A large gold diamond is centered at the top, flanked by four small red squares. The entire cover has a dark blue background with a dense, repeating pattern of small, stylized leaves or feathers.

DRAMA

C R I T I C I S M

V O L U M E

13

A large gold diamond is centered at the bottom, flanked by four small red squares, mirroring the top design.

DRAMA

C R I T I C I S M

Criticism of the Most Significant and Widely Studied
Dramatic Works from all the World's Literatures

VOLUME 13

Linda Pavlovski, Editor

江苏工业学院图书馆
藏书章



Detroit
New York
San Francisco
London
Boston
Woodbridge, CT

STAFF

Lynn M. Spampinato, Janet Witalec, *Managing Editors, Literature Product*
Kathy D. Darrow, *Product Liaison*
Linda Pavlovski, *Editor*
Mark W. Scott, *Publisher, Literature Product*

Ellen McGeagh, *Editor*
Patti A. Tippet, *Technical Training Specialist*
Deborah J. Morad, Kathleen Lopez Nolan, *Managing Editors*
Susan M. Trosky, *Director, Literature Content*

Maria L. Franklin, *Permissions Manager*
Sarah Tomasek, *Permissions Associate*

Victoria B. Cariappa, *Research Manager*
Tracie A. Richardson, *Project Coordinator*
Tamara C. Nott, *Research Associate*
Sarah Genik, Timothy Lehnerer, and Ron Morelli, *Research Assistants*

Dorothy Maki, *Manufacturing Manager*
Stacy L. Melson, *Buyer*

Mary Beth Trimper, *Manager, Composition and Electronic Prepress*
Gary Leach, *Composition Specialist*

Michael Logusz, *Graphic Artist*
Randy Bassett, *Imaging Supervisor*
Robert Duncan, Dan Newell, *Imaging Specialists*
Pamela A. Reed, *Imaging Coordinator*
Kelly A. Quin, *Editor, Image and Multimedia Content*

Since this page cannot legibly accommodate all copyright notices, the acknowledgments constitute an extension of the copyright notice.

While every effort has been made to secure permission to reprint material and to ensure the reliability of the information presented in this publication, the Gale Group neither guarantees the accuracy of the data contained herein nor assumes any responsibility for errors, omissions or discrepancies. Gale accepts no payment for listing; and inclusion in the publication of any organization, agency, institution, publication, service, or individual does not imply endorsement of the editors or publisher. Errors brought to the attention of the publisher and verified to the satisfaction of the publisher will be corrected in future editions.

This publication is a creative work fully protected by all applicable copyright laws, as well as by misappropriation, trade secret, unfair competition, and other applicable laws. The authors and editors of this work have added value to the underlying factual material herein through one or more of the following: unique and original selection, coordination, expression, arrangement, and classification of the information.

All rights to this publication will be vigorously defended.

Copyright © 2001 Gale Group, Inc.
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535

All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form.

Gale Group and Design is a trademark used herein under license.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 92-648805

ISBN 0-7876-3141-8

ISSN 1056-4349

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Preface

D*rama Criticism (DC)* is principally intended for beginning students of literature and theater as well as the average playgoer. The series is therefore designed to introduce readers to the most frequently studied playwrights of all time periods and nationalities and to present discerning commentary on dramatic works of enduring interest. Furthermore, *DC* seeks to acquaint the reader with the uses and functions of criticism itself. Selected from a diverse body of commentary, the essays in *DC* offer insights into the authors and their works but do not require that the reader possess a wide background in literary studies. Where appropriate, reviews of important productions of the plays discussed are also included to give students a heightened awareness of drama as a dynamic art form, one that many claim is fully realized only in performance.

DC was created in response to suggestions by the staffs of high school, college, and public libraries. These librarians observed a need for a series that assembles critical commentary on the world's most renowned dramatists in the same manner as Gale's *Short Story Criticism (SSC)* and *Poetry Criticism (PC)*, which present material on writers of short fiction and poetry. Although playwrights are covered in such Gale literary criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism (NCLC)*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800 (LC)*, and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism (CMLC)*, *DC* directs more concentrated attention on individual dramatists than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries in these Gale series. Commentary on the works of William Shakespeare may be found in *Shakespearean Criticism (SC)*.

Scope of the Series

By collecting and organizing commentary on dramatists, *DC* assists students in their efforts to gain insight into literature, achieve better understanding of the texts, and formulate ideas for papers and assignments. A variety of interpretations and assessments is offered, allowing students to pursue their own interests and promoting awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Approximately five to ten authors are included in each volume, and each entry presents a historical survey of the critical response to that playwright's work. The length of an entry is intended to reflect the amount of critical attention the author has received from critics writing in English and from foreign critics in translation. Every attempt has been made to identify and include the most significant essays on each author's work. In order to provide these important critical pieces, the editors sometimes reprint essays that have appeared elsewhere in Gale's literary criticism series. Such duplication, however, never exceeds twenty percent of a *DC* volume.

Organization of the Book

A *DC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** consists of the playwright's most commonly used name, followed by birth and death dates. If an author consistently wrote under a pseudonym, the pseudonym is listed in the author heading and the real name given in parentheses on the first line of the introduction. Also located at the beginning of the introduction are any name variations under which the dramatist wrote, including transliterated forms of the names of authors whose languages use nonroman alphabets.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.

- The list of **Principal Works** is divided into two sections. The first section contains the author's dramatic pieces and is organized chronologically by date of first performance. If this has not been conclusively determined, the composition or publication date is used. The second section provides information on the author's major works in other genres.
- Essays offering **overviews and general studies of the dramatist's entire literary career** give the student broad perspectives on the writer's artistic development, themes, and concerns that recur in several of his or her works, the author's place in literary history, and other wide-ranging topics.
- **Criticism** of individual plays offers the reader in-depth discussions of a select number of the author's most important works. In some cases, the criticism is divided into two sections, each arranged chronologically. When a significant performance of a play can be identified (typically, the premier of a twentieth-century work), the first section of criticism will feature **production reviews** of this staging. Most entries include sections devoted to **critical commentary** that assesses the literary merit of the selected plays. When necessary, essays are carefully excerpted to focus on the work under consideration; often, however, essays and reviews are reprinted in their entirety. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- A complete **Bibliographic Citation**, designed to help the interested reader locate the original essay or book, precedes each piece of criticism.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

Cumulative Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by the Gale Group, including *DC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

A **Cumulative Nationality Index** lists all authors featured in *DC* by nationality, followed by the number of the *DC* volume in which their entry appears.

A **Cumulative Title Index** lists in alphabetical order the individual plays discussed in the criticism contained in *DC*. Each title is followed by the author's last name and corresponding volume and page numbers where commentary on the work is located. English-language translations of original foreign-language titles are cross-referenced to the foreign titles so that all references to discussion of a work are combined in one listing.

Citing *Drama Criticism*

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume in *Drama Criticism* may use the following general formats to footnote reprinted criticism. The first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to materials reprinted from books.

