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ANGLO-AMERICAN

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INTERPLAY IN

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RECENT DRAMA

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RUBY COHN

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# *Anglo-American Interplay in Recent Drama*

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# Contents

|  |        |
|--|--------|
| Introduction   | page 1 |
| 1 Funny money in New York and Pendon:<br>Neil Simon and Alan Ayckbourn | 9      |
| 2 Artists' arias: Edward Bond and Sam Shepard                          | 36     |
| 3 Phrasal energies: Harold Pinter and David Mamet                      | 58     |
| 4 Reading and teaching: Maria Irene Fornes<br>and Caryl Churchill      | 94     |
| 5 Males articulating women: David Hare<br>and David Rabe               | 117    |
| 6 Englobing intimacies: Christopher Hampton<br>and Richard Nelson      | 141    |
| <i>Notes</i>   | 167    |
| <i>Bibliography</i>  | 177    |
| <i>Index of plays and playwrights</i>                                  | 187    |

# Introduction

The history of drama abounds in change, exchange, and paradox, but my present concern is a segment of contemporary theatre history. Shaw's quip still has point – that Britain and America are two countries separated by a common culture – but several dramatists of these countries also *share* a common theatre culture. Unlike interpersonal characters, dramatists speak each to each through their dramas, and, unlike the mermaids of Eliot's *Prufrock*, I think that they also speak to me, and, I hope, to you. This book records my impression of a transatlantic dramatists' exchange through the languages of the stage, mainly but not entirely expressed in words heard. Shifting my metaphor from the ear to the eye, I scrutinize plays of several American and English dramatists who offer mutual illumination through a double focus. I should say "double focuses," since I discern different points of tangency within each Anglo-American pair.

The half-dozen playwright couples worried their way into my mind, in empirical response to theatre productions. Empiricism used to have right of domain in Anglophone culture, but Latinate theory is colonizing its ground. Ignoring theory, I grapple with living and lively dramatists who are skilled in the languages of the stage. Uneasy with superlatives, I do not claim that these "twins" are the most durable dramatists of our time – well, not all of them. Nor did I seek out those who are the most representative of their countries. All artists are nurtured by a specific time and place, and although I cite printed texts, I try to situate each play in the specific time and place of first performance. As background, however, I offer a few paragraphs on the historical time and place in which these modern English and American dramatists function.

## *Anglo-American interplay in recent drama*

Time first. The earliest play within the body of my book is Harold Pinter's *The Room*, written during four afternoons in 1957, as a favor to a fellow actor at a university. Although the quasi-hermetic room later became a synonym of the Pinteresque, it remained unnoticed at a time of international crisis. In that year the Soviet Union shot a satellite into space, and there was no joy in the West at this scientific feat of the cold-war enemy.

Two places of "the West": England and the United States. Following World War II the United States emerged as the strongest power on a shrinking globe. The British Empire, upon which the sun proverbially shone, had been eroded in that same war, but a decade passed before British self-esteem withered, after the misguided invasion of Suez in 1956. A headline screamed: "EDEN GETS TOUGH. SAYS 'HANDS OFF OUR CANAL'. IT'S GREAT BRITAIN AGAIN!" (Quoted in Maschler, *Declaration*, p. 156). Such boasts had to be swallowed when Britain (and a token French force) was ignominiously forced to withdraw. Moreover, the cold-war enemies collaborated toward the final humiliating armistice. A superseded Winston Churchill wrote in vain to President Eisenhower: "I do believe with unfaltering conviction that the theme of the Anglo-American alliance is more important today than at any time since the war. . . . If [misunderstanding] be allowed to develop, the skies will darken indeed and it is the Soviet Union that will ride the storm" (Hitchens, *Blood, Class and Nostalgia*, p. 283). Churchill as a false prophet would be savagely lampooned by his countrymen Charles Wood (*Dingo*, 1967), Joe Orton (*What the Butler Saw*, 1969), and Howard Brenton (*The Churchill Play*, 1974), but the cold war of Churchill (along with his many collaborators) is nevertheless the most persistent background for the theatre of both Anglo-phone countries, until the implosion of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Since the cold war lasted nearly half a century, both Western countries became inured to its skirmishes, and each nation gnawed at its own problems, upon which I touch with a few dates. The year 1958 marked the birth of a British movement for nuclear disarmament, in which women assumed leadership. In the United States during the 1960s the Civil Rights movement magnetized young idealists, with blacks assuming political leadership for the first time since Reconstruction. American involvement in Vietnam expanded in 1964, and student protests flared in 1968, more inflammatory in the bellicose United States than in a shrunken Brit-

## Introduction

ain. By the end of the 1970s, both nations retreated into parallel conservatisms. Margaret Thatcher's first term dates from 1979, and Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980; four years later, each of them was reelected. More than ever before, such news was viewed instantaneously in the television culture of both countries.

