



Relatively Speaking | July 12 – 28, 2007



ILLUSTRATION BY ELIZABETH WOLF

## Relatively Speaking: the play

Greg is sure that he and Ginny are in love, right up until the moment he finds a strange pair of slippers under Ginny's bed.

He panics – do they belong to another man or were they the left-behind-toy of a former roommate's dachshund as Ginny maintains. Another man would explain the bunches of flowers and boxes of candy that seem to appear regularly, but Ginny says there is no one else.

So Greg does the only reasonable thing – he asks Ginny to marry him.

Ginny doesn't exactly say yes. She doesn't exactly say no. Instead she tells him she is going off for a day in the country to visit her parents. When Ginny leaves, Greg finds a note with the address and follows her. His plan: to ask her father for her hand in marriage. Her plan: to break things off with her older, married lover.

And the farce is on! Mistaken identity, nearly missed entrances and exits and cross-purposes: Alan Ayckbourn has brought to us a truly fun night in the theatre.

### *INSIDER'S INSIGHT*

Written by Debra Baron, Director of Education  
and Gabriel Davis, Education Associate

Available for download at [westportplayhouse.org/relativelyspeaking.htm](http://westportplayhouse.org/relativelyspeaking.htm)

# Alan Ayckbourn

Alan Ayckbourn's talent for comedy is no joke: after struggling for 6 years, his first farce *Relatively Speaking* made a splash that literally changed his entire life – making him one of the most sought after comic playwrights of our time.

*“...written whilst I was at the BBC, it [Relatively Speaking] wiped out my overdraft virtually overnight. Stephen Joseph had suggested that I try to write a ‘well made’ play (as opposed to this experimental nonsense I’d been indulging in). I tried to achieve this. It’s not that well made but it was the best I’d managed up till then. When he found it was over-running, characteristically he just tore the middle pages out at random. Despite this it seemed to work.”*

– Alan Ayckbourn

The play opened on March 28, 1967 at the Duke of York's Theatre and was a massive success on the West End. To this day *Relatively Speaking* is one of Sir Alan's most popular and most produced plays.

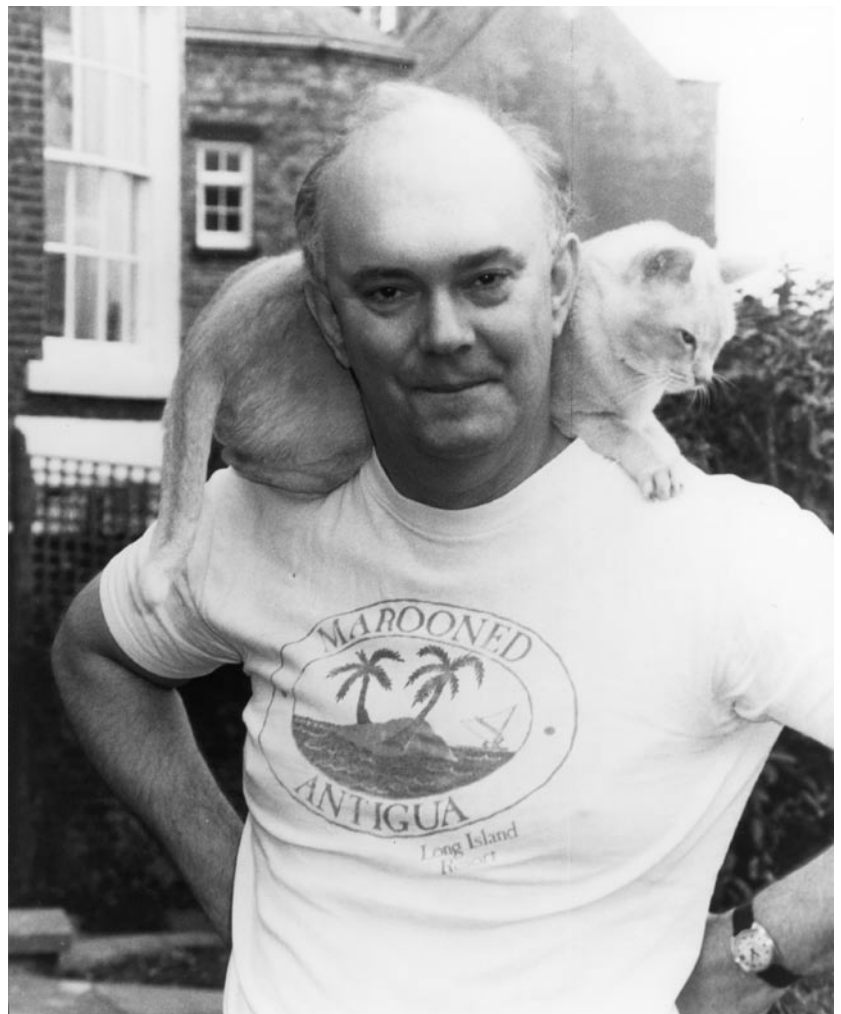
When commissioned to write the play by Stephen Joseph (then Artistic Director of the Stephen Joseph Theatre in Scarborough), Sir Alan was working as a radio drama producer at the BBC in Leeds. *Relatively Speaking* marked the beginning of a theme central to much of Ayckbourn's work: men and women's inability to get along with each other.

