



By Alan Ayckbourn
Directed by Ted Pappas

Study Guide

A study guide to Pittsburgh Public Theater's production of :

RolePlay

By Alan Ayckbourn
Directed by Ted Pappas

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Guide Prepared by Rachel Begg

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Alan Ayckbourn

By Rachel Begg



Image from the Mander & Mitchenson Theatre Collection

Born April 12, 1939, in London, Alan Ayckbourn began writing plays at the age of ten, while still in school. At seventeen, he began working as an actor and assistant stage manager with Sir Donald Wolfit, an acclaimed British actor (whose last words were reportedly, “Dying is easy, comedy is hard.”).

The next year, Ayckbourn met Stephen Joseph, the founder of the Theatre in Scarborough. He played the role of Stanley in Harold Pinter’s *The Birthday Party*, which Joseph directed. Joseph served as a mentor for Ayckbourn, and in 1971, Ayckbourn took over as Artistic Director for Joseph’s company.

Ayckbourn’s first hit play was 1967’s *Relatively Speaking*, which opened in Scarborough, then transferred to the Duke of York’s Theatre in London. With few exceptions, almost all of Ayckbourn’s plays (numbering over 60) have premiered at the Theatre in Scarborough. On April 30, 1996, this company was given its permanent home at the Stephen Joseph Theatre, which sits at the center of Scarborough and has two auditoriums.

Since *Joking Apart* in 1978, Ayckbourn has directed each of his London productions. He has directed the works of others as well, not only in London, but also Houston, Los Angeles, and for the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. His play *Absurd Person Singular* was a part of the Pittsburgh Public Theater’s 1993-1994 season.

In addition to his many full-length plays and trilogies, Ayckbourn has written children’s plays and co-wrote the hit musical *By Jeeves* with Andrew Lloyd Webber—a re-write of the duo’s 1975 musical, *Jeeves*. *By Jeeves* had a sell-out run at the Pittsburgh Public Theater before heading to Broadway in 2001.

Alan Ayckbourn: Complete List of Plays

- 1959 *The Square Cat*
- 1959 *Love After All*
- 1960 *Dad's Tale*
- 1961 *Standing Room Only*
- 1962 *Christmas V Mastermind*
- 1963 *Mr. Whatnot*
- 1965 *Relatively Speaking*
- 1967 *The Sparrow*
- 1969 *How The Other Half Lives*
- 1970 *Family Circles*
- 1971 *Time And Time Again*
- 1972 *Absurd Person Singular*
- 1973 *Table Manners* (Norman Conquests trilogy)
- 1973 *Living Together* (Norman Conquests trilogy)
- 1973 *Round And Round The Garden* (Norman Conquests trilogy)
- 1974 *Absent Friends*
- 1974 *Confusions*
- 1975 *Jeeves* (re-written in 1996 as *By Jeeves*)
- 1975 *Bedroom Farce*
- 1976 *Just Between Ourselves*
- 1977 *Ten Times Table*
- 1978 *Joking Apart*
- 1979 *Sisterly Feelings*
- 1979 *Taking Steps*
- 1980 *Suburban Strains*
- 1980 *Season's Greetings*
- 1981 *Way Upstream*
- 1981 *Making Tracks*
- 1982 *Intimate Exchanges* (consisting of eight plays)
- 1983 *It Could Be Any One Of Us*
- 1984 *A Chorus of Disapproval*
- 1985 *Woman In Mind*
- 1987 *A Small Family Business*
- 1987 *Henceforward...*
- 1988 *Man Of The Moment*
- 1988 *Mr. A's Amazing Maze Plays*
- 1989 *The Revengers' Comedies*
- 1989 *Invisible Friends*
- 1990 *Body Language*
- 1990 *This Is Where We Came In*
- 1990 *Callisto 5* (re-written in 1999 as *Callisto 7*)
- 1991 *My Very Own Story*

Alan Ayckbourn: Complete List of Works (continued)

