

PROSCENIUM

Bedroom Farce

By Alan Ayckbourn

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Wednesday 14th March to Saturday 17th March 2012
Compass Theatre, Ickenham

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Cast:

Ernest	David Pearson
Delia	Susi Thornton
Nick	Robert Ewen
Jan	Hannah Lester
Malcolm	Paul Davis
Kate	Angie Sutherland
Trevor	Ben Morris
Susannah	Clare Wooster
Directed by	Shirley Wootten
Stage Manager	Crystal Anthony
Assisted by	Evelyn Sawyer
.....	Sheila Harvey
Properties	Anne Gerrard
Set Construction	Mark Brookes
.....	Richard Kessel
Lighting	Roger Turner
Sound	Sim Hill & Arnold Glickman
Publicity photograph	Alicia Van Veen
Publicity Design	Charles Anthony

Place: the bedrooms of Delia and Ernest, Malcolm and Kate,
Jan and Nick.

Time: one Saturday evening/Sunday morning
sometime in the late 1970s.

Proscenium would like to thank Ruislip Dramatic Society
for their help with this production.

The Author

Alan Ayckbourn was born in Hampstead in 1939. His mother, a writer of short stories, and his father, an orchestral violinist, were not married and separated just after the end of the war.

‘My mother was the uncrowned queen of the women’s magazine market. I became used to seeing the family breadwinner working at the typewriter. Finally she bought me a small typewriter to keep me quiet. I banged out derivative high action adventures.’

In 1948, when Alan was away at preparatory school, his mother wrote to him to tell him she was getting married. When he was 12 he won a scholarship to the public school, Haileybury.

‘For better or worse I am middle class. I spent my childhood bang in the centre of the Home Counties as the stepson of a bank manager. Where you were born and how you were raised dictates the voice in your head. My feeling is for London suburbia. Maybe going as far as Reading but not further than that.’

The marriage, however, was far from happy: ‘I was surrounded by relationships that weren’t always stable, the air was often blue and things were sometimes flying across the kitchen.’

While at Haileybury he became interested in drama, touring America and Europe with the school’s Shakespeare company. When he left school at seventeen he was determined to make a career in the theatre and began by working as assistant stage manager and playing minor roles in a number of travelling and repertory companies, beginning with Sir Donald Wolfit’s.

‘Wolfit seemed very big. I don’t think he could have been that tall, but he seemed enormous to me, in all directions. He used to wear cloaks and big black hats, and his hair was always brushed back. And his performances were majestic and huge. They were all about acting. By modern standards, it’d be quite a shock, I’m sure.’

In 1957 he took a temporary job at the Scarborough Library Theatre, where he met Stephen Joseph, who became a key figure in his life – mentor and father figure. ‘When Stephen Joseph thought of forming a company, London seemed hopeless economically and more by luck than judgment he heard about a building in this town on the east coast called Scarborough. I was one of the accidental pieces of dross that floated in and was naturally encouraged by a man who believed everyone should write (although I wanted to act!) and so the theatre grew.’

And so encouraged by Joseph (‘If you want a better part you’d better write yourself one’) he wrote his first play, ‘*Square Cat*’ under the pseudonym Roland Allen, which was performed in 1959. From 1962-1964 he moved to Stoke-on-Trent, as founder member and associate director of the Victoria Theatre, where he directed, wrote plays and acted. In fact almost his final appearance on stage was in 1964.

‘I played Stanley in the second production of *The Birthday Party*, directed by this totally unknown, and as we thought, slightly crazy writer who was theatrically electrifying. I was converted forever to Pinter.’

He returned to Scarborough in 1965 and *Relatively Speaking* proved his first enormous success, transferring to the West End in 1967. It was followed by *Absurd Person Singular* (1972), *Norman Conquests* (1973) and *Bedroom Farce* (1975) – all brilliantly funny and all subtly and sharply analysing suburban middle class marriages. In 1970, moreover, he was appointed artistic director of Theatre in the Round, Scarborough, a position he held until 2009.

‘I’ve stuck purely with theatre, and I think it’s because I’m a total theatre nut. I love it, I’ve lived my life in it. And I think some of my strongest muscles wouldn’t be employed at all on television. I’d feel like an oil painter who’s suddenly been asked to work in water colours.’

Since returning to Scarborough Ayckbourn has written - and directed - more than seventy plays: all but four premiered at the Theatre in the Round, over forty subsequently transferred to the West End, Royal National Theatre or RSC, and ten were produced on Broadway. He has continued to develop and experiment: in subject matter – *Woman in Mind* is seen entirely through the perspective of a woman going through a nervous breakdown – and structure – *House and Garden* is two plays which take place simultaneously in two different theatres. He also spent two years, 1986-7, as visiting director at the Royal National Theatre, where his productions included *A View from the Bridge*, his own *A Small Family Business* and *'Tis Pity She's A Whore*. He has always said that he prefers directing to writing:

'I dislike the actual business of writing so much I try to get over it as quickly as possible. I am strictly a one play a year man. For 360 days I think about writing, consider, contemplate, and successfully avoid writing. In fact I suspect I would never write at all but for my other self – artistic director of the Theatre in the Round. The Theatre has already announced its programme and is already taking money under false pretences from a public wishing to see this unwritten play. Eventually I write it. I have to.'