Susan Sontag, "Going to the Theater, Etc.," *Partisan Review* XXXI, no. 3 (Summer 1964), 389-94; excerpted and reprinted in *Drama Criticism*, vol. 1, ed. Lawrence J. Trudeau (Detroit: Gale Research, 1991), 17-20.

Eugene M. Waith, *The Herculean Hero in Marlowe, Chapman, Shakespeare and Dryden* (Chatto & Windus, 1962); excerpted and reprinted in *Drama Criticism*, vol. 1, ed. Lawrence J. Trudeau (Detroit: Gale Research, 1991), 237-47.

Suggestions are Welcome

Readers who wish to suggest new features, topics, or authors to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions or comments are cordially invited to call, write, or fax the Managing Editor:

Managing Editor, Literary Criticism Series

The Gale Group

27500 Drake Road

Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535

1-800-347-4253 (GALE)

Fax: 248-699-8054

Acknowledgments

The editors wish to thank the copyright holders of the excerpted criticism included in this volume and the permissions managers of many book and magazine publishing companies for assisting us in securing reproduction rights. We are also grateful to the staffs of the Detroit Public Library, the Library of Congress, the University of Detroit Mercy Library, Wayne State University Purdy/Kresge Library Complex, and the University of Michigan Libraries for making their resources available to us. Following is a list of the copyright holders who have granted us permission to reproduce material in this volume of *DC*. Every effort has been made to trace copyright, but if omissions have been made, please let us know.

COPYRIGHTED EXCERPTS IN *DC*, VOLUME 13, WERE REPRODUCED FROM THE FOLLOWING PERIODICALS:

Bulletin of the Comediantes, v. 33, Spring, 1981 for "Tirso's Don Juan and the Opposing Self" by Everett W. Hesse./v. 37, Summer, 1985 for "Love, Matrimony and Desire in the Theatre of Tirso de Molina" by Henry W. Sullivan./v. 40, Summer, 1988 for "Tirso de Molina's Idea of 'Tragedia'" by David H. Darst./v. 40, Winter, 1988 for "Language and Seduction in 'El Burlador de Seville'" by James Mandrell./v. 42, Summer, 1990 for "The 'Burlador' and the 'Burlados': A Sinister Connection" by Raymond Conlon. All reproduced by permission of the authors.—*The Centennial Review*, v. XXXII, Summer, 1988 for "Megan Terry and Family Talk" by Judith Babnich. Copyright © *The Centennial Review*, 1988. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission of the publisher and author.—*Commonweal*, v. CXVIII, May 3, 1991. Copyright © 1991 Commonweal Publishing Co., Inc. Reproduced by permission of Commonweal Foundation.—*Comparative Drama*, v. 25, Winter, 1991/92. © copyright 1991-92, by the Editors of Comparative Drama. Reproduced by permission.—*Crítica Hispanica*, v. 9, 1987. Reproduced by permission.—*Drama*, 1988 for a lecture delivered on October 21, 1987 by Alan Ayckbourn. © Haydonning 1988./Autumn, 1973 for "Plays in Performance" by J. W. Lambert and others. Both reproduced by permission.—*The Drama Review*, v. 21, December, 1977 for "Two Pages a Day" by Megan Terry. Copyright © 1977, *The Drama Review*. Reproduced by permission of the publisher and the author.—*Forum for Modern Language Studies*, v. XXII, July, 1986. Reproduced by permission.—*The French Review*, v. LVIII, March, 1985; v. 62, April, 1989; v. 66, October, 1992. Copyright 1985, 1989, 1992 by the American Association of Teachers of French. All reproduced by permission.—*French Studies*, v. XLV, April, 1991. Reproduced by permission.—*Hispanic Review*, v. 58, Summer, 1990. Reproduced by permission.—*History of European Ideas*, v. 20, 1995. Copyright © 1995 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.—*The Hudson Review*, v. XLIV, Summer, 1991. Copyright © 1991 by The Hudson Review, Inc. Reproduced by permission.—*Kentucky Romance Quarterly*, v. 29, 1982. Copyright © 1982 Helen Dwight Reid Educational Foundation. Reproduced with permission of the Helen Dwight Reid Educational Foundation, published by Heldref Publications, 1319 18th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036-1802.—*L'Esprit Créateur*, v. XXXVI, Spring, 1996. Copyright © 1996 by L'Esprit Créateur. Reproduced by permission.—*MLN*, v. 90, April, 1975. © copyright 1975 by The Johns Hopkins University Press. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.—*Modern Drama*, v. XXVI, March, 1983; v. XXVII, December, 1984. Copyright © 1983, 1984 University of Toronto, Graduate Centre for Study of Drama. Both reproduced by permission.—*Modern Languages Journal*, v. 70, June, 1989. Reproduced by permission.—*Modern Languages*, v. LIX, September, 1978. Reproduced by permission.—*The Nation*, New York, v. 252, April 8, 1991. © 1991 *The Nation magazine/The Nation Company, Inc.* Reproduced by permission.—*The New Leader*, v. LXXV, June 1-15, 1992. © 1992 by The American Labor Conference on International Affairs, Inc. Reproduced by permission.—*Nottingham French Studies*, v. 29, Spring, 1990; v. 33, Spring, 1994. © The University of Nottingham 1990, 1994. Both reproduced by permission.—*Papers on French Seventeenth Century Literature*, v. XV, 1988; v. XVI, 1989; v. XXII, 1995. © 1988, 1989, 1995 PFSC. All reproduced by permission.—*PMLA*, v. 89, January, 1974. Copyright © 1974 by the Modern Language Association of America. Reproduced by permission of the Modern Language Association of America.—*Renaissance*, v. XXXVII, Summer, 1985. © copyright, 1985, Marquette University Press. Reproduced by permission.—*Romance Languages Annual*, v. 1, 1989; v. 6, 1994. © 1990, 1995 by Purdue Research Foundation. All rights reserved. Both reproduced by permission.—*Romance Notes*, v. XXIII, Winter, 1982; v. XXXII, Fall, 1991. Both reproduced by permission.—*The Romanic Review*, v. 45, 1974. © The Trustees of Columbia University. Reproduced by permission.—*Studies in American Drama, 1945-Present*, v. 2, 1987; v. 4, 1989. Copyright © by Philip C. Kolin and Colby H. Kullman. Both reproduced by permission.—*Theatre Journal*, v. 34, October, 1982. © 1982 University and College Theatre Association of the American Theatre Association. Reproduced by permission of The Johns Hopkins University Press.—*The Times Educational Supplement*, March 15, 1991 for "Plotting Success" by Reva Klein. © The Times Supplements Limited 1991. Reproduced from *The Times Educational Supplement* by permission of the author.—*Times Literary Supplement*, November 1, 1991; August 19, 1992; August 13, 1993. © The Times Supplements Limited 1991, 1992, 1993. All reproduced from

The Times Literary Supplement by permission.—*The University of Mississippi Studies in English*, v. X, 1992. Copyright © 1992 The University of Mississippi. Reproduced by permission.—*Variety*, May 4, 1992. Reproduced by permission.

