

For a decade Alan Ayckbourn has dominated the British theatre, his plays seen by millions in the commercial West End and in virtually every subsidised rep in the land. A new Ayckbourn comedy comes as a huge relief to theatre managements because it will fill houses but can never quite be written off as 'mere entertainment'. He keeps them in work. His characters are usually middle class, his settings domestic, his most double-edged comedy about the way nice people behave nastily; yet his latest London hit, *Way Upstream* at the National Theatre, is an allegory of good and evil, no less. And since then he's written *Intimate Exchanges*, which has no fewer than 16 possible endings: all of them are now in the repertoire in Scarborough, because it's there, at the theatre he runs himself, that Ayckbourn's plays are first seen, by audiences of seaside landladies, not by the London 'glitterati'. Paul Allen interviewed Ayckbourn in the heart of his autonomous kingdom, the Stephen Joseph Theatre-in-the-Round.

Calling it Theatre-in-the-Round is simply putting your cards on the table; your audiences are close to the action, sat on all four sides and not cut off by curtains. But why the Stephen Joseph theatre?

Stephen Joseph was a man who returned from America in the early 50s bearing news of fresh theatre forms. From my experience theatre was at that period very much strangled by proscenium arches. Stephen came back with twin ideals: open staging, and the need for the closer integration of the playwright. Outside the one or two great dignitaries who swanned into their own rehearsals, most playwrights were given misleading information at that time, told the wrong places to rehearse and things like that, deliberately to keep them apart. Stephen started in quite a modest way to change all that, doing a series of Sunday night shows in the Mahatma Gandhi hall in Fitzroy Square in London, an Indian youth hostel. New work mingled with the wafting of curry. He encouraged quite a lot of I think bad but also some quite interesting theatre work. When you cast your bread on those sort of waters you pick up all sorts of strange dramatists. Later, when he thought of forming a company, London seemed hopeless economically and more by luck than judgment he heard about a building in this town on the East Coast called Scarborough. I was one of

## Interview with ALAN AYCKBOURN



Alan Ayckbourn

the accidental pieces of dross that floated in and was naturally encouraged to write by a man who believed everyone should write (although I wanted to act!) and so the theatre grew. When his premature death happened in 1967 the few of us remaining realised the theatre was likely to finish. It was run literally on the back of an envelope by a man who ran it eccentrically and entirely idiosyncratically. But we tried to keep it going and we try today to continue the traditions of Stephen Joseph: flexible staging and new writing.

And you kept his name when you moved from the library to the middle floor of a school where you are now. Why is this theatre so different from the other Stephen Joseph-inspired theatre in Stoke on Trent? The staging is the same, but there the new plays are often local documentaries — the story of a railway line and its workers, the mining industry, the Potteries and the contemporary battle to save a steelworks, *The Fight for Shelton Bar*.

The Stoke theatre was in fact a Scarborough summer company that moved into Stoke one year and opened the theatre there. I suppose it's twofold, why it's become different. Stoke itself is an industrial area with a totally different audience to cater for; and the director, Peter Cheeseman, is himself a man with strong ideas about the theatre. Peter found his spiritual home in Stoke. We were all settled in to the usual actors' thing — digs at the lowest possible rate, renewed at the end of the month. Peter bought a house, pawned everything and got a mortgage. When we asked how long he thought he was staying, he said 'forever, I think'. Stoke suited what he wanted to do, it was the community he wanted the theatre to reflect. Scarborough's a much more amorphous town. It's a holiday town. It's got two or three industries but you can't really generate a fantastic amount of excitement with a documentary on coach-building, and I don't think the coach-builders have the same sense of identity as the pottery workers, the miners or the steelworkers.

