

**PLAYING WITH TIME: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THEATRICAL
TIMEFRAME, DRAMATIC NARRATIVE AND CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT
IN THE PLAYS OF ALAN AYCKBOURN.**

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KEYWORDS

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Theatrical Time

Alternative Narratives

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The Norman Conquests

Absent Friends

Time of My Life

Communicating Doors



ABSTRACT

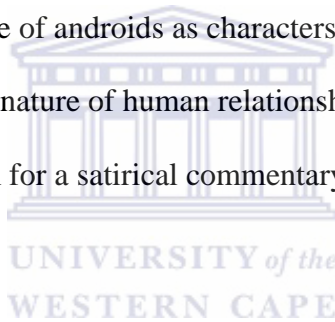
Alan Ayckbourn claims that he has always been fascinated by time as an aid to dramatic story telling. The thesis examines how Ayckbourn manipulates the dramatic timeframe, often in an unconventional manner, as a device to aid both the development of dramatic narrative and the development of characterisation within his plays. It shows how the choices Ayckbourn makes regarding dramatic timeframe are crucial to the structure and overall development of his plays, and how by making unusual choices, Ayckbourn is able to achieve flowing narrative and a depth of characterisation that are uniquely his.

The thesis begins by tracing Ayckbourn's theatrical origins; his practical theatre background, his working relationship with Stephen Joseph, and the playwrights who influenced his early output, in particular J.B. Priestley and his "time plays". In the second chapter the thesis then goes on to examine the distinction between stage time and real (or as Ayckbourn describes it "foyer") time and how the playwright exploits the relationship between the two, experimenting with time frames to create different types of dramatic effect. It then examines the influence of filmic devices on Ayckbourn's work, showing how the playwright uses the concept of the close-up and long camera shot in a theatrical context.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine Ayckbourn's "event plays", which are generally longer and more complex than a standard dramatic piece. They are made up of two or more interconnected plays, which when combined together create a substantial theatrical work.

The thesis discusses how the extended duration of these “events” allows both the characterisation and the narrative to develop more fully than would be possible in a regular two- to three-hour play, and how, when the individual plays within a series are combined, dramatic synergy is achieved. Chapter 4 also goes on to consider the interconnection between chance events and deliberate choice, by examining Ayckbourn’s alternative narrative plays *Sisterly Feelings* and *Intimate Exchanges*.

The final chapter looks at how Ayckbourn uses the future as a setting for a number of his works to continue the exploration of human agency which began with his alternative narrative plays. His frequent use of androids as characters in his plays allows him the opportunity to comment on the nature of human relationships, whilst the future setting also provides the ideal platform for a satirical commentary on social and political issues.



DECLARATION

I declare that *Playing with Time: The relationship between theatrical timeframe, dramatic narrative and character development in the plays of Alan Ayckbourn* is my own work, that it has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged as complete references.

Elizabeth Vokes



November 2006

Signed:

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Chapter 1

Introduction - The Early Years

Introduction

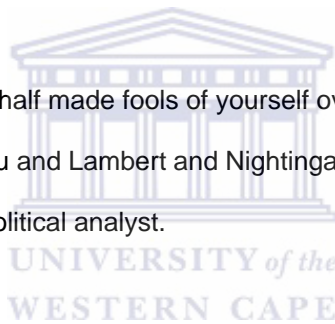
Alan Ayckbourn is Britain's most prolific living playwright. His body of work numbers more than seventy plays, not including revues, musical entertainments and adaptations. His plays have been translated into over twenty different languages, and statistically speaking, somewhere in the world, an Ayckbourn play is being performed every single night of the year. Only Shakespeare is performed more frequently. Today he is one of Britain's most popular writers. He is even regarded as a "cash cow" for many theatre companies, both professional and amateur. The inclusion of an Ayckbourn play in the season's repertoire will almost certainly provide a guarantee of box office success. Indeed it is this box office potential that enables Ayckbourn to continue to run what has come to be known as "his" theatre, such is the symbiotic relationship between the playwright Ayckbourn and the Stephen Joseph Theatre in the Round in Scarborough. Whilst he provides the theatre with his services as artistic director, a regular new "Ayckbourn" for the season, and his continued support for promising new writers, the theatre provides him with an environment in which he can experiment and push the theatrical boundaries to their limits with the sort of freedom that can only be envied in playwrighting circles. As Michael Billington points out, what makes Ayckbourn unique as a playwright is that he has been afforded the luxury of being able to work in his own space, setting to a large extent his own artistic agenda:

He has proved the power of permanence: of a writer having his own theatre where he can choose, cast and direct the plays as well as nourish the repertory with his own work. This is more crucial at a time when British dramatists are increasingly vociferous about their spasmodic, freelance involvement in theatre and their lack of any direct control over the final product. [1983: p164]

Not only has Ayckbourn's popularity amongst theatre goers continued to grow, allowing the Stephen Joseph to operate in a town with less than half the population that would normally be required to support a theatre of that size, but he has become noted amongst theatre critics and writers as one of Britain's most important playwrights, with many of his plays firmly established within the modern theatrical canon. In 1998 the National Theatre conducted a poll amongst journalists and theatre professionals of the plays written in the last century that they considered to be of most significance. *The Norman Conquests* was the choice for 1973 and Ayckbourn was the fourteenth most voted for playwright. He has continued to receive numerous awards and nominations for his plays, including in 2001 the *Sunday Times Award for Literary Excellence*. This popularity, which was apparent from the outset, did however, to a certain extent, work against his reputation as a serious dramatist in the early years. He was largely overlooked by theatre academics and critics during the early part of his career, being considered too "lightweight" to merit serious attention or criticism. While the likes of Pinter, Osborne and Orton were creating waves on the London stage, Ayckbourn went largely unnoticed. There were several reasons why this may have occurred. Firstly, Ayckbourn wrote mainly comedies, which have never been able to command the same critical respect as

the historical play or tragedy. Secondly, as already mentioned these comedies were on the whole commercially successful, and were extremely popular amongst the middle class audiences who were going to see them, again causing much suspicion amongst the critics. It was not until the mid-1970s, after the success in particular of *Absurd Person Singular* and the trilogy *The Norman Conquests*, that a small group of theatre critics began to see Ayckbourn as a writer with a great deal to say about social issues of the time. But this was by no means the consensus view. Many still regarded him as a lightweight boulevardier. Michael Billington recalls a conversation he had with a film critic friend who had recently attended a performance of *Absurd Person Singular*:

You drama critics haven't half made fools of yourself over Ayckbourn. He's simply a good light-comedy writer yet you and Lambert and Nightingale talk about him as if he were some kind of social and political analyst. [1983: p67]



In fact it was not until the early 1980s that Ayckbourn's full contribution to British drama would be properly recognized.

Thirdly, the fact that Ayckbourn was working in a small regional theatre in the small east coast seaside town of Scarborough three hundred miles away from London, left him somewhat on the fringes of the mainstream theatre scene. Fourthly, and possibly most importantly, Ayckbourn was never considered to be a writer whose work had any real political implications. Ayckbourn himself admits to a deep mistrust of so-called political theatre:

I don't like intrusions like heavy political themes. Of course one can write a play about women's liberation - it's a very important topic - but I don't think it's very satisfying when they stand on a chair and tell the men in the audience that they're pigs. And that's where I differ from agit-prop theatre, in that I hate being told things. I hated it at school and I hate it in theatres. [Watson: 1988: p117]

This was in sharp contrast to the “New Wave” of writers who were exhibiting their work at venues such as the Royal Court Theatre in the capital at the same time that Ayckbourn was starting out as a writer in Scarborough, and who were not afraid to lay their social and political cards on the table for all to see. Drama critic Richard Griffiths admits that he misread Ayckbourn’s early work, and suggests that he was probably not alone in this:

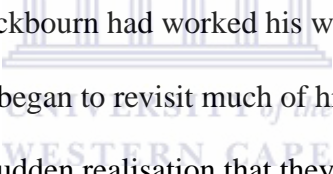
I think Ayckbourn (Alan) for example was clearly not a serious writer as far as I was concerned in those days and not somebody you'd take seriously which is not the view I now hold at all, a quite radically different view. I think a lot of people were, including me, were very dismissive of him at that point and I think that was, because he wasn't epic and he wasn't political, well he appeared not to be, I mean I think probably both of those are not quite true but at that point he seemed to be just a kind of genial farceur and I think probably a lot of us misread him at that point. [online interview]

It seems likely that another reason why Ayckbourn was so misread early in his career was that theatre writers and critics were not expecting to find anything ground-breaking in his plays. There was no hint or suggestion that they should need to look below the veneer of the comic surface. They were not expecting a writer of comedies from a provincial backwater to write anything other than a pleasant evening’s entertainment. They did not see the deeper social and political significance of his plays simply because, at that stage

at least, they were not looking for it. This view, however, began to change towards the end of the 1970s, as more and more theatre critics began to notice that Ayckbourn's so-called "lightweight" comedies were in fact a detailed exposé of middle class life and an alarmingly accurate social commentary.

In this way, then, his recognition as a serious playwright was not something that happened overnight, but rather grew as Ayckbourn's work started to become a regular feature on the London stage, with a few key events that served to hasten the process. Although early plays such as *Relatively Speaking* and *How The Other Half Loves* had played in the West End to significant commercial success, they were still cast in a popular entertainment mode. They were, as was common in the late 1960s, mounted as a "star vehicle" for popular stage and film stars well known to the audience. Ayckbourn's plays are not noted for having lead or star roles, but rather work as ensemble pieces. The result being that the stars (for example, Celia Johnson in *Relatively Speaking* and Robert Morley in *How The Other Half Loves*), tended to upset the balance of the play, focussing more attention on one particular character than the play actually demanded. This, I would suggest, is one of the reasons why, although extremely popular with the audiences, critics were not exposed to the true potential of these particular plays. By the mid-1970s, this star system was beginning to become less important. In this way, it was the plays themselves that would come under more rigorous scrutiny. The first turning point in terms of Ayckbourn's recognition as a serious playwright was almost certainly the appearance of *Absurd Person Singular* on the West End Stage in 1973, followed a year later by *The Norman Conquests* which was to win the *Evening Standard Award* for best

play. Suddenly everyone was aware of Ayckbourn, and many inches of column space were turned over to reviewing and critiquing his work. The second turning point, which was probably even more significant, was when Peter Hall invited Ayckbourn to write a play for the newly opened National Theatre complex on London's South Bank, resulting in what Billington referred to as "the ultimate seal of metropolitan approval" [1983: p50]. The product of this was, perhaps Ayckbourn's most well known and popular play, *Bedroom Farce*: the first of many collaborations between Ayckbourn and the National, the latest being the 2000 production of *House and Garden*. As Ayckbourn's plays moved out of the commercial West End and into the subsidised sector, so Ayckbourn the playwright moved into an altogether different league.



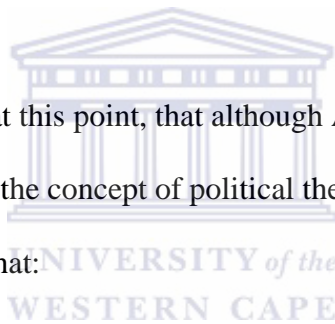
At the same time, as Ayckbourn had worked his way firmly into the ranks of the theatrical establishment, critics began to revisit much of his early work with new insight. It was almost as if there was a sudden realisation that they may have missed something of significance and there was a flurry of reassessment. One of the main beneficiaries of this retrospective was *How The Other Half Loves*, which in hindsight was found to have a serious social message, providing an in-depth exploration of both the institution of marriage and the British class system shown through the various social and professional relationships between the three couples and the personal relationships between individual characters. What was becoming clear was that instead of taking an overtly political stance, Ayckbourn used his comedy to show and explore rather than to preach. As Billington points out, it is Ayckbourn's attention to his characters and his ability to allow

them to “speak” through their behaviour rather than in direct terms, that allows us to watch his message unfold without being immediately aware of it:

Ayckbourn is not a prescriptive or nakedly political writer. He offers no solutions. He does, however, recognise the problems. He is a very funny writer but a deeply serious one who turns behaviour into social comment. [1983: p74]

Ayckbourn’s theatre is a theatre of recognition, offering a quiet, unobtrusive commentary on everyday events that have a knack of being uncomfortably all too familiar to audiences.

It is interesting to note at this point, that although Ayckbourn has spoken out almost contemptuously against the concept of political theatre, in an interview with Michael Church he suggested that:



Political theatre is usually so busy being political that it forgets to be theatre.... The best political plays hit you without your knowing it. It's so insulting to be shouted at.

[*Sunday Times*, 1 June 1986, p42]

It was his own venture into a more political, satirical and altogether darker side of comedy that led to what could be described as a second wave of critical recognition, which began in the early 1980s with *Way Upstream*, which saw Ayckbourn expanding into uncharted territory. This was not only in terms of the technical innovation (Ayckbourn had filled the theatre with water in order to create a river, on which a life size boat manoeuvred around the auditorium) but as Paul Allan writes:

Only after the performance did we start to realise that Ayckbourn had been far more adventurous in terms of his content: at the start of the most selfish, materialistic and confrontational decade in living memory he had written about good and evil, a moral fable. [2001: p193]

This trend was followed later in the decade by plays such as *A Small Family Business* and *Man of The Moment*, a clear critique of the moral values and political principles of the (by then well entrenched) Thatcher government. It is no secret that Ayckbourn was disillusioned with the way in which the Thatcher government had gradually reduced the amount of arts funding available until it had reached almost unworkable levels. But it was really his disillusionment in the political process itself, rather than with a particular political party that began to emerge during this time. He saw the Thatcher government as merely an element of the “steady deterioration in the consensus at the heart of British political life since World War II [and the] ‘nebulous hate’ in the world at large at this time” [Allen: 2004: p73]. For the first time, Ayckbourn, who by his own admission sat very much on the fence in terms of party political orientation, was provoked into adding his own voice to the political debate through a new style and tone of play. The Britain of the 1980s was in many respects a polarised political landscape, with a new wave of left-wing playwrights taking a deliberate oppositional stance against the government of the day. Ayckbourn, on the other hand, by taking a non-partisan approach was writing against this wave. Ayckbourn’s plays of the 1980s were written more in the time-honoured tradition of comedy: used as a satirical device to comment on social issues (often through criticising the establishment) without being necessarily political.

It was not, however, just the political climate that led Ayckbourn in a new direction. The opportunity to write a large-scale play exclusively for the National Theatre's Olivier auditorium, presented him with a budget that allowed him to experiment in ways that were not possible in the much smaller theatre at Scarborough:

Moving into a more social and political kind of drama is only really feasible if you can command a decent-sized cast. [Allen: 2001: p 223]

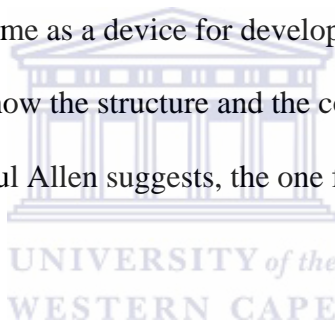
The play in question, *A Small Family Business*, gave Ayckbourn a new reputation, as critics saw how he was able to address the bigger more political issues just as successfully as the more intimate personal concerns he had written about previously.

Ayckbourn is very much a man of the theatre. Only a few weeks of his year are spent writing. The rest of the time he is involved in various activities relating to the running of the theatre. He directs not only his own plays, but also revivals of classics and work by new writers. His early involvement in all aspects of theatre from acting, set construction, sound design and stage management has left him with a knowledge of stagecraft few writers could aspire to. His plays are extremely well crafted, and are written taking account of the very specific theatre space within which he works. It is this deep understanding of the mechanics of the theatrical process that has allowed him to cast aside convention and create some of the most technically demanding plays ever seen on the British stage. His theatrical apprenticeship and his knowledge of what constitutes a well made play have allowed him to stretch the boundaries of theatrical convention to

their limits. It is this technical inventiveness and ingenuity that has also contributed to Ayckbourn's reputation as a dramatist:

He is a restless technical experimenter, always trying to increase the frontiers of the possible. In that sense he is a theatre man through and through. Almost every other post-war British dramatist has flirted with cinema, television and radio ... Ayckbourn alone has achieved a living ... out of theatre. He is fascinated by what theatre can do. He is even more fascinated by showing that there is nothing that it cannot do. [Billington: 1983: p129]

The remaining chapters of this thesis will focus on this technical ingenuity, in particular the manipulation of theatrical time as a device for developing dramatic narrative and characterization, and examine how the structure and the content of his plays become inextricably intertwined. As Paul Allen suggests, the one follows inevitably from the other:



Structure is the word that he - and other directors - come back to time and again. It is not an assertion of the importance of form over content but a recognition that form gives expression to content. [2001: p262]

The rest of this chapter will look at some of the reasons why Ayckbourn became so adept at using new forms and techniques, and why in particular he became so fascinated by the possibilities opened up by the unconventional use of, and manipulation of, dramatic time.

The Scarborough Revolution

The events that brought Ayckbourn to Scarborough, to work for Stephen Joseph, were largely a matter of chance. In the winter of 1957 he had been working in repertory theatre in Oxford when, as the season was coming to an end, the stage manager asked him if he wanted a job working as an assistant stage manager with a new company that Stephen Joseph was bringing together in Scarborough. After asking the first obvious question “where’s Scarborough?”, and being in need of employment, Ayckbourn committed himself for the summer season. It was to be one of those seemingly unimportant decisions which turn out to be of monumental importance and provide a key turning point in one’s life. This fact struck Ayckbourn some years later and was to become the inspiration of the play *Sisterly Feelings*, which explored the idea of chance events versus deliberate choices in moulding and shaping our future lives. For it was during this summer season at Scarborough in 1958 that Ayckbourn was to first come into contact with Stephen Joseph. Joseph was to eventually become a mentor to the young Ayckbourn, and was undoubtedly the strongest individual influence on Ayckbourn’s choice of career. It was Joseph who was encouraged Ayckbourn to turn his hand to writing. As a young actor, Ayckbourn complained about the parts he was being given to play, and so Joseph told him that if he wanted a decent part, he had better write it himself. He told Ayckbourn to go off and write a play and promised that if it was any good, he would put it on at the theatre. The result of this conversation was Ayckbourn’s first play *The Square Cat* (co-written in 1958 with his wife Christine Roland under the joint pseudonym Roland Allen).

At the same time that Ayckbourn was quietly (and largely unnoticed) beginning his career in the remote east coast town of Scarborough, major theatrical events were taking place on the London stage. The late 1950s and early 1960s were ground-breaking years for British drama. Although today some may argue that the real revolution came somewhat earlier, started by Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, it cannot be denied that the "New Wave" writers coming out of the Royal Court school had a lasting effect and influence upon much of what would subsequently appear on the British stage. The work that these writers contributed to British theatre has often been described as revolutionary. Indeed, in terms of subject matter and new and ground-breaking content, they did provide a unique voice and their plays would prepare the way for those to follow. For example, in the agit-prop movement of the 1970s the influences of the "Angry Young Men" are certainly apparent. However, I would suggest that what was happening at Scarborough was in its own way just as innovative. Whereas the "New Wave" writers in Sloane Square were revolutionising British theatre with *what* they had to say, Joseph's theatre was more concerned about *how* it was said, exploring new ways and forms of presentation.

It was in Scarborough ... that Stephen Joseph found the right mix of circumstances and individuals to base a revolution in British theatre that was precisely contemporaneous with the revolution George Devine was fostering with his stable of writers in Sloane Square. While Joseph, like Devine, was running a writer's theatre, it was on theatre form rather than the subject-matter of plays that the revolution was based. [Watson: 1988: viii]

Nothing it seemed was impossible to stage, the only boundaries were in terms of the limits of the playwright's and the audience's imagination. The most notable of the new ideas: the concept of Theatre in the Round (which in the late 1950s was still in its early experimental stages) was enthusiastically taken up by Joseph and would become his (and later Ayckbourn's) trade mark feature. Glaap points out that the main advantage of such a theatre is that it is "open to various experiments and binds stage and audience together" [1999: p8]. It was both of these aspects that appealed to Joseph. He was a passionate believer in the intimacy of the round, which allowed for a new type of relationship between actor and audience, but more especially he was fascinated by the technical aspects of theatre, and this new kind of performance space was much more conducive to using technical effects and tricks in new and exciting ways. An example of this was the way in which Joseph took advantage of new technology, such as the tape recorder, which had only become available in the 1950s and was relatively untried and tested in theatre circles:

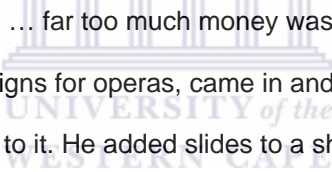
He was obviously a man much more interested anyway in the technical side of the theatre than in the acting side... We spent a lot of time chatting about sound and how to improve it. It was all rather new, we were in the pioneering days of tape-recorders.

