



Clive Francis

Going to Scarborough Fair with Alan Ayckbourn

*An encounter with the prolific
British playwright on the occasion of
the premiere of his 35th full-length play*

by Gerard Raymond

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hy does Scarborough, a tiny seaside resort situated on the Yorkshire Coast of England, attract the attention of major theater critics as well as producers and aficionados from around the globe? Because this town, though 250 miles from London, is the home base of playwright Alan Ayckbourn; all but three of his many plays have been premiered here at the Stephen Joseph Theater in the Round. This month, his 35th full-length play, *Man of the Moment*, premiered here.

Having already surpassed Noel Coward's output (33 plays), and just two plays behind Shakespeare, Ayckbourn, who turns fifty next year, will have a place in theater history based on sheer numbers alone. However, he also holds the distinction of being one of the most popular and most successful playwrights in the

world. He has been translated into 24 different languages and his plays are performed constantly throughout the world. Currently in London, last year's Ayckbourn hit, *A Small Family Business* is continuing its run at the National Theater; *How the Other Half Loves* (1970) is enjoying a successful revival in the West End; and his 34th play, *Henceforward*, is scheduled for a West End opening in November, with Ian McKellan. *TheaterWeek* caught up with this unassuming, unpretentious, most genial playwright, while he was busy rehearsing the new Scarborough season.

The name of Ayckbourn is almost synonymous with the Stephen Joseph Theater, which he joined in 1957. Joseph, the son of actress Hermione Gingold, had a vision for the theater which clearly inspired the young





Stephen Moore, Theresa Boden, and Clive Francis in *A Small Family Business*

Nobby Clark

Ayckbourn: "He had two concepts, both of which were fairly original in English theater at that time. One was to stage plays in the round, which we still do, and the other was to encourage new writers as active participants in the creative process of playwriting. At that time in England, writers had become rather remote figures. Stephen actually reinvented the author back into the fold. Indeed, he encouraged everyone working in that tiny theater—box office men were typing away between selling tickets."

Ayckbourn, who joined the company as an actor, was similarly encouraged to write. After six not very successful attempts (four plays were written under the name of Roland Allen), he came up with *Meet My Father* in 1965. This same play, retitled *Relatively Speaking*, became a resounding success in the West End in 1967. Critics hailed him as the new Noel Coward and West End's answer to Neil Simon. (Both epithets were to prove misleading.) That same year, Stephen Joseph died and Ayckbourn was asked

by the trust that ran the Scarborough theater to take it over. "I sort of inherited it," he says matter-of-factly.

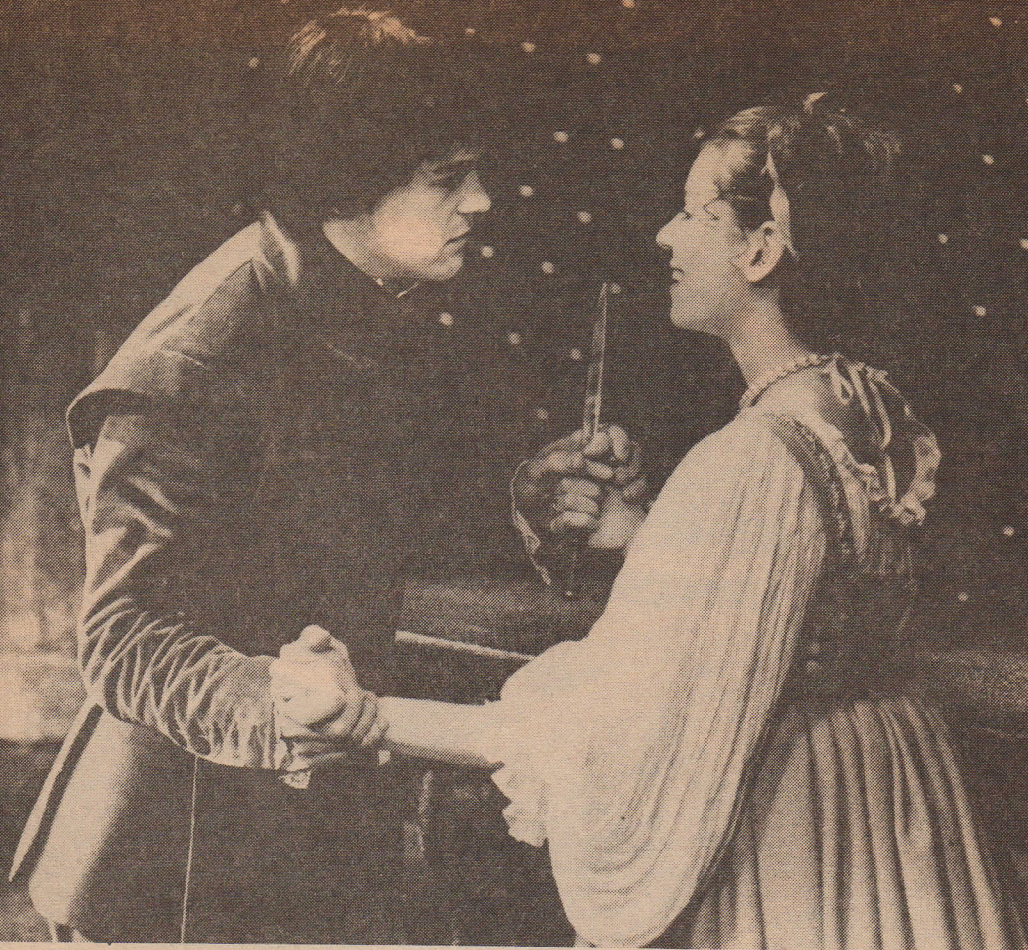
By 1970 Ayckbourn was director of productions, with full artistic control, and had expanded the small theater's operations to include a nine-month season. "I've tried to keep up Stephen's basic tenets: new work, a company, and playing in the round. Of course, it also became a wonderful place for me, the writer. I suddenly looked back about three years ago and I realized I'd been in a unique position. I just had my plays done automatically. Some people may argue that maybe some of them should have been turned down. Nonetheless, it was just me, the writer and me, the director, together; I hope not uncritically."

