

CRISTIN TIERNEY

# *Islington* **Tribune**

**Performance artist marks anniversary of Joe Orton's death at library where book thefts led to prison**



Performance artist Tim Youd at the Essex Road library

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VISITORS to South Library last week may have wondered why a bespectacled chap in the entrance hall appeared to be retyping a Joe Orton play on a 1960s typewriter.

Those with knowledge of the playwright's life had a clue, however, as the Essex Road library is where Orton and his partner Kenneth Halliwell stole hundreds of books, returning them with humorous collages on the dustjackets.

They were caught in 1962 and sentenced to six months in prison following an elaborate sting operation led by Islington Council's principal law clerk, Sidney

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Porrett.



**Joe Orton, above, was murdered by Kenneth Halliwell, below, at their Noel Road flat in 1967. Halliwell then killed himself**



Orton, who always maintained he and Halliwell were sent to prison not so much for the crime but because they were gay, rose to fame after his release, but it was short-lived.

He was murdered by Halliwell in 1967 at the Noel Road flat they shared near Angel. Halliwell then committed suicide.

This week Tim Youd, a performance artist from California, marked 50 years since Orton's death by retyping all his plays on a single sheet of paper, using the kind of typewriter used by the playwright.

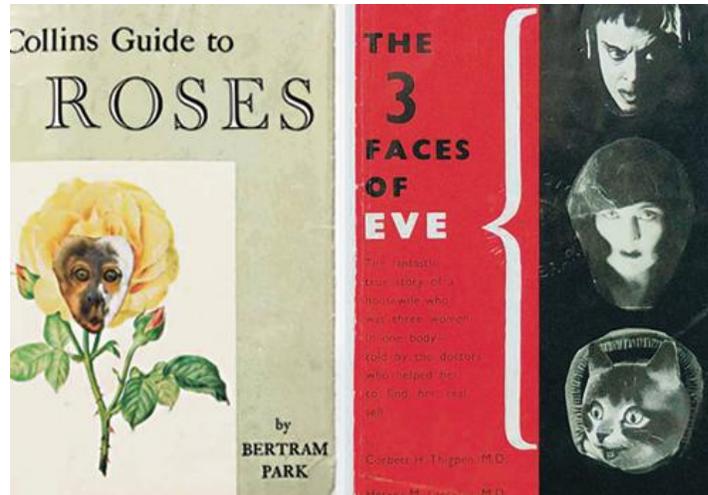
"What Orton did would be considered an artistic intervention," Mr Youd said. "They altered the books in a titillating way, would put the books back and

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they'd be picked up by an unsuspecting person, who would be shocked.”

Mr Youd added: “They were sentenced to six months in prison and [to Orton] it felt like a punishment for being gay.

“The miraculous thing is that he had not really written any plays before being in prison, but it inspired him, the unfairness and farcical nature of it. A lot of his plays are about that.”



**Books defaced by Orton and Halliwell**

Orton claimed at the time that the alterations were in protest at the state of public libraries, with their “endless shelves of rubbish and hardly any space for good books”.

Mr Youd used the same typewriter as Orton, an Adler Tippa, for the first six plays and then an Adler Universal 40 – the typewriter the playwright bought shortly before he died – for *What The Butler Saw*, which premiered after Orton’s death in 1967.

The artist has embarked on a mission to retype 100 novels over 10 years. He retypes each novel on the same make and model typewriter in a location charged with literary significance specific to the book.

Each novel is retyped on a single sheet of paper, backed by a second sheet, run repeatedly through the typewriter.

At the end of the performance, the two sheets are separated, with the entire novel present, but entirely illegible.

Speaking on the day of Donald Trump’s inauguration as US President, the American artist added: “Orton writes farce and satire, and this very moment,

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with the political situation, Trump and Brexit, we are living it, and he writes about that. He makes it out for the farce that it is.”

Mr Youd’s final Orton performance will be at the opening of an exhibition of art inspired by the playwright’s life and work at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Peckham, south London, at 2pm on February 5.