For the most part the theatre reflected such events slowly, obliquely, or not at all. In England David Mercer is virtually alone to frame several plays in an explicit cold-war context, but historic events do figure in other dramatic fictions. The Suez debacle of 1956 frames John Osborne's *The Entertainer* (1957), as it does Christopher Hampton's *White Chameleon* (1991). The space rivalry of the Soviet Union and the United States contributes to Tom Stoppard's moon plays *M is for Moon among Other Things* (1964) and *Jumpers* (1972). Three decades of the cold war are traced in David Edgar's *May Days* (1983). Lanford Wilson's *Angels Fall* (1982), Caryl Churchill's *Serious Money* (1987), and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (1991) react to their countries' conservatism in radically different theatrical languages. None of these plays figures in my study, but the frequent chronological gap between event and play illustrates the political obliquity of formal theatre. What was clear in the text, subtext, and context of drama was the spoilage of the American dream, paralleled across the Atlantic by the spoilage of British national pride.

From this scattershot of historical dates, I turn to the stages of both countries, alike in spanning formal theatres as well as churches and attics. In the first half of the twentieth century theatre history and history of drama were virtually synonymous, but they separated in the second half-century. A history of twentieth-century British drama characterizes it as "a rational drama dealing with social issues" (Innes, *Modern British Drama*, p. 2), and, not dissimilarly, a history of twentieth-century American drama characterizes it as "realistic contemporary middle-class domestic melodrama" (Berkowitz, *American Drama*, p. 3). These descriptions are more accurate before midcentury than after, but even in the earlier period new forms materialized, from the music hall made literate (Auden and Isherwood) to religious verse drama (Eliot and his disciples). In the United States, too, there were dramatic escapes from the middle-class living room; current problems were raised in the *Living Newspaper*, and into domestic melodrama intruded

factory workers, sharecroppers, and immigrants, who were unfamiliar to middle-class audiences.

Of individual Anglophone playwrights before midcentury, only Shaw and O'Neill could tower with such earlier European giants as Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, or Pirandello. Although Shaw died in 1950 and O'Neill in 1953, their legacies were felt for decades afterward. Both transplanted Irishmen essayed several dramatic styles over their long careers, but it is their divergently realistic plays that garnered the largest audiences. Of polar temperaments, Shaw is a writer of social comedy, O'Neill of mythic tragedy. Perhaps corollary to the generic cleavage, Shaw's dramas are embedded in the class-based British society of his time, even when the setting is nominally ancient Egypt or Rome. O'Neill's dramas traverse a century of American history, and however conscientiously he seeks social differentiation in a play like *The Iceman Cometh*, he paints lonely individuals who interact painfully across chasms deeper than class. In plumbing the stage for tragedy Miller, Williams, Albee, and Shepard are all his sons. In contrast, Shaw's English sons – and daughters – wield a deft wit in his tradition of socially critical comedy; the plays of Bond, Brenton, Frayn, Gray, Hare, Churchill, Gems, and even Pinter and Stoppard, thrust and parry with sharp phrases in a socially nuanced world.

A few dates reveal startling transatlantic theatre juxtapositions that did not startle at the time. The year 1956 is usually cited as the birthdate of contemporary British drama, because of the opening of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* at the newly refurbished Royal Court Theatre. That same year O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* opened in New York, not only bringing posthumous acclaim to its author, but astonishing audiences with a sympathetic portrait of a drug addict. Hindsight reveals that O'Neill is less traditional than Osborne, not only in his muted climaxes, but also in the existential isolation of his tortured, self-deluding characters. Jimmy Porter's mellifluous tirades prove to be less eloquent than the hesitant stammering of Edmund Tyrone.