Last year, for the first time, a new Ayckbourn play premiered outside Scarborough. "It was a shock to suddenly write *A Small Family Business* for Peter Hall at the National Theater and have to submit it to him." The National had previously produced many

of his plays, beginning with *Bedroom Farce* in 1977, all of which were transfers from Scarborough. Hall, who is currently ending his tenure as director of the National Theater, asked Ayckbourn to form a company and direct a three-play season at the National, which would include the premiere of one of his own plays.

Describing his reasons for accepting Hall's offer, Ayckbourn says, "Another of those Stephen Joseph tenets came back to me—you must constantly surprise yourself if you want to run a theater. Once you say to yourself, 'Oh, but we always do that at this time of the year,' you're in a rut. Peter's invitation was timed to perfection. I thought I would benefit and the theater would benefit." He also admits that the "chance to do what I was doing at Scarborough, but on a much larger scale, and also perhaps the chance to go down and direct there once and see if one could make it" motivated him to work in London.

Apart from *A Small Family Business*, a brilliantly funny exposi-



Rupert Graves and Suzan Sylvester in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*

Nobby Clark

tion of dishonesty, greed, and family loyalty (still in the National's repertory), the other two plays in the Ayckbourn season were *Tons of Money*, a lighthearted farce, and Arthur Miller's *A View From the Bridge*, which transferred successfully to the West End. A fourth play, John Ford's Jacobean tragedy *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, was added to the season this year. "I think something else fell through, but it is nice to think that they asked me back for other reasons," chuckles Ayckbourn.