In writing *Relatively Speaking* Ayckbourn also made connections which would prove invaluable throughout his career. When the play transferred to London, under the direction of Nigel Patrick, the character of Greg was played by a young Richard Briers. Briers would go on to brilliantly portray characters in many of Sir Alan's plays. And the success of *Relatively Speaking* cemented Ayckbourn's connection with the Stephen Joseph Theatre as a playwright (he'd been performing with them as an actor). To date seventy of his plays have premiered at SJT. Of those, over half have moved to the West End or National Theatre. In 2008, he will step down as SJT's Artistic Director after 36 years of service.

Ayckbourn's work has been translated into 40 languages and performed throughout the world. He's been nominated for a Tony Award for Best Play for *Bedroom Farce* in 1979 and in 1976 won the Drama Desk Award for Unique Theatrical Experience for his trilogy of plays *The Norman Conquests: Living Together, Round and Round the Garden* and *Table Manners*. Nominations for the Drama Desk award include *Private Fears in Public Places* (2006), *Comic Potential* (2001) and *A Small Family Business* (1992). Ten of his shows have appeared on Broadway including *Absurd Person Singular* (1974-76 and a revival in 2005), *A Small Family Business* (1992), *Bedroom Farce* (1979) and with Andrew Lloyd Webber the musical *By Jeeves* (2001).

He has received a number of honorary degrees including the Montblanc de la Culture Award for Europe and a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Writers Guild of Great Britain. A fellow at the Royal Shakespeare Company, he was honored with the title of Commander in the British Empire in 1987 and in 1997 Ayckbourn was knighted Sir Alan for services to the theatre.

Other plays by Ayckbourn include *Communicating Doors*, *How the Other Half Loves*, *Woman in Mind* and *House and Garden*. He has also written several children's plays including *Champion of Paribanou*, *Dad's Tale* and *Christmas v Mastermind*.



Alan Ayckbourn

## Something Unexpected

Sometimes inspiration is merely the knack for recognizing a good idea when one hears it. In fact, the play's satisfying twist – involving the slippers Greg discovers under the bed – was reportedly suggested by Ayckbourn's agent during the pre-London tour of the play.

## Excerpt from a 1998 Interview

Conducted with Simon Murgatroyd and reproduced with permission from Alan Ayckbourn's official website at [www.alanayckbourn.net](http://www.alanayckbourn.net).

**Simon Murgatroyd:** I would like to talk about your writings. I've read and seen numerous plays written by you and for me once I've read one I get something very different out of each one. Do you have certain reasons for writing a play, basically is it bums on seats or is it something personal to you or what is your inspiration?

**Alan Ayckbourn:** Well, I mean I'm obviously aware that there's no point in writing a play unless hopefully somebody comes to see it. It's a very empty exercise writing a play and showing it to an empty auditorium so perhaps using my mind I think one of the reasons that ever happened was possibly the brief that Stephen gave me when he first asked me to write a play. He said, "Yeah sure write one but remember if it's a complete and utter disaster it will probably close" which was a very daunting thing to say to a new writer but I knew then that I had to do two things. I had to satisfy me; I had to satisfy the people I was working with who were more than colleagues because we were a fixed Company so they had to play the stuff I was writing and you could really lose a lot of friends unless you were very careful. There's nothing an actor likes least is working on a role that is unrewarding so I tried to do that. The least difficult thing to do was fill the theatre because I naturally found I was writing comedies, which is not as easy as one thinks. I mean I spend the rest of my life with people saying, "Don't you ever want to write something serious?" But the fact is I think I was learning, you can write as many plays as you like in your study but until you are in the theatre and you've got the other ingredients added, primarily of course the actors and the audience, all the other ingredients as well, there is only so much learning you can do.

