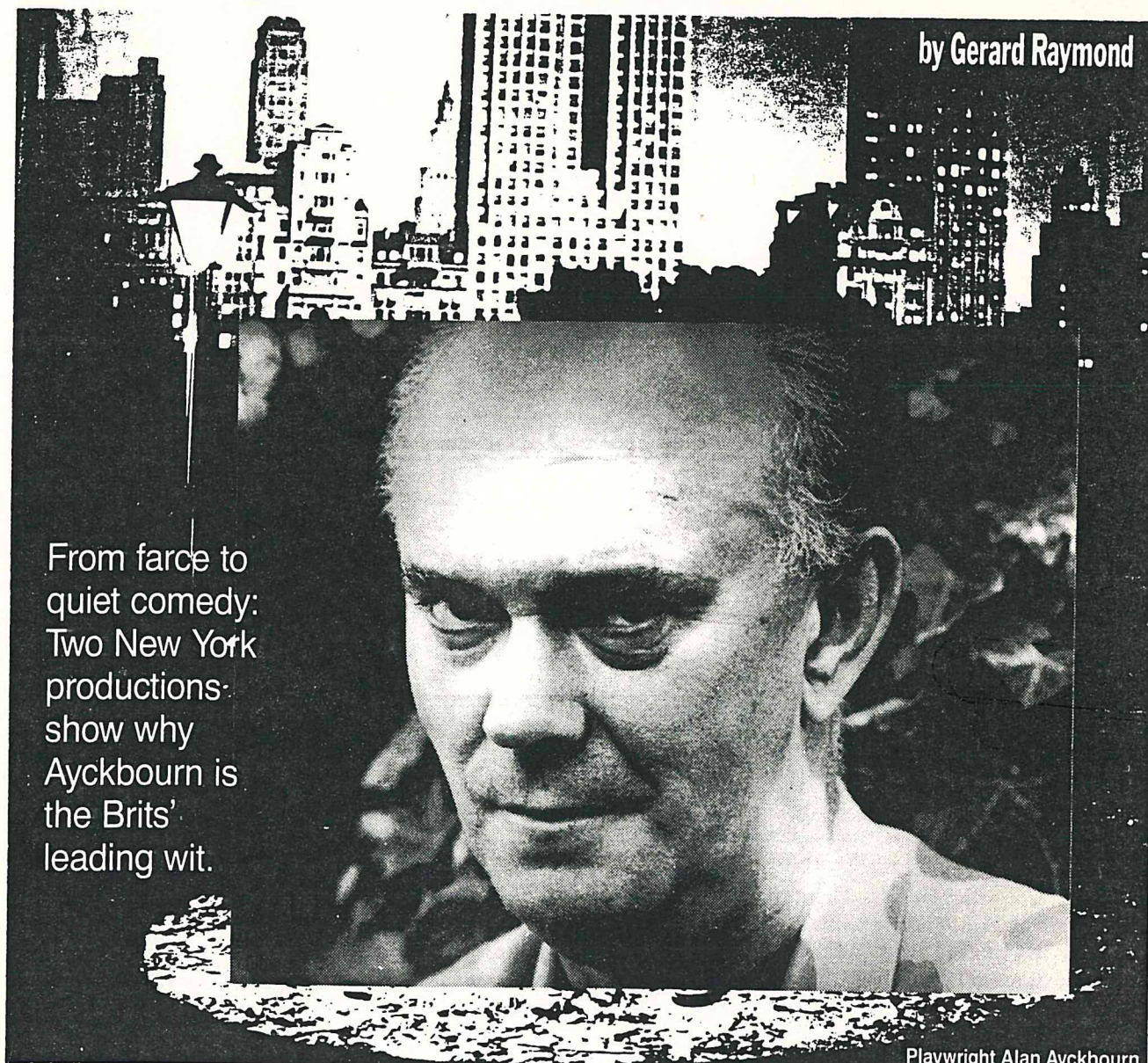


# Alan Ayckbourn Takes Manhattan

by Gerard Raymond



From farce to quiet comedy: Two New York productions show why Ayckbourn is the Brits' leading wit.

Playwright Alan Ayckbourn

**A**LAN AYCKBOURN DEPLORES THE MIS-guided comparison between Neil Simon and himself. "It's ridiculous, we really are chalk and cheese. I mean, if you think you are watching Neil Simon when you are watching my plays, then you are in for a hell of a disappointment, because they have none of those wonderful Doc Simon gag sequences and those marvelous lines."

What you get instead is the work of England's most prolific and most inventive playwright.

After many sporadic and unsuccessful

New York productions, there are now excellent stagings of two Ayckbourn plays. Lynne Meadow's production of *Absent Friends* opened February 12 at the Manhattan Theater Club and *Taking Steps* directed by Alan Strachan opened February 20 at Circle in the Square.