In 1964, with the Broadway opening of *Hughie*, O'Neill emerged as a prophetic absurdist, while Off-Off Broadway 20-year-old Sam Shepard stomped onto a church stage with his mythoabsurdist *Cowboys*. In London that year Pinter was inhabituallly silent, but mannered comedy was spawned afresh by Joe Orton's *Entertaining Mr. Sloane*, conceived in unlimited lust. Not only were sexual



## Introduction

frontiers penetrated in that year but so were linguistic boundaries with the invented Scots of John Arden's *Armstrong's Last Good-night*. Peter Shaffer's *Royal Hunt of the Sun* emblazoned resplendent design in Michael Annals's kaleidoscope of colors on the Chichester Theatre's stage. With the loss of empire, Britain was also losing her decorous theatrical insularity.

Critical histories exist of the past century of British and American drama respectively, and I do not propose to blend them. What I do wish to stress is that the playwrights of both countries are dedicated to what has become a minority art – the theatre – and that theatre has often turned against drama during this period. Actor-managers of both countries had virtually disappeared by midcentury, but they were replaced by dictatorial directors with distinctive signatures. Elia Kazan worked with (and sometimes against) new playwrights in New York, and John Barton, Peter Brook, or Peter Hall subdued Shakespeare in Stratford. More in the United States than in England, actors' physical feats took precedence over vocal control. Commercial temptation – film and television – on the one hand, and antiverbal, site-specific experimentation on the other siphoned practitioners away from drama in both countries. By the end of the twentieth century, it takes an act of aesthetic courage to commit to the palpable presence of actors projecting through the several languages of theatre, especially speech. (I vividly recall a Grotowski-trained actor pleading with him: "I want to pronounce words, words, words!")

Glancing back at this date-marked zigzag through theatre history on each side of the Atlantic, I perceive that I haven't mentioned what I cannot quite document – contrasting histrionic expectations. Most germane to this study is England's *literary* bent versus the American "Method." On the face of it, there would seem to be no obstacle to improvising in a literary context, or to cloaking a script in seeming spontaneity. In theatrical fact, however, the inward-probing actor was invariably contrasted with the technical actor: say, Marlon Brando or Geraldine Page versus Laurence Olivier or Maggie Smith. Again, I cannot document it, but I think that the Method orientation of personal psychology helped create a climate of experimental indulgence for physicalizations, gallery performances, and happenings of the 1960s and 1970s. In contrast, even salacious English subjects were garbed in elegant phrases, usually heard in formal theatres.

Then there is the fact of geography: Willy-nilly, Britain is located in Europe. Even in the aeronautical age of swift flights, theatre travel is cumbersome, what with sets, properties, costumes, and the demands of different theatre spaces. Given the geographical proximity, even inexpensive European productions arrived sooner in London than in New York: Peter Hall's domestic *Godot* played in London in 1955, but only in 1958 did Herbert Blau's San Francisco *Godot* arrive in New York; absurdist seepage into mainstream theatre was thus delayed. The impact of Brecht was not only earlier but more direct in Britain than in the United States; epic staging followed almost immediately upon the 1956 visit to London of the Berliner Ensemble. Quasi-Brechtian dramaturgy – Bolt, Shaffer, Arden, even Bond – took a little longer. (Christopher Hampton converted Brecht into a character in *Tales from Hollywood* in 1983.) Brecht himself spent much of World War II in Santa Monica, California, but his teachings were fragmented in the United States: His social commitment was espoused by the Living Theatre, his exploitation of popular arts by the Bread and Puppet Company, his sociocritical approach to acting by the Open Theatre, and his narrative performance by the Mabou Mines.

To this day contemporary British drama will occasionally risk a socioepic sweep, whereas American drama is comfortably confined in the stage living room; that thumbnail contrast pits sociological versus psychological theatre. But however inventively deployed, the stages of both countries continue to harbor individuals; and however hemmed in by flats, the stages of both countries are set in a global context. Nationalistic critics of both countries tend to plead the virtues of home-grown products as against transoceanic rivals.<sup>1</sup> Such contests are, however, fomented by news-greedy journalists, and not by audiences who revel in the infinite riches of the several little rooms of theatre. Dramas speed across the Atlantic in both directions. In Britain some American classics have acquired a new resonance, for example, Keith Hacks's comic inflection of O'Neill's *Strange Interlude* and Michael Blakemore's racial inflection of Miller's *After the Fall*. In regional American theatres rather than on Broadway, English classics can be meaningfully naturalized, as in the case of Tony Taccone's Bay Area *Volpone* and Carey Perloff's New York Pinter. Unspeakable Shakespeare Festivals spot the American landscape, even more markedly than in Britain.