COPYRIGHTED EXCERPTS IN *DC*, VOLUME 13, WERE REPRODUCED FROM THE FOLLOWING BOOKS:

Bermel, Albert. From "Fears into Laughs," in *One Act Comedies of Moliere*. Second edition. Translated by Albert Bermel. Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1975. Copyright © 1975 by Albert Bermel. Reproduced by permission.—Betsko, Kathleen, and Rachel Koenig. From an interview in *Interviews with Contemporary Women Playwrights*. Beech Tree Books, 1987. Copyright © 1987 by Kathleen Betsko and Rachel Koenig. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.—Breslauer, Jan and Helene Keyssar. From "Making Magic Public: Megan Terry's Traveling Family Circus," in *Making A Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women's Theatre*. Edited by Lynda Hart. The University of Michigan Press, 1989. Copyright © by The University of Michigan 1989. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.—Cave, Richard Allen. From *New British Drama in Performance on the London Stage: 1970 to 1985*. Colin Smythe, 1987. Copyright © 1987 by Richard Allen Cave. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.—Kauffmann, Stanley. From *Persons of the Drama: Theater Criticism and Comment*. Harper & Row, Publishers, 1976. Copyright © 1966 by Stanley Kauffmann. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission of Brandt & Brandt Literary Agents, Inc.—Keyssar, Helene. From *Feminist Theatre*. Macmillan, 1984. © Helene Keyssar 1984. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.—Londre, Felica Hardison. From an interview in *Speaking on Stage: Interviews with Contemporary American Playwrights*. Edited by Philip C. Konlin and Colby H. Kullman. The University of Alabama Press, 1996. Copyright © 1996. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission of the publisher and the author.—Marranca, Bonnie. From *American Playwrights: A Critical Survey, Vol. I*. by Bonnie Marranca and Gautam Dasgupta. Drama Book Specialists, 1981. Copyright © 1981 by Bonnie Marranca and Gautam Dasgupta. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission of the author.—McKendrick, Melveena. From "Tirso de Molina and the other Lopistas," in *Theatre in Spain, 1490-1700*. Cambridge University Press, 1989. © Cambridge University Press 1989. Reproduced by permission.—Soufas, Teresa Scott. From *Melancholy and the Secular Mind in Spanish Golden Age Literature*. University of Missouri Press, 1990. Copyright © 1990 by The Curators of the University of Missouri. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.—Taylor, John Russell. From "Art and Commerce: The New Drama in the West End Marketplace," in *Contemporary English Drama*. Edited by C. W. E. Bigsby. Edward Arnold, 1981. Copyright © Edward Arnold (Publishers) Ltd. 1981. Reproduced by permission.—Taylor, John Russell. From *The Second Wave: British Drama for the Seventies*. Hill and Wang, 1971. Copyright © 1971 by John Russell Taylor. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission of The Peters Fraser and Dunlop Group Limited on behalf of John Russell Taylor.

PHOTOGRAPHS APPEARING IN *DC*, VOLUME 13, WERE RECEIVED FROM THE FOLLOWING SOURCES:

Ayckbourn, Alan, photograph. AP/Wide World Photos. Reproduced by permission.—Molière, engraving. The Library of Congress.—Tirso de Molina, engraving. The Library of Congress.

Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments xi

Alan Ayckbourn 1939-1
English playwright and lyricist

Molière 1632-167336
French playwright

Tirso de Molina 1580(?) -1648177
Spanish playwright

Megan Terry 1932-278
American playwright

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Author Index 339

DC Cumulative Nationality Index 413

DC Cumulative Title Index 415

Alan Ayckbourn

1939-

English playwright and lyricist.

INTRODUCTION

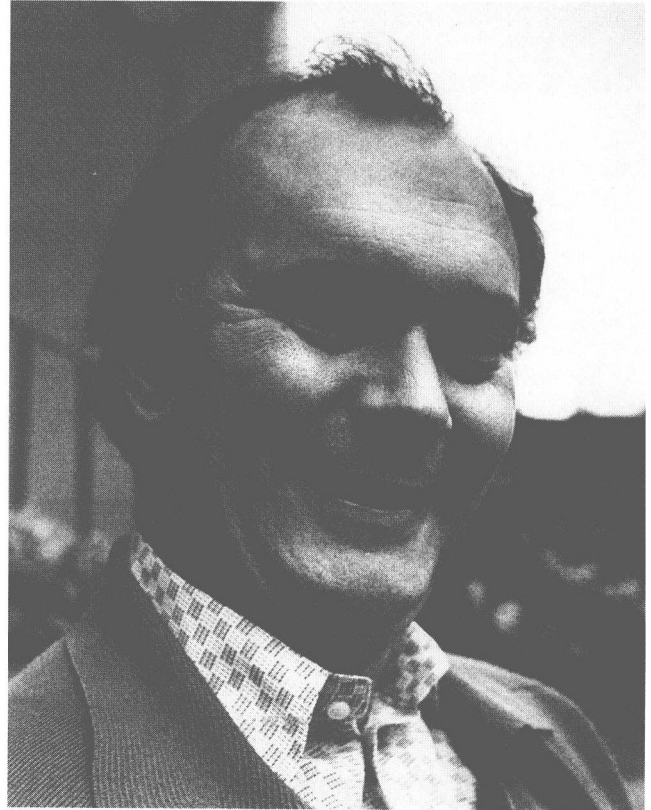
One of Great Britain's most popular and prolific playwrights, Ayckbourn is best known for his intricately plotted and inventively staged plays that explore daily middle-class life and marriage. In works that successfully balance tragic subject matter with comic events, Ayckbourn frequently centers on what he perceives as the monotony and emotional torment underlying his characters' lives and examines such themes as loneliness, unintentional cruelty and self-interest.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Ayckbourn was born April 12, 1939, in London. Influenced by his mother, a romance-fiction writer, Ayckbourn began writing at an early age. He attended Haileybury School in 1952, devoting most of his time to writing plays and acting. Ayckbourn toured with several repertory companies and worked as assistant stage manager before he began his relationship with the Studio Theatre Company in the small resort town of Scarborough. There Ayckbourn gained experience in all aspects of theater under the direction of Stephen Joseph, an innovative stage manager who had introduced the concept of theater-in-the-round to England. During this period, Ayckbourn wrote several light comedies that he had admittedly created as vehicles to advance his own acting career. Ayckbourn's first significant work, *Standing Room Only* (1961), which concerns a London bus driver and his family who are caught in a twenty-year traffic jam, is his only absurdist drama. After receiving harsh reviews for *Xmas v. Mastermind* (1962) and *Mr. Whatnot* (1963), Ayckbourn took a financially secure position at the BBC in 1965, producing radio dramas while concurrently writing plays for the theater. His first success came when the farce *Relatively Speaking* (1967) opened in London to wide critical acclaim.