- 1994 *Communicating Doors*
- 1994 *Haunting Julia*
- 1994 *The Musical Jigsaw Play*
- 1995 *A Word From Our Sponsor*
- 1996 *The Champion of Paribanou*
- 1997 *Things We Do For Love*
- 1998 *Comic Potential*
- 1998 *The Boy Who Fell Into A Book*
- 1999 *House* (House & Garden)
- 1999 *Garden* (House & Garden)
- 2000 *Virtual Reality*
- 2000 *Whenever*
- 2001 *GamePlan* (Damsels in Distress trilogy)
- 2001 *FlatSpin* (Damsels in Distress trilogy)
- 2001 *RolePlay* (Damsels in Distress trilogy)
- 2002 *Snake In The Grass*
- 2002 *The Jollies*
- 2003 *Orvin—Champion of Champions*
- 2003 *Sugar Daddies*
- 2003 *My Sister Sadie*
- 2004 *Drowning On Dry Land*
- 2004 *Private Fears in Public Places*
- 2004 *Miss Yesterday*
- 2005 *Improbable Fiction*

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An Hour with Sir Alan Ayckbourn

Clare Coulson interviews Sir Alan Ayckbourn and gives a brief insight into the mind of Britain's most famous contemporary playwright.

Where do you get your inspiration from?

Various places, snatches; fragments; I wait for them to accumulate. I never start a play with one idea, usually several, usually one is the theme. The theme really just occurs, I sometimes look around deliberately but most ideas have been expressed before, it's finding a different way to tell it. I've gone through various convoluted ways of telling stories, some interesting and unusual, *Damsels in Distress* (three plays currently showing at Durham's Gala Theatre) are examples of that, they share the same set and company but change their personality with each totally different play. A lot of good work comes from actors working together and trusting one another. I don't know where the ideas come from in the end is the short answer!

You have explored different viewpoints sometimes, for example in the Norman Conquests.

Yeah, in that one I did.

Is that a theme you want to go back to?

No, not really, I've done that now and I've also done alternatives, I enjoyed doing that. I like the idea of 'what ifs'- what if I'd had coffee instead of tea. The idea that tiny things have profound consequences and that intrigues me. I'm interested in most things on the human scale. I don't ever write about world events except in relation to the characters. I explore human relationships more. In *GamePlan* I'm interested in the mother daughter relationship and explore the effect of an almost manic depressive as another and the daughter's reactions.

Pinter was quoted as having said 'What he has given to theatre is immeasurable. I take my hat off to him'- I'm sure you've heard that one or two times- how do you feel your work relates to Pinter's, you've said he's one of your role models.

When I was a very young actor he directed a production of his play *The Birthday Party* and I was in it. The play made no sense and we didn't understand it until we went on stage and we just electrified the audience. We just came off stage and stared at him! I understood him a lot more after that and what I liked about him was his use of language, almost poetry, highly stylised- mine isn't nor is mine naturalistic. Actors know when they've got a line wrong with me because the rhythm is wrong. The text conveys more of a feeling than a meaning. The meaning underlies it, little things that one subconsciously recognises because of the way it's written.

How do you feel about other representations and interpretations of your work, do you welcome them or do you ever feel they are totally misrepresented?

Most of them I'd say- I don't see a lot, they upset me, I said in an interview once, it's like someone drawing a moustache onto your baby! I don't really like it that much. I've become so much the writer--director that I have so much more control over my material. In fact my career grew separately, I wasn't by any means intending to direct my plays but I lost my regular director and...er...realised if I was authoring it originally why not continue and now I couldn't tell you where it starts and it stops. I've got a new one *Snake in the Grass* and I already can see how it will be.

Do people ever get offended by your use of sensitive issues and your juxtaposition of them with humour?

