Look Back in Anger:  
A conversation with Director Sam Gold

On January 28, 2012, as part of Roundabout Theatre Company’s Lecture Series, Sam Gold spoke about Look Back in Anger with Education Dramaturg Ted Sod. 
An edited transcript follows:

Ted Sod: Tell us about yourself: Where are you from? Where were you educated? When did you decide to become a director?

Sam Gold: My parents live on the Upper East Side and they grew up in Brooklyn so we’re very much New Yorkers. I went to undergrad at Cornell as an English major but I was really interested in acting. While I was there, I directed a few plays with friends just to keep myself working. I came back to New York right after college and pretty quickly moved from acting to directing, mostly out of the desire to work. I wound up working for three years with a downtown ensemble called The Wooster Group, where I was the dramaturg. I worked with Liz LeCompte, a director that I admire a lot. While I did that, I also was in a grad school directing program at Julliard, which unfortunately doesn’t exist now but it was a great place to study and meet a lot of young actors. One of whom was in the play today, Adam Driver, who is a graduate of the acting program there. When I finished the Julliard program, I quit my job at The Wooster Group and I started a career as a freelance director.

Ted Sod: Let’s talk about the choice of this play. When Todd Haimes, our Artistic Director, invited you to become an artistic associate and asked you what you wanted to do, this was the first thing that came to your mind -- yes?

Sam Gold: Yes. Most of my career has been directing new plays; I’ve been working a lot with writers on their brand new plays. The thing that hooked me into directing plays were these beautiful older plays that I admired as an English major and as an acting student, plays that I just fell in love with. When Todd offered me a home here, it was an opportunity for me to re-explore some of these plays that I fell in love with early on. Todd asked me what I wanted to do and this was the play I brought him and it worked out very quickly. It hasn’t had a great revival in a long time and Todd was excited about that. We did a couple of readings of it and it was a very happy match.

Ted Sod: This play is truly a seminal piece for British dramatic literature. Can you tell us about that? You really have a sense of what this play meant in 1956 and how an artist like yourself brings it to a contemporary audience in 2012.

Sam Gold: It’s a very autobiographical play. Osborne was an out-of-work actor living in Midlands, a crappy industrial town in England, and his wife was cheating on him with the local dentist. He was in a bad place and was really angry at his wife and also really lost in terms of being a young person in postwar Britain. He wrote this play as a kind of diatribe against his wife and against the culture that he felt disenfranchised from. Jimmy Porter, the character he gave birth to as his surrogate, is a very unique breed of person in postwar Britain. He was a working class guy with an education and that was a cultural
change in England at that time. Because of the war, it was the first time that you could get a real university education as a working class person. The very strict class system going on in England for generations was being called into question and the play became a brave symbol of class war in England at the time. When people went to the theatre at this time they were mostly seeing middle brow comedies about wealthy people playing tennis. Osborne didn’t connect with those people and felt that the British did not put working class people on the stage. In America, we had more exploration of the working class on stage. We had a history of Clifford Odets, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, but in England it wasn’t really happening. This play is very much indebted to Tennessee Williams, it’s a bit of a rip off between *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Hamlet*.

When the lights came up there was a woman who spoke with an upper class accent ironing on stage; it was a real controversy and people had a really hard time with it. The reception of the play was very divided. People thought, “this isn’t a play, it’s terrible, where are the fancy people playing tennis?” Then there were some who thought, “wow, this is a kind of conflict and kind of person that hasn’t been put on stage and is representing something that really deserves a voice.” Quite famously, the critic Kenneth Tynan, took Osborne’s side and decreed that Osborne was going to change the landscape of British theater, which he did. Many of the plays that we have now are indebted to this change that Osborne brought with kitchen sink realism. He changed the face of British drama by delivering a play that screwed with the audience’s expectations and showed them something they’d never seen on stage before.

Ted Sod: The play opened in 1956 and there was another critic in concert with Kenneth Tynan who defended the play and pointed out to the reading audience that it had value and merit and that was Howard Hobson. The other thing that helped the play gain an audience was that they put a snippet of it on television and so many people were intrigued by it, that they demanded that the whole play be shown. So it was that confluence of things that allowed the audience to find the play because people were not able to make heads or tails of it when it first began.

Sam Gold: It brought a much younger audience to the theatre; it’s a play about young people’s problems. At first it was a really hard play to catch on, but when young people got a whiff of it, it became a really big sensation.

Ted Sod: Obviously you made some bold choices as to what the mise en scene would be. Can you talk us through a bit of the process? Did you start with this set or did it come up after you played with the idea of having a more realistic set?