[Ayckbourn in Watson: 1988: p16]

Joseph's fascination with sound was shared by Ayckbourn, who used sound effects to create an English Country House setting in his early play *Mr Whatnot*. The play was actually written for Joseph's theatre company at Stoke, rather than for Scarborough, but it was the stage space, which did not allow for the traditional use of flats to create a realistic

scene that allowed Ayckbourn to play with his new found toy to such dazzling effect. It is this lack of illusionistic stage sets that prompts the playwright to tap more directly into a very important dramatic source – the audience’s imagination. Creating a setting entirely through sound effects and actors’ movement requires a significant imaginative investment on the part of the audience, one which has an enormous payoff for those members of it who are willing to buy into the convention placed before them.

Ayckbourn, in a conversation with Ian Watson, suggests that this was one of the reasons why the West End transfer of *Mr Whatnot* was very poorly received, when the original Stoke production had been highly successful, commanding some very favourable reviews:



[I]t was overproduced, and ... far too much money was spent on it. Peter Rice, who'd done a lot of very nice designs for operas, came in and did some very, very decorative sets, none of which added to it. He added slides to a show that supposedly had to do with imagination. [1988: p51]

The idea of theatre in the round was not an entirely novel one. As early as 1940 the Americans had built an “in the round” house, The Penthouse Theatre, at the University of Washington in Seattle. And it was in America that Joseph first encountered this style of theatre for himself at venues in Dallas, Houston and Fort Worth. He had been so struck with its theatrical possibilities that he became a relentless champion of this relatively new form of theatre. He was particularly struck by the way in which audience and actors were able to interact in a unique way that was not possible in the more traditional style proscenium theatres. He went on to set up a permanent Theatre in The

Round not only in Scarborough but also in Stoke. A few years before Joseph established his theatre company in Scarborough, J.B. Priestley had also recognised the potential of this style of theatre, writing in his lecture “The Art of the Dramatist”:

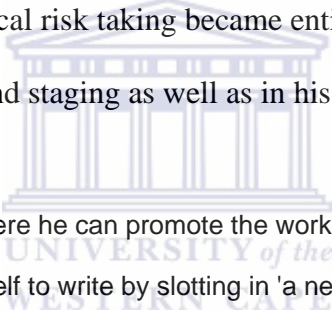
If I were beginning again, I would move in the opposite direction, towards more elaborate construction and even greater intimacy, taking a few characters through an intricate and ironic dance of relationships. In order to concentrate on ideas, words, subtly intimate acting, I would make a clean break with our picture-frame stage and all its clutter of canvas, paint, carpets and curtains, leaving designers and sets to the movies. I would write for theatre-in-the-round, the opposite of the movies both in its costs and its art, the theatre where everything visual, except the close and vivid faces and figures of the players, is left to the imagination. [1957: p30]

However, what was different about Joseph was that he took his vision, and managed to bring it to life, creating a theatre company whose home was a small concert room on the second floor of the public library in the most unlikely of towns. His enthusiasm for the round and the innovative techniques in staging he employed meant that his theatre developed at a pace that would soon outstrip the advancement of those in the States. As American Kelly Yeaton points out:

In essence, Joseph started in 1955 and has already caught up with our slowed-down progress. If British arena can maintain this pace we may soon have much to learn from them. [1968: p243]

The room over the library was never intended to be a permanent location. Joseph’s philosophy was one of constant change, and he believed no theatre company

should exist for more than a few years before collapsing into itself, allowing something new to be generated from its remains. The irony, therefore, is that the two theatres that Joseph established are both still flourishing, in spite of having in both cases to move location, due to their enduring success and popularity. The importance of Joseph's vision in this regard cannot be underestimated. It is clear that a large part of Ayckbourn's experimentation in form grew directly out of the challenges posed by this specific space. Joseph's legacy to Ayckbourn, in the form of the permanent theatre, has allowed Ayckbourn freedom to experiment which would not have been possible in a more conventional setting. Running his own theatre also afforded him a level of control where technical innovation and theatrical risk taking became entirely possible. Risk taking, that is, in the area of performance and staging as well as in his writing:



He has an ideal space where he can promote the work of promising new writers and, at the same time, force himself to write by slotting in 'a new Ayckbourn'..... In that sense, he is able to continue the tradition established by Stephen Joseph.....: flexible staging and new writing. [Billington: 1983: p165]

Ayckbourn's complex multiple plays discussed in chapters three and four (particularly the marathon *Intimate Exchanges*) could only have been staged under such conditions and are unlikely to have ever emerged if it were not for the very special relationship that exists between Ayckbourn and his theatre.

However, Stephen Joseph's legacy to Ayckbourn went far beyond the physical theatre space which he inherited. Theatre in the round was just one of Joseph's pet

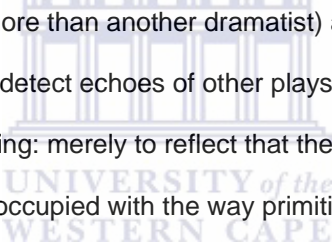
causes, and he had many other ideas on the nature of theatre that would find their way into Ayckbourn's own theatrical psyche. Joseph's passion for the technical side of theatre certainly influenced the young Ayckbourn, allowing him to develop the special interest in the mechanics of theatre that has left its mark throughout the Ayckbourn canon. Ayckbourn remarked to Ian Watson:

He believed that all of us shouldn't be purely concerned with our own little role in theatre, that theatre people should be total theatre people.... And to that extent, if you hadn't had that sort of training, most of your plays you couldn't have written, because most of them are based on stage management of one sort or another. I adore lighting and I love sound, and he encouraged both aspects. [1988: p28]

Working alongside Joseph with such close involvement in the technical aspects of running the company was critical to Ayckbourn's development as a technically innovative playwright. Equally important, however, was Ayckbourn's introduction to the work of other established playwrights that formed part of the standard repertory. It is often forgotten that the young playwright, after starting out in stage management, turned his hand to acting before he ever began to put pen to paper. In this respect he became very familiar with the traditional canon from both on and off stage, learning much about dramatic technique and the art of constructing what he liked to term "the well made play".

Early Theatrical Influences

Ayckbourn has acknowledged that there were numerous playwrights of varying styles and from diverse periods that left a profound mark on his consciousness and were in some small way responsible for his own particular style and direction of writing. Not least of these were his contemporaries Osborne, Wesker, Orton and in particular Pinter. One of Ayckbourn's early plays *The Sparrow*, a working-class play revolving around a relationship triangle, has definite echoes of *Look Back In Anger*, and has also been described by more than one critic as being very similar to Ann Jellicoe's play *The Knack*. As Billington remarks:



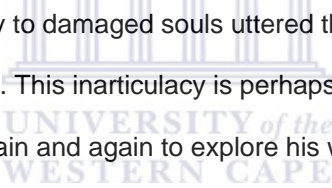
Ayckbourn was not (any more than another dramatist) an island; and it is in no way surprising that one should detect echoes of other plays. To say this is not to accuse Ayckbourn of carbon-copying: merely to reflect that the 1960s was a period in which many dramatists were preoccupied with the way primitive, animal instincts towards domination were being privately enacted. [1983: p29]

Rather than being influenced by these playwrights, it is perhaps more accurate to say that he was merely subject to the same influences as them. However, whilst some of the influences may have been subliminal, Ayckbourn acknowledges that there was one particular playwright of the period who had a very direct input into his development as a writer:

I think one starts by copying other people.... Pinter came and worked with us in our company and directed his *Birthday Party* with us. That had a very strong effect. I think if you're ever going to develop you take these influences and they disappear into your

bloodstream ... If I did look like a poor man's Harold Pinter it would be dreadful. What I liked when I first came into contact with his work as an actor was, I suspect, that the way you understand him is as a poet. ... He has a love of distorting the everyday phrase, slightly bending it. He bends it more than I do, but I also bend phrases or put them in incongruous positions in speeches, which I hope makes them funny, simply because they seem slightly out of context. [Page: 1989: p89]

The phrasing used by Ayckbourn is indeed similar to that used by Pinter, and as Tim Luscombe (talking about *Intimate Exchanges*) points out, the two writers also share a common concern over how for many (including their own characters), language can often prove to be inadequate as a device for genuine communication:



Each play ends in an elegy to damaged souls uttered through the inarticulate poetry spoken by broken humans. This inarticulacy is perhaps Alan's main pre-occupation that draws me as a director again and again to explore his work. How useless our words can be, how, as the character Miles puts it when talking about talking in *Protest*, 'I realise it's not a frightfully efficient means of communication, especially when employed by two people like us, but it's the best person to person system so far devised...' As a writer, Alan shares this obsession with many writers, amongst them most obviously Harold Pinter, but whereas Pinter demonstrates his theories through the use of pauses and silence, Ayckbourn offers us a torrential deluge of words: funny, inadequate, idiomatic, counterproductive; true to life, in their middle class baroque and suburban rococo.

[Luscombe: 2006]

Yet although Ayckbourn admits to being influenced by this early experience of working with Pinter on the Scarborough production of the *Birthday Party* (Ayckbourn

played the part of Stanley), both writers owe something to the early plays of Noel Coward. Like Coward both playwrights utilise very precise and carefully constructed speeches, where the pauses and the punctuation can become more meaningful than the words they interrupt. As Paul Allen notes:

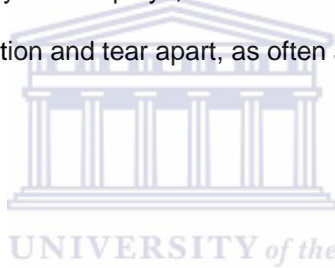
Each is pretty determined to have the words spoken as they are written for the very good reason that rhythms and sense and style have an organic relationship with content, and have been crafted with care and purpose. [2001: p79]

These words could equally be used to describe the writing of Coward. However, it is perhaps the influence taken from the structure of Coward's plays rather than the style that is most evident in Ayckbourn's work. Early in his career Ayckbourn was often referred to as the modern Coward because of the similarities in the settings and the structure of their plays. Both writers were exponents of the "drawing room comedy" and in plays such as *How The Other Half Loves* and *Absent Friends*, we see Ayckbourn using the familiar sitting room set, whilst *Mr. Whatnot* uses an English Country House as its backdrop. Ayckbourn, however, would go on to create his own variation on this by moving the action to a less conventional domestic setting such as the kitchen (*Absurd Person Singular*), the bedroom (*Bedroom Farce*) or even the garden (*Round and Round the Garden*).

Coward was certainly one of a number of playwrights whose dramatic construction was exemplary and from whom Ayckbourn was to learn the art of writing a well-made play. Ayckbourn's early repertory experience exposed him to the standard theatrical canon, and

along with Coward, playwrights such as Terence Rattigan provided numerous examples of well-formed, dramatically sound plays. It was this repertory experience that would also introduce Ayckbourn to the works of J.B. Priestley, a less conventional writer who was prepared to extend the boundaries of dramatic possibility (most notably through his experimentations with time), which would encourage Ayckbourn himself to shape and adapt the tried and tested models of the 1940s and 1950s, using them as a basis from which to create his own social statement:

[He] take[s] the form of middle-class comedy and use[s] it not as, say, Rattigan or Coward have done in many of their plays, to confirm the complacency of that cosy little world, but actually to question and tear apart, as often as not, the people [he] place[s] within it. [Watson: 1988: p80]



Ayckbourn has always had an interest in the writers of the Restoration period. Restoration plays were the first to be classified under the genre of “comedy of manners”, and as David L. Hirst suggests (when discussing the twentieth-century versions of this form), this is a category into which Ayckbourn’s earlier plays fit very comfortably:

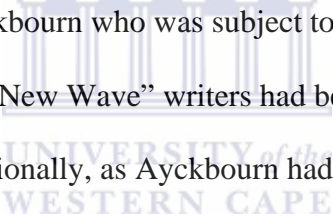
When ... Ayckbourn can satirise the mores of specific clearly differentiated groups within the same (middle class), we have proof of the abundant comic potential of this native tradition. [1979: p5]

But it is the structure of these earlier plays which is of greater influence in Ayckbourn’s work. When writing his adaptation of *A Trip To Scarborough*, Ayckbourn found himself

reverting to the original source material (Vanbrugh's *The Relapse*) rather than the Sheridan play from which the title is borrowed, acknowledging the superior craftsmanship of the earlier version. The sound dramatic construction of these seventeenth-century writers can also be seen in Ayckbourn's early plays, in particular in his first major success, *Relatively Speaking*, which Ayckbourn describes as his own "well-made" play, and which is constructed along similar lines with a:

Short exposition, for all the world like a front-cloth scene, introducing us to the situation, followed by a longer exploitation of the comic complications arising from it.

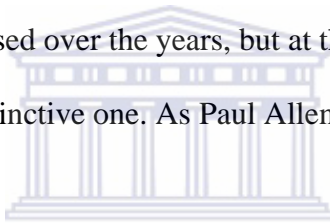
[Holt: 1999: p15]



But it was not only Ayckbourn who was subject to the influence of these earlier dramatists. Virtually all of the "New Wave" writers had been actors before they had turned to writing, either professionally, as Ayckbourn had been, working in weekly repertory, or, as in the case of Arnold Wesker, as part of an amateur company. It is possible that Ayckbourn's technical background had made him more sensitive to the craft of playwriting and the art of construction, than to the content or message that the play was trying to present (although the two are often closely intertwined). His emphasis then became form over content, whilst others, perhaps more politically aware than Ayckbourn, chose to place content over form. Ayckbourn, talking to Ian Watson, suggests that other young writers of the period did not place much significance in or pay close attention to the art of theatrical construction:

I was influenced a lot by Pirandello and Ionesco and Anouilh. I was very keen on Anouilh. I liked the way he constructed. I was very drawn to the craftsmen of the business. Although I liked the content, I was perhaps slightly less impressed by the techniques displayed by some of the new wave. [1988: p84]

Ayckbourn gleaned much from his theatrical apprenticeship and spent a long time learning all the rules, not through a conscious attempt at theoretical analysis, but more through a process of absorption. Later in his career, in his book The Crafty Art of Playmaking, Ayckbourn formalised the rules he had learned, composing what amounts to a manual of how to write a play. It was largely a retrospective process, looking back at the various techniques he has used over the years, but at the time of writing the plays, his approach was a much more instinctive one. As Paul Allen describes it:



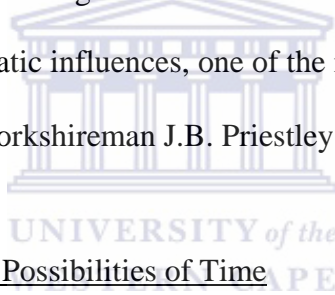
Alan is fundamentally an instinctive writer, putting deliberate faith in his unconscious to come up with the right material and not analysing too much either the ideas or the technique, except perhaps sometime afterwards for the benefit of interviewers or students. [2001: p182]

Being involved in the production of the plays of so many great writers whose work had become part of the theatrical canon, having stood the ultimate test – that of time and endurance - he began to learn instinctively what it was that made good theatre. He was able to gain an insight into the dramatic techniques and devices that were effective in creating a successful play. To put it more simply, he was able to learn quickly, on a theatrical level, exactly what worked, and what did not. As he said in an interview in

Drama:

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. [No.1, 1988: p6]

Ayckbourn was not the first playwright to have taken the conventional dramatic structures and forms and turned them on their heads, creating a highly effective theatrical device. Having found himself working in the North Yorkshire town of Scarborough, it is fitting that of all his early dramatic influences, one of the most significant and lasting would be the “time” plays of Yorkshireman J.B. Priestley.



J.B. Priestley and the Dramatic Possibilities of Time

All drama rests upon convention ... what we must not do is to declare that one convention alone can offer people the experience they demand. [Priestley: 1957: p7]

These were the words that J.B. Priestley used in his lecture *The Art of the Dramatist*. Speaking here late in his career, Priestley had already demonstrated his point as far back as the 1930s in his early plays. What Priestley was attempting to point out was that as a dramatist one cannot afford to stand still, but must constantly strive to extend the boundaries of theatrical possibility. In his lecture he discusses in some detail the relationship between dramatic form and content, suggesting that the best drama operates

on two distinct levels. The first of these is a sympathetic understanding of human life and behaviour, the second being the theatrical mechanics of presenting this to the audience. He then goes on to suggest that in the best theatre the two levels must synchronize, the form becoming the means for presenting the content in a new and refreshing way. Therefore a dramatist should not only be searching for new things to say, but equally of new ways of saying them:

Just as you must look for new life on one level, you should experiment on the other level, of theatrical form, style, contrivance, to discover what best expresses that life and the bent of your mind. You may have to create a new convention. [Priestley: 1957: p30]

Priestley was constantly experimenting in dramatic form, most notably in a trio of plays that came to be known as his “Time Plays”. In each of the three plays, *Dangerous Corner*, *Time and The Conways* and *I Have Been Here Before*, Priestley explores a different aspect of time theory, manipulating and distorting the usual conventions of time to achieve a specific dramatic effect. *Dangerous Corner* deals with the consequences of a seemingly insignificant remark by following the events that emanate from its single chance uttering. The characters are sent down a path of misfortune, until the play comes full circle and arrives back at the opening scene, where the play re-commences, offering the audience an alternative narrative. In *Time and The Conways*, the chronological order of the Acts is inverted, with the effect that what is experienced in the future begins to intrude upon scenes from the past. Priestley explains:

What I wanted ... to suggest was life outside Time as we usually know it, the kind of freedom of the fourth dimension that comes to us in a fragmentary fashion in dreams, events out of chronological order, childhood and adult life interrupting each other, all of which can bring a piercing sweetness, a queer poignancy, and, again, dramatic experience a little different from what one has known before. [Priestley: 1957: p52]

I Have Been Here Before is perhaps less unconventional in its form, appearing to follow a straightforward chronological, linear structure, but it is interesting for the way in which it examines an unusual time theory, that of modified recurrence, which Priestley had discovered in Ouspensky's *New Model of the Universe*. The theory suggests that, in a variation of reincarnation, we are all given the chance to live our lives again in exactly the same form. Each time we move through the circle of life we are able to effect small changes on ourselves and on those around us, until finally, having achieved as much as we are able, we fall out of the circle to begin a different life anew. Although Priestley states in his introduction to the play that he himself did not believe in this theory, he was fascinated by the dramatic possibilities that it suggested.

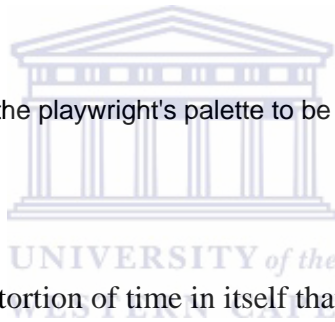
There are echoes of all three of these plays in Ayckbourn's work. *Dangerous Corner* was quite clearly inspirational in the creation of Ayckbourn's two "alternative narrative" plays *Sisterly Feelings* and sixteen variant *Intimate Exchanges*. *Time of My Life* owes much to *Time and the Conways*, in the way in which the past is viewed through the lens of the future, whilst the time travel plays *Communicating Doors* and *Whenever* have aspects of revisiting the past with an intention of changing the future in the manner

of *I Have Been Here Before*. But Priestley's Time Plays had a more profound influence on Ayckbourn's writing that goes beyond these direct parallels:

A great deal of my interest [in time], I confess, was first fuelled, when I encountered the work of the father of the twentieth century Time Play, J.B. Priestley. It was largely thanks to his adventurous experiments with stage time that I became aware of its huge narrative potential. [Ayckbourn in Glaap: 1999: p26]

The unusual choices regarding stage time and theatrical have since become a standard part of Ayckbourn's theatrical toolbox. As he told Glaap:

Time is just one colour in the playwright's palette to be spread, mixed, thinned and splattered as required. [Glaap: 1999: p27]



It is not the manipulation or distortion of time in itself that is dramatically interesting, but rather the way in which it subsequently drives the narrative and, to some extent, the characterisation within the play. Time is by no means the only tool available to Ayckbourn; his experiments with space are equally adventurous, but it is time which appears to fascinate him most, and which seems to be such a dominant feature in so many of his plays. Talking to Ian Watson he explains:

I think how to tell the story to me is always very important. And I always look for new ways. I am particularly attracted to the stage... I love the permutations that it possesses and I love exploring them. And particularly I'm fascinated by things like how it presents time, and how its space can be changed, and the peculiarity which it possesses that, when you warp time on stage, you're warping time for an audience as well as for the

actors - you're doing it positively, in front of people's eyes... On the stage, the way you do it is much more immediate. [Watson: 1988: p70]

Ayckbourn plays with time in a very deliberate way. The timeframe within which the play is set, the use of multiple timeframes in one play, the writing of multiple interlinked plays or plays with multiple narratives and setting plays in the future are examples of choices the playwright has made to achieve a very specific effect or make a particular dramatic point. The remaining chapters of this thesis, by close examination of several plays from different points in Ayckbourn's career, will look at just how effective these choices were in achieving the desired theatrical outcome.