**S.M.:** Do you think that your success has changed your writing at all?

**A.A.:** I don't know if success has. I suppose to a certain extent, I think the writings changed quite considerably. It's probably not



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by  
**ALAN AYCKBOURN**  
with  
**Ian Martin**  
and  
**MIRANDA FELLOWS**      **NEIL HUNT**  
**DIRECTED BY BEN JANNEY**  
**SETTINGS AND LIGHTING BY JOHN PITTS**  
**ADVANCE DIRECTOR JACK WELLES**  
AN EDDIE BRACKEN VENTURES PRODUCTION

*Relatively Speaking* had its American premiere here at Westport Country Playhouse in 1970.

Pictured: 1970 program cover and title page for *Relatively Speaking*



*Relatively Speaking* had its London premiere at the Duke of York's Theatre in 1967 and was actually first produced under the title *Meet My Father* at the Library Theatre, Scarborough, in 1965 (pictured here).

Library Theatre, Scarborough, 1965.  
From The Bob Watson Archive.  
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quite so perceptible if you see one play to the next because the change is very gentle but if you go from, *How the Other Half Loves* to *Things We Do for Love* I think there is a tremendous journey being made here and that is just growing up. I'm hopefully getting better at what they do. Also of course, the more you write the greater the expectation – people have seen half a dozen of them and really enjoyed them and then they arrive saying, "I'm really looking forward to this," and one does have a sense of not wanting to disappoint them and at the same time wanting to do your own thing and I suppose this has caused me to always be aware of the two elements all the time, not that I ever wanted to, but it would be awful to have people coming, having expected from me a really jolly time, to be hit with something absolutely searing – you know, and dreadful, lots of blood and death all over the place. They might be seriously disappointed and I've always thought, well I've got to say something different to them, something new and indeed to explore new areas, without them leaving the theatre.

**S.M.:** This is a morbid question, I don't mean to be morbid but it's said that a measure of a writer is the lasting quality of his work hence Chekhov, Shaw, Shakespeare, etc. They deal with many issues that you yourself do – love/revenge/unrequited love/comedy of manners. After your death how do you see the lasting quality of your writing, do you think it will last and do you think the SJT [Stephen Joseph Theatre] will last without you?

**A.A.:** I hope the theatre will – it'll have a job but I hope it will. I suppose the cynic in me says that there might be a lot more support for me after I'm gone than there is when I'm around. There's more pubs open called Charles Laughton since he left than when he was a kid but I mean belatedly they've seen (but that's by and the by) but the writing I really don't know. There are very famous writers from various periods none of whom we've ever heard of again, it would be very hard to say. I should think it would be unlikely that a lot of the work would last, I'd hope one or two did, I think Peter Hall summed it up when he said, "A good writer reflects their time" so in a sense a good writer has both qualities. *She Stoops to Conquer* – there is still enough in that play that is relevant to us in terms of sexual games and politics even though our own perception (how we play them off) has changed. Nonetheless we understand how it works and it also tells us quite a bit about the whole area and I suppose it's when you write about the externals that's the right field. If you're writing a fierce piece about the Malton-by-pass it tends to die with the project I guess. I hope so – it would be nice to think people would carry on doing them.

**S.M.:** You write pieces for our time. The great writers mentioned earlier did the same for that era.

**A.A.:** They've lasted yes. I don't think Chekhov really worried his head too much about that. The fact is he wrote so beautifully about people that: (a) actors love them and (b) we love to watch them. We still get jealous, we still fall in love, we still get disappointed, there is always something in any of the plays when we say, well that's me or that's someone I know. I suppose it's that recognition quality, it's the people. I think it's very important that theatre in the end, however many technical jinx you put into it, is really about the human being, about the people and I think cinema sometimes isn't – it's about technology and it's great, it's timeless but well sometimes, and even telly isn't quite, but theatre is. Yes it's nice to put the lighting in and nice to have sound, it's nice to have a bit of the

set but in the end it's how interested are you in the people on stage that really keep people here and it's the only live experience and the only time in terms of drama that you are in the same room as the performer, performing simultaneously with you, matching heartbeats as it were and knowing, as anyone in theatre would know, is how, even if it's very subtle, is how unique each performance is – that house is that, therefore we were this.