Sam Gold: I started with a thought about paring down the play to something very simple. I really wanted people to hear the words and care about the marriage. It felt like the play is bogged down with a lot of history and I thought I would love to have people come in and wipe the slate clean and just let them really hear the play. My first instinct was to play the play really close to the audience, to make it intimate. I wanted it to feel like the audience and the actors were in the same room. I didn’t want it to feel like the lights were going down on them and here was the fourth wall and that this was happening in another time and place. This isn’t a play you can look at as a museum piece. I felt like one of the things that was so exciting about the play originally was that it alienated people, it made people uncomfortable and it woke people up to new ways of seeing drama on stage.
When I started, I did actually design a realistic room. The play takes place in the attic of a Victorian house, a very tiny little apartment in a house but I decided at the last minute to get rid of it. I thought that when you go see plays now they all take place in shitty living rooms; that's the drama that my generation makes, so it's not very surprising if you were to walk into this theatre and see a shitty living room, it would look just like the last play you saw here. I wanted it to look different than that. I was sitting in the theatre one day looking at the space and I said “You know what, let's just wall the theatre off, let's just not use the theatre, let's wall it off and just do the play in the front of the proscenium.”

Ted Sod: What I love is the ways you found to use that wall. Can you tell us about rehearsal and how you discovered things?

Sam Gold: The great thing about having a space that’s unique is that everybody had to think differently. It makes it so you can’t rely on your habits and expectations, which I think gives you a much more alive experience. Usually in a play that takes place in a living room you say to yourself, “Oh I’m angry at my wife so I’m going to go to the kitchen and get a glass of water and drink it so I can calm myself.” You go through a process of using the space physically to deal with the circumstances of the play and when the director takes all of that away from you as an actor, it’s very challenging. How do you explore the circumstances of the play when all you have is 5 feet of space? I felt like I had to get really specific with what every single moment was about in the play and we carved out something very real. I hope you felt like the people were going through something right in front of your face, which I thought could be exciting and startling for people.

Ted Sod: For those of you who know the play and its original form, we should address the fact that Sam worked with the estate to excise one character, Colonel Redfern, who is Alison’s father. Could you tell us about your concern with this character?

Sam Gold: I made some trims to the play, which was one of the first things I did. The largest adjustment I made was cutting the beginning of Act II when Alison’s father shows up to take her away and there’s a scene between them. I cut that mostly because it had a lot of information about post-war England, the legacy of the aristocracy of the military after World War II. Alison’s father had been living in India and had returned from India after the war and there are a lot of references to post-Edwardian England that I thought wouldn’t resonate with a contemporary audience.

As a director who mostly does brand new plays, I have a really deep understanding of how a playwright is writing things directly for people who are going to come see it a day later. I knew that Osborne was writing things for that audience and to arbitrarily decide to keep that stuff in for an audience 50 years later seemed unnecessary to me. I thought it would be interesting to see the play function without that material that felt embedded in the 1950s. So I trimmed the stuff away that didn’t have to do with the love rectangle. I wanted that rectangle to become the focus of the story.
Ted Sod: Of course, you always work with the estate, it’s not something you just do on your own.

Sam Gold: This play has been revived many, many times. The estate, the people that handle Osborne’s work, were very excited to see what it would be like to do it this way and have been very supportive of it. In fact, I think for a lot of reasons, this play hasn’t had a really good shot in America. It ran here for a year in 1957 and it was a big deal but since 1957, it hasn’t had much of a life in this country. I think the estate, for many practical reasons, is very interested in wrestling with how to present his play so that people can experience it in a way that people must have experienced it in the 1950s.

Ted Sod: I have one last question about casting. Did you pick these actors based on how willing they were to be this exposed?

Sam Gold: I wish I could say that I said to all of them, “I’m going to put you on a five foot cliff for this whole play, do you want to do that?” But I actually just trusted that the best people for the roles would get excited by how we were going to work on it together. We all made it together. I like to think of the actors as co-story tellers with me. We all talked a lot about the play and what it meant to us and why we cared about it and how we wanted to try and tell the story. Matthew, who plays Jimmy, has loved this play since he was fourteen years old and has known the play for a long time and has seen a lot of productions. I think everyone came at it with a lot of commitment and I think being presented with the challenges I presented them with, they were excited to tell the story and make it clear for people.

Ted Sod: Let’s open it up to audience questions.

Audience member #1: This is a three part question: Do you think John Osborne would have agreed with your changes to the script? Are any of the actors English? And lastly, did you use animals exercises at any time to explore the characters? I was really impressed with the physicality that took place on this small stage and it reminded me of animals playing around, especially the two guys. Cliff reminded me of a lion cub.