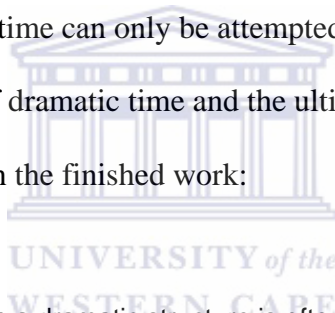


Chapter 2

Long and Short Lenses and Other Filmic Devices

Stage Time and Real Time

Ayckbourn, having been fascinated by the possibilities of dramatic time and taking great delight in playing with this in an experimental and innovative way, has never lost sight of the fact that time is one of the most crucial, indeed pivotal factors to be considered in the construction process of any dramatic work. Any manipulation of the usual conventions surrounding time can only be attempted if the playwright is fully aware of the highly complex nature of dramatic time and the ultimate effect that any choices with regard to time will have on the finished work:



The choice of time scale in a dramatic structure is often one of the most important basic decisions a dramatist needs to make about their play. [Ayckbourn in Glaap: 1999: p27]

Such is Ayckbourn's respect for the power of dramatic time that it is one of the first decisions that he will make when beginning to develop a new play, second only to the other crucial decision, that of place or setting. The decision regarding time is perhaps more complex than it might first appear, as dramatic time can operate on more than one level; there is the length of the play itself (the real time decision) as well as the period over which the action will take place (the stage time decision):

One of the tools available to the stage dramatist (and in my view one of the least understood) is time. Not the running time of the play - though that is important but the time frame within which the author has chosen to set the play.

[Ayckbourn in Glaap: 1999: p45]

The first of these decisions - the running time of the play - will be explored in more detail in the next chapter. The effect of choosing a particular time frame within which the action of the play takes place can best be explored by looking at three of Ayckbourn's plays; *Absent Friends*, *Absurd Person Singular* and *Joking Apart*, where the specific choice in terms of the period of time over which to present the play's narrative, gives a unique tone and atmosphere to each play, and is utilised to differing dramatic effect in each case.

Ayckbourn has suggested that "In general, the rough rule is to try and tell the story within the shortest period you can" [Glaap: 1999: p45]. This is closely tied into the Aristotelian principle of the "Unity of Time". In a dramatically sound and well-constructed play the action should, if possible, take place within one twenty-four hour cycle. Ayckbourn appears to concur with this idea when he says:

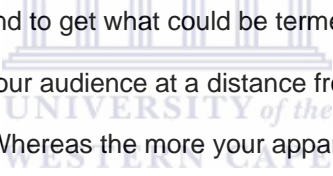
I find it dramatically more effective to condense the stage action where possible. To conduct events over the course of a single day or night concentrates the audience's mind far more than meandering through a few decades. [Ayckbourn: 2004: p21].

He then goes further, suggesting that there may be other advantages in reducing the time frame. For example, Ayckbourn had a very practical reason for choosing the short time frame (of a single day) for one of his early plays *Relatively Speaking*:

Time, by passing that swiftly, helped lend credibility to the confusion. The characters apparently had less time to think about things, thus avoiding our question - why didn't she ask him that? A question we would probably have asked had it been set over four days

[Ayckbourn: 2004: p21].

However, as Ayckbourn is constantly reminding us, there will always be the exception to the rule and, in certain cases, it may be necessary to extend the time span in order to create a specific effect or to tell the story from a particular angle. The choice of time frame will give a very specific feel to the play, and Ayckbourn likes to compare the playwright's use of time frame to the cinema director's use of the camera:



In a long time span you tend to get what could be termed a "long lens" feel to the piece. You are in effect placing your audience at a distance from the action. They are watching, as it were, in "long shot". Whereas the more your apparent elapsed stage time matches the actual time by your audience's wristwatches, the nearer you might be deemed to have moved them to the action. In effect, you create the equivalent of a "close-up" lens.

[Ayckbourn in Glaap: 1999: p46]

In the play *Absent Friends*, the action takes place over a period of about two hours, one Saturday afternoon. In this play the stage time and the real time (what Ayckbourn likes to call the foyer time) are to all intents and purposes synchronized. The two different time schemes run in parallel, giving the ultimate "close-up" lens feel to the play. In *Absurd Person Singular*, the action takes place over three consecutive Christmas

Eves, giving a medium term perspective, whilst in *Joking Apart*, Ayckbourn uses the long lens to full effect, extending the action of the play over a period of twelve years.

In his book The Crafty Art of Playmaking, Ayckbourn tells us:

The question I always ask is: in how short a time can I hope to tell my story - both according to the foyer clock and on stage? [2004: p21].

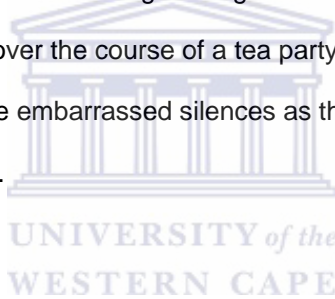
In his play *Absent Friends*, the answer to this question is about two hours – in both cases. The play has a very specific time scale. The opening stage direction tells us that it is 3pm on Saturday afternoon. Throughout the play there are further references to the exact time. When John enters and is reprimanded for being late he declares that it is “only twenty past” [p13]. At this point of the play, the elapsed foyer time is also about twenty minutes, and so we are given the first clue that stage time and real time are running almost in parallel. At the beginning of Act II, the stage directions confirm this, stating that it is now 4.15pm. What, then, is the significance of allowing the action to take place over such a short period of time, and what particular characteristic does this particular choice of time frame bring to the play?

Absent Friends and The “Close-Up” Lens

Absent Friends has been described by Ayckbourn as a play within which “nothing happens”. It is, after all, just a play about people sitting, drinking tea and talking. In fact, this simplified description is quite deceptive as a great deal happens in the course of two hours. There is a plot, albeit without a great deal of action to drive the narrative, but

nevertheless it is a plot built on a minute, extremely intimate and personal scale. The play, then, is not plot driven, and as a result, the characters' actions and dialogue (or indeed the lack of them) come under intense scrutiny from the audience. The short time frame has the effect of a "close-up" shot, and thus every detail of the play - the dialogue, the quirky behaviour of the characters and the moments of silence and inaction - become magnified, as if they have been placed under a microscope. The seemingly insignificant details suddenly take on a profound meaning:

In a play like *Absent Friends*, the two time streams [stage time and foyer time] are virtually synchronistic. The result is to give stage minutiae considerably greater significance. In that play, over the course of a tea party, the selection of a sandwich, the pouring of a cup of tea, the embarrassed silences as the conversation lapses, are brought sharply into focus. [Ayckbourn: 2004: p22]



The unusual mannerisms of the various characters become important to the narrative in a play of this time scale; in a play with a longer lens, these small nuances would become lost and swallowed up as part of the larger picture. The character of John is given a nervous, twitchy disposition. The effect is a visual one and not only is it comical, as it appears that John has no real control over his behaviour and therefore his unfortunate habit is liable to surface at the most inappropriate moment, but it is also symptomatic of the tension that is building up between the various characters. It is John's discomfort that is exacerbating his problem, the tenser he becomes, the more noticeable his fidgeting, which has the effect of causing those watching him to become nervous and tense themselves and putting the whole room on edge:

Diana: Would you like to take a seat John?

John: No, it's all right, thanks. I don't like sitting down very much.

Evelyn: Sit down, for heaven's sake.

John: I don't like sitting down. I don't enjoy it.

Evelyn: He'll never sit down. I don't think I've ever seen him sit down. He has his meals dancing around the table.

John: I prefer standing up, that's all.

Pause. John jiggles violently.

Diana: (*tense and shrill*) John, will you please sit down before you drive me mad.

John: (*sitting*) Sorry. Sorry ... (*he sits on the hearth bench*)

Diana: I'm sorry.

John: No, it's me. I'm sorry.

Diana: I'm sorry, John.

John: No need to be sorry. That's all right.

Evelyn: You'll never get him to sit still, I'll tell you that.

Evelyn sits, chews and reads. John tries not to fidget, then picks up the towel-holder from the bag and beats time with it. Diana looks at him sharply. He mouths "sorry" and puts it down. Diana sits staring ahead of her, steeped in worry. Marge studies her pattern.

Marge: (*at length*) I think I've gone wrong with this. I've got twelve too many stitches.

How the dickens did I get twelve too many stitches?

[p15-16].

In the course of these few lines, in which nothing of substance is said, the audience is shown John's reluctance to be a part of Colin's tea party, Evelyn's resigned exasperation

at her husband's annoying behaviour, symptomatic of their marriage in general, Diana's tension, demonstrated through her uncontrollable outburst, and even a sense of the mutual animosity felt by Diana and Evelyn towards each other. With the close-up lens it is possible to have people just sitting and saying nothing as at the end of this extract. It becomes visual drama, where pauses and silences add to the realistic, naturalistic feel of the play. As Holt has suggested Ayckbourn "understands the primacy of dramatic narrative which is a narrative of action - not of words" [1999: p34]. In a play like *Absent Friends*, the action is minimalist and drafted with extreme economy; nevertheless it is in the detail that the fascination lies. The characters are able to say so much with a simple glance, and in the action of chewing or of studying a knitting pattern the characters reveal themselves openly to the audience. Even when the silence is broken, it is often, as in this case, with a banal comment which has much more to do with demonstrating character than any advancement of the narrative. The playwright can also afford to be more economical with the dialogue for certain characters, as in the case of Evelyn. She says very little, often replying in short, one word answers, showing her complete indifference to being at the party. Her abrupt style shows her contempt for the other couples and reinforces the fact that she is there only under sufferance, to try and assist her husband in his business dealings. Because the play is not action or plot driven, Ayckbourn can dispense with the necessity of using dialogue as a means of informing the audience of vital information or as a device to move the narrative along. This allows the plot, such as it is, to move at a more natural pace, with no need for any artificially contrived acceleration devices, as are typically found in traditional farce. In a similar way Ayckbourn can allow the character of Marge to chatter away over the most mundane

things, such as the finer details of how she came to purchase her latest pair of shoes, simply as a way of letting her character emerge. However, what she has to say is not unimportant; indeed to her these things are at the forefront of her consciousness, and therefore of great significance, at least at that particular moment in time. The close-up lens is allowing us to see the very immediate concerns of the characters, and through this observation derive a greater insight into their personalities.

Another very significant effect of employing the “close-up” lens is the way the audience can be drawn into the action, sharing in the same feelings of nervous anxiety that are experienced by the characters on stage. Ayckbourn told Glaap:

Absent Friends' time span, being what it is, had the intended consequence of making the play far more claustrophobic, almost oppressive [Glaap: 1999: p47].

The audience becomes very aware of the tension building from a very early stage of the play. The first few minutes of the play are already fraught with unspoken recriminations hanging ominously in the air. The characters are all on edge, demonstrated by the constant bickering exchanges that take place. Even friends Diana and Marge end up arguing about the present Marge has brought for Diana, which Diana wants to pay for:

Diana: (producing her purse) How much?

Marge: I won't take it, put it away.

Diana: How much was it?

Marge: Diana, will you put that purse away this minute.

Diana: No, I'm sorry Marge, I'm going to pay you.

Marge: Diana, will you put that away this minute. Evelyn, tell her to put it away ... [p4].

The exchange, which begins in a lighthearted, almost playful mood, soon turns into a squabble, and the audience is left under no doubt that everyone is extremely nervous about Colin's imminent arrival. By the time Colin actually arrives, half way through the first Act, the atmosphere is already intensely claustrophobic, and not only from the view point of the characters on stage. The audience, too, is waiting, tensely for Colin to arrive. The anticipation of the audience mirrors that of the on-stage characters, due largely to the fact that real time elapses at the same speed as stage time. This anticipation helps to build a picture of Colin in the audience's mind (which again is happening simultaneously on stage, as the characters are imagining how Colin will appear, given his recent tragic circumstances and the fact that they have not seen him for several years). This picture is then thoroughly undermined when Colin eventually arrives and is positively cheerful, and full of happy reminiscences about the time he shared with his fiancée before her untimely death. This then forms the basis for much of the comedy, as we watch Colin keep completely calm and under control, whilst he becomes the unwitting catalyst, causing everyone else to unravel around him.

There is another aspect to the short lens approach, and that is that the audience experiences the narrative, which recounts various events stretching from thirty years ago up to the present, from one single moment or point in time. The effect is like looking at a "snap-shot" or a still picture, as opposed to more filmic feel that is created through a long shot approach. The narrative takes us as far back as the early days of Diana, Paul and

Marge's friendship with Colin (long distance), into the medium distant past, with the history of Paul's infidelities over the last few years, short-term problems such as Marge's pre-occupation with her husband's sickness of the last week, and then immediate pre-occupations such as ensuring everything is in place for Colin's arrival (will the sandwiches be alright?). All these story lines, from different points in the past, are told within the framework of a single afternoon's action. The choice of this particular afternoon is not accidental. It is a crucial and pivotal point in the relationships of the two couples gathered for the tea party, which is then brought to crisis point by the arrival of Colin, who wreaks havoc by bringing up the past in a disturbing way. Rather than diffusing the tension, he actually increases it. By the end of the play, all the story lines have been brought together, and we see how things that have happened in the past finally come home to roost in the course of this particular afternoon. Looking back at past events from a specific moment means, necessarily, that the story is told in retrospect. This allows the characters to analyse and interpret the past with the benefit of hindsight, using knowledge they have gained since. This knowledge is shared with the audience, giving them further insight into the characters. The characters can re-assess situations, in a sense saying "what we didn't realize at the time", which is not possible if the audience is presented with the past events at the actual time that they are occurring (for example, if the narrative took place in several scenes spanning twenty or thirty years). There is also the potential for characters to distort the facts as their memories become selective, and the picture they see is often tinted through a rose-coloured lens. The way in which different characters remember slightly different aspects of the same event, or emphasise one part of the story over another, is also a useful tool for the playwright to help in

establishing character. One of the most comical moments in the play comes as a result of Colin reminiscing about the times that he and Paul used to go round to Diana and her sister Barbara's house for tea when they were boys. Firstly, there is a certain confusion about which sister had been the focus of Paul's affection. Colin insists that Paul was only ever interested in Diana, which Diana has difficulty in believing, and Paul goes so far as to deny. Secondly Colin then relates a story about the first time they went round and Paul stole the napkin that Diana had used. He turns it into a romantic tale, suggesting that Paul was so smitten with Diana, that he stole it to keep as a memento:

Colin: ... Anyway, at the end of the meal, do you know what he did – and this shows how romantic he is underneath all that lot – he picked up that napkin that you'd been using, Di, and he put it in his pocket. Took it home to remind him of you.

Marge: Ah.

Diana: Is that where it went.

Paul: I don't remember doing that.

Marge: I think that's a lovely story. Just shows. All men are romantic at heart.

....

Paul: *(laughing suddenly)* You know something, Col?

Colin: What?

Paul: I've just remembered. I've still got that table napkin of hers, you know.

Colin: Have you really?

Paul: Yes. I use it to clean the car with.

Diana rises, picks up the cream jug and pours it slowly over Paul's head. Paul sits for a moment, stunned.

[p38]

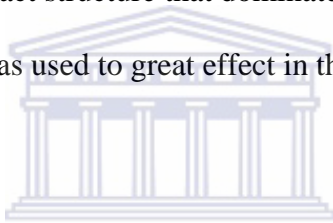
The story is based in fact. Paul must have taken the napkin as he still has it, and yet each character is able to place their own interpretation or spin on the events that happened several years earlier. Viewed through the close-up lens, Paul and Diana's different reactions to the same story go a long way towards filling in the details of their lives, showing the audience a picture of how their relationship has progressed over the years between the afternoon of the napkin episode and the present time. What starts out as an attempt by Colin to put a spark of romance into his friend's marriage, turns into a catalyst which causes Diana to finally explode and signals the beginning of the end for their doomed relationship. Colin, who has not seen his friends for years, is also unaware of what has happened in the years in between. For him, the story is a delightful memory, for Paul and Diana, it is filled with irony. Then comes the moment, apparent to both the audience and to Diana, where it seems that Paul remembers and admits to still having the napkin after all these years. Perhaps the philandering Paul still has romantic feelings for his wife, after all. This thought lasts just a few seconds as we learn that the trigger for his memory was in all likelihood his car. Diana has had her hopes lifted and dashed just once too often, and this being the last straw, calmly and deliberately deposits the jug of cream over Paul's head. In this one single moment, we are given a snapshot of their entire marriage. There is a whole history of disappointment and betrayal demonstrated through this one single act. As Paul sits, motionless, and under the intense magnification of the ultimate close-up lens, we see his past, present and future framed in a single shot.

The Long Lens - *Absurd Person Singular* and *Joking Apart*

In another of Ayckbourn's earlier plays, *Absurd Person Singular*, the narrative extends over three years. Other than the use of this extended time period, the structure of the play is, in fact, quite conventional:

This was the first time I ever wrote a play over this length of period it's based upon a basic well-made play. But it's a variation on it, I hope [Ayckbourn to Glaap: 1999: p39].

As with *Relatively Speaking*, Ayckbourn was using a tried and tested formula, this time turning to the established three-act structure that dominated the theatre of the early twentieth century, and which was used to great effect in the construction of traditional farce:



Ayckbourn adds a new dimension to the traditional domestic comedy in this particular excursion. His stage directions indicate Act I, last Christmas; Act II this Christmas, Act III, next Christmas. His structure is a variation of Ben Travers' formula for a farce (the chronology is Travers'): "Act II - the sympathetic and guileless hero is landed into the thick of some grievous dilemma or adversity. Act I - he gets into it. Act III - he gets out of it" (Smith 67). [Ruskin: 1999]

Absurd Person Singular cannot be described as a farce in the mould of Feydeau or Travers¹, yet Ayckbourn takes aspects of farce and uses them in a unique way. This can be seen not so much within the structure of the overall play, as within the structure of the three individual Acts. Act II, in particular, contains all of the required elements - the

¹ Ayckbourn would later write a genuine farce, *Taking Steps*, which he dedicated to Ben Travers. Interestingly he decided on a two-act structure on this occasion.

suicide attempt of the hapless Eva being thwarted constantly by a barrage of completely unintentional intervention on the part of her guests, who remain entirely oblivious to her plight. Farce requires a sense of immediacy, and once events are set in motion, they continue at a relentless pace until they finally grind (or crash) to a halt as a conclusion is reached. This is perhaps one of the reasons why Act II, described as taking place “This Christmas”, and therefore being more immediate than the two acts placed either side of it, works well as a self-contained mini-farce. Admittedly, the subject matter (a depressed woman on the verge of suicide) is an unusual choice and begins to move the play into the realms of black comedy. By placing this Act in the centre of the play, and extending the time frame on either side, Ayckbourn is able to develop this dark theme further. The bleakness of the final third Act, with Ronald huddled and wrapped in a blanket in a deteriorating, unheated Victorian kitchen (where the servant’s bells are still in evidence) certainly evokes a Dickensian picture of Christmas yet to come. Unlike Scrooge, however, we realise that these characters will not get an opportunity to return to the present to put things to rights (it would be another twenty years before Ayckbourn explored the possibilities of time travel in one of his plays). The fact that the stage directions place the third Act nominally in the future, allows the audience to travel through time, to establish a clear picture of what is yet to come.

Another consequence of extending the time frame over a period of three years is that Ayckbourn manages to retract the “camera”, pulling further away from the action, using a much wider angle than the one used in *Absent Friends*. This creates what he terms the long lens effect which enables the audience to chart the development of the

characters, their relationships and their movements up and down the social hierarchy over time, allowing them to see “the big picture”. This “rise and fall” can be seen not only in the social and professional repositioning of the couples, but also the power shifts within individual marriages. In Act I, Geoff is the up-and-coming young architect full of potential, whilst Eva is already showing signs that she may not be able to keep up with the inevitable social advancement this will entail. She comes into the kitchen in order to take her medication, a precursor to the suicidal state she will find herself in by the opening of Act II. During Act II, neither Geoff nor Eva is in any position to take a controlling hand within the relationship, and their marriage appears to be on the brink of collapse. By Act III, Geoff’s fall from professional grace has paved the way for a new dynamic to develop within the marriage. At the same time that his world falls apart - literally, as the Shopping Centre roof, built to his design, caves in - his wife Eva begins to rebuild her life and as a consequence makes a positive contribution to rebuilding the marriage. She is able, eventually, to take on the dominant role in the relationship, even to the extent of trying to take control of Geoff’s professional affairs. Similarly, we see how Sidney Hopcroft’s ascent of the professional ladder re-enforces the dynamic within his marriage. The power he has gained in the business world is transferred into his own domestic sphere. His wife Jane, already acquiescent in Act I, becomes more and more subservient in response to Sidney’s increased demands, until at the end of the play she too is dancing to his tune: the acolyte, administering his commands, dishing out forfeits to the other guests.

The other dynamic that we are able to track across the years concerns the relative positions of the three couples in the social pecking order, in particular the meteoric rise of Sidney and Jane Hopcroft as it accelerates over the course of the play. As Billington observes:

What gives [the play] theatrical momentum is partly the slightly artificial Dickensian structure whereby the action covers Christmas Past, Christmas Present and Christmas Future and partly the way it shows Sidney and Jane Hopcroft progressing to the top of the heap [1983: p58].