MAJOR WORKS

Ayckbourn's prolific output prompted numerous critics to remark that his total number of plays now surpasses that of Shakespeare. Many of Ayckbourn's plays present the foibles of middle-class married life within the structure of the "well-made" play. For example, in such early plays as *Relatively Speaking* (1967) and *How the Other Half Loves* (1969), Ayckbourn utilizes the conventions of mistaken



identities and misunderstandings, complicated plots and precisely timed exits and entrances to humorously explore marital infidelities. *How the Other Half Loves* also presents a good example of how Ayckbourn uses staging techniques to transcend space and time. The play has two separate settings that are superimposed onstage so that actions occurring in different places at different times are seen simultaneously. *Time and Time Again* (1971) and *Absurd Person Singular* (1972) mark the beginning of plays in which Ayckbourn created more fully developed characters in the context of what he termed "the truly hilarious dark play." *Absurd Person Singular*, for instance, concerns three unhappily married couples who take turns entertaining one another on three successive Christmas Eves. One of the wives repeatedly attempts suicide by various ludicrous means in front of the other guests while they remain cruelly unaware of her pain. *A Small Family Business* (1987), which depicts the moral decline of an entire family through a series of humorous and complicated plot twists, is, nevertheless, noted for its unhappy conclusion: a drug-addicted daughter sits alone in her room injecting heroin

while downstairs her family celebrates their entry into the drug trade. Continuing to emphasize the dark side of everyday existence, *Woman in Mind* (1985) charts the mental breakdown of Susan, the wife of a self-centered pastor. At first she fantasizes about an ideal family; however, her fantasy world eventually degenerates into uncontrollable hallucinations, and she is left utterly alone as her real family remains oblivious to her emotional needs.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Though Ayckbourn's reputation is based primarily on his ability to write entertaining comedies, most critics agree that his plays convey serious themes concerning the failures and tragedies of ordinary life as well as the moral and cultural decline of society. In particular, such plays as *A Small Family Business* and *Woman in Mind* not only depict the foibles of individuals, but are noted for addressing such social issues as drug abuse, the shortcomings Ayckbourn perceives in organized religion, and the manipulative qualities of the media, most evident in *Man of the Moment* (1988), in which a villainous character is made a hero by television journalists. Characterizing Ayckbourn's critical status, Michael Billington called him "the best comic dramatist since Molière," while Peter Hall has asserted that, "in 100 years' time, when he's forgiven for being successful, people will read his plays as an accurate reflection of English life in the 1960s, '70s and '80s. They represent a very important social document."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Plays

The Square Cat [as Roland Allen] 1959
Love After All [as Roland Allen] 1959
Dad's Tale [as Roland Allen] 1960
Standing Room Only [as Roland Allen] 1961
Xmas v. Mastermind 1962
Mr. Whatnot 1963
Meet My Father 1965 [also performed as *Relatively Speaking*] 1967
The Sparrow 1967
**Mixed Doubles: An Entertainment on Marriage* 1969
How the Other Half Loves 1969
The Story So Far 1970 [also performed as *Me Times Me Times Me* (revised edition), 1972, and *Family Circles* (revised edition), 1978]
Ernie's Incredible Illusions 1971
Time and Time Again 1971
Absurd Person Singular 1972
***The Norman Conquests* 1973
Absent Friends 1974
†Confusions 1974

Bedroom Farce 1975
Just Between Ourselves 1976
Ten Times Table 1977
Joking Apart 1978
Men on Women on Men [with Paul Todd] 1978
Sisterly Feelings 1979
Taking Steps 1979
Season's Greetings 1980
Suburban Strains [with Paul Todd] 1980
Way Upstream 1981
Intimate Exchanges 1982
It Could Be Any One of Us 1983
A Chorus of Disapproval 1984
The Westwoods 1984
Woman in Mind: December Bee 1985
Henceforward . . . 1987
A Small Family Business 1987
Man of the Moment 1988
Mr. A's Amazing Maze Plays 1988
The Inside Outside Slide Show 1989
Invisible Friends 1989
The Revengers' Comedies 1989
Body Language 1990
This Is Where We Came In 1990
Wildest Dreams 1991
Time of My Life 1992
Dreams from a Summer House 1992
Communicating Doors 1994
Haunting Julia 1994
The Musical Jigsaw Play 1994
A Word from Our Sponsor 1995
By Jeeves 1996
The Champion of Paribanou 1996
Things We Do for Love 1997

*This work includes the plays *Countdown* and *We Who Are About To*.

**This work includes the plays *Table Manners*, *Living Together*, and *Round and Round the Garden*.

†This work includes the one-act plays *Mother Figure*, *Drinking Companion*, *Between Mouthfuls*, *Gosforth's Fete* and *A Talk in the Park*.

AUTHOR COMMENTARY

Alan Ayckbourn (essay date 1987)

A lecture delivered on October 21, 1987, in *Drama*, No. 167, 1988, pp. 5–7.

[The following excerpt highlights a talk given by Ayckbourn, in which he voices his concerns about the future of the commercial play.]

Most of my talks start off with different titles and end up roughly the same—a sort of history of me. Anyway, this time I wanted at least to start differently, even if I end up in the same place. I want to draw your attention to what I consider to be an endangered species; it's called the good

commercial play. There are still a few of us practising it out there, but it is becoming increasingly difficult to develop. There are several reasons why.

The first is down to the fact that a lot of work is being done by community or group theatres—splendid work too, except that what's happening is that these plays are what I call Event Theatre—plays that are often developed and done *in situ* to cover a particular event, something pressingly social like, say, the miners' strike. But very often they don't move any further than that. They die with the group doing them, and so there is no play left over to move forward. You might note, for instance, how few productions have been seen of even a show like *Nicholas Nickleby*. The play that you can take off the shelf and do, is actually not as much in evidence as it used to be.

The second reason, possibly, is due to the fact that a lot of theatres are consigning the new writers to the studio end of the business—the low risk end. I would say that studio writing is fine and good, for *very new writers*. But for writers to survive they have got to come out of the greenhouse at some stage. One of the great benefits I had was to experience commercial pressures: to do more, that is, than just deliver a play. If you are always being sheltered by productions of, say, *King Lear*, assorted Agatha Christies and Alan Ayckbourn—we always tend to get bracketed together—then in truth, as a writer, you remain playing to small houses in small theatres, or to no houses in small theatres. As one regional director said to me, there's a lot of very good work being done developing new writers in studio theatres but whoever saw a second production of most of these plays? A writer learns a lot from repetition of his work—at least he does if he is canny.

The third, the most obvious but probably the biggest reason, is the shrinking budgets, the move away from government finance, the smaller amounts available for smaller theatres outside London where new dramatists, one hopes, are coming—a play is an expensive thing. It's easy enough—comparatively easy anyway—to get a small scale production in a small theatre, but it's that next stage, to play among the big league, that is getting tougher. At Scarborough we spend a lot of time encouraging new writers, but it is not really a matter of receiving a script and saying 'this looks good' and just doing it. Often it's a matter of recruiting and creating a working relationship with an individual who you have a hunch might write a play in five years.