Sam Gold: First question: Would Osborne have approved of this version of the play? Whether he’d have liked it or not might depend on how many glasses of champagne he had before the show. I’ll say this, Osborne in 1956 would not have approved because Osborne was adamant about the script. The original director, Tony Richardson, and the producer of The Royal Court, George Devine, begged Osborne to cut the play. It was just too long-winded and self-indulgent. He said “absolutely not.” So in 1956, he would have been very angry if he knew that in 2012 I was making cuts. Later in life, when he wasn’t doing so well and he had real regret about where his career was going, he actually rewrote Look Back in Anger as a play entitled Déjà Vu. So he tried to make some changes himself, which were very unsuccessful and the play didn’t do very well.

I can say that as a director I’m not particularly interested in his opinion; I’m interested in his work. I love and I connect to the play and my job is to have a point of view about the material. I have to express how I connect to the material and bring that material to a contemporary audience. I will say, just to feel good about myself, that there have been a lot of people who saw the original production or who knew Osborne, who said to me “Oh, my God, Osborne would have loved this production of the play.” I am dying to hear
what Osborne's biographer, John Heilpern, whose work really inspired me, thinks of it. He wrote a
phenomenal biography of Osborne that I really learned a lot from and I'm dying for him to come because I
think he'll have great insight. I feel proud that I made something that has integrity that he would either
love or hate but that he wouldn't dismiss.

Second question: I have an American actor playing Welsh, a Welsh actor playing British, a Canadian actor
playing British, and a British actor who lives in America playing British.

Ted Sod: It's an international cast. And the third question about the animals?

Sam Gold: I don't particularly get involved in acting exercises, it's not really how I work, but I think the
confinement of the space gave the actors some physical constrictions that really changed how they
worked physically on stage. I also had a fight choreographer, so a lot of the physicality between Jimmy
and Cliff was stuff we spent hours and hours working on with someone whose job it is to make violence
safe and authentic on stage. So a lot of the physicality was something we put a lot of time and effort into.

Audience member #2: I actually worked on a production of this about 20 years ago. I want to say
that I loved the production but I'm curious, did you have any concerns about the political side of
things when you were so focused on the relationship side of things during your edits?

Sam Gold: I committed to doing this play before the issue of class disparity in America was a national
conversation. I felt maybe people would tune into the play because it's something that's on our
collective conscience right now. I am certainly not the kind of director that would have tried to set this in
Occupy Wall Street and tried to show everybody that we are living in a parallel time to post-war Britain
because I think that's a narrow way to look at the play; but hopefully you still get all that without me
having to spell it out. I did throw food all over the floor for that reason, I thought well maybe I'll make the
space feel a little grosser so you could get the feel that Jimmy is not a respectable guy.

Audience member #3: I was curious about the choice of the squalor. It looks like Grey Gardens up
there.

Sam Gold: I don't think it's literal. It's not the literal space and I think a lot of people have a hard time
with that concept. I've made a space that is abstract and I've made the actors extremely natural. That's my
point of view and my choice. I can imagine an audience member having trouble with that concept. I would
say on top of that, when I did a lot of research, it seemed disgusting how these people lived, it was all
coal heat and they would been covered in soot. The entire town that Jimmy Porter was living in was
covered in soot and my first design idea was to cover everything in soot but that was impractical.

We actually had an audience member scream "Don't get in that bed, it's disgusting!" which is very rude
to do in the last moments of a play. I'm telling you for next time. I'm not sure why people feel the need to
talk during an incredibly powerful moment of theatre, but I learned something in that moment. I learned
I was telling the story I meant to tell, which was that the audience should be disgusted and asking, "why
are they getting in bed? What are they deciding on? Where is this marriage going?" I was creating an
image that could give the audience a visceral sense of what I thought was going on in their marriage.
Audience member #4: I think the production is wonderful. When I was watching it, what I saw was a young couple who seemed to be trapped in an abusive marriage; she was very clingy and he was very brutal. Unfortunately, I did not get that she was an upper class woman and he was a middle class guy and also I didn’t know it was in the Midlands or wherever they are. I think I lost some context and I just wonder if some part of the things that were cut could have offered more to the framework and history.