## Introduction

My turf is new drama. An embattled new drama achieves production over the opposition of safe classics, on the one hand, and of antiverbal experiments, on the other. Having enjoyed new drama in each country for some forty years, I at long last have arrived at a half-dozen Anglo-American juxtapositions that seem to me, quite frankly, fascinating. In spite of the somewhat different social forces in each nation; in spite of the wide differences in histrionic expectation, to which I earlier alluded; in spite of the different theatre heritage of each country; I find astonishingly comparable points and plays.

In my own reading I am irritated by introductions that summarize the still unread book, so it would ill behoove me to do so, but I nevertheless hazard a few generalizations about the following pages. My dozen dramatists have mastered the several languages of the stage to different degrees, whether it be plot and character presentation through dialogue, molding of stage space with or without sets, but obligatorily with lights, a panoply of nonverbal sounds, and a kaleidoscope of stage properties. Ayckbourn's manipulations of stage space, Fornes's<sup>2</sup> transformations of stage characters, Shepard's several songs, and Bond's scenes of split focus are some of the inventive strategies I consider, but I recognize that I am partial to fresh air rising from what we still call the *English* language. At a time of critical jargon, of pious multiculturalism, of lofty theories, I stand my ground on the playwrights' concrete demotic language sounded in the voices of trained actors. I hope that my account of the exchange between English and American playwrights will incidentally communicate my own pleasure in the seeing, reading, and writing about these plays.

I do not approach the dramatists systematically or mechanically. In the case of Neil Simon and Alan Ayckbourn I try to present the stage worlds that emerge from their respective stage skills. In the less evident comparison of Edward Bond and Sam Shepard I confine myself to a single facet of their rich dramaturgy: the stage artist and how he or she reflects the playwright's art. Stage speech is anatomized in the plays of Harold Pinter and David Mamet. Theatrical forms of instruction are scrutinized in the plays of María Irene Fornes and Caryl Churchill, whereas I listen closely to the speech of women *characters* in the plays of David Rabe and David Hare. I back off for a larger view of structure and syntax in the stage speech of the drama of Christopher Hampton and Richard

*Anglo-American interplay in recent drama*

Nelson. Through the points of tangency runs the thread of stage languages, especially speech.

Tough critic that I am, it may not be apparent that, in one way and often in more than one, I admire all twelve playwrights, so I hereby state it categorically.

# *Funny money in New York and Pendon*

*Neil Simon and Alan Ayckbourn*

The American Neil Simon and the Englishman Alan Ayckbourn are magnets to the theatre in an age of mass media. Both playwrights are energetically productive, what with Simon's twenty-seven plays and Ayckbourn's thirty-nine, although the numbers may be mounting as I write. Both men are devoted to comedy, but they have at times voiced a yearning for a Chekhovian blend of the comic and the tragic. Ayckbourn calls his plays "black farce" (Innes, *Modern British Drama*, p. 317). Black or white, their plays have been translated into many languages, yet each playwright has had only limited appeal in the country of the other. Grounded in the middle-class mores of their respective countries – Simon urban and Ayckbourn suburban – the two playwrights are routinely paired, almost as though they were a comedy team, but no one has lingered over their likenesses as they craftily delineate family strains.<sup>1</sup>

Ayckbourn himself distinguished half-humorously between them: "If you dropped a play of [Simon's] in the street and the pages fell out in any old order, you'd still be laughing as you picked them up. If you dropped a play of mine, too bad. As a writer, he's highly verbal whereas I'm situational" (Kalsen, *Laughter in the Dark*, p. 44). My quotation from Simon is more general, differentiating two cultures rather than two writers: "American humor is rooted in people's neuroses, while English humor is more slapstick" ("Make 'em Laugh," p. 14). There is some truth in both insights, each playwright surreptitiously defending his own practice. However, I am going to argue that the two dramatists create similar worlds, through quite different manipulation of the languages of the stage – verbal or situational, slapstick or neurotic.