Well, I don't laugh at the issues. Sometimes, though not as frequently as I feared. One play is about a woman committing suicide but what makes it ok is that the woman committing suicide is never funny, what makes it funny is that none of the other characters know that she is intent on doing it. Funny and serious at the same time. It does depend very much on the pitching of the scene. There's one point in *'Way Upstream'*, a very violent play, where the family are on a pleasure craft and they get lost on an unknown part of the Thames and captured by pirates. The wife is made to walk the plank and the husband is marooned whilst she calls out for help and he says 'you'll be fine, you'll be fine' but it's quite serious because she's going to drown, and it's funny, awful, funny, awful and the two elements themselves create a sort of tension which is both funny and sad at the same time- I think that is good drama. The moment Sorrel collapses in *GamePlan* and Kelly holds her and becomes little mother and then out comes Leo who is really rather seedy and embarrassed about what he's done and then he drops dead and the every body laughs and suddenly the play gets turned on it's head. *Snake in the Grass* (his new play, out this summer) is a ghost story but it's actually a very dark subject, also about women who have been abused, one by her parents and one by her husband. It isn't a comedy but it is, well it has comedy in it.

You were saying you don't like being boxed as comedy.

No, I don't think you can box plays. I think comedy is necessary otherwise you go into an extreme area and the audience's senses just shut down.

So would you say that your education influenced your writing career?

Yeah, in an odd way. I mean one of the obvious things was I was sent to boarding school at the age of 7-17 so school became more important than home. You had the strange notion about life as it was an all male school and girls at home are all bespoke for so when I left I went woman mad. You did get a great ability to survive as you were thrown into an environment which was quite hostile and you learnt to keep your head down and work round it. Some became sports heroes, I did it by becoming arty, we became rather strange, very pretentious, rather Bloomsbury Set the four of us!

Do you prefer the National or Scarborough Theatre?

I prefer our Stephen Joseph Theatre in Scarborough, it was built around us, the green room is quite unusual as it feeds into the dressing rooms, rehearsal room, workshop, wardrobe and everything has to go through it including front of house. We reduce all the lighting in the green room during performances so that it is quiet and calm. At The National the dressing rooms are un-labeled and spread out.

How long does it take you to perfect a performance?

They grow all the time, it depends, the girls (Saskia Butler and Alison Pargeter) hadn't really done anything this size before and they've learnt really quickly. The plays grow, mature but occasionally they could do with a pair of hedge clippers so it doesn't get too big, over embroidered, usually in the spirit of exploration but it can be a complication. I have a golden rule 'if you put something into a performance take something out of it'. Then it never gets too big but it evolves.

Scarborough and the Stephen Joseph Theatre

By Rachel Begg

Alan Ayckbourn's long-standing position as Artistic Director of the Scarborough Theatre began in 1971, sixteen years after innovative theatre champion Stephen Joseph opened the first theatre in the round in the UK in Scarborough.

Stephen Joseph was the son of publisher Michael Joseph and comedienne Hermione Gingold (Eulalie Mackechnie Shinn in the 1962 film *The Music Man*), who first saw theatre in the round in the United States. He founded his theatre in the round in 1955 in a temporary space in the local library. By 1957, Alan Ayckbourn was acting under the direction of Joseph, who began to serve as mentor to Ayckbourn. It was Joseph who encouraged Ayckbourn to write for the theatre, as he believed that those within the theatre were best equipped to write for it. He felt that the relationship between a playwright who was an active member of a theatre company yielded better works than could be written by someone with no attachment to the people or place where the play was going to be produced. Stephen Joseph died in 1967, and Alan Ayckbourn took over Artistic Directorship in 1971. He wanted to see his and Joseph's dream realized, one of a custom-built theatre for Scarborough that would be an "intimate, compact crucible where the essential elements of theatre, actor, and audience could be best brought to the point of spontaneous dramatic combustion." In 1976, the theatre moved to the former Scarborough Boys' High School, which was converted for the theatre's use, but it was not until 1988, when the Odeon movie theatre closed, that Ayckbourn found the place to see this dream realized.