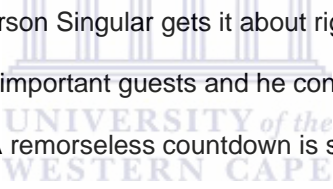
Sydney Hopcroft is a small-time developer who is anxious to cultivate useful business connections. He is throwing a party as a way of ingratiating himself with his business contacts, hoping they will throw some scraps of work his way. The main comic moment of the first act comes when Jane Hopcroft stands outside in the pouring rain, locked out of her kitchen by her husband because he is so concerned about the impression she will create if she comes into the house soaking wet dressed in a raincoat and wellington boots. Not only is Jane made to suffer outside in the cold and wet, but when she finally manages to get back in the house, she is subjected to further misery as Sidney casually asks where she has been, pretending to be totally innocent of the part he has played in her ordeal. In fact he is simply relieved that she was not seen by his guests and that the evening (in his terms) “went off rather satisfactorily, anyway”. As he points out to Jane:

I mean these people just weren't anybody. They are people in the future who can be very, very useful to us [p34]

As we move into the future we see just how successfully Sidney Hopcroft does indeed cultivate these useful contacts. In Act II, we again see the Hopcrofts trying to be helpful and ingratiating, but there has been a power shift since the first Act. As Eva and Geoff's private world is falling apart around them, Sidney and Jane seize on the opportunity to take control of the situation, embarking on a frenzy of cleaning ovens and mending blocked sinks which appears to be more about claiming a position of superiority (skillfully taking on the tasks that Eva and Geoff are incapable or unwilling to do themselves) than through mere benevolence. The Hopcrofts have put themselves in a situation where they are able to help others, even if not directly asked. By the time we arrive at Act III, the tables have turned completely, as Eva suggests that Geoff should ask Sidney if he can put some work his way. Geoff is extremely reluctant to stoop to such depths, no doubt thinking back to their relative positions only a couple of years earlier, but as Eva reminds him, "ever since the ceiling of the Harrison building caved in and nearly killed the manager, Sidney Hopcroft is about your only hope of surviving as an architect in this city." (p72). Finally, in the closing moments of the play, we literally see the Brewster-Wrights and the Jacksons dancing to Sidney's tune as he conducts them in a game of musical dancing ending up by frantically commanding them to "Dance. Dance. Come on. Dance. Dance. Dance. Keep dancing. Dance ..." (p92).

Like *Absent Friends*, *Absurd Person Singular* contains a number of specific time references which play an important role in the construction of the play. Sidney's first entrance in the opening moments of the play sees him consulting an imaginary clock on the invisible fourth wall and checking the time against his wrist watch. "Eighteen-twenty-

three. Getting on. Seven minutes they'll be here.” (p2). We see from this that Sidney is running things with military precision. He is using time as a means of control. He only has this one evening to make a good impression, and therefore needs to utilize every minute to full effect. If he can keep control over time he will maintain control of the situation. In the opening few pages it would appear that as in *Absent Friends*, stage time and real time are running in parallel. However, by page 5, we are shown the first signs that the two time frames are beginning to diverge. Sidney says “two minutes to go”, followed almost immediately by “one minute to go”. The difference here between the two time frames is only a small one, but will accelerate as the play continues. Ayckbourn, talking about the relationship between stage time and real time, himself admits that:



The opening of *Absurd Person Singular* gets it about right, I've found, when Sidney and Jane anxiously await their important guests and he continually consults the invisible fourth-wall kitchen clock. A remorseless countdown is set in motion as the minutes tick by. But they are not our minutes. They're stage minutes. [2004: p28]

The running time of Act I – approximately forty-five minutes - represents an entire evening of probably at least three hours. Not only are the stage time and real time running at a different pace, but also the passing of time as perceived by the different characters is also very different. For Sidney time is running faster than he would wish as he is in danger of losing control. His sense of urgency around making sure that everything is ready and in place on time, is actually representative of his eagerness to move on up the social and business ladder. His urgency is the cause of Jane's anxiety that evening as she runs around frantically trying to finish off the last minute preparations, just as it is

Sidney's social and professional ambition that is a constant cause of her stress in life as she struggles to keep up with his relentless pace. For example when Sidney says to Jane "Come along. She's waiting" (p17), referring to Marion waiting for her drink, it is in fact Sidney who is waiting, and anxious for Jane to keep up with his own exacting schedule. In contrast to this, for Marion Brewster Wright, time appears to be running an interminably slow pace. After talking to Sidney in the kitchen she heads back in to the living room, looks at her watch and utters an incredulous "My God". Unlike Jane, Marion has very little interest in her husband's business affairs (she is so indifferent that she can't even remember Sidney's name), and as a consequence is totally bored by the whole evening, having nothing in common with the other guests, who are not from her usual social circle. It would also appear that this is not an uncommon event and that she is used to accompanying her husband to numerous such occasions. This particular evening, as on many others we would imagine, she resorts to drink to help her through the evening. As we see by Act III, it appears to be a crutch that she has resorted to in order to get through life. The audience is given the first glimpse that Marion's life is gradually decelerating as she is forced to relinquish her career, her children as they are packed off to Boarding School, and eventually her role as a wife as we see the total lack of communication between Ronald and herself in Act III. In fact, in this final Act it is almost as if time has come to a complete standstill for Marion as she spends most of her time in bed:

Eva: She seems to be rather dug in up there. Almost in a state of hibernation. Doesn't she ever come out?

Ronald: Not if she can help it.... [p66]

Ronald Brewster Wright's attitude to time also differs significantly to that of Sidney. For Sidney the main purpose of the evening is business rather than pleasure, whereas Ronald sees it merely as another social event which happens to have been organized by one of his smaller clients. Whilst Sidney is desperately fighting against time to try and close his business deal, Ronald is in no hurry to talk business, and would be happier to leave the finer details to Monday morning:

Sidney: I know this isn't perhaps the moment, I mean it probably isn't the right moment, but none the less, I hope you've been giving a little bit of thought to our chat. The other day. If you've had a moment.

Ronald: Chat? Oh, yes – chat. At the bank? Well, yes it's – probably not, as you say, the moment.... [p26]

Ronald is taken aback slightly by Sidney "talking shop" and tries to be as non-committal as possible, not wanting to be hurried into making any rash promises. Ronald is in a position of power, having it within his means to provide Sidney with the finance he needs. He is also using time as a means of control – if he can manage to stall Sidney for the next hour or so, he will be able to make the decision in his own territory, giving him the upper hand. Sidney, however, has time against him and is losing control as the minutes pass. In this way it is possible for time, in effect, to be running at different speeds

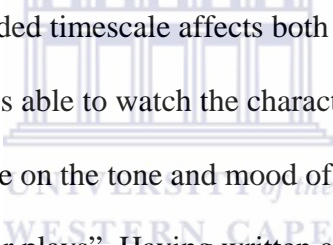
for the different characters. It also becomes an important weapon in the power play and maneuvering going on between them.

For Ayckbourn timeframe is not simply another decision which has to be made when embarking upon a new play, but becomes much more integral not only to the plot and narrative development, but also to the development of the characters and the world they inhabit. As Dominic Nightingale points out:

The Hopcrofts may have their temporary triumphs and the Evas their respites. The Geoffreys, Marions and Ronalds demonstrate a wider, more general truth. Like everything else in Ayckbourn's bleak, funny world, time itself is deeply inimical to hope, effort, fulfilment and happiness. [Billington: 1983: p66]

The above could equally apply to *Joking Apart*. Taking place across a period of twelve years, *Joking Apart* has the longest time-span of any of Ayckbourn's plays (excluding, that is, those involving time-travel). The action begins twelve years ago, with an interval of four years between each scene, until finally we are brought up to date. The lens is lengthened to give us the widest focus possible. It would be fairly difficult to extend the timeframe further still, as the actors are already faced with the challenge of playing their characters ranging from their late twenties to early forties. As with *Absurd Person Singular*, which takes place over three consecutive Christmas Eves and *Joking Apart's* immediate predecessor *Just Between Ourselves* in which each scene takes place on the birthday of one of the characters, Ayckbourn once more chooses to set the play within the ritual of celebration. The use of Bonfire Night, Midsummer, Boxing Day and Debbie's Eighteenth Birthday allow the opportunity to show a gathering of friends and

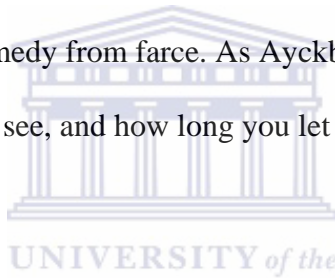
family, as they find themselves meeting less and less frequently and growing apart as the years go by. By the final scene we realize that the friends are not as close as they used to be, following the all too familiar pattern of losing touch and only meeting up on these special occasions. Even immediate neighbours grow distant, as we see in the final scene when Anthea tells Olive about Louise and Hugh. “We haven’t seen them for yonks. We asked them today of course. Well it wouldn’t be the same without them, would it?” (p207). In this way the audience, too, feel in the same position. It is four years since we saw the characters, and it is almost as if we are guests at the party, catching up on old times, and filling in the blanks surrounding the intervening years.



The choice of this extended timescale affects both the pace of the play and also the pace at which the audience is able to watch the characters develop. As a consequence it also has a significant influence on the tone and mood of the piece. *Joking Apart* was the third of Ayckbourn’s “winter plays”. Having written almost exclusively for the Scarborough summer season, in 1976 Ayckbourn found himself tasked with providing a play for the new winter season introduced at the theatre. The resultant play was *Just Between Ourselves*. It marked a distinct change in tone and the beginnings of a much darker, less farcical comedy that was to continue into the 1980s with plays such as *Way Upstream* (1981) and *Woman in Mind* (1985). The next two “winter plays”, *Ten Times Table* (1977) and *Joking Apart* (1978) also followed this same pattern. As Billington points out, *Joking Apart*, in particular, marked a new direction for Ayckbourn’s writing and a stark contrast to the more obvious comedy of plays such as *Absurd Person Singular*, *The Norman Conquests* and *Bedroom Farce*:

In London, the play never proved very popular largely because it defied audience expectations: no great show of technical virtuosity, no revelation of character through farce, no continuum of laughter to offset the pain. [1983: p123]

Although to some extent influenced by the bleakness of his surroundings whilst writing the play, it is rather the extended timeframe that gives the play its reflective mood. It lacks the frenetic pace of, for example, the second Act of *Absurd Person Singular*. Events unfold slowly and situations are allowed to develop gradually over a long period of time, allowing a much deeper look into the psyche of the characters. It is really this extended view that distinguishes tragicomedy from farce. As Ayckbourn has said, it is all about how much you let the audience see, and how long you let events unfold before you conclude the narrative:



Farce is a tragedy that's been interrupted. All you do is edit it at the right point. If you let a character's life run on before editing - let's say until he's married ten years - then as a result you'll have a slightly darker, but I hope truer, picture. [Page: 1989: p91].

In *Joking Apart*, what we see is a group of people whose lives move gradually forward, there are no great revelations or changes over time. Some characters change more than others. Richard and Anthea, for example, the perfect couple, with everything in their favour, seem to change very little. They somehow manage to keep up the appearance of youthfulness whilst those around them seem to grow old before their time, weighed down by the problems life has thrown their way. It is almost as if Richard and Anthea are the barometer against which we measure the change in other characters. We need this

yardstick because the changes are not dramatic, but slow, subtle ones brought on by the onset of age. People remain fundamentally the same, they just become worn down by time. There are certain recurring themes that demonstrate this consistency of character. Hugh, for example, is always eating (except when his wife is cooking) and this characteristic remains even when he is under great stress caused by anxiety over his family. His wife Louise becomes addicted to pills over the course of the play, but it is not a sudden process; it happens slowly, so much so that it is impossible to tell where the occasional pill to help ease her anxiety turns into a full-scale dependence. Her nervous disorder was always there, it just becomes much more obvious as the play progresses. Another example is the way in which Brian's girlfriends get progressively younger. It is in his nature to try and keep himself young by going out with younger women, but as he gets older and his girlfriends get younger this characteristic becomes more and more exaggerated. Even when we think he may have changed in the final scene when he turns up at the party without a date, we are suddenly left with the possibility that he might have his eye on Richard and Anthea's eighteen-year-old daughter Debbie. What the play seems to demonstrate is not so much that people change over time, but rather that time allows people to develop and grow. Yet, returning to Billington's suggestion that "time itself is deeply inimical to hope, effort, fulfillment and happiness", there is a sense that time mocks and frustrates such efforts. Brian, in attempting to cling to his youth merely becomes a source of ridicule in the process. Billington seems to sum up the play's strengths when he says:

Joking Apart ... has a lot to recommend it : a basic psychological truth, a gradual revelation of character, a feeling for the inaudible and noiseless foot of time. [1983: p123]

Other Filmic Techniques in Theatre

The creation of the close-up and the long “shot” within his plays is not the only filmic device used by Ayckbourn. From an early age Ayckbourn has had a fascination with film, and these cinematic influences are apparent throughout his work. Talking to Ian Watson, Ayckbourn acknowledges:

I suppose a lot that influenced me has nothing to do with the theatre at all. *Whatnot* is the outstanding example, which was totally to do with films - people like Rene Clair and Renoir, and going back to Buster Keaton and Laurel and Hardy, who still remain, I suppose my major comic influence. [1988: p85]

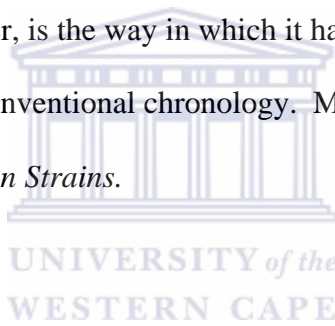
If *Mr. Whatnot* was heavily influenced by the early silent comedians, it was the pioneering techniques of the French cinema which would play an important role in the construction of several of his later plays. Michael Holt suggests that Ayckbourn sees his role as akin to that of a cinematic auteur:

I use the cut, the superimposed shot and so on which are more or less cliches in the film these days but still novel and unusual in the theatre. It means that action can be moved very quickly ... Narrative techniques have speeded up ... thanks to film and TV ... Film techniques have a vital part to play in the staging of my plays today.

[Ayckbourn in Holt:: 1999: p39]

The Revenger's Comedies, a double length play which will form part of the discussion in the next chapter, is loosely based on Hitchcock's classic film *Strangers on a Train*. Indeed the play often feels more like a film than a piece of theatre as the action

moves through numerous locations in a series of short scenes, cutting back and forth between the two main story lines that make up the narrative. The technical process of changing the scenes almost instantaneously, with just a short musical cover, was achieved by the means of a series of rostra, which could slide in and out on tracks, and could be reset off-stage ready for the next scene change. This same technique was used more recently in *Private Fears in Public Places* which has a staggering fifty-four scenes.² In both these plays Ayckbourn used the cut between and occasional overlapping of scenes in order to accelerate the plot and create a flow to the narrative. In both cases, though, the plays follow a normal chronological sequence. Where the cut has proved to be a highly effective dramatic tool, however, is the way in which it has allowed Ayckbourn to move away from the constraints of conventional chronology. Most notably this can be seen in his 1980 musical play, *Suburban Strains*.



Suburban Strains

What Ayckbourn wanted to do was to tell a rather conventional love story. The plot is a simple one – Caroline meets Kevin, Kevin has a series of affairs, Caroline throws Kevin out, Caroline meets Matthew, Caroline realises she is probably better off with Kevin:

² It is interesting to note that French film director Alain Resnais should choose this particular play to make his second Ayckbourn film adaptation, to be released late in 2006, following his highly acclaimed version of *Intimate Exchanges*, called *Smoking/No Smoking*.

I'm fascinated by techniques and by being aware that what I want to say is relatively simple, that is, it's usually telling about people and about their relationships. In order to throw any light - or at least fresh slants - it's necessary to find new ways to tell the stories.

[Ayckbourn in Watson: 1988: p71]

One of the new ways used by Ayckbourn was to write the play as a musical, which was to be the first of many collaborations between Ayckbourn and musician Paul Todd. The second, perhaps more significant new way to tell this particular story was to develop an elaborate timeframe involving two different time periods, running at different speeds, with a complex series of cuts, superimpositions and montage sequences drawn almost directly from the world of cinema. Ayckbourn told Ian Watson:

I wanted to tell a very complex story - well, it's actually very simple, but I wanted to highlight it in a different way. I've always had this ambition to run parallel times, and here was the chance to do that, by starting a story simultaneously in the middle and at the beginning and running parallel. The technique is basically filmic there, isn't it? Yes, a lot of my stuff is obviously filched from film. The thing about film is that it's developed its own tense flexibility: what I do is pre-edit, as it were, with plays. [1988: p70]

The action alternates between two differing time periods. The first, the present, takes place in a miserable winter, just before Christmas, a time of year often used by Ayckbourn (for example in *Absurd Person Singular* and *Season's Greetings*) to show just how miserable it is possible to be in the middle of a supposedly festive occasion. The other covers a longer time period extending from spring into a particularly hot summer, some three years earlier. The frequent cutting back and forth between the two time

frames allows us to see the contrast between these two periods, and indeed the two different men in Caroline's life:

The treatment is generally chronological, but with leaps; moments from the first relationship are frequently recalled, to be juxtaposed with the second.

[Page: 1989: p57]

The technical aspect of placing these two timeframes simultaneously on stage is a credit to Ayckbourn's theatrical instinct. In order to pull this off, there were three main devices used to demonstrate the switch between the timeframes. Firstly, the theatre's stage lighting was used to full effect. Subtle changes in lighting were used to denote the different time periods, and are clearly marked by Ayckbourn in the stage directions:



The Lights change. We are back in past time. The music continues under the following

Kevin appears from the front door [short scene with dialogue]

He goes off removing his jacket to the hall

The Lights change back to present time

(p9)

Secondly, Paul Todd, who wrote the musical numbers for the play, also created a soundtrack of incidental music, akin to a film score which provided not only background music to cover the scene change but also a clever means of denoting a location or time switch by a change in musical mood.

Thirdly, for the first time two concentric revolves were incorporated onto the Scarborough stage. This allowed for two distinct acting areas, an inner circle representing

Caroline's flat and an outer circle representing all other locations. This was much more effective than simply demarcating two separate areas of the stage, because the revolves allowed not only for a smooth inter-cutting between scenes but also provided the ability to overlap stage space and stage time, presenting the same place (for example Caroline's flat) simultaneously in two different time periods. Thus we are able to directly contrast the two different relationships that occur three years apart:

The action takes place on and outside a revolve, which, indeed, does revolve, thus enabling an inter-cutting of scenes from past and present and, for example, having Caroline talk simultaneously to two men from different periods of time in her life.

[Glaap: 1999: p77]

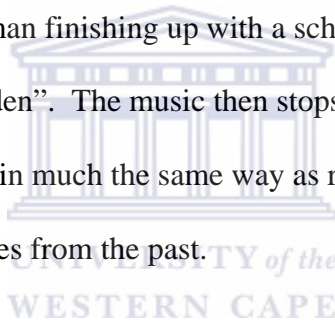
The revolves also allowed for seamless scene changes, which enabled a smooth flow to the action. This was evidently of utmost importance to Ayckbourn as the published play opens with an author's note to this effect:

Of course, the setting for the play is left entirely to the imagination and discretion of each director and designer. However, it is to be hoped that whatever decision re settings they finally reach, they will ensure a fluent and uninterrupted line to the narrative.

(unnumbered)

This is perhaps best demonstrated by the cinematically titled Montage Sequences, of which there is one in each act. These sequences are one single scene where locations criss-cross rapidly and time moves chronologically but with sudden jumps, using only the moving revolve, lights and backing music to help the audience move with the action,

allowing one section to commence almost before the previous one is complete. During these sequences the narrative is moving at an extreme pace, the actors creating a complete “mini-scene” with just a few lines of dialogue before lights and music change to move us to another place and another time. During the Montage Sequence in Act I in the course of a single scene we chart the whirlwind romance of Caroline and Kevin, the frenetic pace of the scene matching the speed at which their relationship evolves. For example, on page 12, we move from a restaurant, to Caroline’s school, to Caroline’s flat in the space of less than ten lines. The scene comes to an abrupt end - just as the relationship is destined to do – the bubble is burst by Joanna who brings Caroline back down to earth by saying “that man finishing up with a schoolteacher is a bit like Evel Knievel marrying a traffic warden”. The music then stops, the lights fade and we are jolted back to the present time, in much the same way as reality can sometimes bring a sudden halt to pleasant memories from the past.

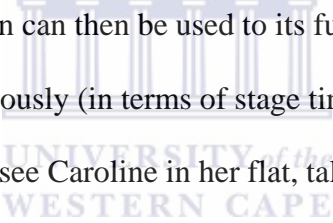


Ayckbourn deliberately runs the two time frames at a different pace. The fact that the “present” takes place over a shorter period than the “past” means that the “past” has to run at a much faster, more frenetic pace in order to catch up with the “present” to bring the two timeframes together by the end of the play. The scenes from the “past” are therefore shorter in nature and also involve bigger time jumps in between them. The “present” runs at a more sedate, leisurely pace, covering a period of just a few weeks. It therefore requires fewer cuts between scenes. The different pace of the two timeframes not only helps the audience to follow the narrative as it crosses between them, but also helps to demonstrate that we view the past and the present very differently. The past often

seems more exciting, if we look at it through rose-tinted spectacles, and in comparison our present life often appears to be dull and pedestrian.