*Its sometimes forgotten that your theatre has a better record than most other theatres of putting on new plays by other authors?*

Yes, it's not purely a set of trains that I lay out for my own amusement. I'm conscious, when I meet other writers who are less fortunate than I am, that I am terribly lucky that I can schedule — and have scheduled — a play of my own for next December. I haven't written it, I haven't much idea about it, but I will have. It's a wonderful feeling not to have to write it and then set about finding a slot for it and wait and watch the damn thing go cold on you. You're very excited when you've finished, and want to get it on stage and get actors tearing it apart and putting it together again, and get audiences reacting.

*You also have control of your work for the simple reason that you're now successful enough to dictate your own terms. You direct your own plays in London. But here they're done with a company that's hand-picked; what happens when, in *Way Upstream* for example, you work here with actors who have a clear relationship with the parts they play, and then at the National the star actors come in?*

I don't think they were particularly starry about it, but there is a tension over and above the tension of doing a new play and wanting to do it well and be good in it. Here,

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because they're a company they worry for the right things. They want the play to be right. Down there, reputations are at stake, there's competition, and it's all geared so unhealthily to the three week rehearsal, and then the Opening Night at which you are judged — and your next performance is probably decided as a result, if the right agents are watching. There's all that and the problem of trying to unify it into a oneness. The National should be able to do that because it is a company, but then it's so huge that it isn't a company.

*Does working with your regulars restrict what you write?*

I try and match them. I wouldn't try and write something totally unsuitable for the company I have, but then the company I've got generally reflects what I'm doing at the moment anyway.

*Lavinia Bertram and Robin Herford, who play the nice couple caught in the middle of Way Upstream, are also in Intimate Exchanges, the new play at Scarborough which has 16 possible endings. How did they get cast?*

When this company had done its last performance of *Way Upstream*, in Houston in America, most of the company were so exhausted by America that they all wanted a rest, except Lavinia and Robin who were quite happy to carry on. It came to me that

here was the opportunity, without putting anybody out of work, to do my two-hander that I'd always wanted to do. Here were two actors I'd worked with for years and years, two people who would actually trust me, and I could trust them, to do a play of an enormous nature. *Sisterly Feelings* was a play in which there were alternative scenes in the middle but that was a small scale version of what I really wanted to do, which was a play which developed from one tiny little moment — whether a woman decides to smoke a cigarette or not — into two separate second scenes, four choices of third scene, eight choices of fourth and sixteen choices of fifth scene. To do that hair-raising amount of material and ask two people to do it, to learn the equivalent of half the bible, required an enormous act of faith. If I'd carried that round the West End in a suitcase, which is what the scripts would have needed, I don't think anybody would necessarily have bought it.

*You set yourself amazing problems in plays and have great fun solving them, and part of the pleasure of an Ayckbourn play comes in that fun — 16 endings for Intimate Exchanges, a play*

*set on a boat on real water in Way Upstream, one floor representing three different floors of house simultaneously in Taking Steps. But how does the actual choice of subject fit into all this?*

I hope it comes first. With the 16 endings I've been fascinated by choice. The fact from

the little one's said about one's own life that apparently it's all been totally accidental. I didn't know Stephen Joseph from Adam. I just knew there was a job going in Scarborough, when I was chiefly concerned about my little props cupboard while working in rep in Leatherhead. And when he was ill and dying and I was a bit rudderless I joined the BBC entirely by accident, to find myself sent to Leeds and into the lap of another remarkable man Alfred Bradley. He was very special and incredibly into new work, and there was I rolling around like a marble. If I'd rattled the other way, what would have happened? From the tiny choice about the cigarette in *Intimate Exchanges* we go into bigger choices until at the end we're talking about birth, death and marriage. The idea came and so the choice thing happened. With the split levels in *Taking Steps* I had the story but I wanted an interesting way to tell it. But I was working towards farce in that and I wouldn't pretend that it has anything other than the sheer need to entertain, that play.