The two plays, both written in the

'70s, cannot be more different in style and lie at opposite ends of the spectrum of comic writing.

In *Absent Friends* a group of friends arrange a tea-party to console Colin, whose fiancée has recently drowned. The object of their sympathy is not only blissfully unaware of the marital tensions among his friends, but also oblivious to their discomfort, insists on talking rapturously about his dead girlfriend. With devastating precision Ayckbourn exposes a troubled group of people hiding behind the rituals of "proper" social behavior.

*Taking Steps* is a farce constructed in the classic style of Ben Travers (*Thark, Rookery Nook*), to whom the play is dedicated. Instead of doors, the staple requirement for farce, Ayckbourn substitutes floors. His stroke of comic genius is to collapse the attic and master bedroom of a crumbling old mansion onto the same playing area as the ground-level living room. Actors pass within centimeters of each other when they are actually located on different floors. The plot hurtles towards chaos as various people misread letters that are not meant for their eyes and as the occupant of the house tries to purchase the building from its rather disreputable owner.

“I have quite a soft spot for *Absent Friends*,” Ayckbourn acknowledged last December when we met at the Stephen Joseph Theater in the Round in Scarborough, Yorkshire. “It’s very low key and it’s the first play I wrote, I think, which didn’t have some huge plot motor whirring away.”

When Ayckbourn directed the first production of *Absent Friends* at Scarborough in 1974 it was daring to play comedy slowly or quietly. The idea had come to him when he was a repertory actor touring the regional theaters from 1957 to 1964. The old weekly rep schedule ran: thriller, comedy, serious play, farce. “You put the comedies in between to double the audience and then did the serious plays. Every time we did a comedy the directors would say things like ‘brighten and fast up,’ the lighting would be brighter, and the acting very loud and quick. I thought, even then, that one day I’d love to write slow, quiet comedy that had all the rules of tragedy attached to it.”

But Ayckbourn was not breaking new ground only because *Absent Friends* was a “slow comedy.” He was dealing with *death*. He had previously explored the comic nature of attempted suicide (*Absurd Person Singular*, 1972) but in *Absent Friends* he placed death at the center of his comedy. And a major

part of his Scarborough audience at the time were senior citizens.

“Of course what I didn’t know was that most old people find death funny. It’s the middle-aged people—the coronary belt—who are clutching their hearts. When they get to 60 or 70 or 80 most them, thank God, seem to have come to terms with death and find the whole business of younger people getting upset by it terribly funny. So we had a lot of very cheery old-aged pensioners on the first night, which was rather jolly.”

*Absent Friends*, like most Ayckbourn plays, moved to the West End in the year after its Scarborough premiere. But it never found its audience in London and is one of his least produced plays today. “I don’t think it is for big theaters. I wanted to see how small we could go, down to the minutiae. It is just a tea-party observed, and all the undercurrents are running. One of the joys of it at Scarborough was that the audience was leaning forward, some even on the table, very much a *part* of that tea-party.”



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"I just think we do such terrible things to each other in the name of love—of course it has to be said that bad relationships make good theater."

**A**lthough Ayckbourn's starting point is always comedy, he rarely writes farce. "They are too damned difficult. They take a good idea and they also take a lot of work and obviously one has to feel in the mood for farce. If I write one in ten that's a farce, I should be doing pretty well." *Taking Steps* in 1979 was his first attempt at the genre since *How the Other Half Loves*, which he wrote in 1969.

The basic idea which led to *Taking Steps* was about a wife who leaves her husband a note a third party reads, putting that person in a difficult position. "Then I wanted a woman in an attic somewhere, I don't why, but I just wanted it. I could see it was a triple set—that

seemed to me rather boring—and then I suddenly came up with stairs idea, which meant that I had a visual motor that was fun as well." The actors mime climbing up and down two staircases as they traverse the imaginary floors of the set, giving one meaning to the play's title.

Ayckbourn was nervous about whether the audiences would easily understand the nature of the three-level action in *Taking Steps*.

"If you explained the device to somebody in the foyer they probably would turn around and sell their ticket back. So it was rather joyous to see my fears confounded and the audience quite happy to play along with me.

"As long as you set the rules up

and attempt to follow them, it is amazing where an audience will follow you. So you usually put more balls in the air: Eventually, in *Taking Steps*, you get three sets of people on three different floors and plaster apparently falls down from one floor to the other. It is very encouraging, the mental chess that people, as a collective body, are able to play. I vowed after *Taking Steps* never to underestimate an audience again."