Scarborough is a resort town on the coast of the North Sea in Yorkshire, UK. Its population is approximately 100,000, roughly that of Erie, PA, and despite this fact, it has gained the reputation of a theatrical nerve center in the United Kingdom. It is home to the National Student Drama Festival each year, and almost every one of Alan Ayckbourn's plays have premiered there. With the reputation afforded this town by its connection to Ayckbourn, and the power of his position as Artistic Director, the realization of Stephen Joseph's dream was made possible. The conversion of the old Odeon movie house into the new theatre cost £5.2 million, £400,000 of which Ayckbourn contributed himself. The new theatre has two auditoria, a theatre in the round for 404 audience members, The Round, and a 165-seat end-stage/cinema, The McCarthy (named for one of the theatre's chief contributors, Charles McCarthy). The complete theatre complex was named The Stephen Joseph Theatre in honor of the dramatist who first brought theatre in the round to the UK, and whose tutelage cemented Alan Ayckbourn's connection to Scarborough.

The Docklands

By Rachel Begg

Once the largest port in the world, the Port of London was the victim of 57 consecutive nights of bombing during the blitz in 1940, and never recovered. Additionally, when the shipping industry began to utilize the larger container system of cargo transportation (using large, sealed containers which could be transported interchangeably on land and sea) during the decade between approximately 1960 and 1970, the Docklands fell virtually obsolete, as its docks and waters were too small to accommodate the large vessels needed to transport the new large containers. The result was the de-evolution of the Docklands into a derelict area of about 21 square kilometers, rife with unemployment and poverty.

In 1981, the London Docklands Development Corporation was established to head the regeneration of the area. This corporation, known as the LDDC, was given government funding to purchase and redevelop land. Along with this funding, an enterprise zone was established in 1982 that allowed for tax exemptions for businesses, which made outside funding highly appealing to investors.

All of these incentives, however, did not always sit well with Docklands locals. Many felt that the new developments were elitist and favored luxury and the wealthy over affordable housing for the existing Docklands communities. When the redevelopment project finished in 1998, control of the Docklands was turned back over to the local authorities.

The new Docklands area is now home to luxury apartments, various commercial enterprises, and some light industrial spaces. The Docklands Light Railway was constructed at a relatively cheap price, costing only £77million to connect the Docklands with the City of London. Now the population of the Docklands has more than doubled since the regeneration project began, and it is increasingly considered a posh place to live. Most of the old buildings along the docks have been converted into apartments, and the docks themselves are now mostly used for water sports, as the shipping industry has largely moved downriver.

Some striking disparities exist in the Docklands today. Luxury apartment buildings exist alongside dilapidated public housing, and the tallest building in London, One Canada Square, neighbors the site of a 1996 IRA bombing which killed two people, injured forty, and cause an estimated £150 million in damage.

Despite disparities and conflicts, the Dockland's has not stopped growing. New developments are being planned for expansion on the Dockland's Light Railway, as well as new connections to existing lines and communities. Additionally, the London City Airport, which is on the cusp of the Docklands, is planning development. One Canada Square is now book ended by two new towers, and its Canada Water complex is still on the rise.

RolePlay Cast of Characters

Justin Lazenby: a complacent computer game software designer

Julie-Ann Jobson: his high-strung fiancée, a computer programmer

Paige Petite: their upstairs neighbor; a former exotic dancer fleeing the wrath of her goon boyfriend, Rudy

Micky Rale: an ex-boxer; Rudy's bodyguard, assigned to watch Paige while Rudy is gone

Derek Jobson: Julie-Ann's father, an intolerant businessman

Dee Jobson: Julie-Ann's mother; a vapid woman

Arabella Lazenby: Justin's mother; an unapologetic and very vocal drunk

GLOSSARY

Account in credit—not in debt; being ahead; “in the black”

Ballast—something that provides stability

Barking—short for “barking mad;” insane or crazy

Bloke—equivalent to the American slang, “guy,” only it applies more generally to strangers rather than friends

Bugger—a multi-purpose British slang word that, alone, means something only slightly ribbing, and combined with “off” means something a bit more biting than “get lost”