Sam Gold: I find this a fascinating question. First of all, you understood everything. So what I think you may be suffering from is the fear that there is something that you don’t understand. You think the production could have helped you understand more. Nothing I cut would have illuminated the word Midlands. It is not said in the play. It’s just that in 1956 it was very clear to people what the Midlands were. If you take a play out of its time and its place and you put it somewhere else, it’s going to have different meaning and different things are going to resonate. Even if I gave you an incredibly realistic 1950s production, you would still have no idea what the 1950s Midlands was like. You would be just as confused about it as you are now. So what I decided to do was to speak to what you do understand and how you could connect. When you say that it was an abusive marriage, that’s exactly what the play is, so you got it. I hope that when people come to the theatre, they can engage in what they are seeing and not in some abstract idea of what they think they should be seeing. A lot of people come to this play and walk out at intermission all disgruntled that this is not a faithful production of this play, “where is the kitchen sink?” I wish I could help audience members be trained to come and watch what’s in front of them and just say, “Am I interested in that?” and if you don’t like it, that’s awesome. I have no problem with people being critical of my work, but I feel so bad for people who leave disgruntled and angry because it isn’t the thing they thought it was going to be. If what you wanted was in your head, stay home and think about it.

Audience member #5: How do you think this play is speaking to women in this generation compared to when it was set?

Sam Gold: That’s a really great question. I thought a lot about it. Osborne wrote this play out of deep anger towards his first wife and his mother who he had a really hard relationship with and as I started to get into the play, I thought that’s much more specific than saying, “He’s a misogynist.” It is about specific relationships. What I set as a goal for myself, was to portray the marriage in a way that was of equal responsibility. Alison is not a victim and Jimmy is not a tyrant and he is not right to call her all the things he calls her. But in every marriage, if you’ve ever had a relationship fall apart, things get polluted and it gets nasty. If you hold both people accountable, I think there’s a way to see that marriage in a 21st century way. I really see how Alison is culpable to a certain degree and I see how she is very three-dimensional and sympathetic. I also think there are certain things that are hard for me. Like the idea that on Sunday, the men sit around and read the newspaper and the women do the ironing and make the food. It took me a while to realize that the guys wouldn’t have made dinner, they wouldn’t have been a part of that and they wouldn’t have ironed their own shirt. They just wouldn’t do it. That is a cultural difference and it is like anything from another time.
Ted Sod: You may already know this, but as Sam said Osborne had a very tenuous relationship with his mother who was a cockney bar maid. He called her, “My invitation to a sick bed.” He was married five times, mostly to actresses, but also to the New Yorker film critic Penelope Gilliat. His last marriage was the most successful but by then he had probably mellowed some. He completely alienated his daughter and stopped speaking to her, so we’re not dealing with somebody who’s sweet. For me, Osborne’s understanding of women is in the piece. His understanding of women and how he either sees them behaving or wants them to behave is very interesting to me.

Sam Gold: I don’t think it’s wrong to say that the women in the play may not be written as three dimensionally as the men, I personally think I would have loved seeing Osborne held accountable to think more fully about women in the play. That doesn’t mean I’m not going to do the play because there are things that really interest me about the play but I would like the play more if he was better at writing women. I’m married to a writer and I work with writers all the time and everybody’s got blind sides and things they don’t write as well.

Audience member #6: I was really excited by this restriction of space and seeing the actors as they left the stage, watching the action in that neutral zone. To me, it brought to mind a boxing ring. I wondered if you could speak to that.

Sam Gold: That came out of the idea that the actors were going to come out while the house lights were still up and start the play before we thought it was going to start. It was all a matter of engaging you and being in the room with the actors and feeling like there was a real connection between the performers and the audience.

Audience member #7: The title, I wonder if it was a quotation. How did he come up with the title?

Sam Gold: In his notebooks there is a list of 30 titles. They’re all around the same word, Look Back in Anger, or I’m So Angry, or The Angry Guy. It’s a list of 30 of them and he picked one. It’s not a quote as far as I know.

Ted Sod: The original manuscript was sold in an auction and had all the different titles on it crossed out. He had to sell it because he needed dental work and couldn’t afford it in the early 1990s. He died in 1994 of diabetes, and, as Sam said, he had a rough time at the end.

Sam Gold: This play was written in about three weeks; he just sat at a typewriter and got it all out. He was really angry that his wife was cheating on him with a dentist. He sat down with a bunch of boiled cabbage and spewed this thing out, so I think there’s an amazing amount of literary reference and extremely sophisticated writing in there but there’s also rough edges to the play. Things that you can’t explain; things that aren’t fully developed. I think over the course of history some of the great works of art that we hold onto are the ones that don’t fit perfectly, the ones that don’t make sense. Osborne didn’t know he was tapping into something, but the play tapped into something very deep. On the surface it may have some rough edges but down deep, it is very true.