I therefore disagree with the redoubtable British critic, Michael Billington, who has taken exception to coupling Simon and Ayckbourn: "The two dramatists have little in common other than that they write deceptively serious comedies, make a lot of money and get their work performed in their own theatres" (*Alan Ayckbourn*, pp. 50-1). I suppose it is true that they both "make a lot of money," but Simon has never had his own theatre, even though a Broadway theatre has been named for him. No theatre bears Ayckbourn's name, which does, however, grace a New York alley. More important, Ayckbourn has since 1976 been the artistic director of, and a very active director in, the Stephen Joseph Theatre at Scarborough, a resort town on England's northeast coast. Simon has opened some two dozen plays outside of New York before displaying them on Broadway, and this is comparable to Ayckbourn's Scarborough premieres before he ventures into London's West End, usually with a different cast. Since such "out-of-town" tryouts, and subsequent revision, account in part for their "lot of money," it is a salient similarity between the two writers, but it neglects the specifics of the plays themselves.

For that, we may begin with Billington's puzzling genre designation - "deceptively serious comedies." What the British critic probably means by his condensed phrase is drama with serious purpose beneath a deceptively comic surface. Since neither Simon nor Ayckbourn is monolithically farcical in the manner of English Ben Travers (to whom Ayckbourn dedicated his *Taking Steps*), or American Kaufman and Hart, some degree of seriousness may be discerned within the comic canon of each of these writers. By and very large, one might say that both dramatists have gradually groped their way through comic structures toward serious themes. In Ayckbourn's words: "Let's see how clever we can be at saying unpalatable things in a palatable manner" (Billington, *Alan Ayckbourn*, p. 165). What both playwrights are clever at is offering tasty lines to actors; those of Simon are snappy, whereas Ayckbourn's people tend to bumble.

After a quick tour through their respective careers, I will pair a few of their plays. Before molting into a dramatist, Neil Simon (b. 1927) wrote scripts for comic personalities on radio and television - Sid Caesar, Phil Foster, Jackie Gleason, Jerry Lester, Garry Moore, Phil Silvers. Alan Ayckbourn (b. 1939) came to drama by way of stage management and then acting in the theatre.<sup>2</sup> Their

plays display the residue of this training. From *Come Blow Your Horn* (1961) to *Laughter on the 23rd Floor* (1993) Simon is king of the one-line quip, which he dispenses prodigally among his characters. In Simon's first published play, for example, two brothers bicker, and their sallies bounce indiscriminately off either one; one brother complains, "I thought we were splitting everything fifty-fifty," and the other brother retorts: "We were until you got all the fifties."

In contrast, a *mute* protagonist energizes Ayckbourn's first published play (and the first of many that he himself directed). His eponymous Mr. Whatnot (1963) leaps, trips, falls, drives an automobile, climbs up a piano, treads on its keyboard, plays cricket with a tennis racket, bounces on a bed, and devours a banquet while concealed beneath a table. A frantic stage manager has to accompany these acrobatics with taped sounds. Ayckbourn's mentor Stephen Joseph summarizes the farcical mayhem: "Real properties, phoney properties and mime properties all enriched the scene, ranging from a genuine steering wheel to represent a car, to an entirely imagined piano that was played furiously" (*Theatre in the Round*, p. 57).

It is tempting to dive into Ayckbourn's various properties and Simon's several sallies, but that would contrast apples and oranges, whereas the two playwrights *are* comparable in their dramatic situations, stemming from Greek New Comedy. In that genre the plot turns on the elimination of an obstacle that separates a nubile woman from her ardent young suitor. Simon and Ayckbourn may age the problematic couple, and by the end of their comedies the obstacle might still cast its shadow, but the two playwrights nevertheless address audiences who possess some residual nostalgia for the New Comedy form. Contemporary content often inflects that form in Simon's plays, but its residue may disappear in Ayckbourn's most serious plays.

As in sitcoms of the media, the plays of both Ayckbourn and Simon prowl around endemic predicaments – mismatched couples, disjointed generations, dissimilar siblings, bad neighbors, frail friends, and hilariously hostile modern environments. Both Simon and Ayckbourn skewer their characters so that they wriggle helplessly – and laughably – often within the family. Simon's unprepossessing characters yearn to be a little bigger than they are, or to reach a little further than they can, within low and limited hori-

zons. Most of Ayckbourn's people are resigned to the traditional British suburban milieu, which repays them ungratefully. The plays of both writers tend to ignore wider issues; not only laws, wars, and poverty, but also racial and religious conflicts, drug abuse, energy depletion, global crises; in short, the world at large. Within their dramas, neither writer is irreparably addicted to the conventional happy ending, but Ayckbourn's finales are increasingly problematic, whereas Simon usually offers his characters an escape route, if only to another temporary clearing in the urban jungle – a quip on their parched lips.