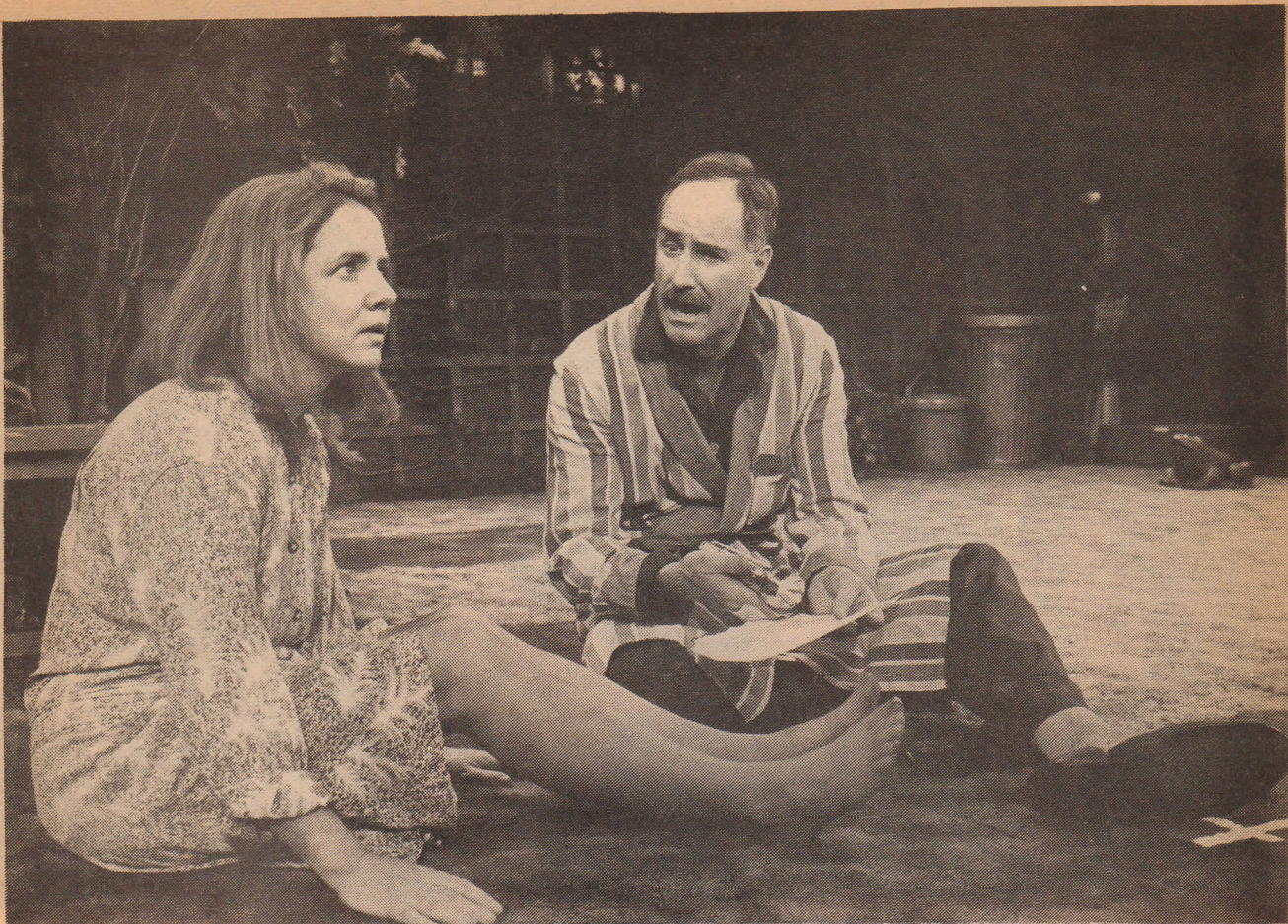
A direct result of this season was the sudden critical appreciation of Ayckbourn's considerable prowess as a director. In fact, Ayckbourn had been directing his own plays for quite awhile, and also many other plays in his annual Scarborough seasons. "It is an odd quirk," he remarks, "that quite often when you direct your own plays, it is assumed they sort of do themselves. Indeed, while it was very gratifying, it was quite amusing to

read the good reviews for *A View from the Bridge*, which is an extremely simple play to direct, given the cast I had, compared to *A Small Family Business*, which was fiendish." It was *View*, nevertheless, that showcased Ayckbourn the director. His revitalization of the play, the impeccable ensemble cast, and Michael (*The Singing Detective*) Gambon's brilliant performance as Eddie Carbone made it one of the undisputed highlights of last year's London season. Gambon won the prestigious Olivier award for Best Actor for 1987, while Ayckbourn won the Plays and Players Best Director Award.

While Ayckbourn's plays have been phenomenally successful in the West End, they have generally not been great hits on this side of the Atlantic. (The one exception may be the Alley Theater in Houston, which has presented numerous Ayckbourn plays, and presented his recent work *Henceforward* in a dual premiere with the Stephen Joseph Theater.) Last season, however, the Manhattan

Theater Club production of *Woman in Mind* generated both critical and popular acclaim. Ayckbourn feels that this is not necessarily an American response but rather a local, New York reaction. "I think one has to separate New York, or Broadway, from America. It does seem to me that my plays do reasonably well when you get to San Diego. New York is that corner of the world where it's all or nothing time.

"This was encapsulated with *Bedroom Farce* [1978]," he continues. "One sensed that the audience couldn't really sort it out. They were going to see the National Theater of Great Britain, which to them meant very serious theater, preferably with a lot of people in wigs and very long acts. And they saw what seemed to be this very silly play about people chasing each other in and out of bedrooms. I think that the audience who might have enjoyed it never got to see it because the National put them off, and the people who came for the National Theater really wanted to see



Stockard Channing plays a mad housewife in the Manhattan Theater Club production of *Woman in Mind*. With her is Remak Ramsey.