In my own case I was lucky enough. I was an actor looking to be a star, who happened to arrive in a theatre where there was one of the most remarkable men I've met—Stephen Joseph. The theatre in Scarborough bears his name. He had a rather eccentric habit of encouraging *anyone* who worked in his theatre to write—the box office assistant etc. We had a lot of playwrights wandering round that theatre at any one time. But, in my case, the eight or nine plays I had done in the privacy of my own home, although reasonable, had never shown any development.

Because a playwright doesn't just develop in isolation. One of the saddest sights is seeing the work of an unproduced author who's written for forty years and who's *stayed absolutely still*. The only thing that has got better is his typing.

Until a play goes through the mill, you can't begin to get a feedback as to what is working and what isn't. I was more interested, in point of fact, in acting during the early times I am now talking about and so, under Stephen's prompting, I wrote a wonderful vehicle for myself; it was designed to show just how good an actor I was. As an ASM I had observed from the wings for two years, a lot of how a play was put together. I knew that if you wanted to be a star you came on at the end of the first act, so I wrote my character in at the last line of Act 1. I stayed on for the next two acts and I gave myself all the laugh lines. In a fit of enthusiasm I wrote myself in as a guitar-playing, singing, dancing pop singer; none of which I could actually *do*. The first act was traumatic and I was sick several times before I came on. When I did come on it was to find myself in a play that I completely failed to recognise as mine. But, what remained with me, was the experience of the very first laugh of the play—it may have been just a titter—a few minutes in. That was very exciting, like gun-smoke to a warhorse. After that I seriously began to think about writing more . . . vehicles for myself. The next play, therefore, was destined to show me in *four* roles. I stole the plot from the *Marriage Of Figaro*, disguising it slightly. *The Guardian*—or *Manchester Guardian* as it was then called—described it as a 'witless' piece. Nor did I get very good reviews as an actor. Still failing to heed the call, I went on to write a third play, and this time I wrote a mere *eight* parts for myself. I came on and off in a monstrously bad series of false moustaches. The play died without trace. It was then—around then—that I hit on the idea of putting *other* actors in, in the hope that they would do something for my plays that I so conspicuously could not. About the same time Stephen guided me gently away from acting towards directing.

So, I developed two careers at once. On the one hand I was directing and on the other hand I was a writer delivering plays at regular intervals to Stephen and his company: I think the first thing to be said about the whole business of starting to write (I may be repeating myself) was that I had been fortunate enough to be put in at the sharp end. I was writing plays in a company running on a shoestring in a town, Scarborough, in the North East of England; a town not known for its theatrical innovation. It was a variety town in summer and in winter it had no theatre at all. Here we were doing a totally unknown form of theatre—theatre in the round—by totally unknown writers, actors and directors; it was the first outside London fringe I suppose. We are talking here, don't forget, about the early 'sixties. We were all earning nothing. We were the first company not to play the National Anthem, which immediately branded us as communists, and it meant that nobody came because of that, as well as for the other, reasons. My plays were supposed to earn us the money to

live until next week. So the onus was well and truly upon me. My colleagues in the dressing room were putting pressure upon me to write something they could do. If we were all going to starve in force nine gales in Scarborough then the least I could do was to provide them with something worth acting in.

On the other hand, I had to satisfy the needs of a very disparate audience coming not at all from the traditional theatre-going public. The thing about Scarborough is that it is a holiday town, and people tend to behave abnormally when they're on holiday. They do daring things, like going to the theatre. For many people in our audiences, the nearest they had got to a live actor was the television set (thus the classic overheard remark when the lights went up one evening of . . . 'oooh, it's in colour'). What we got from these audiences was instant involvement, to the point often—irritatingly sometimes it's true—of very loud comment. They became involved. Coming, as I do, from the rather more laid-back Southern regions, I found it very stimulating. And every night I was experiencing—as an actor to begin with being right in the middle of the whole thing—how a play was progressing. Perhaps, as importantly, I was also noticing how the plays were failing. In that respect theatre in the round is very useful. From any angle one is watching the audience. I'm a great audience watcher even today.

But even then, and later when we moved to Stoke-on-Trent, no West End managements looked anywhere near us. Incidentally, it is interesting to note that although I was greeted as an overnight success, I'd had some ten plays unproduced, and it wasn't until my seventh produced work—so *seventeen* plays in all—that I got one nibble from a West End management. It was a long business and a long investment by that theatre which, by the end, was doing reasonably nicely, but not more, from my work. It's an interesting thing that a new playwright can sometimes deliver, quite out of the blue, a most magnificent first script. But if you are lucky enough to produce it, the difficulty will start on the second or third piece. Because, you see, the trouble with playwriting is that it is beset with rules. I always compare it with furniture making rather than with any other kind of writing.

To create a play you need a great knowledge of construction. The whole thing is to hold an audience's attention for two hours. Narrative, character, development and dialogue are all a crucial part of the process. They are basic rules, but only after you have learned them can you consider breaking them. At one point Stephen suggested that I write, for once, a well-made play. *The well-made play*—to a young dramatist this is an insulting term. It suggests that you are selling out. But it intrigued me as an exercise when I was writing the first of my plays that was really commercially successful—*Relatively Speaking*. I remember sitting down and trying to write a piece that was, if you like, actor-proof, a play that would have a mechanism in it that would need only the slightest of pushes to make it work. In doing so I had to apply all my mind and

technique to such an extent that I became very depressed. In fact I kept putting it off. I remember Stephen phoned me and asked if I yet had a title; titles of my plays always come first. I said 'not yet'. He said that the leaflets were going to press so I clutched, from the air, a title . . . *Meet My Mother*, I'll call it that. So he said he'd put it in. A couple of days later he called and told me that he had changed it to *Meet My Father*—it looked better on the programme. I said 'fair enough, that'll fit'. In fact I hadn't started it yet. This was the play (it was eventually finished) that caught the eye of a West End impresario. The casting, although difficult, was eventually first rate Michael Hordern, Celia Johnson, Richard Briers and Jennifer Hilary, and we went out on tour.

With this play I had a stroke of good fortune. It happened to arrive at a point when the French Window was almost forgotten—it was a play, I blush to confess, with French Windows. The hairy men had moved in—the heavy, post Osborne, Pinter mob, and realism was the course of the day. In came this rather charming vehicle with a rather embarrassed author in tow, who wanted to be associated with that heavy mob, not with this cosy little piece. As it happened the piece was received rapturously but it probably set me back a couple of years. I was known as Mr SitCom. Mr Light Ent. I tend to wince even now when people say—thirty four plays later—that this is still the best thing I've written.