**S.M.:** Is theatre a dying art form?

**A.A.:** They've been saying that since I started. There's always something coming along to replace it. This century of course there's been radio, silent movies, movies, television, virtual reality, videos; there is always something else on the need to be complacent, it could disappear. I think there are two things that will stop it – one if it always re-examines what its centre is – that human thing, the other is of course that human beings need other human beings. I think the current trend is that sort of fragmentation, I think horizon: things like computers, the internet - it won't be long before everyone works from home linked in with bits of wire, something which is quite nice but on the other hand it could get damn lonely out there, you know, just you on the end of a terminal. I think the need for places to meet, just things other than commerce or business will always be there, like a secular church but it's like when you sit in an auditorium with three or four hundred people/strangers witnessing something, laughing and crying with strangers, it helps to reaffirm your humanity. You say we are part of the same team; we're different in that we probably will leave the theatre, many of us not speaking to each other but at that moment we'd shared something together which was like a common ground and I think we need to do that. It's reassuring as well as occasionally illuminating.



Library Theatre, Scarborough, 1965.  
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# Farce

## The Farce

What is farce? As a playwright, Alan Ayckbourn has created countless examples of the form. Not to be confused with romantic comedy, farce does not contain a traditional plot involving frustrated young lovers who eventually overcome all obstacles to their union. Rather farce often focuses on a transgressive act or on a character's urge to hide something – a skeleton in the closet – from the other characters and the unforeseen chain of events that results.

Having no time to step back and consider what they have been doing or will be doing next, the character that has something to hide soon passes the point of no return. Erroneously believing that any course of action is preferable to being found out or admitting the truth themselves they fall deeper and deeper into 'trouble.'

The "skeleton in the closet" of today's farces is typically infidelity with the protagonist trying to prevent the affair from coming out. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century a woman lying about her age or a man having fathered an out of wedlock child were typical 'skeletons.' Usually there is an unconventional happy ending – where to the delight of the audience poetic justice is not always observed – and the protagonist may get away with what he or she is trying to hide. *Relatively Speaking* represents Ayckbourn's most conventional use of orthodox farce technique.

Sir Alan is also an innovator in the form. While countless other writers have used farce, few have accessed as vast or varied a use of it as Sir Alan. His plays have been called "comic jigsaws" and indeed, many of them literally fit together like pieces in a larger puzzle. Several of his plays – *House and Garden* (a pair of plays) and *The Norman Conquests* (a trilogy of plays) – will feature a single cast of characters occupying one house or set of grounds in real time. Each of the plays in *House*

and *Garden* stand alone but have actually been performed simultaneously in adjacent auditoriums with a single cast. This is the penultimate in comic timing: each time an actor exits in *House* he or she has a corresponding entrance at that very same moment in *Garden*.

And the whole idea of writing interlocking works began with a joke: a reporter asked him what was next after his hit *Absurd Person Singular* to which he quipped "I'm thinking of writing a trilogy of plays." The quip was of course instantly printed in the papers as fact. Rather than retracting the statement, Sir Alan saw it as a writing challenge (this marks the genesis of *The Normal Conquests*).

Despite the complexity of his "comic jigsaws," Sir Alan's approach as a playwright is deceptively simple. He begins with an idea, then a character, then another and then structures a situation to bring them all together. And the secret ingredient in his plays – the ingredient of all good farce – is suffering. Or so says comedy scholar, Albert Bermel, whose fascinating book on the history of farce characterizes the form as one in which danger, destruction, and torment comprise the palette artists like Sir Alan use to generate elation in their audiences. The German language even has a word for this feeling: *schadenfreude* – the pleasure we take in other people's misfortunes.

Farce can be cruel, brutal, even murderous (for a wonderful example of this, take a look at Joe Orton's *Loot*). It seems to spring from the inevitable strain experienced when human beings attempt to live together in a society, to share common values and to get along – as men and women struggle to do in all Sir Alan's work. Farce lives in the subversive impulse to scoff at the very values those around us hold dear as an act of escape and release from the very things that bind us together.