Gerry Goodstein

something much more serious. So in a way I kept falling down the hole. I fall down the hole in places like France as well, where I am neither of the boulevard nor serious. *Woman in Mind* got terrific reviews over there but nobody went to see it because they thought it wasn't really very funny."

New York and France not withstanding, Ayckbourn's unparalleled success has led some critics to dismiss him as lightweight, the snobbish rationale being that anyone who is this popular cannot be taken too seriously. However, even many of his former detractors note that Ayckbourn comedies have been getting darker and more serious of late. Critics like Michael Billington of *The Guardian*, point out, however, that certain fundamental themes have always run through Ayckbourn's work. The fact that his plays are so cleverly crafted tends, sometimes, to disguise this. He accurately observes the behavior of men towards women—two completely different, most often totally incom-

patible, species. Billington, in a definitive study of Ayckbourn's work, described the typical themes: "disillusionment with marriage, horror at masculine insensitivity towards women, dislike of do-gooders and bullish opportunists, and sympathy with the feckless and incompetent."

"My plays have been dark for quite a long time," reflects Ayckbourn. "We go back to plays like *Absent Friends* [1974] and *Just Between Ourselves* [1976], which I think were really rather sad and serious documents." In *Absent Friends* a young man, whose fiancé has just died, is invited by a group of old friends in a misguided attempt to bring him comfort. Ayckbourn turns this bleak occasion into a hilarious and biting look at human insensitivity and marital infidelity. While it is excruciatingly funny, there is a also certain Chekhovian pathos that Ayckbourn often brings to his comedies.

In addition, his themes have broadened in recent years, to include

dishonesty in *A Small Family Business* and the nature of fame and the tendency to make heroes out of criminals in our society in the new *Man of the Moment*. Ayckbourn acknowledges that his writing style has changed over the years. "I started by writing very plot-oriented plays because I think at first one is a little bit nervous about technique. You think if you can at least keep the story going then people won't walk out. Then, as it dawns on you that, far from walking out, you are actually keeping them in their seats, the plot can be allowed to relax a little. You can now allow a lot more color to bleed through into the characters. You actually stop pushing them in and out of doors, which I did originally. And of course of the nature of the comedy shifts—which is much more interesting—into a level where there isn't much use of gag lines or comedy situations. The nicest laugh I get in plays is the sort of sigh of recognition which comes out from some situations. People have



Tea time: Heather Stoney and Ursula Jones in the Scarborough production of *Woman in Mind*

either been there or know of it.”

Structure is often a key element in an Ayckbourn play. No other playwright keeps testing the limits of the medium as frequently and as inventively as he keeps doing. In *How the Other Half Loves*, he presents two dinner parties, taking place on two consecutive days in two different households, simultaneously on the same set. In *Sisterly Feelings* (1979), as the author once described it, “four combinations of alternative versions are possible, depending first on a toss of a coin at the end of the short prologue, then halfway through by a decision made by one or another of the sisters during the course of the action.” *The Norman Conquests* (1973) is a trilogy which is not sequential but the same play told from three different vantage points. While each play takes place, the others are happening simultaneously in adjoining rooms.

Ayckbourn has, on many occasions, acknowledged his love for puzzles and games, and it is this side of him that

explores what seem like the limitless possibilities of the theater. “I have to restrain myself. I love playing with new shapes and forms. Audiences are really very quick. That is the joy of it.” He explains the trick is “making it logical. You can’t cheat them. You don’t suddenly change the rules.”

Ayckbourn describes his audience as covering a wide spectrum, from the middle-class, white-collar Scarborough folk to the visitors who come to the town for the holidays. The latter include people from the working class who don’t normally go to the theater but are doing so only because they are tourists. “I’ve had this group ever since Stephen asked me to write my first play. I’ve always tried to juggle the so-called theatrical cognoscenti with the people who don’t know any of this at all. I think it has been a very good tightrope for me to walk. You can never get too clever, because then the seats start slamming up. If you start

talking down to them—then you are not only insulting the intelligent members of the audience, you are also insulting your actors.”

The small size of the Stephen Joseph Theater is very important to Ayckbourn. In an institution like the National, he notes, most of the major production decisions are made before rehearsals begin. “In Scarborough, most of the decisions are made after the actors have started, and that’s great—because they don’t feel somehow that they are in some sacrosanct area. I always like them to feel that it’s their medium—they are in control of it to some extent.” He recalls another lesson learned from Stephen Joseph: in directing, “anything an actor feels he has generated himself is worth a hundred directions you have given.”