It was a couple of years later that I was to meet the first of my mega-stars, Robert Morley, when I wrote *How The Other Half Loves*. I didn't write it for him, I actually wrote it for my company. The thing I was learning was how to write for groups of actors. I've never been against the star system. What I've hated is the idea of a vehicle for a star, and I've always tried to write equal parts, equal shares for actors. I hope I've never written a part that I wouldn't have played myself. To that extent I was writing team plays. But I came to a head on collision for the first time with Robert Morley. He was due to play one sixth of a play of mine which increasingly became one third, one half and then three quarters. Now, if you employ Robert Morley there is no point trying to pretend he isn't there. He is very very big, and big too with his audiences. People who pay to see plays by unknown writers in fact pay to see people like Robert Morley. So, in the end one let him out of his cage and he rampaged about the play, and it was the longest run I've ever had. He said, very sweetly, to me at the end—he knew I was wincing a lot as yet another scene vanished— . . . I've left a trail of sadder but richer writers behind me'. I was forced to agree with him.

As for my writing now many years on, Scarborough has given me, if nothing else, the right to take daring risks, and the right to fail. I now realise that I have a double obligation: to an audience—one has to entertain them as a practical writer; but one has also to give them something else besides. And balancing these two aspects is a fine, indeed a keen edged manoeuvre. In the end, it is the tight rope that a commercial play has to be willing to tread. You

can offend more people than you please, or you can just make the work so trite and glib that you avoid the central issues. But audiences don't forgive you for that either. So, the 'commercial play' - defined simply as a play that people pay to come and see in large numbers, and which is done several times. My main fear is that the conditions for writers like myself, who have had the theatre and funds to do it, will just not be around in a few years. They may even be fading out now.

I'm going to fade out now. I wonder if you would like to ask me some questions, because I'm red-hot on questions.

Question: You have been very unpretentious and self-deprecatory about your method, in the sense that you talk as if you were merely a technician, yet it must be clear to most people who've seen your plays that there is a very deep human content in them. Some might even put it so high as Chekhovian content. Do you not agree that there's some personal pressure which works in you as well as the apparent technical approach that you adopt?

Answer: Yes. I am interested in how people treat each other. There's obviously a huge male/female rift in many of my plays. There is also I think, recently, a concern about the moral state of the nation. The last play, *A Small Family Business*, was described, rightly I think, as a morality play. It is about the nature of honesty. Without sounding too 'revivalist preacher', it struck me that we were in danger of having no agreed moral code any longer. Now it was exactly what any of us chose to make it. We all had an idea of what we considered to be honest, that to steal the office pencil was OK, to steal the desk was probably not. I tried, in that play, to take us very gently from things we would all condone to matters that none of us should condone, murder and drug peddling. Yes, I do talk technically, mainly because when you talk about other things you get rather near your creative centre. And I find it very difficult to say things which, outside the context of my plays, don't sound, well, rather trite.

Reva Klein (essay date 1991)

SOURCE: "Plotting Success," in *The Times Educational Supplement*, No. 3898, March 15, 1991, p. 34.

[In the following essay, Ayckbourn discusses Invisible Friends, a work he considers to be a morality play.]

"I may not have a lot of things, but I do have technique." I suppose it comes from doing the same job for 33 years. Despite his standing as one of the most successful playwrights in the English-speaking world today, Alan Ayckbourn is nothing if not humble. The award-winning writer and director who describes himself as someone who is "known for making plots like watches" is in London rehearsing his new family play *Invisible Friends* at the National Theatre. When it opened last year at Ayckbourn's own theatre, the Stephen Joseph in Scarborough, *The Times*

hailed it as "one of the best examples of children's drama . . . since Peter Pan".

Ayckbourn himself wouldn't be caught dead calling his own work "children's drama", preferring instead the concept of mixed-age, family audiences where children and parents sit and laugh and get scared and feel sad together. "Those are the best sort of audiences," he says, "not just dragooned kids being told to sit and shut up by fearsome teachers."

Invisible Friends he calls a shorter, more resolved version of his adult play *Woman In Mind*, a moving piece about a depressed woman, lonely in her middle-aged marriage, who retreats into a fantasy world. What audiences at the National will be seeing is more lighthearted, but equally concerned with loneliness, alienation and the power of the imagination.

It's about young Lucy, who's fed up with her family, and no wonder. Her mother is depressed, her father appears to be narcoleptic and her heavy metal-obsessed brother is simply on another planet. Lucy invents an imaginary friend who fulfils all her needs. All's fun and games until, in the second act, the appearance of the imaginary friend's brother and father signifies a shift towards the sinister and dangerous. Resolution arrives just in time, and Lucy and her family all live, if not happily ever after, at least more at ease with each other.

Ayckbourn considers the play to be, like his other work, "a half concealed morality play". A firm opponent of the type of children's theatre that he scathingly calls "junior agit-prop", he just as firmly believes in the capacity of children to grasp complicated messages. "In the last few years, from seeing children sitting with parents in adult theatre wide awake throughout, it began to occur to me that many of us are excluding children from theatre for the wrong reasons and that when we did things specifically for them, they were condescending. It was then that I decided to try to write for family audiences the same sort of things I do for adults. This type of theatre is my adult theatre except that it's pared down."

His first two forays into what he admits to having conceived as children's theatre were long ago and dreadful enough, he chuckles, to have nearly put him off writing. Last year's *Mr A's Amazing Maze Plays* was, if not overwhelmingly successful, interesting enough to whet his appetite for more.

OVERVIEWS AND GENERAL STUDIES

John Russell Taylor (essay date 1971)

SOURCE: "Three Farceurs: Alan Ayckbourn, David Grogan, Simon Gray," in *The Second Wave: British Drama for the Seventies*, Hill and Wang, 1971, pp. 155-71.

[In the following excerpt, Taylor examines the works of Ayckbourn, David Cregan, and Simon Gray—playwrights who, in Taylor's opinion, are re-examining traditional theatrical genres.]

We tend to expect plays by new writers to be in some sense *avant-garde*, and the newer the writer the more *avant-garde* the play. We even sometimes seem to suggest that it is the young writer's duty to be *avant-garde*, and chastise him if he is falling short of this ideal by writing straightforward, old-fashioned sorts of plays. But of course, there is no necessary connection between youth and deliberate modernity. Indeed, one of the salient characteristics of the newer British drama has been exploration of a different sort: the re-examination and revivification of forms of the past, reclaiming for serious attention techniques and genres which have fallen into disuse or at least into intellectual disrepute.

One obvious example of this process is the new interest shown by several of our younger dramatists in the most 'theatrical' of theatrical genres, melodrama and farce. Sometimes, perhaps, they have been prompted to look again by the influence of Brecht, with his theoretical advocacy of the enddistancing techniques natural to farce in order to induce a more critical attitude in audiences towards what is going on on stage. Sometimes, rather, it may be the influence of Theatre of the Absurd, Ionesco in particular, with its emphasis on the mechanical nature of farce, farce's shameless manipulation of its human puppets for the purposes of plotting, as a useful way of demonstrating the absurdity of the human condition. And sometimes, no doubt, it is just because the dramatists concerned enjoy traditional farce on its own familiar terms, and see no reason why they should not constructively exercise their enjoyment and pass it on to audiences supped full of horrors.

