacks on authority figures: doctors, police officers, religion, and the government are all made to look absurd. What does this mistrust of authority have to do with the problem of sexual repression? Why do people repress their desires? Whose fault is it?
4. Watch how the set and lights transform as the play goes on, especially in the second act. How does this transformation relate to the themes of repression and chaos?
5. Are there any villains in *What the Butler Saw*? Which characters do things that you consider morally wrong? Do they pay for their mistakes, or get away with it?