It is necessary to establish the dual timeframes early on in the play, as it is important that the audience understand the mechanics of how the concept will work, but also to allow them to “buy into” the idea at an early stage:

Often in theatre we accept a seemingly impossible stage time simply because the dramatist and actors have successfully gained our consent to enter with them some new, illogical universe. [Ayckbourn in Glaap: 1999: p26]



Once established, the convention can then be used to its full effect. “Past” and “present” can then be presented simultaneously (in terms of stage time). For example, this happens at the end of the play, when we see Caroline in her flat, talking to two men from two different periods in her life. It is effectively just one scene. The cut between the two men is simply there to denote the time change. We see that nothing has really changed three years on. Caroline is still having the same conversation. Ayckbourn is no doubt showing the audience his view of the repetitive pattern of relationships. We seem to learn very little from our past, and appear destined to repeat the same (often disastrous) course of action over and over. There is also an echo of his play *Sisterly Feelings*, written the previous year. The play takes us through a series of alternatives, but finally ends with exactly the same scene, regardless of the path chosen to get there. What Ayckbourn does is to suggest that we are destined to end up with certain people – that in life we tend to get who we deserve. This is in effect what happens to Caroline as she goes through a long

elaborate learning process only to finally “settle” for Kevin. As she sings in the closing musical number:

Why not choose myself an ending

Where at least I'm not alone?

For happiness is something

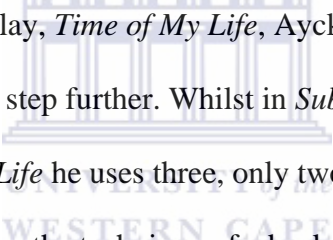
That is never yours by right.

Why not settle for today

And cuddle up tonight?

(p83)

Time of my Life



In his 1992 play, *Time of My Life*, Ayckbourn takes the idea of cutting between different time frames a step further. Whilst in *Suburban Strains* he cut between two timeframes, in *Time of My Life* he uses three, only two of which move forward in time, the third timeframe utilising the technique of a backwards narrative. Telling the story from the end back to the beginning is a device more common to film than to theatre, although it had already been used successfully on stage by Harold Pinter in his play *Betrayal* as far back as 1978. In *Time of My Life*, Ayckbourn uses time as far more than a clever theatrical device. As the title would suggest, time forms an integral part of the content as well as the structure of the play:

It both reflects a theme and serves the plot, so in this case I felt the time-juggling was quite justified. Used in this way, time permitted varying angles to be 'shot' of a single moment in time: it allowed before, during and after to be seen in long shot, medium and close-up.

[Ayckbourn: 2004: p24]

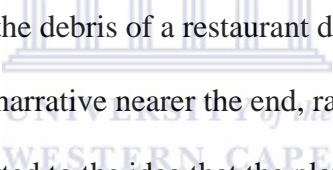
Earlier in the chapter we saw how Ayckbourn used the different lenses for differing effect in different plays, now for the first time he combined multiple lenses within one single play. Ayckbourn uses the short lens or the close-up shot for the scenes set in the present. As in *Absent Friends*, the scene between Laura and Gerry in the present runs almost in real time; if anything, it is running at a slightly slower pace. It begins when the rest of the party leave (at around 10.30 pm) and ends when Laura and Gerry leave the restaurant some time later that evening. The medium range lens extends over a few weeks, following Laura and Gerry's youngest son Adam backwards in time towards the day when he first meets his new girlfriend Maureen. The long lens scenes involving the eldest son Glyn and his wife Stephanie go forward in time over a period of two years. This is the audience's long range view into the future where we learn not only about Glyn and Stephanie, but also about the future of the other characters. It is perhaps this series of scenes that teaches us the most, the audience having the advantage over the characters in the play, who are not able to look into the future in the same way:

The older couple goes forward in time over two years....We probably learn more about everyone because we learn about the future. [Glaap: 1999/; p154]

The different lenses used necessitate that the scenes run at different speeds. This gives each timeframe a different feel. Combining the three lenses into one play gives Ayckbourn the opportunity to tell the story from different angles, each with a different perspective:

Because of the length of time - two years, two months, two hours - the speed of the scenes is somewhat different. You get a great sort of global feeling from the two-year one. I mean in that space of time Stephanie, the wife, has a baby, she has a collapse, she recovers, she forms a new relationship, and by the end of the two years she is somebody different. In two months quite a bit happens, a relationship forms and is gelled but it's not a huge thing. And in two hours we really have quite, what I call, a close-up lens, quite a detailed conversation which, because it's interrupted by other scenes, has natural pauses in it which, I said to the actors, are not breaks in the scenes, but for once we can actually have what can happen between a couple who have lived together for all that time - a natural silence which can go on for five minutes, whereas with the younger couples, particularly the very young couple, there's an anxiety to keep talking.

[Ayckbourn in Glaap: 1999:p157]



The play begins amidst the debris of a restaurant dinner party at around ten thirty in the evening. By entering the narrative nearer the end, rather than at the beginning of the evening, the audience is alerted to the idea that the play is not going to be subject to the usual chronological treatment of events, but more importantly the audience begins the evening with the sense that something has already happened. Instead of only speculating about what is going to happen, they are already starting to speculate about what *has* happened. In this way we are setting up an openness on the part of the audience to accept the multiple time frames involving past, present and future (not necessarily in that order). Throughout the play the characters, too, speculate about what might happen in the future. There are always question marks hanging in the air:

Gerry: Well, at least they're back together. Glyn and Steph. That's the main thing.

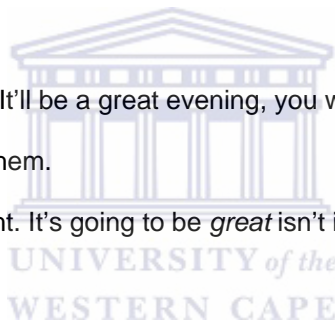
Laura: How long for though.....?

(p17)

For the audience, the answer will come within the next two hours, but the characters will have to wait much longer to find out. At the beginning of the play the characters, unlike the audience, have a knowledge of the past. The audience, unlike the characters, will eventually have a knowledge of both the past and the future. This knowledge, however, is only gleaned as the play develops and remains incomplete until the end of the play. There is, then, a constant disparity between what the characters on stage, and the audience offstage, are aware of, thus creating dramatic irony. In the section of the play that goes backwards in time, the audience already knows what is going to happen.

Adam: (*Taking her hand*) It'll be a great evening, you wait and see? Trust me. They'll love you. And you'll love them.

Maureen: Yes. You're right. It's going to be *great* isn't it? (p30)



As soon as these words are spoken the audience picks up the irony, knowing that nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed the final moment of the play (at the beginning of the evening) when Gerry makes his speech to the gathered family is perhaps the most ironic moment of all.

Nevertheless – you know, in life, you get moments – just occasionally which you can positively identify as being among the happy moments. They come up occasionally, even take you by surprise, and sometimes you're so busy worrying about tomorrow or thinking about yesterday that you tend to miss out on them altogether. I'd like to hope tonight might be one such moment. And if it is – let's not miss out on this one, all right? All that really means is, enjoy yourselves. (p92)

As Gerry talks about looking to the future, not only are we aware that Gerry's future will only consist of a matter of a few hours, but also that the remainder of the evening will be spent regretting the past, speculating about the future, and failing to seize the moment they are in:

The play's structure is circular, so that his speech, which takes place at the beginning of the dinner-party, is actually performed at the end of the play, by which time it has been thoroughly undermined. [Duncan:1996: p132]

Whereas in *Suburban Strains* most of the action takes place in one timeframe at a time, cutting between the past and present, with just the occasional overlapping of the two, in *Time of My Life* Ayckbourn takes the idea of overlapping scenes and simultaneous action a step further. Ayckbourn is very aware about the need to draw the audience into accepting the concepts he places before them and so introduces the idea of simultaneous action in the first few pages. Although the opening scene is set entirely in the present there appear to be two scenes happening at the same time. As often happens when a group of people gathered together, we end up with more than one conversation happening at once. Two different groups of people are able to hold two completely different conversations, managing to effectively block out what is being said by the other group. Normally, to present this in a play would necessarily mean placing one conversation after the other (even though they occur simultaneously in reality) to allow the audience to focus on one conversation at a time, and listen carefully to what is being said. In these opening moments of the play Ayckbourn decides not to artificially separate

stage time and real time, but rather allow them to run in parallel. This has two effects. Firstly it places the audience member right in the centre of the dinner party, and as in real life they must decide who to listen to. Half the audience will end up following one conversation, and half the other. The audience is therefore placed in the same position as the stage characters. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, it puts the idea of simultaneous action firmly on the agenda and prepares the audience for what is to come. On page 19 of the play, Ayckbourn chooses not to cut away from the present, but rather continue the scene (albeit silently) as the other scenes (in the past and future) unfold. In this way the present is always visible to the audience and we are constantly aware of the current moment. However we soon see that this is not the case for the characters in the play. As the present continues in real time, the scenes in the past and the future are representative of the way in which the characters are more concerned with remembering the past (often with regret) and wondering about the future that lies ahead (often with pessimism). Just like Gerry and Laura sitting silently and largely unnoticed for much of the evening, so the characters often fail to notice what is happening in the “now”. They are so busy looking to the past and the future that they forget to make the most of the moment they are in. This is a point that Glyn picks up on when he says:

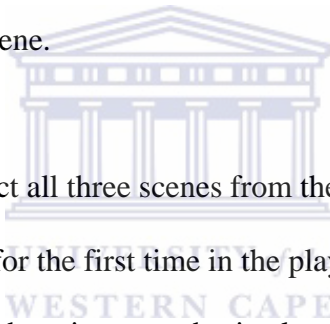
Yes. We're happy. I think we're happy. Aren't we? Pretty happy, anyway. Who the hell ever knows when they're happy? I don't know. (p23)

He is really saying you can never enjoy the moment because you only get to reflect on it sometime in the future. By the time you realise the significance of what is happening it

will be too late, and the moment will have passed. Then towards the end of the play he realizes that that is exactly what happened to them:

It was something Dad said, actually – that was probably one of the best, the happiest moments of our lives. Only the trouble with those sorts of moments is that you seldom ever realize that they are – until they've gone. Do you see? I mean very rarely do you find yourself saying to yourself, I am happy *now*. Sometimes you say I was happy *then*. Or sometimes even, I will be happy *when*...But rarely do you get to realize it *now*. (p85)

This then gives an even greater sense of irony to Gerry's speech when we actually hear it spoken in the following final scene.



At the end of the first Act all three scenes from the past, present and future are lit simultaneously. The audience, for the first time in the play must focus on all three timeframes at once. As a result there is an emphasis placed on the interconnection between the timeframes. The past affects both present and future, and in the present too, we may be in a position to try and influence what is yet to come. Laura, in particular, feels that she must try and control the future, in much the same way that she tries to control her family, and in particular her children. She is also very aware of how the past affects the future and tries to learn from the past in order to stop history repeating itself.

Laura : And I can still be of use to him, I know I can. He's got something, that boy. Real potential. And I'm going to make sure he gets the chance to realize it. Doesn't get trapped by some ambitious little nobody, like that one.

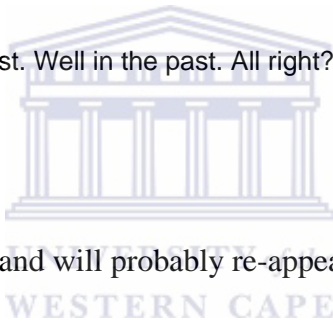
Gerry: Now, be fair. How do you know she's that...?

Laura: Because I recognize her. From thirty years ago... Nothing changes. (p70)

This also shows us that sometimes these things are inevitable, that human nature never really changes, and to try to change it would be futile. There is also a sense that the past creates the future, or at least helps to shape it and no matter how hard we try and forget what has happened or to escape from our past it will always catch up with us as we see in this exchange between Glyn and Stephanie:

Stephanie: You have done it in the past, haven't you? Said you loved me when you were –

Glyn: Now that's in the past. Well in the past. All right? That's forgotten. We agreed. All right? (p22)



But of course it isn't forgotten, and will probably re-appear to be used as ammunition in some future argument.

Whilst the audience is taken further and further into the future as the play unfolds, the characters, who remain in the present, have their own ways of speculating about the future. In the opening scene the following exchange takes place after Adam and his new girlfriend, Maureen, have left the table:

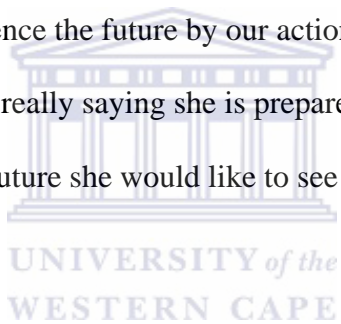
Laura: I say I don't know where he finds them.

Gerry: It's alright. It won't last. You know Adam...

Stephanie: It might. How do we know it won't?

Laura: I hope to God it doesn't... I fear for that boy, sometimes. (p7)

In these few lines we can see the family members presenting contrasting attitudes to Adam's new relationship, but also very different ways of thinking about the future. Gerry looks to the past to predict the future. He suggests the relationship won't last, based on Adam's previous track record. As a business man he is probably used to analyzing trends from past information. Stephanie is suggesting that we shouldn't look to the past, but also that the future is unpredictable. She is suggesting that there is the possibility for everyone to change. This positive outlook is perhaps a preview of her own transformation into a confident and successful woman by the end of the play. In Laura's remark, there is a hint that in fact we are able to influence the future by our actions in the present. When she says "I fear for that boy" she is really saying she is prepared to intervene or rather interfere in order to create the future she would like to see for her son. We see this when a few lines later she says:



Laura: He needs help, he can't cope with these things on his own. He never could.

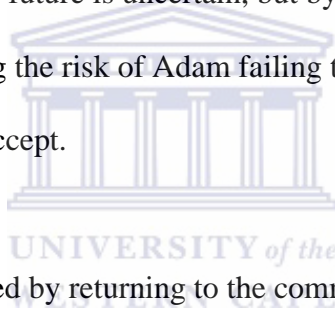
Stephanie: He's going to have to one day, isn't he?

Laura: Not while I'm around. I'm amazed at you, Stephanie. I thought as a mother yourself, you might understand how I feel. (p8)

Laura thinks it the perfectly normal role of a mother to try and "help" her son. Stephanie, however quite clearly sees this "help" for what it is – Laura's attempt to take control over her son's life, and in particular his future. When Laura says:

You know you're free to choose. You're perfectly free. You're twenty-four years old in October and you're old enough now to make your own mistakes. (p14)

it is in fact emotional blackmail, and Adam knows he is not free to choose. He would welcome the opportunity to make his own mistakes and learn from them, but knows that he must be content, for the moment anyway, to learn from his mother, who in trying to control his future is just trying to prevent him from making the same mistakes that she herself has made in the past. Laura's actions, then, have become more than simple interference. She is not prepared to take the risk of allowing Adam to make his own decisions. Laura knows that the future is uncertain, but by taking control over her son's decision making she is reducing the risk of Adam failing to live up to her expectations to a level that she is prepared to accept.



One of the effects created by returning to the commencement of the narrative in the final scene is that the audience is able to see during the closing moments of the play the beginning of everything they have already witnessed that evening. The audience at this point knows exactly what the future holds for these characters as it has already been presented to them on stage. There is therefore, an inevitability surrounding the situation, but it comes not so much from the fact that we already know what has happened (or will happen), but rather from the fact that we are now fully aware of the nature of the different characters. We realize that they are destined to behave in a certain way and to a large extent play a significant role in shaping their own future. It is almost as if we could predict the outcome, even if we hadn't seen it for ourselves. Even the car crash, which is described as an accident, was probably caused to some extent by the events of the

evening – the arguments and the heavy drinking leaving Gerry in a very poor emotional and physical state to drive a car. As we are gradually shown more and more of the future as the play goes on, we become less and less surprised at what we are seeing. In the final scene, when we are right at the beginning of the dinner party, Laura and Gerry discuss Adam's new girlfriend, who they are about to meet for the first time:

Laura: Adam's girl – (She strains to read the card). Maureen, that's her name. Doesn't sound so promising does it?

Gerry: We're reserving judgment now, aren't we?

Laura: Yes....

(p88)

At this point, having seen most of the play, we know immediately that she hasn't reserved judgment at all. The events of the play have confirmed this, but more importantly, by the end of the play we now know Laura all too well. We know it is simply not in her nature – she can't help herself. Ayckbourn carefully plants clues to the character's destinies in the opening scenes. Laura's cold indifference to her elder son and her grandchildren and her controlling manipulation of her younger son which we see two years down the line, were evident enough in the opening scene. Even Stephanie, who appears to change the most over the course of the play, is perhaps not so different after all. In standing up to the manipulative Laura at the dinner party, she is showing early signs of the characteristics which would help to take her through her break-up with Glyn and come out the other side a stronger and more emotionally complete person.

Another of the effects of returning to the beginning of the evening in the last scene of the play is to give the impression that characters are suddenly given an opportunity to go through the evening a second time. As an audience we are willing them to grasp this second chance, and enjoy the moment as they are living it, in the light of all the past and future events that only we the audience are aware of. As Duncan points out there are parallels to be drawn between Ayckbourn and J.B.Priestley. Writing about *Time of My Life* he says:

Its most obvious precursor is Priestley's *An Inspector Calls* (1946), with which it shares a basic conceit: that the apparent warmth and generosity of a well-to-do family is stripped away to expose their true inhumanity and selfishness. Like Priestley, Ayckbourn sets his play in the provinces, and takes as its focus a celebration, in this case, the birthday of Laura Stratton. Around this one evening he reveals the past and future by a clever use of flashbacks and flash-forwards.

[1996: p131]

There is also a similarity between *Time of My Life* and Priestley's *Dangerous Corner*, in that in the final moments of the play, we suddenly find ourselves back in the opening scene. The one significant difference, however, is that where Priestley's characters (in both plays) are given an alternative path to follow, which completely alters their future lives, *Time of My Life* offers no such alternative:

In *An Inspector Calls*, Priestley gives the selfish, destructive Birlings a second chance, the implication being that it is possible to learn from one's mistakes... Ayckbourn is a realist... There is no reprieve for his characters; as in life, they have only one chance.

[Duncan: 1996: p138]

Chapter 3

Event Plays

Ayckbourn has written a number of plays which have been described as theatrical “events”. These plays involve extending the total stage time beyond the normal two- to three-hours duration of a standard single play. The first of these theatrical events came relatively early in Ayckbourn’s career, with *The Norman Conquests* trilogy in 1973. The trilogy consists of three separate but interconnected plays which chart the events of a single weekend from the perspective of the dining room, the living room and the garden. Although each play can be seen in isolation and is complete in itself, it is only once all three plays have been seen that the audience is able to see the larger picture. For his fiftieth birthday Ayckbourn indulged himself by writing the double length play *The Revengers’ Comedies*, which could be seen in two parts, either on two different evenings, or (preferably) on one day with a two-hour break in between. Ten years later, on reaching sixty, Ayckbourn wrote *House and Garden*, two connected plays which are performed simultaneously by the same cast in two different auditoria, with two different audiences³. These plays show Ayckbourn at his technically most inventive, and demonstrate how he is constantly testing himself to see how far he is able to stretch the constraints associated with the medium of theatre:

³ Ayckbourn had begun this tradition of writing something out of the ordinary to mark his birthday with *Sisterly Feelings* for his fortieth birthday. Although also an “event play”, it deals with alternative narratives and will therefore be discussed along with the most complex of all the “event plays”, *Intimate Exchanges*, in the next chapter.

Technically, *The Norman Conquests* shows Ayckbourn pushing his personal frontiers outwards (in one sense, he turns playwriting into a heightened game, intellectual self-entertainment). [Billington: 1983: p74]

To use the word “play” to describe the outcome of Ayckbourn’s writing is apt, for as Billington says, the technical construction of these projects is like a theatrical puzzle which Ayckbourn then takes great pleasure in solving. Although always writing with the audience in mind, there is a definite sense that there is something self-indulgent about these particular plays. The fact that (with the exception of *The Norman Conquests*) they were written as a birthday present to himself, goes to further emphasize this point. It should be remembered that Ayckbourn was operating from his own theatre and the control he had over programming meant that he was able to indulge himself in this way. He was thus able to mount *The Norman Conquests* in Scarborough, even though the likelihood of a trilogy transferring to the West End would be very slight, given the commercial viability of such an undertaking. As it transpired, the plays were picked up by a smaller theatre in Greenwich, where they proved successful enough to eventually earn a West End transfer. By 1999, a very different picture emerged as Ayckbourn’s “event plays” had by this time developed a reputation to such an extent that the Scarborough productions of *House* and *Garden*, far from generating reluctance on the part of the audiences to see more than one play, actually served as a drawing card:

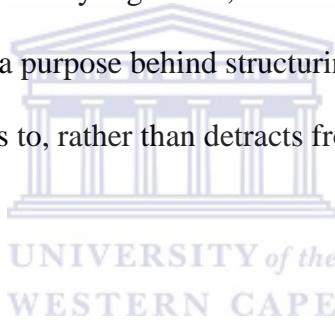
Between them, the two plays reached an audience about 40 per cent larger than Keith McFarlane [the finance director] can normally expect to budget for. In other words, the 'event' factor drew more people than two unconnected plays would have done. Also each

put a cast of 14 on stage and allowed the writer to combine public and private dramas in a way that is now normally out of reach of a new play. All these things may be connected.