Alan Ayckbourn must surely belong wholeheartedly to this last group. Of all our younger dramatists he is the one who has most consistently and uncompromisingly avoided any suggestion of deeper meaning in his plays. Try as we may we cannot find any trace of social or political indoctrination masquerading as harmless diversion, let alone of cosmic anguish. His prime determination is unmistakably to make us laugh and keep us laughing, and all his considerable technical gifts are marshalled to that end alone. It is a tight-rope, and a particularly dangerous, vertiginous tight-rope at that, since if the writer stumbles he has no safety net of deeper significance to fall into: if his plays are not funny they are nothing. And while we are inclined to accept serious intent, however muffled, as a mitigating circumstance for a dramatist, unreasonably enough we see no merit at all in the dramatist who tries to make us laugh and fails.

Fortunately, this has not yet happened to Alan Ayckbourn. Even his less successful plays have always had at least that going for them. No doubt a lot of his basic theatrical instinct comes from the years he spent in the rough-and-

tumble of provincial theatre, as actor, ASM, writer and general odd-job man. He was born in London in 1939, was educated at Haileybury till the age of seventeen, and has worked in the theatre, one way or another, ever since. Acting jobs came and went in rep at Worthing, Leatherhead and Oxford, and finally with Stephen Joseph's Studio Theatre in Scarborough, Stoke-on-Trent and elsewhere. During his time with the Studio Theatre he acted a wide variety of roles (I remember seeing him once, devastatingly, in drag as the dictatorial Cook in David Campton's *Little Brother, Little Sister*) and began to write under the pen name of Roland Allen. His earliest plays were actuated primarily by the desire to give himself show parts as an actor, but as time went on he became more interested in writing *per se*, and less interested in acting.

The first real success of his writing in this phase was *Standing Room Only* (1961), in which the elements of his later style are clearly visible. The situation undeniably has overtones of Theatre of the Absurd. The play postulates a future (but probably not too far distant future) in which London has finally become immobilized by that great, ultimate traffic jam which there is no untangling. As a result of this, thousands of Londoners have resigned themselves to staying where the jam left them, camping out in cars and buses all over the West End. The action of the play takes place on a double-decker bus stuck in Shaftesbury Avenue, and it retails a few hours in the lives of five characters who have taken up permanent residence in it with considerable comic adroitness, if at times some slight sense of strain at spinning out one joke quite so far. On the other hand, it already suggests Ayckbourn's particular speciality, the comedy of embarrassment, with its characters trying desperately to continue living normal, respectable, suburban lives in these very eccentric, public conditions.

Though there was talk of a West End production for *Standing Room Only*, it never actually materialized. Ayckbourn's first West End airing came instead with *Mister Whatnot*, staged by the Studio Theatre at Stoke-on-Trent in 1963 and at the Arts the following year. The oddity of this play was that it is about three-quarters mimed: the hero, a piano-tuner let loose in a stately home, never says a word throughout, and much of the rest of the action is conducted wordlessly. The piano-tuner falls in love with a Lord's daughter, and after various vicissitudes succeeds in marrying her in the teeth of the family's objections and in spite of her fiancé, an effete but eminently suitable candidate for her hand. One might suppose that the main inspiration for the play was silent film comedy, but in fact its closest connections seem to be with the films of the Marx Brothers, and there are sections of the action which look like conscious tributes to Harpo in particular. For instance, there is a big meal-table scene in which our hero hides beneath the tablecloth and progressively eats and drinks his way round the table, to the puzzlement and consternation of the diners, who remain unaware of his presence and cannot understand why glasses and plates which, they could have sworn, were full a moment ago are now empty.

The audiences were amused, but the play got a mixed press and did not run. Not so with Ayckbourn's next West End play, *Relatively Speaking* (1967). This at once established itself as a major popular success, and went on to be translated into a dozen or more languages and produced all over the world. It is an essay in sheer mechanical ingenuity—the spinning-out of one joke beyond any reasonable possibility—and works as much on the audience's nerves (will he or won't he be able to come up with yet one more twist?) as directly on their funny bone. It thereby achieves the curious effect of being at once forced and funny. It turns entirely on one endless misunderstanding. Greg, a rather innocent young man involved in a serious affair with a not-so-innocent girl, decides he wants to marry her, and therefore wants to meet her family. She is evasive about this, but tells him that an address he finds scribbled on a cigarette-packet is that of her parents, whom she is going to visit that Sunday. So, come Sunday our hero turns up at a house in the country to introduce himself as Virginia's fiancé. But as we know, or very rapidly guess, the occupants are not her parents at all, but her former lover (an older man) and the lover's unsuspecting wife. If this were Feydeau that would be the beginning, and endless complications would follow. In any case, it would be only one thread in an intricate mesh of inter-related intrigues. But for Ayckbourn that is all there is to it.

The four people concerned are the entire cast, and the whole comedy is extracted from the possible patterns of misunderstanding which can be found in this one basic situation. It has to begin with a couple of pretty obvious falsities: when Greg arrives at 'The Willows' he is made to behave as surely no young man in the world would behave, and certainly as no one as shy and socially self-conscious as he would, by marching in, not introducing himself at all (not even 'I'm Greg - Ginny's fiancé') and remaining sublimely unconscious of the total mystification his arrival causes. Why? Obviously, because the play would stop there and then if he were permitted to say any more. The comedy then derives entirely from variations on embarrassment, with the well-bred hosts trying vainly to find out who their unexpected guest is and what the hell he wants without appearing to do so. If the degree of evasiveness Greg manages unconsciously to achieve is beyond the capacity (or incapacity) of any sane person, the responses of the older couple are beautifully observed and hysterically funny.

The first act curtain, predictably enough, is the arrival of Ginny, come to satisfy her curiosity about her ex-lover's wife. (Another improbability which is a little hard to swallow, incidentally, for how on earth would she explain her appearance there without giving the game away if the unexpected presence of Greg did not remove the necessity?) Now the lady of the house feels fairly happy: here is the missing link, in that she knows Virginia works for her husband, and can therefore imagine some reason why she and her fiancé should have turned up this bright Sunday morning. But for the husband complications are

only just starting. After freeing his mind of the understandable confusion that it is his wife rather than his 'daughter' ex-mistress that the young man wants to marry, he then has to cope with the problem of keeping up the pretence that the girl is his daughter for Greg while not arousing his wife's suspicions in the process. Once committed to this ticklish situation, he warms to his task and starts embroidering things for Greg with a string of splendidly embarrassing reminiscences of his 'daughter's' childhood, when she was so fat she was almost circular and was known as 'Jumbo Ginny'. Eventually, when this situation too has been milked for as many laughs as possible, all the complications get sorted out, even if no one ends up much the wiser. At each stage in the play there is present, shadowy but haunting, the feeling that the next moment it may just come to a stop, that even Ayckbourn's considerable ingenuity may run out and he will not be able to find another trick to keep things going in despite of all reason. It doesn't, and he does; the tight-rope is successfully walked even though we are sometimes too uncomfortably conscious of the abyss which yawns beneath.