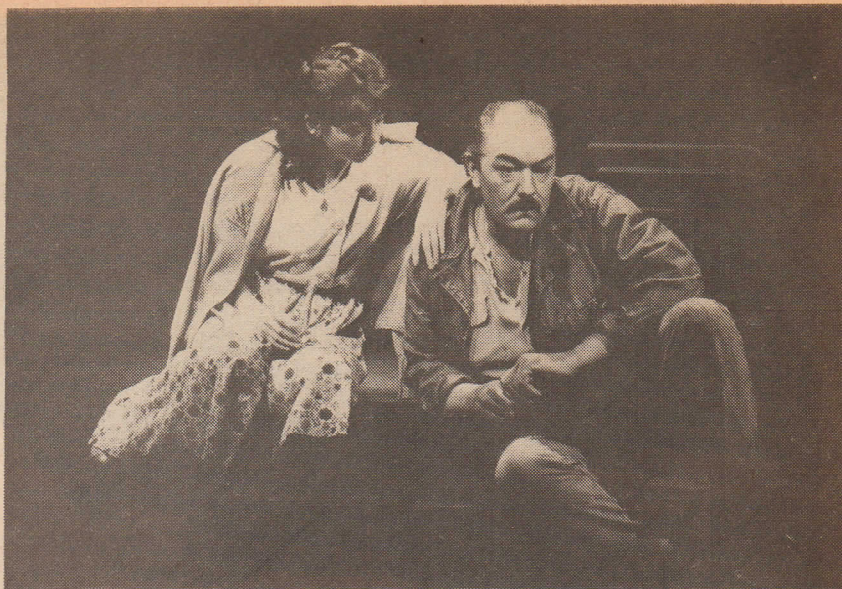
There is, however, one genre which Ayckbourn has yet to conquer. His venture into the field of musical comedy produced his one major flop in the West End. He wrote the book and

lyrics for the musical *Jeeves* (1975), based on P. G. Wodehouse's stories and scored by none less than Andrew Lloyd Webber. "I've always had a hankering to lick the musical since then. But it is very hard, because I think I'm actually not geared toward the big musical. I find, in the end, that because of the size and the scale of it, you have to simplify the form. It is not a small coincidence that we are blessed, at the moment, with pretty good lyric writers and some very good composers but there are very few good book writers in musicals, because it's a dog's job." Over the years there has been talk of reviving *Jeeves*, but Ayckbourn points out that Webber has used up most of the original music. "There was one of our *Jeeves* songs in *Evita*, and in every musical he writes there's another one."

In December this year, the film version of *A Chorus of Disapproval*, the first Ayckbourn play to reach the screen, will be released, starring Jeremy Irons and Anthony Hopkins. After many years of resisting "film nibbles," Ayckbourn says he finally gave in, due to the persistence of director/producer Michael Winner. Ayckbourn gleefully adds that he made things extremely difficult by making many demands, including final cast approval of the scriptwriter and even seeing to it that the film was shot in Scarborough. He actually ended up writing the script, purely as a defense, he says, because he didn't like the previous drafts.

Ayckbourn has always been wary of his plays translating into films. He explains that as a boy he spent all his holidays in the cinema. "We saw about twelve or fifteen films a week—often twice. We saw so much rubbish, but we also picked up the grammar of film. All of this is in my plays. I've used filmic stuff on stage." Cross-cuts and superimpositions are quite commonplace devices in film, he points out, but very effective on stage. "That's one of the problems with my stuff. Once you transport it back into film it's not very interesting." He says that he works very hard to create something which is specifically theatrical and that if, in one sense, all

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Above: Suzan Sylvester and Michael Gambon in Ayckbourn's National Theater production of *A View from the Bridge*. Below: Barry McCarthy and Lynette Edwards in the Scarborough production of *Henceforward*...

his plays did make very good films, "I'd begin to get very worried that I shouldn't have been working in this medium to start with."

Meanwhile, Ayckbourn is back at his beloved Stephen Joseph Theater. "I always promised to come back to Scarborough and I think nobody believed I would. When I told the board I wanted to take a two-year leave of absence, they thought this

was the way that I was going to gracefully get out. So I think no one was more surprised than they were when I returned. I've discovered that I could survive as a writer. I've written two plays away from Scarborough and that is good. I had suddenly begun to worry whether or not my creative juices would function away from that little theater. I wanted to prove they could." □