The Play

Ayckbourn recalls that 'Someone jokingly remarked after *The Norman Conquests* that there were very few rooms left in the house for me to visit – except the bedroom and the bathroom. (The bathroom came later in *A Small Family Business*). I stored the idea of a bedroom away for later. Though even at that juncture it crossed my mind that if I did write a bedroom play it might be more interesting and unusual to avoid those more predictable elements of bedroom behaviour, namely sexual activity and sleeping.' Though later he admitted that 'actually, of course, it's full of sex, but sex of a different sort. It covers a wide range of sexual troubles, sexual problems.'

Peter Hall suggested that Ayckbourn write a play for the newly opened National Theatre and when he went to look at the, as yet, incomplete Lyttleton theatre he found it 'less a theatre, more a football stadium. I had never written for such a large stage. Overall the acting area was probably some ten times the size of the in-the-round arena I was used to. I decided that the only way to tackle such a space was to divide it: not one bedroom but several.'

He also used a personal experience to provide the impetus for the plot. A friend/acquaintance recounted the recent failure of some personal relationship long into the night. 'Eventually, abandoning politeness, I went upstairs to my bedroom where my wife was already in bed. Oblivious he followed me, and, uninvited, sat on the bed still in full flow. As he droned on, I undressed and joined my wife in bed. In the morning we discovered him curled up at the foot of our bed like some large dog. One that I was later to name Trevor.'

And so *Bedroom Farce* came into being: three bedrooms, three couples and a fourth straight from their wildest nightmare.

Farce/Comedy?

When the play opened at the National in 1977 some critics thought that the subsidised theatre was not the appropriate stage for what was, after all, popular commercial comedy. As Ayckbourn remarked: 'God bless Peter Hall, I say. I hope I repaid his faith.'

In 2011/12, however, the National's most popular and critically acclaimed play has been *One Man, Two Guvnors*, which certainly has many of the elements of a farce. And its success has been echoed by *Noises Off* at the Old Vic, which has trousers dropping, doors slamming and an attractive young woman in her underwear. That's real farce.

Ayckbourn remains quite relaxed as to how to define the nature of *Bedroom Farce*. 'Comedy, I read somewhere, consists of larger than life characters in real situations. Farce, on the other hand, portrays

real characters projected into incredible situations. *Bedroom Farce* is a comedy about real characters who, projected into incredible situations, start behaving in a larger than life manner as the situation appears to them too horrible real. I'm with Chekhov on this. He called his plays comedy or farce whenever he felt like it, probably to confuse Stanislavsky.'

Michael Billington has no doubts about the seriousness of the comedy. 'For what is the play actually about? What Schopenhauer called "the tyranny of the weak", the capacity of a neurotic couple not only to export their problems but to exacerbate the crises in other people's marriages. Ayckbourn sets up a brilliant comic device, lets his imagination take over and allows the ideas to spring out of exact observation of human behaviour.'

Ayckbourn's Achievement

'A master hand at turning the bitter apathy, the stale absurdity which most English playwrights now find characteristic of Britain's lower middle class existence into hilarious comedy.'

Harold Clurman

'My work is about man's inhumanity to woman and woman's inhumanity to man. It's also about the whole physical world's inhumanity to us all.'

Alan Ayckbourn

Separate Tables

By Terence Rattigan

Proscenium presents an iconic work by Terence Rattigan. Two plays set in a residential hotel in Bournemouth in the early 1950s, linked – with two exceptions – by a single cast of characters, and by undercurrents of prejudice, class and hypocrisy. Dealing with themes of guilt, oppression and stifling family relationships, each act stands alone as a thought provoking and moving examination of the human condition.

Directed by Alan Bobroff
Wednesday 13th to Saturday 16th June 2012
7.45pm, Compass Theatre, Ickenham
Box Office : 020 8866 7075

About Proscenium

Proscenium was founded in 1924. Since then, the aim of this experienced group has been to present classic and contemporary plays to as wide an audience as possible. Since 1990, performances have taken place at the Harrow Arts Centre and, more recently, at the Compass Theatre, Ickenham.

The company meets three times a week, at the Harrow Arts Centre for rehearsals, so that four plays are presented in each season. Social, fund raising activities and play readings take place throughout the year.

Artistic Director : Michael Gerrard

Secretary : Izzie Cartwright

Chair : Crystal Anthony

Contact us at www.proscenium.org.uk