[Allen: 2001: p309]

Ayckbourn's original motives for writing these "event plays" would therefore appear to be largely irrelevant. In fact, it is this process of repeatedly challenging himself to find new ways to present his narratives that has resulted in some of the most innovative theatre to be seen on the British stage.

The plays, although technically ingenious, are not simply clever for the sake of being playful. There is always a purpose behind structuring the plays in a particular way, so that the form of the play adds to, rather than detracts from the content that is being put forward. As Baker points out:

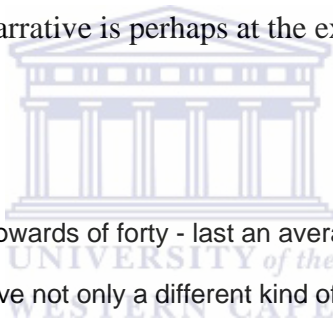


His devices are delightful in themselves, but they usually also enrich the action and comment on the characters.

[1991: p31]

It is the particular device of increasing the total duration of the plays that presents the greatest potential for the full development of both narrative and character. In both *The Norman Conquests* and *House and Garden*, it is the development of character which is most in evidence. In both cases the plot itself is only slightly extended; the multiple plays allowing the audience to witness the same events from a different perspective. The audience is able to learn more about the characters through watching the action that in a single play would necessarily take place off-stage, but which in these multiple plays is

now performed in full view. In *The Revengers' Comedies*, however, it is the development of the narrative made possible by its double length that is one of the play's main strengths. The play is in essence a single play, but with a longer than normal duration. This allows for an extension of the narrative as the plotting can become more intricate and various sub-plots can be developed. As discussed in the previous chapter, Ayckbourn's fascination with film has always been evident, and in particular, the structure of *The Revengers' Comedies* owes much to filmic devices. The plot, too, is borrowed from Hitchcock, being loosely based on *Strangers on a Train*. It is the filmic influence that gives the play its plot driven nature and its relentless pace. Paul Allen also suggests that the focus on the narrative is perhaps at the expense of a more detailed characterisation:



The number of scenes - upwards of forty - last an average of six or seven minutes each, which means the plays have not only a different kind of momentum but a different level of characterisation too... With the exception of Karen and Henry, and to a lesser extent Imogen, character is sketched in with a couple of broad strokes so that we have enough to go on to serve the narrative. This is very much the nature of many films, but it is rare in Ayckbourn plays. [2004: p131]

This broad-stroke characterization is indeed rare in Ayckbourn, but not altogether unprecedented. One of Ayckbourn's earliest plays, *Mr. Whatnot*, influenced by the silent movie era, also presented a cast of characters who were very much caricatures of the English class system. Where the plays differ greatly is that *Mr. Whatnot* was thin in terms of both characterization and plot. The play was built upon the technical ingenuity of the sound effects in particular, and the opportunity to pay homage to the silent movies

through the delightful mime performed by the actors. *The Revengers' Comedies* has a plot that is of epic proportions, and which, much like a film, moves through an exhaustive number of different locations. As Allen quite rightly points out, such a structure necessarily requires a number of characters that have perhaps just one or two lines and are included purely as a plot device, for example the motor-cyclist who delivers Karen's threatening letter to Henry, or the fireman who is necessary to douse Karen's arson attack on her own home. If the play had been confined to less than three hours in length then there would have been a danger that some of the more prominent characters, too, would have been too broadly drawn, resulting in flat, cartoon like figures with which the audience would be unlikely to relate to. The result of making the play over five hours in length is that the two main characters of Henry and Karen, in fact, become two of the most complex and interesting characters to appear in any of Ayckbourn's plays, and as the narrative develops, we find out more and more about them, and move deeper into their respective psyches. In this way we see how plot and character are very much intertwined. Indeed, the main driving force behind the narrative is Karen's increasingly psychotic behaviour, coupled with Henry's reaction to it. For example, the following interaction between Henry and Karen at the end of Part I, lays the foundations for the narrative to take a new, darker direction at the beginning of Part II:

Karen: I do hope you're intending to keep your side of the bargain, HenryBell. You're not getting seriously involved with the Friesian, are you? Because that's not our deal. Not at all it isn't and you know it. So don't try and double cross-me, HenryBell, will you, because although I'm a loyal friend, I'm also a very bad enemy. Very bad. Awful. Believe me.
(Henry stares at her).

(Softly) Do you know what I do to people who try to double-cross me, HenryBell? *(In a whisper almost jokingly, but not quite)* I take revenge! Revenge!

(She puts her finger to her lips and tiptoes off. Off along the passage we hear her shout 'Revenge' once again. Then the sound of her receding laughter.)

Henry: *(To himself, in dawning horror)* My God, she's mad! She's completely mad. What am I going to do?

(As he stands there, the lights fade to blackout).

[p101]

The characterization, therefore, becomes a means to service the plot, and the narrative develops as a result of the very specific characteristics displayed by both Karen and Henry. In fact, the entire plot device depends upon the actions of the two main characters and the way in which they react to and interact with each other. The mechanics of the plot rely not only on Karen's emotional instability, but on her child-like qualities which enable her to dream up her fantastical schemes of revenge. Also, without Henry rising to Karen's bait, the narrative could not proceed as it does. If it is Henry's distressed state that leaves him powerless to resist Karen at the beginning of the play, then it is his emotional recovery and new-found enthusiasm for life that eventually allow him to break free. What Ayckbourn does is to use these two characters as a basis from which to launch, and then subsequently drive the narrative, the other characters being introduced merely in order to play a supporting role. As Michael Holt points out, whilst the first part of the play is cast very much in the mould of an Ealing comedy film, it is by extending the narrative into a second part that Ayckbourn is able to take the comedy into darker territory, and as the character of Karen becomes more and more deranged, so the plot takes on a more frenetic and altogether unnerving quality:

It is a seductively recognizable comic milieu, with characters defined by their evocative names, drawing us into the Will Hayes/Ealing tradition However, this is a cozy trap to lure us towards the second play, which completes the action. For here the comedy assumes grotesque proportions; Henry Bell's pact with Karen Knightly for the solving of each other's problems turns from dream solution into nightmare driven by fanaticism. Ms Knightly is revealed as distinctly unbalanced, ruthless and obsessive in her determination to eliminate enemies, real and imagined. [Holt: 1999: p39]

What is also very evident is the way in which a five-hour play allows for a level of comic detail that could simply not be accommodated in a single play. For example, in the case of one of the minor characters, Norma, a young girl working as a domestic on Karen's estate, it is necessary, for the purpose of the narrative, to show the audience that she is an extremely shy and naive young girl. When Henry mistakenly believes that she is having an affair with Anthony Staxton-Billing, we can therefore see the absurdity that lies behind his assumption. The length of the play allows Ayckbourn to introduce a scene where Norma is serving breakfast to Henry. She is given just a few words to say, but it is through her actions that the audience learns that she is nervous almost to the point of paralysis. The scene lasts for a full three pages of script, during which all that happens is that Henry is given a bowl of cornflakes to eat. However, it is through the attention to detail in the stage directions that not only do we learn what we need to know about Norma, but we are also treated to one of the funniest scenes in the play:

Winnie: Now serve the cornflakes. Serve the gentleman with the cornflakes.

(Norma takes up the silver bowl and moves round to Henry's other side.)

That's it. Good girl. Good girl. Don't get nervous, he won't bite you.

Norma: Cornflakes, sir?

Henry: Yes, thank you very much.

(Norma now attempts silver service on the cornflakes. It is nail-biting stuff. Each serving gives him about eight cornflakes at a time. She is very nervous. Henry watches her, scarcely daring to breathe. Winnie continues her back-seat advice in a low monotone.)

Winnie: That's it, carefully, carefully, carefully.

(Norma shoots the cornflakes over the table. She attempts to rescue them. So does Henry.)

(Sharply) No, don't try to pick them up. Leave them there.

(Henry and Norma both stop at once.)

No point in picking them up now, is there? Keep going.

(Henry gets another eight cornflakes.)

Norma: Is that sufficient, sir?

Henry: *(Relieved)* Yes, yes. That's perfect.

(He stares at his nearly empty bowl.)

Winnie: Milk and sugar now. Milk and sugar.

Henry: Oh, now look, I can easily do that myself. Please.

[p29]

The extra stage time not only allows for more detail in the writing, but also for a more expansive plot that can encompass numerous threads and sub-plots, all of which add to the texture of the play. After the initial scenes, once Karen and Henry have made their pact of revenge, the play divides into two distinct sections, each with their own subsidiary stories. Thus we follow the lives of those working at the offices of Lembridge Tennant as Karen works on her plan to destroy the man who forced Henry out of his job, whilst cutting between scenes showing the rural lives of those living in and around Karen's estate as Henry attempts to take revenge on the wife of Karen's former lover. With over

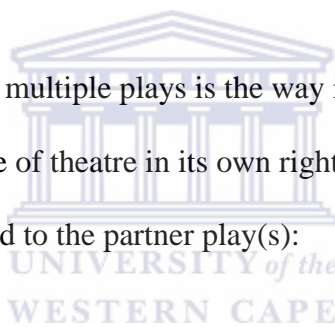
five hours of stage time available, each of these two sections can be afforded the same level of detail as would normally be given to a two- to three-hour play, giving the audience time to absorb and enjoy each of the threads. Although the play does have a “filmic” feel it is the duration of the play that makes it distinctly theatrical. The American film *Sweet Revenge* (with a running time of around one and a half hours), based on the play, omits many of the minor characters and the sub-plots in which they appear. Without this level of detail the motivation for the actions of the main characters is not exposed in the same way as it is in the play. It also fails to show, in particular, how Karen’s plan for revenge is carefully calculated, being nurtured and developed over a long period of time. The patience she shows and the level of sophistication that goes into her scheming (her plan of revenge is not merely a whim) gives the audience the first clues as to the deep-rooted psychological problems which will manifest themselves more obviously towards the end of the play. The double length of the play also allows for an extended narrative in terms of both the number of locations and the forward time-frame (several weeks would be necessary for the full completion of Karen’s scheme).

In *The Norman Conquests*, the extended stage time allowed for a different type of narrative expansion, where the three plays developed in a side-ways fashion, effectively running in parallel to each other. Ayckbourn used just the one plot for all three plays, but the narrative grew through taking the implied off-stage action of one play, and writing it explicitly into another. In this way, without having to be over-inventive in terms of the plot, Ayckbourn was able to let the characterisation develop in a way that had not previously been possible in his writing:

You start - I started - with plot very much. It was round about the Normans that suddenly, because of the scale of them, I was unable to keep plotting. There was one scene that I started to write in the Normans, and I realized that it just had to be there because it was there, and nothing was actually going to happen in it. It was the beginning of the second act of *Living Together* when they all come in from washing up, and there was just this lagoon of peace. I had to sit down and write a play where people just sat and talked; it sounds very naive, but I'd never actually written people just sitting and chatting. I was very nervous about doing it. And I suppose out of all the Norman Conquests that, to me, was my big achievement, and it was that which led on to *Absent Friends*.

[Ayckbourn in Watson: 1988: p88].

Another aspect to Ayckbourn's multiple plays is the way in which each individual play maintains an integrity as a piece of theatre in its own right, and yet at the same time manages to complement and add to the partner play(s):

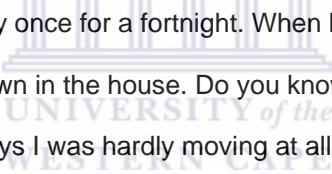


Each play, although dealing with the same characters and events, began to develop a distinct atmosphere of its own. *Table Manners* was the most robust and, as it proved on stage, the most overtly funny. *Round and Round The Garden*, possibly due to its exterior setting, took a more casual and (as it contains the beginning and the end of the cycle) a more conventional shape. *Living Together* has a tempo far slower than anything I had written before and encouraged me, possibly because of the sheer over-all volume of writing involved, to slacken the pace in a way I had never dared to do in any comedy.

[Ayckbourn: 1977: p12]

In *The Norman Conquests*, Ayckbourn has written three very different plays, all sharing a common story line, which offer the audience three quite contrasting evenings in the

theatre. As Ayckbourn suggests, it is because he was writing a series of three plays, that he was able to attempt things that he would not have risked, had he been writing just a single play. It is unlikely that he would have had the courage to let *Living Together* develop in the manner that it did, if it were not for the contrast of the more obvious comedy and faster pace of the other two plays. It is sometimes through the characters' lack of action that they reveal themselves. Reg's confession to Ruth about how he has come to rely on his wife to such an extent that he is unable to function properly without direction or instruction from her, seems typical of the familiar Ayckbourn character who, finding themselves worn down by the life they are living, lacks the necessary agency to effect any meaningful change:



I remember she went away once for a fortnight. When her father was ill. Took the children with her. Left me on my own in the house. Do you know I felt myself gradually slowing down. At the end of ten days I was hardly moving at all. Extraordinary. It was as if she'd wound me up before she left and now I was running down. I hadn't even got the energy to take the milk in. [p130]

It is in these quieter moments that the audience can often learn most about the characters. That is not to say that comedy necessarily must be derived from action, but, in fact can emerge from the most mundane and trivial of situations. One of the funniest scenes in the trilogy comes in the Act I (ii) of *Living Together* when Sarah and Annie are fighting over who is going to make the coffee:

Annie: (*at coffee*) What's everybody want? White or black?

Sarah: No, I'll do it...

Annie: It's all right.

Sarah: No, I'm doing this-

Annie: I'm already doing it.

Sarah: You're not already doing it, I'm doing it.

Annie: Oh, don't be so ridiculous, Sarah.

Sarah: I'm not being ridiculous. This is your weekend to rest.

Annie: Oh, forget that.

Sarah: Will you please give me that coffee pot?

Annie: What's the use of-

Sarah: Annie, will you give me that coffee pot at once or I shall lose my temper?

Annie: (*thrusting the pot at Sarah*) Oh, go on have the damn thing then. (*She sits sulkily.*)

Sarah: Thank you. (*Recovering her composure*) Now then, everyone. Black or white?

Reg: I should heat it up first. It'll be cold by now.

[p118]

Again, in *House and Garden*, Ayckbourn has written two very contrasting plays around the same storyline. The two plays have a different feel to each other, and as Allen points out, because of the stage time afforded, there is a more varied tempo than is normally found within a single stand-alone play:

With five hours to tell a single story, albeit one with many strands, it is less plot-driven than Ayckbourn's other multiple plays and that very expansiveness allows it to change pace and mood and to give each of those strands due worth. [2004: p200]

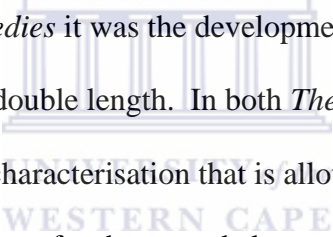
Garden, perhaps due to its outdoor setting, has a more relaxed feel and an altogether gentler pace than *House*. The majority of the plot developments occur within the more formal confines of the living room, and it is in *House* that most of the major decisions

appear to be taken. In addition, there are several characters that are confined largely to just one of the plays, and only make a brief appearance in the other. There is thus a divide between those characters who inhabit the house and those who feel more comfortable remaining in the garden. *Garden* therefore portrays a more expansive picture of village life (reminiscent of *Intimate Exchanges*), whilst the events of *House*, being more concerned with problems of one particular family and their immediate friends (much like *The Norman Conquests*), gives a more intimate view.

These multiple plays also allow Ayckbourn to be more inventive in the use of settings. In both *The Norman Conquests* and *House* and *Garden* each of the plays has one single set throughout, which apart from the obvious advantage of making life easier for the stage management, has the effect of directing the focus of the audience onto one particular perspective. As an alternative to narrating from the point of view of a particular character, the room (or the garden) takes on this role. The audience is shown events as they occur within a confined space, the picture being seemingly complete from that one angle or perspective, but to get the full picture, the audience must see the same events from a different angle, in other words they must move into another space, into another play. By telling the story through more than one play, multiple sets can still be used whilst maintaining the tight focus that is derived from a single set play. The different sets used help to a large extent to create the distinctive atmosphere and tone of each play but perhaps more importantly allow for a variation in the way in which the characters interact with their surroundings:

The open-air setting of *Round and Round The Garden*...gives that play a certain wild, back-to-nature feeling (it certainly sets Norman off), which the other two plays, in the confines of the dining room and the living room, can't achieve. And with *House* and *Garden* the two locations make for two very contrasting plays; the same characters behave very differently depending on which set they're in. [Ayckbourn: 2004: p34]

Indeed it is not only Norman who runs wild in the garden. Both Tom in *Round and Round the Garden* and Teddy in *Garden*, lose their inhibitions, seemingly quite out of character, when freed from the constraints of the formality they would normally exhibit when indoors.



In *The Revengers' Comedies* it was the development of the narrative that benefited most from the play's double length. In both *The Norman Conquests* and *House and Garden*, however, it is the characterisation that is allowed to develop to an extent that would not be possible if it were not for the extended stage time. During the course of the various plays the audience comes to learn more about each of the characters as their actions and interactions build on what has previously been seen. The relationship between the audience and the on-stage characters therefore becomes more intimate as it develops over time. As Paul Allen says of *The Norman Conquests*:

It is hard to see quite how the full complexity of this family's dynamics would have been realised in a single play while retaining such an organic link between character, plot and comedy. [2004: p32]

Once again, Allen refers to the strong connection between character and plot. Whilst the individual plays could be classified as being either plot intensive (e.g. *Round and Round The Garden*) or character driven (e.g. *Living Together*), such a distinction would not take into account the complementary nature of these two modes. In fact, it is often through the mechanism of the plot that the audience is able to learn more about the characters. On occasion the plot devices can often provide the motivation for the characters to behave in the way that they do, for example, Sarah's flirtation with Norman can only happen because she and husband Reg have been summoned to the family home to look after Mother, whilst Annie goes off on her planned weekend with Norman. At other times, it is the psyche of a particular character that creates the opportunity for the plot to develop in a particular way, such as when Norman, who has very strong motives for wanting to stay another night, engineers the car accident so that he cannot get home. In his multiple plays, Ayckbourn builds both plot and character layer upon layer. Events unfold chronologically only within an individual play. As the subsequent plays are seen, the time-line returns to the beginning of the narrative, where another layer of information is added. Watching the characters from a different angle exposes them further, and as the audience learns more, so their theatrical experience is enhanced:

The [Norman Conquests], while enjoyable individually, gain resonance and depth when seen as one gigantic work: a rueful, eight-hour comedy. [Billington: 1983: p70]

These multiple layers create a synergistic effect, as Paul Allen describes *The Norman Conquests*:

Each can be thoroughly enjoyed individually. But when you know that Reg, turfed out of one room so that Sarah can have an earnest word with Tom, is going to stumble in on Norman and Annie in intense conversation in another, the cumulative effect is greater than the sum of the parts. [Allen : 2004: p32}

The synergy will only take effect on viewing the second or third of *The Norman Conquests*, or whichever of the two plays, *House* or *Garden*, is seen second. Due to the way in which the plays' time-lines are structured, in a horizontal rather than vertical integration, the audience is able to view the plays in any order they wish. In this way, in any given audience there will be members that are seeing their first play in the series, and others who have already witnessed one or more of the other versions. The moment of realization will therefore come at different points. To take Allen's example above, the completion of the picture can either come during *Table Manners* (for those who have already seen *Living Together*) or during *Living Together* (if the events of *Table Manners* are already known). What this then creates is the unusual situation where different members of the same audience have a different level of knowledge or information. It may seem slightly odd to someone who is seeing *Table Manners* as the first play to hear certain members of the audience roar with laughter when Reg walks into the room carrying a waste paper basket for no apparent reason. When, however, they come to watch *Living Together*, and see Reg come into the room to check up on Norman and Annie, and unable to think of an excuse for being there, pick up the waste paper basket and walk out again, they are able to see the complete joke (probably to some other audience member's bemusement).

In this way the audience whose knowledge remains incomplete until all of the plays are seen, is placed in a similar situation to characters who are not always aware of what is occurring in the other locations:

House and Garden is not so much two plays as one long play which happens in two places and in which - as in life - the characters cannot all see or know what is going on all the time. Nor can we, as the audience. [Allen: 2001: p310].

