

# British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

## A Subject of Scandal and Concern

John Osborne  
Proud Haddock  
Finborough Theatre  
22 May–7 June 2016

George Holyoake was one of the founders of the Cooperative movement in Britain. He was also a teacher who gave lectures on socialism. In 1842, he was sentenced to six months imprisonment for blasphemy based on a political comment he made at the end of a public lecture in answer to a question from the floor.

John Osborne dramatises this injustice in his short play *A Subject of Scandal and Concern*.

It opens with Holyoake in the kitchen of his wife's sister, eating soup his wife Madeline (Caroline Moroney) made for him. They are both poor. He is hoping to get a teaching post in Sheffield. Madeline tells him that their child is sick for lack of food and that her married sister's family are angry about his views.

Before he can do much about these problems, he is arrested in Cheltenham for alleged blasphemy. He had reluctantly responded to a question about religion by pointing to the £20 million pound annual cost of the Church at a time of great poverty. He added, "we are too poor to have God," and in reference to the way the State would save money by putting its officers on half pay suggested, "while our present distress remains, it is wisest to do the same with the Deity."

The newspapers and local magistrates distort what he says, put him on trial and sentence him to gaol. They admit his crime is not so much his private thoughts about religious beliefs but the possibility that his words may, "subvert peace, law and order because they attack human authority."

They are clearly worried about him as a symptom of a wider movement of discontent. They try unsuccessfully to get him to implicate the famous social reformer Robert Owen.

This is a clear, fluent production with strong, convincing performances of some nineteen characters by a cast of six. Jamie Muscato is particularly impressive as the dignified Holyoake, reduced by confinement to a stooping figure who on release is still able to part with a funny, sarcastic remark to his gaolers.

The play is being performed at a time when the government's policy on so-called religious extremism has been criticised by many including the United Nations as "treading into the territory of policing thought and opinion."

About a month ago, I began a course for theatre directors. In the opening session, we were treated to a video asking us to report people "being drawn into radicalism" or "supporting extremist views" without explaining what that would look like.

Universities are becoming more nervous about even reputable academics having public discussions on campus about the dangers of the government's Prevent strategy.

It would seem that John Osborne has written a play for today.

**Reviewer:** [Keith Mckenna](#)