*But it does nearly make you cry once or twice as well.*

Oh yes, but I hope that's because one stays with the characters. I've learned that to be very funny you need to be very sad. All good comedy should make you cry, otherwise you're probably examining characters with insufficient depth. My early plays — *Relatively Speaking* and indeed *How the Other Half Loves* — keep getting revived, but they're fairly light. Stephen Joseph inspired *Relatively Speaking*, the last play he was to work with me on. I was writing all kinds of stuff, trying not to sound like anybody else, very weird. He told me that if I wanted to break all the rules, which I obviously did, I ought to learn what they were first and write a well-made play with a beginning, middle and end, which you can then despise, and hate me for asking you to write it. I was very grateful to him. But it was later in plays like *Time and Time Again* that I was able to let the brake off. I'd been so anxious just to get the story told. I was rather like a football ref, ordering characters off when they'd had enough time. Now you can allow them, and they seem to go off of their own accord.

*It sometimes seems to me that just when the critics start to say you're really a rather serious playwright under all the comedy, you go and write a farce like Taking Steps to keep them on their toes; and when they've got you identified with farce, you come up with something like Way Upstream. Is this deliberate provocation?*



*The National Theatre company production of Way Upstream by Alan Ayckbourn*

Well I hate to get pushed into a corner because I've seen it happen to my colleagues. I prefer to be thought of as just a playwright and then produce just like anyone produces things, different shaped pots if that's what you happen to be throwing as a potter. It does depend on how you're feeling.

*Way Upstream though very, very funny, is set on a cabin cruiser on a river and deals with a nice couple who are first bullied by the people they go on holiday with and then terrorised by the people who seemed to have rescued them. How did this major departure come about?*

I don't know, one had this need to write about good and evil, much more clearly than normal. It certainly was a very different play but I didn't want everybody then to think I was going to write all these morality plays from now on. I think the next play I write is heading towards being quite farcical again. I think I want to have some fun. The great thing about *Way Upstream* at the National is the way it's being taken by audiences. It's like a children's matinee. By the time of the rainstorm and the fight when Emma and Alastair finally get away from Vince, they're whooping and shouting and clapping and behaving in a most un-National-Theatre-like manner. Audiences are taking it as I hoped they'd take it; it's riddled with all sorts of images but I hope above all they take it as a cracking good story. I think maybe some of the critics were leaning back. They weren't going to get involved. Maybe if you see too many plays you lose your innocence.

*For a play about good and evil it has a surprisingly happy ending.*

It ends hopefully but I do think it needed to. It's so negative otherwise. I'm grossly depressed by the world and all that happens in it most of the time, and most of my plays about the human condition never resolve themselves at all. What cheered me was that my two small protagonists in it, having found their inner strength, also find the strength to go back. People started saying it was about the SDP, which I found very depressing. I hope one's into a bigger league than that. It's about people who don't say what they feel, and they should do, whether they're having a motorway driven through their garden or being persecuted by some monolithic state, or just being bullied by the man next door. I chose strange names because I wanted to slowly withdraw all the familiar comforts of civilisation. There is something very strange about going on boats anyway, because it doesn't have many laws. I also wanted to

write about the nature of leadership, how some people automatically and erroneously assume leadership.

*Most people assume that if you're successful you must be conservative. Do you resent that?*

I think it's inevitable. I still actually am, inside me, in quite a feud with the establishment, especially the theatre establishment. That's partly why I live so far away from it all and I'm not seen amongst it. I just hope that eventually people will read some of the plays and think differently.

*You've been having theatrical hits since 1967, over 20 of them now. Why haven't you been lured to television?*

Partly because of my upbringing. One's spent so much time, probably more than most as a theatre writer. I've probably written more consistently for the theatre than any other writer. Most of them sooner or later go to film like Pinter or something else. I've stuck purely with theatre, and I think it's because I'm a total theatre nut. I love it, I've lived my life in it. And I think some of my strongest muscles wouldn't be employed at all on television. I'm strong on construction, on the games element, on building two-hour bridges; television wants something quite different. I'd feel like an oil-painter who's suddenly been asked to work in water-colours.