

magazine, wrote the house plays and went on the annual Shakespearean tour, taking *Macbeth* to USA and Canada.. His English teacher was a friend of Donald Wolfit, and when Ayckbourn left school in 1956, after his A levels, he immediately started work as acting assistant stage manager in Wolfit's revival of *The Strong Are Lonely*. He then gained valuable experience on the Repertory theatre circuit, working at Worthing, Leatherhead, Scarborough and Oxford as, variously, assistant stage manager, stage manager and actor.

In 1957 he became a permanent member of Stephen Joseph's Theatre-in-the-Round at Scarborough where under Joseph's inspiring influence he became technically knowledgeable and tremendously aware of the relationship between actor and audience. When he expressed dissatisfaction with a light-weight part Joseph told him: *If you want a better part you'd better write one for yourself. Write a play, I'll do it. If it's any good.* The result was *The Square Cat*, written and performed in 1959 under the pseudonym Roland Allen and followed by three more Roland Allen plays in the next two years.

In 1962 he became Associate director at the Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent. The following year *Mr Whatnot*, a resounding success at Stoke, was the first of his plays to transfer to the West End, where it was something of a critical disaster at the Arts Theatre, though Eric Rhode, in 'Play and Players' wrote: *You cannot accuse Alan Ayckbourn of being mean. He seems to have fallen in love, quite splendidly, with everything theatrical.*

## METROPOLITAN SUCCESS

In 1964 Ayckbourn became radio drama producer for BBC Leeds and the next year Stephen Joseph commissioned a play for the Scarborough summer season. *Stephen asked me simply for a play which would make people laugh when their seaside holidays were spoiled by rain and they came into the theatre to get dry before trudging back to their landladies. This seemed to me as worthwhile a reason for writing a play as any so I tried to comply.* The result was *Relatively Speaking*, which transferred with great success to The Duke of York's with a cast which included

Michael Horden, Celia Johnson, and Richard Briers and ran for 355 performances.

It is a brilliant lightweight play, a masterpiece of technical ingenuity and comic craftsmanship; but it also contained what would become trademark Ayckbourn characters and themes: uncomprehending husbands and neglected wives, rotting marriages and adulterous sex. This was followed by the transfer of *How The Other Half Love* to the Lyric and in 1970 he left the BBC to become Director of Productions at the Library Theatre, Scarborough, and so began an annual transfer of plays from Scarborough to London, including *Absurd Person Singular*, *The Norman Conquests* and *Bedroom Farce*, which opened at the National Theatre in 1977, the ultimate seal of metropolitan approval.

## ABSENT FRIENDS

*Absent Friends* was written and produced in 1974/5 and has none of the technical inventiveness of the plays which surrounded it. In fact it has a kind of ruthless simplicity where stage time matches real time. It deals, comically but sensitively, with the tongue-tied, embarrassed modern response to death, the Great Unmentionable, swathed in cosmetic euphemisms. The group who meet to bring comfort to a bereaved friend are all isolated by crippling self-interest and the arrival of Colin, a suburban Gregers Werle, creates chaos by what Michael Billington describes as *The blithe destructiveness of the good.*

Michael Billington sees echoes in the play of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, *Dangerous Corner* and *The Wild Duck*, and Ayckbourn himself, commenting on his next rather lightweight, jolly play, writes: *I think I was rather rude to it. I said to it 'I'm an 'Absent Friends' man now, a much more serious dramatist'. I always liked 'Absent Friends' but that's just blatant prejudice for a play that's had fewer productions than any other.* That may be so, but the play was much admired. Alan Brien in his review writes: *'Absent Friends' is a serious, almost clinical, presentation of the serious nature of marriage where the most painful moments occur, not when the participants recognise its weaknesses, but when the outsider mistakes them*

for strengths. And Michael Billington declares: 'Absent Friends' was the turning point: the play that proved he could handle tragic themes within a comic framework and hold an audience's undivided attention.