Much the same could be said of Ayckbourn's next full-length play to reach the West End, *How the Other Half Loves* (1970). Here again mechanical ingenuity is the making, and at times almost the breaking of the play. The initial situation is again quite simple: we meet two families, the Fosters (upper-middle class) and the Phillipses (on their way up), linked by the fact that the husbands both work in the same firm, and that Mrs Foster is having a secret affair with Mr Phillips. The play would be quite slight and conventional, were it not for one brilliant technical device (a little like Peter Shaffer's switching of light values in *Black Comedy*) which makes it. This consists of superimposing the two households in one set, which is alternately or as a rule simultaneously the Fosters' drawing-room and the Phillips's living-room. The walls are variegated with patches of their different decorative schemes (pseudo-damask wallpaper and distemper-contemporary), their sofa and chairs mix Harrods-grand with suburban-inventive, and when the table is laid for dinner it is half linen and crystal, half paper napkins and tumblers from the shop round the corner.

This enables simultaneous actions in the two houses to be not only crosscut but intertwined. It turns out that a hapless and socially out-of-their-depth couple, the Featherstones (he works in the clerical department) have been hit upon by both guilty parties in the little game of marital infidelity as an alibi and consequently have to take embarrassing part in two simultaneous and variously excruciating dinner-parties at the same table. This sequence is the climax and really the *raison d'être* of the play. The Featherstones, almost equally ill at ease socially with both the Fosters and the Phillipses, find matters even worse when they are unwittingly forced to provide a smokescreen for Fiona Foster and Bob Phillips during an awkward dinner-table conversation which they never quite begin to grasp the drift of. Especially since they are seen by us as undergoing these two ordeals at the same time, staggering

conversationally from one end of the table to the other, with the minor upsets of one occasion being picked up immediately in the talk of the other (Featherstone knocks something over in one, his hostess in the other speeds to mop it up).

But the superimposition device is used with great ingenuity throughout, as characters walk round each other, deliver insults in each other's face, sublimely, mutually unaware, and talk in apparently unrelated snatches of dialogue which nevertheless for us pick up one another, re-echoing or briskly deflating. It is only after the dinner-parties when the double set becomes single and all the complications are disentangled, that the play drifts into anti-climax. But where it is funny it is very funny indeed, with a dash and conviction which makes all question of whether Ayckbourn can qualify (on the grounds of technical innovation) as a 'new dramatist' or must be written down (on the grounds of his subject-matter and flighty approach to it) as a crass conservative sublimely irrelevant.

Not, I think, that one would ever be tempted to classify Ayckbourn as an important dramatist. He knows his limitations and seems to work very happily within them. Though not many of his plays have turned up in London, he is quite prolific, still writing plays for the Scarborough company where he started at the rate of about one a year (latest *The Story So Far*, 1970), and writing them off if they flop. He has also written a number of shorter pieces, such as *Countdown*, a sketch in the marital diversion *Mixed Doubles* (1969) about a long-married couple continuing their own interior-monologue reveries while the husband tells a joke, and *Ernie's Incredible Illucinations* (1969), a playlet for children about a boy with an embarrassing gift for materializing his fantasies. If Ayckbourn looks certain to remain, at best, one of our most reliable light entertainers, there are, after all, many worse things to be. . . .

J. W. Lambert, E. Shorter, R. Craig, J. Peter (essay date 1973)

SOURCE: "Plays in Performance," in *Drama*, London No. 110, Autumn, 1973, pp. 17-29.

[In the following excerpt, the authors discuss trends and review plays in London theater.]

Time to sober up, to return to the straight, though luckily not the strait, and still less narrow, theatre. In particular to the commercial (or as it would prefer independent) theatre, which has produced a by no means contemptible clutch of comedies. Unquestionably first among them is Alan Ayckbourn's tongue-twistingly titled *Absurd Person Singular* (Criterion). Those of us who have managed ever since *Relatively Speaking* to enjoy Mr. Ayckbourn's plays without condescension must observe with rueful amusement his gradual promotion by the *beau monde* into what

in fact he always was, something more than a deft contriver of after-dinner amusement; after all, *How the Other Half Loves* even managed (unlike Ustinov's *Half-way up a Tree*) to survive the inevitable transmogrification imposed by the mischievous enormity of Robert Morley. *Time and Time Again* is an astonishing demonstration of how to use farce techniques for sharp social comment and insight into human nature. And *Absurd Person Singular* repeats the process. If I have a reservation it is that there is here less humanity; clarity of vision begins to seem at times a little flushed with *Schadenfreude*. Nevertheless the piece is enormously enjoyable as well as lethal in its portraits of six assorted middle-class English on three successive Christmas Eves. First we are in the speckless kitchen of Sidney and Jane; he a small tradesman, she an obsessive if muddle-headed housewife, entertaining their bank manager and his socially superior lady and a young architect and his difficult wife. Farcical disasters proliferate. So far, so good. Next we are in the progressive young architect's cluttered mess of a kitchen; his neurotic wife keeps attempting suicide, the bank manager's wife is floating out on a tide of alcohol, the visiting small tradesman's wife busies herself with cleaning up—and the curtain falls on a mood of still uproariously funny but increasingly chill hysteria as the sextet, in varying stages of collapse, join one by one in singing 'The Twelve Days of Christmas'.

Last comes the big-house kitchen-sitting room of the bank manager, with some sort of an air of comfortable traditional values about it. But there is no heating, the bank manager's wife is upstairs, by now a hopeless alcoholic, he himself has withdrawn into a fog of affable indifference, the young architect's career has collapsed (though his suicidal wife has, all unexplained, turned into a briskly competent young woman). Enter the former small tradesman, now well on the way to big money as a property developer. With appalling geniality he sets the others, all too literally, dancing to his tune, and the play ends with a gruesomely funny demonstration of the power of money.

Eric Thompson's direction most skilfully paces the personal and professional development of the six: Alan Tagg's sets neatly sum up the character of each *ménage*. Perhaps Richard Briers, as the manic tradesman on the make, and Sheila Hancock as the bank manager's lost wife, offer dazzling caricatures, but I shouldn't care to quibble. Certainly Bridget Turner's quintessential housewife, Anna Calder-Marshall's obsessively wrecked young architect's wife, David Burke as the shaggy, aggressive, womanizing pride of the polytechnic and Michael Aldridge as the gently fading bank manager weave a superbly comic, sharply cruel portrait of a very real society. . . .

John Russell Taylor (essay date 1981)

SOURCE: "Art and Commerce: The New Drama in the West End Marketplace," in *Contemporary English Drama*, edited by C. W. E. Bigsby, Edward Arnold, 1981, pp. 177-88.