The main difference is that the audience is able to obtain an almost complete picture by the end of the cycle, whereas the characters often remain unaware of events that have transpired whilst they were (often conveniently) located elsewhere. Much of the comedy is derived from the dramatic irony of the audience being aware of something whilst a particular character remains unfortunately ignorant of the full facts. Characters such as Tom and Ruth in *Round and Round the Garden* can be talking at cross-purposes, each failing to communicate his or her true meaning to the other, whilst the audience is completely aware of misinterpretation on both sides:

Tom: This has complicated things no end. I mean, it looks as if the ball's in my court rather. Yes, you've bowled me a googly there.

Ruth: What the hell is a googly?

Tom: If a woman, unexpectedly, suddenly tells you she loves you, where do you go from there?

Ruth: Are we talking theoretically?

Tom: If you like.

Ruth: Well, it's rather up to you then, isn't it? Firstly, you have to ask yourself, do I love her?

Tom: Well, I haven't had much time to think. I mean, love's a bit strong. Anyway, there's somebody else.

Ruth: What are you talking about?

Tom: Well, there's Norman. I've got to think of Norman's feelings.

Ruth: Norman? Don't be so damned ridiculous. As far as Norman's concerned, this is some passing romantic pipe dream. So stop using Norman as an excuse for your own inadequacy. If you don't grab quickly, somebody else will sooner or later. Someone with a little more determination than Norman ever had.

Tom: Well. I'm sorry. That's all I can say. I had no idea. Does Norman know, do you think?

Ruth: What?

Tom: About me?

Ruth: Of course he knows.

Tom: Oh, that explains it. That's why he's been a bit odd towards me. Slightly strained, you know. Oh well.



[p202]

This dialogue eventually culminates in one of the most overtly comical moments in the trilogy when Tom, uncharacteristically, pounces on Ruth, having assumed she was making advances at him, when in fact she was trying to help him to woo Annie. This moment is still funny, even if the audience is unaware of the events in the other two plays, because much of what happens off-stage in *Round and Round the Garden* is implied within that play, allowing the audience to follow the story even if this were the only play they were to see. However, the comedy is increased when the audience's

knowledge is increased - when that same implied off-stage action is played out as the on-stage action in one of the other plays.

There is a basic difference in the structure of *The Norman Conquests* and *House and Garden*, in that with *The Norman Conquests*:

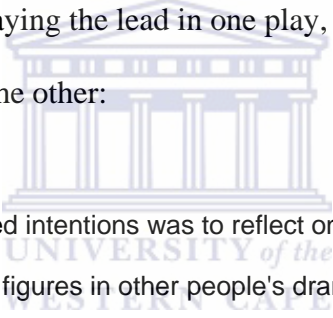
The plays are not precisely simultaneous - when all the characters are in the dining room, for example, it follows that the other locations are necessarily empty - but they do have some simultaneous scenes. [Allen: 2004: p32]

In contrast, *House* and *Garden* are entirely simultaneous such that the off-stage action in *House* gives us the play *Garden* and vice versa. Immediately prior to writing *The Norman Conquests* Ayckbourn had experimented with the idea of off-stage action in *Absurd Person Singular*, by setting the play in the location that would normally be considered to be off-stage. In the first two acts the actual party was taking place in the living room, but Ayckbourn realized that the real action was taking place off-stage, i.e. in the kitchen. J.B. Priestley, in *The Art of the Dramatist* said:

Try to suggest life going on outside your scenes: in poor, thin plays the characters on the stage seem to be the only people left in the world. [1957: p29]

Ayckbourn took this idea a stage further by implicitly showing the life on the outside by writing it into a second or a third play. Priestley is suggesting that the playwright should attempt to show a life outside the characters' own immediate preoccupations. This can certainly be seen to be evident in *House* and *Garden*. By having the actors appear in two

plays simultaneously, it became commercially viable to incorporate a cast of fourteen into the two plays. The effect of this is that Ayckbourn is able to intertwine the stories of several different groups of characters into the overall narrative. This is in contrast to *The Norman Conquests*, which focuses on only six characters who, being largely family, have a strong connection, and whose individual stories combine into one main narrative as they meet up on this one particular weekend. In *House* and *Garden*, the characters are more loosely connected, and therefore a number of different stories can be told. The effect of this is to allow one thread of the narrative to take precedence in, for example *House*, whilst another group of characters can become the focus of the narrative in *Garden*. At the same time as playing the lead in one play, they leave the stage only to emerge as a supporting role in the other:



One of Ayckbourn's avowed intentions was to reflect on the way, at any given moment, we may be only tangential figures in other people's dramas even though our own stories seem all-consuming to us. [Allen: 2001: p310]

Allen reiterates this point when he explains that it is the audacity that Ayckbourn displays in pushing theatrical boundaries to their limit, not only in extending the stage time through writing two plays where most dramatist would have settled for one, but in the ingenious way in which the two are synchronized, that makes *House* and *Garden* not just technically outstanding but also rich in social commentary:

The scale is part of the point; nowhere else in English drama is there such a comprehensive and richly textured account of the spoilt Eden we have made. Nowhere else has it been possible to show the ebb and flow of a whole community in marital

disarray, with one person's tragedy being no more than a bit part in someone else's.

[2004: p199]



Chapter 4

Multiple Choice

Introduction

Theatre critic Michael Billington has said that “Ayckbourn's [characters] are frequently at the mercy of random collisions and chance events.” [1983: p51]. We have seen in the previous chapter how a character such as Norman in *The Norman Conquests* suddenly arrives on the scene, setting into motion a chain of events that will cause the other characters to re-examine their lives, and their relationships with others. Norman is cast in the role of unwitting catalyst, and as a result of his interaction with those around him, leaves behind a mass of debris from which he emerges relatively unscathed, but which forces characters such as Annie, Tom and Sarah into making some quite momentous decisions about their future. This same catalyst figure can be seen in the form of Leonard in *Time and Time Again* and Clive in *Season's Greetings*. Without the arrival of these characters, it is likely that inertia would have prevailed in the lives of the other characters, and things would have carried on as they had always done in the past. An interesting question arises. What if Norman had actually had a Librarian's Conference to go to? What if Clive had missed that last train? Would the events of the weekend have panned out as they did, or would a different series of events have transpired?

It is this question of “what if?” that Ayckbourn would develop further in a series of plays that give us different alternative paths or outcomes. The first of these was his

1979 play *Sisterly Feelings*. Perhaps it would be more accurate to describe *Sisterly Feelings* as two plays – Abigail’s story and Dorcas’ story. Even within these two plays there are two alternative plot lines, giving a total of four possible plays. The play begins with the same opening scene, a family trip to the local Common after the funeral of Abigail and Dorcas’ mother. Amongst the party are Abigail, Dorcas and their younger brother Melvyn, along with their respective partners, Patrick, Stafford and Brenda. Also in attendance is Brenda’s young and handsome brother, Simon, recently returned from Africa. At the end of the scene, Abigail’s husband, Patrick has left early for a business meeting, leaving only one car available to transport the rest of the party home. The two sisters decide to toss a coin to see who will go in the last space in the car, and who will walk home with Simon. The second scene then finds whichever of the sisters walked home in the throes of an affair with Simon. At the end of the first Act a decision must be made on the part of the actress having an affair with Simon, whether to continue or whether to return to their original partner. If the later choice is made, the other sister then goes on to have the affair with Simon in the second Act. The final scene is the same for all versions, with Abigail and Dorcas returning to/remaining with their original partners.

This was followed by the even more ambitious *Intimate Exchanges*, a series of sixteen possible plays that all emanate from one initial five second scene, in which the character of Celia decides whether to smoke a cigarette, or resist the temptation. As a result of this decision the play separates into two alternative scenes at the end of which one of the characters must make another decision, leading to four possible scenes (five days later) that end the first Act. Again a decision is made at the end of each of these four

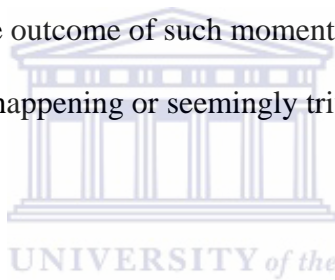
scenes, giving rise to the eight substantial scenes (five weeks later) which open the second Act, and from which the titles of the eight main alternative plays are derived. Each of the eight plays then has two alternative endings (five years later), all of which take place in the same setting, that of a churchyard. The complexity of this theatrical event is compounded by the fact that all ten characters in the sixteen plays are played by just one male and one female actor.

In his 1983 thriller, *It Could Be Any One Of Us*, it literally could, as the killer changed from performance to performance, decided randomly by a game of cards that was played early on in the first Act. In 1993 Ayckbourn wrote one of his most successful children's plays, *Mr A's Amazing Maze Plays*, in which the audience would decide on the path that the play would take, being asked to choose which of a series of rooms the characters should enter next. It is worth noting at this point that these plays could only really have been written by someone who had their own theatre in which to produce them and who was prepared to take on the risk that the project would inevitably entail, particularly in the case of *Intimate Exchanges*, which Ayckbourn himself has described as "theatrical lunacy". Without the ability to take that risk in Scarborough the plays would have never found their way into the West End or London's subsidised theatre. As Ayckbourn told Michael Billington:

If I'd carried that around the West End in a suitcase, which is what the scripts would have needed, I don't think anybody would necessarily have bought it. [1983: p166]

Once the plays had proved to be successful in the provinces, then London theatres would see them as posing less of a commercial risk. As it happens, *Sisterly Feelings* played to critical acclaim at the National Theatre, whilst *Intimate Exchanges* enjoyed an almost year-long run in the West End.

By presenting the audience with a series of possible outcomes, dependent on either chance events or decisions taken, Ayckbourn is emphasizing the importance of certain moments in life which often pass unrecognized for what they are. These moments become a pivotal point from which life can proceed in more than one possible direction. The significance of the ultimate outcome of such moments is often totally disproportionate to the chance happening or seemingly trivial decision that began the chain of events:



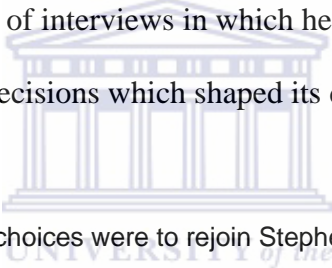
Have you ever reflected how those tiny decisions we make every day of our lives (Shall I take a raincoat today?) can often require us to make further small decisions (Should I shelter in this doorway?), that lead to larger decisions (Shall I accept this stranger's offer of a drink?) which then demand a really big decision (Should we see each other again?), forcing you into those vast decisions (Shall we share our lives together?), that finally lead to the truly monumental decisions (Is it time we called it a day?). [Ayckbourn: 1982]

These turning points exist in many of Ayckbourn's plays, but go largely unnoticed by the audience because we are only ever shown the one path that the playwright chooses for his characters, just as in real life we only ever experience one path, the other possibilities ceasing to exist the moment a particular chance event or a particular decision taken lead us down one road to the exclusion of all others. By *showing* us more than one option we

begin to see just how important these small events and decisions can be. In both *Sisterly Feelings* and *Intimate Exchanges* Ayckbourn opens up the idea of alternative future consequences and shows us that destiny is a product of both random chance and deliberate choice.

Sisterly Feelings

Sisterly Feelings was written in the year of Ayckbourn's fortieth birthday and was almost certainly influenced by his wishing to create something out of the ordinary, perhaps a little self-indulgent to mark this occasion. Ayckbourn has also admitted that the idea came from doing a number of interviews in which he talked about his career as if he had made clear and conscious decisions which shaped its direction, when in fact:



his only conscious career choices were to rejoin Stephen Joseph in Scarborough in 1958 and to rejoin the company again after his stint at the BBC in 1970. The rest, including the first season at Scarborough in 1957, had been luck or instinct. [Allen: 2002: p178]

From these seeds came *Sisterly Feelings*, another example of how Ayckbourn manages to successfully merge the form or structure of the play with the content or message that he wishes to present:

I think, in the best plays, the idea and the technique come together... In *Sisterly Feelings*, I wanted to write about choice, and then came the thought that this was the time to use that particular device, precisely because it was about choice.

[Ayckbourn in Watson: 1988: p70]

The play is indeed about choice, but it is also about chance. In particular about the way in which chance and choice become interlinked, to such an extent that it becomes difficult to see where mere chance ends and choice of action comes into play. The first split-off point in the play is the result of a random event. Using the tossing of a coin to decide a particular course of action to take is obvious almost to the point of cliché. However it is the outcome of this single act that then sets into motion a chain of events which will eventually lead to the second split-off point, which will require a decision to be made on the part of the actress playing either Abigail or Dorcas (depending on who won the toss of the coin earlier in the play). There is, then, a link between the random event and the decision, but also a question arises as to the extent of the choice available to the actress, and even to the randomness of the chance event. Ayckbourn wanted to create a completely random piece of theatre, where the outcome each evening would depend on the tossing of a coin, in full view of the audience, who along with the actors would wait with anticipation to see which version they would enter into that night. What he wanted to do was to “investigate chance on stage and to challenge the convention that a single, fixed, two-hour event is sufficient for dramatic truth” [Allen: 2004: p57]. Unfortunately, the practical mechanics of presenting such a piece went some way towards undermining this. Firstly, to fully appreciate the idea behind the play it is necessary to see more than one version. Without seeing the different possibilities presented, it is easy to miss the significance of the coin tossing outcome, or even the decision made at the end of Act I. In order to encourage audience members to see more than one version of the play, a certain number of the performances had to be “rigged”, in other words the outcome published in advance. For these performances the tension and excitement surrounding the

uncertainty over which way the evening would progress simply disappeared. Even the performances which were left open to chance were often subject to interference on the part of the actors. The audience was not actually able to see the coin as it landed, and so an actor with a particular desire to perform one particular version could easily declare heads or tails as they wished. During the run at the National theatre, Michael Gambon, playing the part of Patrick, found that in Dorcas' version he had too much running around to do. He therefore had the idea of manufacturing a double sided coin, so that he and Stephen Moore (the actor playing Simon) could themselves rig the coin toss, when they felt so inclined. Taking all this into account, the number of truly random performances were fewer than those that were decided in advance. Secondly, the decision made by either Abigail or Dorcas at the end of Act I was often pre-arranged (for the reasons mentioned above), removing the choice element from some of the performances. A more significant problem, I would suggest, was that even when it was left open, it was always the actress who made the choice, rather than the character. The actress plays the same scene on different nights, yet makes a different decision at the end. This could depend on factors such as how the actress believes the character would behave (but why behave one way one performance, and then take a different course of action the next?). The actress may also be influenced by other factors such as which of the following scenes gives her a better role, or wanting to get her own back on her fellow actors for rigging the coin toss. All of this points the arbitrary nature of the decision. In fact this may well be something that Ayckbourn was quite conscious of when writing the play. What it actually does is show how characters can behave in a totally random and seemingly inconsistent manner; that it is quite possible for people to behave in a different manner, given the same set of

circumstances. It is only by showing us plays with alternatives, and giving characters a second chance to repeat their actions that we see just how arbitrary and contradictory human nature can be. This is explored to an even greater extent in *Intimate Exchanges*.

Ayckbourn admits that the technical side of putting on such a play has its difficulties, but that it allows him to explore ideas and themes that would not be possible in a conventional play:

The device has the effect of stimulating actors, irritating stage managers, and infuriating box office staff. By way of apologia, I can only point out that the device is not employed merely out of cussedness. As I say, the plays are about choice. How much do we really control our lives and do we really make decisions or just think we do?

[Page: 1989: p53]

Indeed, in failing to create the purely random piece of theatre that he had set out to do, Ayckbourn is actually adding to the argument he presents for the complex interconnection between chance and choice. We see how both choice and apparent chance are open to manipulation and interference from various sources, on stage, as they may well be in life. Even as a playwright, working under the closed conditions of the theatre, it appears that Ayckbourn himself is unable to control events exactly as he intended.

In spite of the criticisms surrounding the effectiveness of the dramatic device used by Ayckbourn, there is no doubt that the plays bring to the forefront the idea that we are

all at least in some way subject to the random nature of chance events, even if the device of tossing a coin is a little obvious. However, the way in which Ayckbourn explores the nature of choice and agency within his characters is far more subtle. As in many of Ayckbourn's earlier plays, we see how an unwillingness to break away from social convention becomes a straight-jacket for many characters, restricting their ability to make decisions and significantly reducing the choices open to them. (In *The Norman Conquests* we saw how a character such as Norman has managed to free himself from the constraints of conventional behaviour and is thus able to act freely, largely unconcerned about the consequences of any decision he takes. For Annie, on the other hand, who is unable to free herself from these constraints, the decision-making process is a more complex and often guilt-ridden one.) In *Sisterly Feelings*, the decision taken at the end of the first act will largely depend upon the extent to which either Abigail or Dorcas feels pressured by social convention to abandon their affair with Simon. However, irrespective of the decision they make at that point, they will inevitably it seems, by the end of the play, have returned to the status quo. It appears that the pressure to conform is ultimately too great for either sister to ignore. Much as it may initially appear that the characters have a choice over their actions, we see that there are forces much stronger than individual will that come into play. Ayckbourn's choice as a playwright to bring the two storylines together by writing one final scene for all four options says much about how he sees self-determination to be a rather limited concept. In the preface to the play he says:

Not that this is saying that I'm a believer in predestination and the inevitability of fate, but rather that I do believe that mostly we finish up with the friends and partners in life that we deserve.

[1981: p viii]

In a sense what he is showing us in the play is that perhaps there is more than one route that can be taken to lead us to the same place, and that the lessons that we learn along the way mean that we are not necessarily the same person when we arrive. Even though the final scene of the play, on the day of the wedding of younger brother Melvyn to his fiancée Brenda, appears on the page exactly the same for all versions, there is certainly scope for the actors to play the scene with a differing emphasis depending on what has previously transpired. The following exchange, for example could sound very different depending on whether Simon had had an affair with Patrick's wife, Abigail or only with her sister, Dorcas:

Simon: Sorry. Beg your pardon. After you.

Patrick: No, after you. You're the best man after all.

Simon: Yes, true...

Patrick: Well, for today anyway.

[Patrick goes. Simon laughs]

[p145]

By allowing us to see only one final version for all alternatives it may appear that Ayckbourn is suggesting that the decisions we make are perhaps not as important as we may think they are, and that our inherent characteristics are likely to lead us to more or less the same place, in spite of any interventions we might like to think we are making. The task of changing our lives is in fact far more complex than the simple tossing of a coin. Malcolm Page writes that:

Priestley in *Dangerous Corner* suggested that a chance remark can change the course of people's lives: Ayckbourn, more cynically, shows people constantly returning to square one. [1989: p54]

This return to the status quo, could however be seen in a different, more positive light. It is quite comforting to think that the decisions we make may not necessarily be life-changing after all. It questions the notion that there are “right” and “wrong” decisions, suggesting that we are simply faced with different alternate paths into the future. What is very apparent in *Sisterly Feelings* is the idea that nothing we do is totally irreversible. The structure of *Sisterly Feelings* allows for two points in time when one or other of the sisters is able to end their affair with Simon and return to their original partner, once at the end of Act I (where a choice must be made) and again at the end of Act II (i), where the playwright chooses for them. What we see is that there are many moments in our lives where we are able to reverse or rectify the “mistakes” of the past. In *Sisterly Feelings* the alternate paths cross in a figure of eight manner, coming together for a specific moment, only to diverge once more. There is a suggestion that the last scene of the play, rather than being a final point where everything has returned to the status quo and from which only one path into the future is possible, is in fact simply one such moment when the lines cross, and that new choices and chance events will present themselves and that the possible paths into the future are infinite.

There is a certain amount of debate as to just how effective *Sisterly Feelings* is as a piece of theatre and whether or not Ayckbourn fully succeeds in his goal of seamlessly merging form and content. As Michael Billington points out:

The key question ... is whether Ayckbourn's audacious technique meshes with his philosophy. [1983: p133]

There is no doubt that the technical side of *Sisterly Feelings* is ingenious, and at the time it was written, very much at the cutting edge of theatrical experimentation. Whether inspired by the onset of his fortieth birthday or by having just moved the Stephen Joseph Theatre into its new home at Westwood, Ayckbourn certainly produced something novel and refreshing for the Scarborough audience. It proved successful enough to earn a transfer to The National Theatre. The artistic director of the National at the time, Peter Hall, was instrumental in bringing this about, saying:

The play is about decisions, the moment of choice, whether to change your life or not, and the consequent calamities and happiness... It is a joy to behold such craft, such perception, such absurdity. [Page: 1989: p54]

There are, however a number of problems that can be identified in the play. One such problem arises from the fact that in constructing a multi-pathed play, audience and critics are naturally inclined to compare the relative merits of the different versions. One criticism that has been leveled is that in *Sisterly Feelings*, Abigail's story appears to carry more dramatic weight than Dorcas' story, and that the general consensus amongst audience, actors and critics is that it is a better play. The problem appears to stem from the fact that Abigail is married, whereas Dorcas is not. In simple terms, Dorcas does not have as much at stake as her sister. The dramatic tension builds up in Abigail's story, in a way that it fails to do in Dorcas's version. It is also partly to do with the character of

Dorcas' boyfriend, Stafford being presented as weak and ineffectual. As a result, there appears to be little to choose between Simon and Stafford, and whether Dorcas dumps one boyfriend in favour of the other is of limited interest or consequence. For Abigail, the choice between Simon and her husband, Patrick is a much more significant decision. Given these high stakes, the scope for comedy is increased. The camping scene in Act I of Abigail's version contains some of the funniest moments of the play, as Abigail, trying to regain the free spirit of her youth, dances around the tent in her underwear, only to be surprised in the act by her policeman uncle Len who is on a stake-out to catch a suspected coven of witches loose on the common. The comedy comes from the embarrassment she feels, which in turn comes from the fact that as a married woman she has been caught in a compromising situation. The equivalent scene in Dorcas' version, a cross-country running race, also set on the common, is not as overtly comical mainly due to the fact that although Dorcas is trying to hide her relationship with Simon from Stafford, who is skulking in the bushes, the consequences of her being found out never appear to be as great as in Abigail's case. It is not as funny because she has less to lose.