## MARRIAGE

*Marriage is like a cage: one sees the birds outside desperate to get in, and those inside equally desperate to get out.*

Montaigne

*It doesn't matter who you are in this life, when you finally get married, it's bound to be someone you really deserve.*

Emma in *Family Circles*

*Ayckbourn suggests the distinctive sound of a middle class English Sunday morning is that of a marriage quietly falling apart. ...He takes sex and violence off the streets and puts it back in marriage where it belongs.*

Michael Billington 1990

*In Ayckbourn's world, the married state itself frequently becomes a weapon of destruction – and not only for the husband and wife. For when marriages break down, they rarely implode. Marriage difficulties distribute their own disturbance, and as Kalson, the American critic so aptly puts it, we get picture on picture of 'the destruction caused by the fall-out from a disintegrating nuclear family'.*

Michael Holt 1999

## AYCKBOURN ON AYCKBOURN

*The brief I give writers is the one I was originally given by Stephen Joseph: by all means write what you want but for God's sake say it in a way that is going to appeal to people who come to the theatre... if your message is an empty theatre it is useless. Let's see how clever we can be at saying unpalatable things in a palatable manner.*

# ALAN AYCKBOURN

## REPUTATION

Ayckbourn is a very popular, extremely prolific writer of comedies, a contemporary of Osborne, Pinter, Wesker, Arden and Delaney, and yet for a considerable time he did not receive the critical attention accorded to the other playwrights. There is even a possibly apocryphal story of a literary party with guests wearing 'I am not Alan Ayckbourn' badges. Michael Billington explains: *It is a characteristic of the English intellectual classes that they cannot bear popularity and success. It takes a writer or painter or composer or performer out of the clutches of the ruling elite and delivers him or her over to the multitude: what is enjoyed by the many must automatically be second-rate.* (1990). Gradually, however, there has been recognition of his status as a dramatist, acknowledging that he can deal with the darker side of human nature and admiring his technical adventurousness. *He is a very funny writer but a deeply serious one who turns behaviour into social comment.* (Billington) So many of his plays express disillusionment with marriage, horror at masculine insensitivity towards women, dislike of do-gooders and bullish opportunists, sympathy with the feckless and incompetent: and he does this powerfully and successfully because he shows rather than tells, demonstrates rather than debates, observes without judging.

## BEGINNINGS

Ayckbourn was born in Hampstead in 1939. His father was leader of the LSO and his mother a prolific writer of stories for women's magazines. At seven he was sent off to boarding school and his mother embarked on a second marriage to the local bank manager (periodic holiday glimpses of that stormy relationship may well have contributed to his somewhat sceptical view of marriage). From twelve to seventeen he was at Haileybury public school, where he edited the house

# ABSENT FRIENDS

BY ALAN AYCKBOURN

## CAST

Evelyn..... Lynette Shanbury  
Diana.....Izzie Cartwright  
Marge.....Janet Harrison  
Paul.....Rob Hurcum  
John .....Paul Davis  
Colin ..... Vincent Eavis

Directed by..... David Pearson

Stage Manager..... Michael Williams  
Assisted by..... Sandy Millar  
Properties ..... Millie Tucker  
Sound..... Barney Daley  
Set and Lighting Design..... Michael Williams  
Assisted by..... Arts Culture Harrow

The action takes place on a Saturday afternoon in the lounge of Paul and Diana's lounge some time in the 1970s.

*Political theatre is usually so busy being political that it forgets to be theatre.*

*My biggest recurrent theme is that people do care about each other; it's just that they handle each other in boxing gloves most of the time.*

## CONCLUSION

Since *Absent Friends* Ayckbourn has continued the tradition of writing plays, now numbering over fifty, for the holiday audience in Scarborough, which then transfer to the London stage: and his reputation continues to grow – *the plays are all uproariously funny and therefore attract that holiday audience. They are also accurate and, in that accuracy, painful, bleak, dark and tragic* (Holt) – with almost everyone: Letter to the Scarborough Evening News, 12 December 1996.

*Dear Sir,*

*It's high time Alan Ayckbourn and his ilk realised that not many people, rightly or wrongly, want to watch live theatre and if he still insists Scarborough should have a theatre, then let him pay for it as the rest of us have to do.*

*Otherwise close it down. It's obvious not many people want it. The Council can close toilets, lighthouses, to keep the place going. Just what do you think you are doing with our money, councillors?*

**Our thanks for their support for this production  
and for other productions during this 2003/4  
season to Medical Technical Ltd.**

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In this time Proscenium has built up a strong reputation for performing challenging plays (both classic and contemporary) to a high standard.

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PROSCENIUM

## Absent Friends

By Alan Ayckbourn

Wednesday 9th to Saturday 12th June, 2004  
Travellers Studio, Harrow Arts Centre

Absent Friends