Cinema—movie theatre

Cutting it fine—cutting it close

Dustman—rubbish/garbage collector

Flat—an apartment

Getting on my tits—to annoy someone or get on their nerves

Jumper—British slang for a sweater

Mac—a trench coat or long raincoat

Motorway—a highway

Overtaking—passing someone on the highway; speeding

Pidgin Urdu—language created by combination of Persian, Arabic, and Indian elements

Poule de luxe—slang term for an expensive, high-class prostitute

Rally driver—race car driver

Rat-arsed—exceedingly drunk

Sodding—derivation of the multi-functional British slang term, “sod,” which has a friendly tone and can be used in most situations without offense being taken

GLOSSARY (continued)

The Strand—a London neighborhood that spans between Fleet Street and Trafalgar Square—it connects the City of London with the City of Westminster

Sub-Crufts—Crufts is the annual UK Kennel Club dog show—“sub-Crufts” is a snub and an insult all in one

Taffy [accent]—Taffy is a British slang word for a Welsh person—not necessarily a flattering term

Takeaway—akin to a street vendor or fast food carryout only restaurant

Thames—a river that runs through and connects London to the sea, it is one of London’s royal highways

Washing up liquid—liquid dish-washing detergent/soap

Yardarm—a horizontal spar on a square sail—to “go over the yardarm” refers to the sun passing over this spar, indicating a time of 11 a.m. or later—time to start drinking

Zebra crossing—British slang for a crosswalk painted with thick horizontal black and white lines—think Abbey Road

It's A Long Way to Tipperary

Strange things come to mind when you are on the spot and your mind starts to wander. For Justin, under pressure from Julie-Ann to make his announcement about their engagement at the stressful dinner party, the bizarre thought that comes to mind is the 1912 song, "It's A Long Way to Tipperary." To win a five-shilling bet, Jack Judge wrote the song about the Irish county where his grandparents were from. During World War I, Irish infantrymen sang it as a marching song and its popularity spread as soldiers from Britain, Germany, and Russia became enamored of its catchy tune and lyrics:



Up to mighty London came an Irishman one day,
As the streets were paved with gold, sure ev'ry one was gay,
Singing songs of Piccadilly, Strand and Leicester Square,
Till Paddy got excited, then he shouted to them there:

It's a long way to Tipperary,
It's a long way to go,
It's a long way to Tipperary,
To the sweetest girl I know!
Goodbye Piccadilly! Farewell Leicester Square!
It's a long, long way to Tipperary,
But my heart's right there!



Paddy wrote a letter to his Irish Molly O',
Saying, "Should you not receive it, write and let me know!
If I make mistakes in spelling, Molly dear", said he,
"Remember it's the pen that's bad, don't lay the blame on me".

(Refrain)

Molly wrote a neat reply to Irish Paddy O',
Saying "Mike Maloney wants to marry me, and so,
Leave the Strand and Piccadilly, or you'll be to blame,
For love has fairly drove me silly - hoping you're the same!"

(Refrain)



Extra wartime verse:
That's the wrong way to tickle Mary,
That's the wrong way to kiss!
Don't you know that over here, lad,
They like it best like this!
Hooray pour le Français!
Farewell, Angleterre!
We didn't know the way to tickle Mary,
But we learned how, over there!



Additional Resources

Ayckbourn, Alan. *The Crafty Art of Playwriting*

Allen, Paul. *Alan Ayckbourn – Grinning at the Edge*

Holt, Michael. *Alan Ayckbourn*

Glaap, Albert Reiner and Nicholas Quintmere. *Ayckbourn Country*

Tucker, Stephanie. "A Technician in the Wings - Ayckbourn's Comic Potential"
(Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism, University of Kansas, Spring 2003, pp.71-93)

Blistein, Elmer M. "Alan Ayckbourn: Few Jokes Much Comedy"
(Modern Drama (26), March 1983, pp.26-35).

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http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alan_Ayckbourn