

PROSCENIUM

Relatively Speaking

By Alan Ayckbourn

Relatively Speaking

Wednesday 15th to Saturday 18th October 2014
Compass Theatre, Ickenham

Relatively Speaking

Alan Ayckbourn

Cast:

GregLuke Buffini
GinnyClare Wooster
Philip.....Alan Glover
Sheila.....Hannah Lester

Directed by.....David Pearson
Assistant Director.....Vince Eavis

Stage ManagerCrystal Anthony
Assisted by.....Kathleen Jones

Set Design.....Alan Glover

Set Construction.....Mark Brookes

PropertiesAnne Gerrard
Bazga Shabir

Lighting DesignCompass Theatre

Lighting and Sound Operation.....Arnold Glickman

WardrobeThe Cast

Act 1, Scene 1: Greg and Ginny's London
bed sitting room. Sunday 7 am.

Act 1, Scene 2: Garden patio of Philip and Sheila's house,
The Willows, in the Home Counties. Sunday, a little later.

Interval

Act 2, Scene 1: The same. A moment later.

Act 2, Scene 2: The same. An hour or two later.

From the Director

Stephen Joseph asked Alan Ayckbourn for a play that would make people laugh when their seaside holidays in Scarborough were spoiled by the rain and they came into the theatre to dry off before returning to their holiday lodgings. The play is the result and it admirably fills the brief. A sequence not so much of misunderstandings as jumping to conclusions, which then lead to misunderstandings. Good quality comedy writing from Alan Ayckbourn with the usual mixture of layers of meaning behind and beneath the words that are spoken. Great fun to direct and to act in, while also being a challenge to peel the layers off the onion.

Proscenium took a new direction with this production by the formal appointment of an Assistant Director who would manage the rehearsals I had to miss because of other pressing commitments, and would be gaining directorial experience with a view to the future. It has worked extremely well and very happily; the results should show through in the performances.

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. Between 1962 and 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's first title for the play was *Meet My Mother*, which Stephen Joseph changed to *Meet My Father* on the advance publicity for the opening at Scarborough in 1965. The play was very successful and received an offer for a transfer to the West End from producer Peter Bridges, but he said: "That title's very vulgar and seaside, darling, really not suitable for the West End." "So," said Ayckbourn, "we went round and round and round until we came across a Noel Coward title that he hadn't written!" As well as being, perhaps, more polished *Relatively Speaking* does suggest its verbal and structural playfulness more appropriately, and it opened in 1967 at The Duke of York's Theatre with a young Richard Briers as Greg and Michael Horden and Celia Johnson as Philip and Sheila. It elicited a congratulatory telegram from Noel Coward: "A beautifully constructed and very funny comedy."

Ayckbourn himself acknowledged: "In general, the people who liked this play when it was first seen remarked that it was 'well constructed'; those that didn't called it old fashioned. As to whether it's well constructed, well, in a way, I hope it is, since I did set out consciously to write a 'well-made' play. I think this is important for a playwright to do at least once in his life, since, as in any science, he cannot begin to shatter theatrical convention or break golden rules until he is reasonably sure in himself what they are and how they were arrived at."

Relatively Speaking is a comedy of misunderstandings and mistaken identity. Reviewing the revival of the play in 2013 at Wyndham's Theatre, Charles Spencer in *The Telegraph* thought it has "the formal elegance of Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*". Michael Billington in *The Guardian* goes even further: "Ayckbourn not only extends the mistaken identity gag in ways that put Goldini and Goldsmith in the shade, he also takes English comedy out of the drawing room and into the garden."

In an interview with *The Guardian* in 2010 Ayckbourn declared: "The launch of my play *Relatively Speaking* in 1967 in London's West End, when I was still under thirty was my big break. It came at the right time: it was a French window play at a period when most plays were set around kitchen sinks. I think the critics breathed a collective sigh of relief: instead of dirty dishes and angry northerners they had shiny southerners having breakfast in the sunshine."

However, there is a darker side to the play. Michael Billington: "Seeing it again after all these years I was reminded of the play's brilliance as a theatrical construct. Although lighter in structure than many of the seventy or so plays Ayckbourn has written since, it contains fascinating intimations of the middle class marital angst that was to become his speciality." And he quotes in particular an astonishing scene "when Philip and Sheila, talking entirely at cross purposes about Ginny's married lover, reveal the depths of their own antagonism." Charles Spencer also finds the play "tinged with characteristic darkness ... where only at the end do the audience realise what a monster the philandering husband is ... and Ginny's gift for duplicity bodes badly for the future happiness of the innocent young hero."

A brilliantly witty comedy, but one that leaves a bitter lingering after taste.

Playhouse Creatures, by April De Angelis

The year is 1669 - a bawdy and troublesome time. Theatres have just reopened after seventeen years of Puritan suppression. There is a surge in dramatic writing and the first English actresses appear on stage. Playhouse Creatures focuses on five of the most famous (Nell Gwyn, Elizabeth Farley, Rebecca Marshall, Doll Common and Mary Betterton) to provide a moving and often comic account of the precarious lives of Restoration actresses.

Directed by Jevan Morris

14th to 17th January 2015

7:45 pm, Compass Theatre, Ickenham

Box Office : 01895 673 200

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 in Harrow for rehearsals, so that four plays are presented in each season. Social, fund raising activities and play readings take place throughout the year.

Secretary : Clare Wooster

Chair : David Pearson

Contact us at www.proscenium.org.uk