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THE INTENTIONAL IMMORALITY OF JOE ORTON

Joe Orton's *Loot* won the Evening Standard's Best Play of 1966 award, having survived a failed inaugural production and several rewrites. *Loot* became Orton's most successful play during his lifetime, and is the play that hatched the term 'Ortonesque.' It was his first attempt at farce, and was met with both critical and popular success.

Before *Loot*, Orton was most famous for a series of interventions performed with his lifelong partner, fellow artist and writer Kenneth Halliwell. The pair would remove books from local public libraries and modify the cover jackets before returning them to the shelves. Eventually they were discovered, found guilty on five counts of theft and malicious damage, and sentenced to prison for six months. *Loot* draws on Orton's experience with law enforcement.

Orton enjoyed fanning the flames of public opinions of indecency in his plays. One of his long-running alter egos—Edna Welthorpe—wrote many letters expressing her dismay at the immorality of Orton's work. (See the below letter in response to *Loot*.)

Simultaneous popular success and public outcry were hallmarks of Joe Orton's prolific, but short-lived career. Not long after penning this letter from Edna Welthorpe, Joe Orton was murdered by Halliwell. The works of Joe Orton continue to resonate and be widely produced. His other popular works include *What the Butler Saw* (1969) and *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* (1964).



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Dear Sir,

May I add my thoughts to those of David Benedictus on the subject of those much-talked-of awards?

I agree that no one could seriously nominate as the play of the year a piece of indecent tomfoolery like LOOT. Drama should be uplifting. The plays of Joe Orton have a most unpleasant effect on me. I was plunged into the dumps for weeks after seeing ENTERTAINING MR. SLOANE. I saw LOOT with my young niece. We both fled from the theatre in horror and amazement well before the end. I could see no humour in it. Yet it is advertised widely as a rib-tickler. Surely this is wrong?

I certainly wish Joe Orton joy of his awards. He is a clever young man. Perhaps, in time, he will turn his undoubted talents to more worthwhile subjects. Meantime David Benedictus does well to point out the inadequacies of our present honours system.

Yours truly,
E. Welthorpe.