**A**yckbourn was actually forced to come up with his ingenious idea for *Taking Steps* because his theater in Scarborough, where he has been artistic director since 1970, lacks a proscenium stage. But he relishes



Brenda Blethyn, Peter Frechette, and David Purdham in Alan Ayckbourn's *Absent Friends* at the Manhattan Theater Club.

the restrictions imposed by theater-in-the-round. "I think some sort of limit is often very good, otherwise one just has no parameters within which to write." He also delights in setting up new challenges. *Way Upstream*, written in 1981, takes place on a cabin cruiser as it journeys up a river. The stage was flooded up to ten inches and the boat actually floated in this production. "I always try to push something under the noses of the technical people just to keep it interesting. I am a very strong believer in the visual element of theater."

Even so, Ayckbourn's work is hardly dominated by its special effects. *Absent Friends*, and, to a lesser extent, *Taking Steps*, demonstrate his keen observation of human relationships.

**A**yckbourn's views on marriage are downright cynical—no one can accuse him of sentimentality. In the first act of *Absent Friends* we learn very quickly that one woman suspects (correctly) her husband is having an affair with his friend's

### American Premieres of Ayckbourn Plays Not Produced In New York

*Confusions* (1974), Body Politic Theater, Chicago, 1982

*Just Between Ourselves* (1976), McCarter Theater, New Jersey, 1981

*Way Upstream* (1981), Alley Theater, Houston, 1982 (transfer of original Scarborough production)

*A Chorus of Disapproval* (1984), Contemporary Theater, Seattle, 1988

*Henceforward* (1987), Alley Theater, Houston, 1987 (directed by Ayckbourn)

We have actually come to the conclusion, Samuel French Inc. and I, that we don't need Broadway that much. We have never pushed any of the plays to be done there and just release them [to regional theaters] without waiting for the Broadway production. If you have a play done on Broadway you give away a fair amount of rights to a producer for about 50 years, a huge gift. The rewards from a successful production for a producer are enormous. If he gets a mega hit that is going to run round the country for the next 20 years he probably can retire on it. I don't mind doing that provided I am pretty sure that the show is going to do better than it will if it was released, otherwise why bother?

—Alan Ayckbourn, author of 42 full-length plays. His 1987 hit *A Small Family Business* which won the Evening Standard for Best Play is now scheduled for a fall Broadway opening after previously being announced for the past two seasons.



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**"I suppose I come down so often on the side of women because I was brought up in a single-parent family. I tended to see my mother's point of view."**

wife. The friend doesn't mind because he relies on the philanderer for business. Ayckbourn admits that his acerbic view of marriage was partly influenced by his mother's tension-fraught second marriage and, more significantly, by his own failed attempt.

"When I started writing, at about 25, I was angry, partly because I felt very bad about not being able to carry on with my marriage. For anybody who marries under 20, it is a miracle if it survives till they are 30. It's because you haven't really grown or formulated your own personality. Adults seem to encourage you into marriage but they never tell you just what it means to promise yourself to someone for the next 85 years. It is a hell of a promise. I was a solemn young man and I took it rather seriously, so I was rather ashamed of myself for having to break it."

Under Ayckbourn's uncompromising gaze, all the little cruelties exchanged between married couples are held to the light. "I just think we do such terrible things to each other in the name of love. . . Of course it has to be said that bad relationships make good theater." He laughs. "I always say that audiences like my plays because they have a gentle feeling of superiority—they say 'well, we have got problems but nothing like those.'"

Over the years Ayckbourn's views have mellowed somewhat, but he still feels that happy relationships usually occur *outside* of marriage. "It is simply because you aren't pressured by those wretched vows. In some psychological way, when we are outside marriage, we work a bit harder to keep a relationship together." His conviction stems from his own long-term partnership with actress Heather Stoney, who has also been his secretary and trusted critic for these past two decades.

"We never *dare* look at it [their life

together]. We don't have anniversaries and she hates it if I even try and *conjecture* how long it has been. We just say 'well it has been a long time.' And it has been fine." He adds softly, "I think I didn't make any long term promise except I said 'we'll see how long it lasts.'"

While Ayckbourn can be cruel in his exposure of human weaknesses, his plays are never nasty—even his worst characters are depicted with understanding. Nevertheless one feels the playwright is far more sympathetic to the plight of his female

characters than he is to his frequently macho, chauvinist males.

"I am not quite sure, but I suppose I come down so often on the side of the women because I was brought up in a single-parent family for a long time. I tended to see my mother's point of view more than that of my absent father and she had fairly strong opinions about the male sex. A little of that probably rubbed off. I guess there is the balance of male and female in all of us, I tend to swing that way when I write."



Jane Summerhays in Ayckbourn's *Taking Steps* at Circle in the Square.