Many Simon plays of the 1960s and 1970s string jokes on a thin thread of plot, but in his main work of the 1980s he filters jokes through time-bound plays that draw upon his own life – *Brighton Beach Memoirs* (1982), *Biloxi Blues* (1985), and *Broadway Bound* (1986). Simon's alter ego, a would-be writer named Eugene Morris Jerome, is 15 years old in 1937, when war clouds threaten Europe (and especially European Jews) while the Jewish-American Jerome family is mired in the economic Depression. *Biloxi Blues* departs from Simon's native New York to Biloxi, Mississippi, during World War II, where Gene undergoes military training, sexual initiation, and romantic yearning. *Broadway Bound* remains a promise in 1949, the year of the third play, when the senior Jeromes separate, but their two sons start a career as radio gag writers. Paradoxically named for the tragic O'Neill, Simon's comedic Eugene is at once the protagonist and the memorialist of his trilogy, in the manner of Tennessee Williams's Tom of *The Glass Menagerie*. Simon's more recent *Jake's Women* (1990)<sup>3</sup> is even more ambitious in its model; like Arthur Miller in *Death of a Salesman*, Simon sets scenes in the mind of his protagonist.

Ayckbourn has been candid about his own debts – to Oscar Wilde for misprision, to Ben Travers for manic farce, to Noël Coward for an occasional scene, to Harold Pinter for a fine-tuned lexicon (Kalson, *Laughter in the Dark*, passim). He shrugged these mentors off by the 1970s, when he confounded audience expectation by a cunning blend of onstage neurosis, offstage action, and the most blatant manipulation of settings ever seen on the English (or any other) stage. His serious notes – especially in the whimper of his women characters – are sounded a decade earlier than those of Simon. Coincidentally, too, it is a trilogy, *The Norman Conquests* (1973), that established Ayckbourn as a dramatist of serious



purpose, however he would mock that academic phrase. Unlike the plays of Simon's trilogy, which advance chronologically, those of Ayckbourn occur simultaneously, in a dizzying round of on-stage and offstage action. Then, flaunting his control over plot mechanisms, Ayckbourn produced alternative endings for *Sisterly Feelings* (1978) and sixteen variants for four scenes in *Intimate Exchanges* (1982), which was filmed by Alain Resnais as *Smoking and No Smoking*. A few years later *A Small Family Business* (1987) and *The Revengers' Comedies* (1989) virtually writhe through their convoluted plots.

Simon writes as though the subplot had not been invented, but he displays concern for character. He told Edythe McGovern: "The playwright has obligations to fulfill, such as exposition and character building" (Neil Simon, p. 4). Subscribing to the worth of the traditional nuclear family, Simon's characters, particularly his married characters, are sometimes frustrated by their tradition. As his policeman remarks in *The Odd Couple*: "Twelve years doesn't mean you're a *happy* couple. It just means you're a *long* couple." Wittily complaining, Simon's families tend to endure, although the balance of power may shift.

Ayckbourn is an insidious subverter of family harmony, and more and more he undermines the festive final coupling of comedy. Even in the happy ending of *Relatively Speaking* "a disastrous marriage" is prophesied, especially since we never learn whose slippers have wandered into Ginny's bedroom. A modicum of happiness results from uncouplings in *Time and Time Again*, *The Norman Conquests*, *Taking Steps*, *Time of My Life*. It is in Ayckbourn's cruelest plays that marriage endures – *Absurd Person Singular*, *Absent Friends*, *Just Between Ourselves*, *Joking Apart*, *Season's Greetings*, *Woman in Mind*, *A Small Family Business*. In many of these plays a dense but well-meaning husband can drive a wife to quite literal distraction.

Although Ayckbourn's ingenious plots have been admired more than Simon's conventional minitriumphs over mini-obstacles, it is for their characters that both playwrights have reaped praise – and particularly for their sympathy with women. Simon and Ayckbourn are similar in creating women whose ideal of happiness, or even of mental stability, rests upon a man. Simon's Jennie Malone of *Chapter Two* exults: "I'm wonderful! I'm nuts about me!" But in the next breath she nervously asks her recalci-