### Looking for a good farce?

Here are a few classics of the genre:

- Christopher Marlowe  
*The Jew of Malta* (ca.1589)
- William Shakespeare  
*The Comedy of Errors* (ca. 1592)
- Brandon Thomas  
*Charley's Aunt* (1892)
- Oscar Wilde  
*The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895)
- Georges Feydeau  
*Le Dindon* (1896-aka *Sauce for the Goose*)
- Noel Coward  
*Hay Fever* (1925)
- Joe Orton  
*Loot* (1967)
- Michael Frayn  
*Noises Off* (1982)

### A little side note... Sir Alan in NYC: Brits Off Broadway

Brits Off Broadway is a theatre festival in New York which highlights the contrasting styles of accomplished veterans with the work of a new generation of emerging talent. This summer at Brits off Broadway, Sir Alan will direct *Intimate Exchanges* (a mind boggling sequence of eight plays with 16 endings; and two actors play all 10 characters in it). Also this summer, at the Stephen Joseph Theatre in Scarborough, he will be directing both *Intimate Exchanges* and *Relatively Speaking*.

## The Bookstore is now open!

Featuring *Relatively Speaking*, and other plays from our current and past seasons, including:  
*The Skin of Our Teeth*, *Souvenir*, *Mary's Wedding* and *The Turn of the Screw*.  
Plays now available for purchase at the box office.

### Suggested Readings

- *Conversations with Ayckbourn* by Ian Watson
- *Grinning at the Edge* by Paul Allen
- *An American Look at Britain* by Richard Critchfield
- *The Crafty Art of Playmaking* by Alan Ayckbourn
- *Farce: A History from Aristophanes to Woody Allen* by Albert Bermel
- *Comedy of Manners* by David L. Hirst
- *Comedy Is a Man in Trouble* by Alan Dale

### Relatively Speaking: Special Events

#### Sunday Symposium July 15, 2007

Immediately following the 3pm matinee. Free and open to the public. Please contact the box office at 203.227.4177 for exact times.

#### Backstage Pass July 25, 2007

Immediately following the 2pm matinee. Get a first hand look behind the curtain! Playhouse production staff share the tricks of the trade with you and discuss the set design, lights, props, sound, costumes and other special effects involved in our production of *Relatively Speaking*. Please contact the box office at 203.227.4177 for exact times.

#### Thursday TalkBack July 26, 2007

Immediately following the 8pm performance. Free and open to the public. Join the cast members of *Relatively Speaking* to discuss their experience working on the production. Artist attendance subject to availability. Please contact the box office at 203.227.4177 for exact times.

#### Prologue July 20, 2007 at 7pm (30 minutes)

This pre-show, half-hour conversation with Artistic Director Tazewell Thompson offers a glimpse into his creative mind and provides details about the production that you can't find anywhere else.

### Suggested Topics of Discussion

- (1) Investigate the many faces of comedy such as the British Panto as compared to American Burlesque or romantic comedies here and in England.
- (2) Explore the acting approaches of British as compared to American actors.
- (3) Is Neil Simon the American Alan Ayckbourn? Compare the works of Neil Simon and Alan Ayckbourn.
- (4) In January 2007 Sir Alan gave an interview to *The Times of London* in which he stated that under-trained actors from film and television were ruining the West End: "What is happening is that the theatre is being stuffed with the stars' fans. What they experience in the theatre is poor performance. And they go out profoundly disappointed and disenchanting." Focusing on the performances of Kevin Spacey, Woody Harrelson, Glenn Close and others you have seen here at Westport Country Playhouse and on Broadway, discuss the impact on American theatre.
- (5) When it was suggested to Sir Alan by the then artistic director of the National Theatre Richard Eyre that the playwright condense the two *Reverengers' Comedies* into a single play he refused. Investigate the inner workings of these other stubborn London visionaries:

Peter Brook – The king/guru/shaman of pared-down theatre, his fabled "empty space". Some critics have felt that his search for "universality" has left some later productions looking dangerously like the empty spectacles Brook himself once condemned.

Ken Campbell – In the 1970s British theatre's "madcap genius" produced the five-play, eight-hour sci-fi epic *Illuminatus!* and the ten-play, 22-hour hippie extravaganza *The Warp*. Last month he oversaw a 36-hour improvised drama in London.

William Gaskill – This former artistic director of the Royal Court Theatre recently withdrew one of his plays from the Royal Court Theatre's 50th-anniversary season next year because he resented the inclusion of a new play by Tom Stoppard on the grounds that the playwright has no connection with the theatre.

Peter Stein – The co-founder of the Schaubühne Theatre in Berlin is steeped in music, painting and drama: "As a director, you are a combiner: you can't speak, you can't sing, you can't paint, you can't make a set, but you can interfere with everything and organize." His staging of David Harrower's *Blackbird* opens in the West End in February.