Intimate Exchanges

Intimate Exchanges, like *Sisterly Feelings*, is (a series) of play(s) about chance events and happened to develop out of one such fortuitous circumstance. Ayckbourn had always wanted to write a play for two actors, but never felt that he was in a position to deny the other members of the company an acting part. In 1981 at the end of a gruelling tour of *Way Upstream* to America, he found himself with only two members of his acting company who did not feel that they needed a break. He was therefore presented with the

perfect moment in time to write his two-hander, and what transpired was the most ambitious and largest example of Ayckbourn's dramatic output to date.

Like the plays discussed in Chapter 3, *Intimate Exchanges* has a longer than average combined duration, totalling some 30 scenes in all and is a marathon of theatrical endurance, particularly as the entire load rests on the shoulders of just two actors, who between them perform ten different roles. What makes *Intimate Exchanges* slightly different from the other "event" plays such as, for example, the *Norman Conquests*, is that as each new version is seen by the audience, rather than add to what has happened in previous versions – showing us, for example, what was happening in the garden whilst other events were taking place in the living or dining room – the new version simply offers us an alternative series of events. John Peter has suggested that as each new version is seen, it negates what has already been in the previous plays:

The whole thing is arrogant, demented and mesmerizing. Ayckbourn assumes, and it seems rightly, that people will go more than once to watch different things happen to the same people in much the same settings. Of course, sitcom audiences do this all the time; but here the point of each version is that it actually cancels all the others.

[1984: p 39]

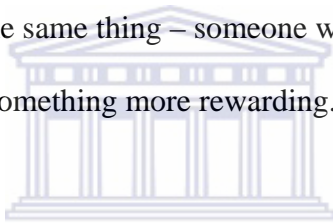
It is true that in terms of plot alone, the various versions do cancel each other out. They are *alternatives*, and one version must necessarily take place to the exclusion of all others, but only if we are considering things from a standpoint of conventionally perceived chronology and logic. What Ayckbourn cleverly manages to do is create a

world where it appears that all these versions can (and indeed do) take place without displacing the other alternatives. The term “parallel universe” has been used in the field of science fiction, and is perhaps one way in which we can view the structure of these plays. The idea suggests that there is more than one feasible way in which our own world could have developed (had a different decision been made at some specific point in the past) and that it may be possible that in some “alternate world”, running in parallel to our own, that different decision may, in fact, have been taken. This would then result in an infinite number of “alternate worlds”, all being slightly different from the next. Even if we discount such an idea, there is still a sense that the different versions of the plays add to all the other versions, simply by allowing us to learn from what “might have” happened “if”. John Peter’s argument, that the alternate versions cancel each other out, falls short, in that it fails to take account of the way in which the plays build very strongly on each other, not only through allowing the characters to develop more fully, but by showing the various permutations in possible relationships between them. What we see as we work our way through the various alternatives is a series of patterns emerging. Robin Herford, who performed in the original production, suggests that Ayckbourn had two main purposes in writing the plays:

A, there's the way the tiniest decision can change the whole pattern of your life. B, it's also saying that within relationships there are patterns for further relationships, so there is a resonance to it. [Page; 1989: p69]

If for example, we take the character of Celia, we see that in both the “smoking” and “no smoking” paths, one possible alternative is to have an affair with either Lionel (smoking)

or Miles (no smoking). Whether it is Lionel or Miles is entirely dependent on whether or not, at the beginning of the second scene, she hears the doorbell ring and so lets Lionel into the garden or, failing to hear the bell, bumps into Miles who is skulking around by the garden shed. However, the reasons for her entering into an affair, amongst them the fact that the communication lines between herself and husband Toby have all but broken down, are almost identical in both cases. The character of Sylvie has possible relationships with Lionel, Miles and even Toby. Each of them has something different to offer, Lionel the security of a home and family, Miles an adventure of a lifetime, and Toby the encouragement to help her develop her full potential. But in all three cases, she is probably looking for much the same thing – someone who can take her away from her current situation and offer her something more rewarding.



One consequence of the way in which the plays are structured is that there is a certain amount of repetition of the earlier scenes. For example, *Affairs in a Tent* and *Events on a Hotel Terrace* have an identical first Act, as do *A Garden Fete* and *A Pageant*, *A Cricket Match* and *A Game of Golf*, and *A One Man Protest* and *Love in the Mist*. For an audience member who is seeing his fifth, sixth, seventh or eighth version, this could present a problem. One of the things, however, that makes re-watching the earlier scenes interesting, is to notice how the same scenes can be played with a change of emphasis. Just as in *Sisterly Feelings*, where the final scene can take on a different feel depending on what had happened previously, so the earlier scenes in *Intimate Exchanges* should be played with a view to what follows. For example in the scene, *A Visit from a Friend*, Miles' interaction with Sylvie can be played in two ways. If the play continues

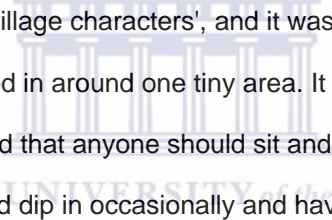
into *Dinner on the Patio*, Miles should be played as being almost indifferent to Sylvie with his attention very much focused on Celia (this then lends credibility to his accepting Celia's dinner invitation at the end of the scene). If, on the other hand, the play continues into *Confessions in a Garden Shed*, then he should begin to make some sort of connection with Sylvie (who he scarcely knows), otherwise the notion of him suddenly asking her to accompany him on a walking tour around the British Isles (although intended to be spontaneous and rash) would appear to stretch credulity too far. This is where a theatrical production has the advantage over a reading of the plays (where the reader will tend to read the earlier scenes only once, as they are printed, and then progress through the new scenes) or even Alain Resnais' film versions, *Smoking* and *No Smoking*, which do not repeat the early scenes, but rather rewind to the decision point and then follow the action in the new direction. It is this re-performance of the early scenes that is one of the key factors that helps to make *Intimate Exchanges* a distinctly theatrical experience. This is where Sheridan Morley writing in *Punch* seems to underestimate the effectiveness of Ayckbourn's presenting us with a range of alternatives:

Given that there may well be eight different ways of writing *Intimate Exchanges*, most playwrights would I think have discarded seven of them and given us a final draft pulling together the best of the rewrites. Mr. Ayckbourn, not a man to waste much, is throwing all eight at his audiences and letting them decide which ones they like best.

[Page: 1989: p68]

It is not a question of deciding between the plays, although they all have their own distinctive feel, and audience members will no doubt have their favourite. *A One Man*

Protest is the most overtly comical of the plays, and being the only one that contains just the six main characters, is probably the most self-contained. *Events On A Hotel Terrace* is the closest any of the plays comes to farce, whilst *A Garden Fete* has an almost Chekhovian feel to the piece. Each play does stand on its own, and will make a pleasant evening's entertainment, but the point is that they complement each other. It is only as the other versions are seen that the whole picture starts to emerge, and the audience's experience is enriched as layer upon layer is added. However, Ayckbourn admits that he never started out with the intention that people would necessarily watch all of the versions:



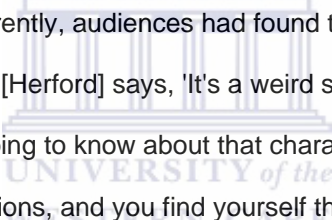
I populated the play with 'village characters', and it was what I call completely closed-circuit writing: it all gathered in around one tiny area. It was meant to be like a big picture book. It was never intended that anyone should sit and solemnly watch all sixteen versions, but that you could dip in occasionally and have a look at it.

[Watson:1988: p132]

What Ayckbourn is also suggesting here, is that even if we were to see all sixteen versions, the picture would still be incomplete. What we are given is, in fact, just a random selection of all the millions of possible “what ifs”. We are merely beginning to scratch the surface of all the potential permutations. A “big picture book” is perhaps a rather modest way of describing the piece, and suggests that the whole thing is all rather superficial with nothing much lying under the glossy surface, which could not be further from the truth. Paul Allen's description is much nearer the mark:

Nothing like it has ever been achieved in the live theatre and one of its great qualities is that it has some of the wide-ranging and appetite-filling scale of a novel, without losing the importunate passion or the public intimacy of theatre; the extended comedy of the television sitcom without forever having to contrive new situations. [2001: p203]

Another way in which the eight different plays build on each other is by allowing the characterisations to emerge and expand in a way that is far more complex and intricate than would be possible in a single two-hour play. The layering effect comes from learning more and more about the characters as we chart their various relationships and observe them in diverse situations:



Both the actors and, apparently, audiences had found the characters filled out as they saw more versions. Robin [Herford] says, 'It's a weird sensation. Normally when you get a script, that's all you're going to know about that character. With this you keep learning more as you do more versions, and you find yourself thinking, ah, that's what he meant'.

[Page: 1989: p69]

For the actors in the original production, learning more about the characters was an incremental process, in which they were not very far ahead of the audiences who were watching the plays. When they started to rehearse the first play, *A Cricket Match*, only two of the eight versions had by that time been written. As the run progressed, and more versions were added, the actors found that they were able to draw on the accumulated knowledge they had gained about the characters they portrayed. As Robin Herford told Paul Allen:

You knew that behind you was this huge body of work. You've seen Toby at his wildest and you've seen him at his most pathetic and you can call on both of those to play whatever's in front of you at the moment. It was almost an orgy of acting. The wonderful thing was that one knew one could be profligate. It was not the kind of situation where you have 40 lines in a play and you know there are four good laughs and you've got to get them every night. You've got hundreds. Hundreds. And you could just fly a bit.

[2001: p202]

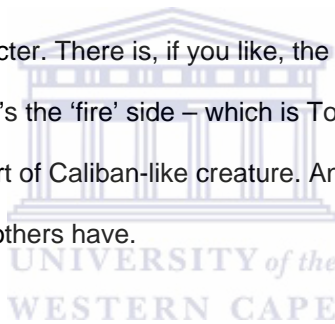
In the 2006 Scarborough production, the two actors, Bill Champion and Claudia Elmhirst, and the director, Tim Luscombe had the benefit of reading the entire piece before embarking on rehearsals. Champion explains that because of the epic nature of the piece (he also likens it to a novel), the characters are given a much greater opportunity to develop. As actors, he said, they were able to explore different aspects of each character and place a different emphasis on these in each play. They were always presented with another opportunity to bring out a different side of a particular character. For example, they would have the chance to show a character's gentler side in another version, and so showing only a character's aggressive side in one particular version is possible, without running the risk of giving an unbalanced performance. What we are able to see by following the characters through all sixteen plays is their behaving in what might appear to be an inconsistent manner, but is in fact, as Tim Luscombe writes in the production programme for *A One Man Protest*, perfectly consistent with the way most people behave most of the time:

Each of the main characters pretty much runs the full gamut of human behaviour, and, just like real people, is allowed to be beautifully complex and contradictory. Sylvie is

sometimes impulsive and conservative, inspirational and frightened, robust and fragile. Miles can be defiant and reserved, compliant and stubborn, diffident and bold. Depending on which variation of *Intimate Exchanges* you see. [2006]

There is another aspect to this broader development of character, in that observing the characters in a multitude of different situations and various relationships, it becomes noticeable that these very diverse individuals have much more in common than would first appear to be the case. As Ayckbourn told Ian Watson:

It's not accidental that each of the three main characters of each sex is an element of perhaps one bigger character. There is, if you like, the 'air' side of the man's character – which is Miles – and there's the 'fire' side – which is Toby – and there's the 'earth' side – which is Hepplewick, a sort of Caliban-like creature. And all three are complementary, all three lack something the others have. [1988: p135]



This was something that had already been seen in *The Norman Conquests*, where Ayckbourn admits that the three main characters Norman, Tom and Reg each represented a different side of his own personality. In *Intimate Exchanges* this particular notion is further emphasised by the fact that just one actor and one actress play all of the roles between them. Even though the actors in both the original 1982 production and the 2006 revival manage to differentiate very successfully between the various characters, through use of costume, wigs, voice and physical posture, the remaining physical resemblances continue to suggest the idea that each may be a facet of one larger, all encompassing character.

Once again, as in *Sisterly Feelings*, the plays are about choice and chance, and Ayckbourn continues to show his audience the extent to which they are inextricably intertwined, to the point that it becomes difficult to distinguish between the two. Where does chance end and choice begin? After the initial break-off point, where a decision as to whether or not to smoke a cigarette is clearly made by Celia, the various moments of decision become less obvious, so much so that it is not until the alternative version is seen that we are able to establish the exact moment where the decision is made, when one of the characters chooses to say something different from the first version. The various versions of the play develop from the premise that to some extent the characters create their own destiny through the decisions they make (or fail to make). What becomes apparent is the way in which decisions taken combined with chance events help to shape the future. For example, in *Love in the Mist*, if Miles makes a conscious decision at the end of the scene to leave with Rowena and return to the hotel in the car, he is simply removing the element of chance that would come from deciding to decline the lift and walk back to the hotel in the other direction. If he does decide to walk back, the element of chance - that he might possibly walk off the edge of the cliff - then comes into play. In making the decision to walk back, Miles has exposed himself to a set of chance events, quite different from the ones that might emanate from driving back in the car. Similarly, in the opening scene, Celia's initial smoking/no smoking decision then leads to a chance event - hearing the doorbell ring (or not). What this suggests is that the characters are not entirely at the mercy of random chance events, and are in fact able to play a small role in forging their own destiny. At the same time there is a question raised as to the amount of control that the characters actually have over the decisions they take. In *A Game of Golf*,

we see how Toby has come to accept that there are certain things in life over which he is powerless to effect change, that no matter what decisions are taken the course is already set, and therefore it is useless to try to change its direction. Unfortunately, as we see in the following extract, it is often the most important things in life, such as our relationships with others, which are the most difficult to control, and in a desperate attempt to regain some semblance of control over our lives we turn our attention to focus on the trivial and the mundane:

Celia: I wish people could hear this conversation. I really do. They wouldn't believe it.

What are you doing?

Toby: I'm looking for the ball.

Celia: Toby, we're talking about our lives here.

Toby: I can't do anything about our lives, Celia. Not yours and mine. I'm sorry. Nothing at all. Whereas this ball – yes, I can. I can look for it. I can find it. Or it can stay lost. And if I find it, I can carry on playing with it. Absolutely straightforward. With us, I regret to say, there is no solution.

[Intimate Exchanges Vol. II : p91]

Tim Luscombe suggests that this is an important theme throughout the plays:

If fear can be called a disease, the bulk of the characters in *Intimate Exchanges* seem to suffer from a fear of life and its uncontrollability. [2006]

One thing that the various versions of the play demonstrate is how, even when characters appear to be in control, this complacency can suddenly be swept away by the intervention of some random chance event, and that the fear that Luscombe talks about is, in fact, a

perfectly justifiable reaction. Michael Holt suggests that the control that the characters appear to have over their own destiny is little more than an illusion, and that the element of chance is in fact so powerful, that it can change their very nature:

Like [Pirandello and Priestly] [Ayckbourn] has experimented with chance and time, using both in constructing multi-pathed plays. As an accomplished technician, he seizes these elements as dramatic puzzles and theatrical opportunities. But they are more than that. What does emerge, as he uses time and chance in a series of plays, is a conviction that in life these two elements are catalysts in the forging of innocence or guilt. For Ayckbourn innocence or guilt is the result of the throw of the dice of chance, time and character. Blame is not his purpose as a playwright. [1999: p49]

The suggestion is that the characters do not choose to behave in the way that they do, but that it is circumstances that drive their actions. For example, Celia does not set out with the intention of having an affair, but finds herself taking that particular path when the circumstances present themselves. It is Toby's admission that their relationship has finally run its course, along with Miles' advances towards her, that combine together to give us *A Cricket Match*, where Miles and Celia are in the throes of an affair, causing them both feelings of guilt and uncertainty. If, however, Toby suggests that they should give their marriage another go, then Miles' advances alone are not enough to persuade Celia, and *A Game of Golf* is the result. Once more we see that it is choice combined with chance that is the ultimate determinant.

Ayckbourn himself, however, in conversation with Ian Watson, suggests that the way in which he structured the plays meant that the characters do, in fact, have a hand in

their own future, and that the role of chance is perhaps of less significance than the deliberate choices made by the characters:

I felt each character had a choice of destiny through it, that's all. None of them behaves inconsistently within that, but things happen to them in one story that couldn't happen in another. You can't cross over once you're set on a course. [1988: p133]

This can best be demonstrated by comparing the structure of *Intimate Exchanges* to that of *Sisterly Feelings*. In *Sisterly Feelings*, there were cross-over points, where characters could make a conscious decision to turn back along a previous path, or to continue in the same direction. As previously described, the narratives cross each other in a figure of eight pattern, ultimately re-joining in the common final scene. In *Intimate Exchanges*, however, the narratives split at the first smoking/no smoking decision point and continue in parallel to the next decision. Each split-off point then creates two more parallel scenarios. In mathematical terms, the parallel story lines can never meet, and therefore, unlike *Sisterly Feelings*, which has just one ending, *Intimate Exchanges* has sixteen different endings which appear to be extremely diverse. Although the narratives run in parallel, they are not entirely isolated and there are a number of inter-connections between them. There are several specific events that occur in more than one version, which are there in order to emphasise the similarities between the alternatives. Celia speaks exactly the same lines to Sylvie as she appears in the garden to empty the tins of paint into the rubbish bin in both *A Visit from a Friend* and *A Gardener Calls*. Whilst the main narrative is focusing at this point on the relationship between Celia and Miles or Lionel, Ayckbourn is demonstrating that for the other characters life continues largely

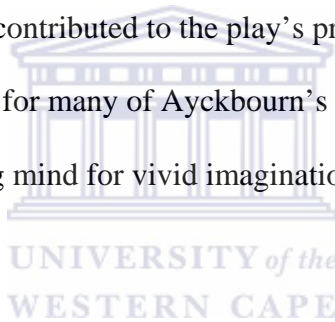
unaffected. In this way, as each play focuses on one or two specific relationships, the characters are called upon to play either a main or a more supporting role, depending on the version being performed. The characters are always there in the background even when the main narrative is not following their particular story. It is a reminder that in another version, they will become the focus of our attention. Another result of the interconnectedness of the versions is that ultimately the endings are perhaps not as diverse as they might at first appear to be, and that there are patterns or similarities that can be discerned. For example, as we join the final scene, we find that both Toby and Jo Hepplewick have died in more than one version, the only difference being the timing. Sylvie and Lionel find themselves married in more than one scenario, in one case the scene is that of their wedding, in another they have been married for a few years and already have children. In writing sixteen different endings, Ayckbourn was trying to show the very diverse paths down which random chance and the choices we make can lead us. But in doing this, he has shown not only the potential for change, but also the possibility of repetition. What is so remarkable is the way in which Ayckbourn presents both the positive success stories, and the tragedies experienced, in sixteen endings that are all equally plausible.

Chapter 5

Back to the Future

Introduction

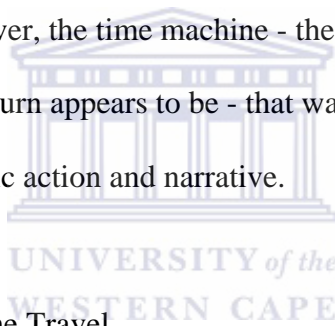
Ayckbourn has on more than one occasion used an imagined future as a setting for his plays. In one of his earliest plays, *Standing Room Only*, written in 1961, Ayckbourn took a familiar spacial setting, in this case Shaftsbury Avenue, and projected it twenty years into the future. In *Absurd Person Singular*, Ayckbourn set the third Act nominally in the future, which contributed to the play's predictive message. The future has also provided the backdrop for many of Ayckbourn's children's plays, making full use of the capacity of the young mind for vivid imagination. Paul Allen has suggested that:



The future is a setting that allows [Ayckbourn] to exaggerate current developments dramatically. It also allows him to play with his abiding, almost obsessive interest in gadgetry and technological development. [2004: p115]

The future setting allows Ayckbourn to comment indirectly on current social issues on a political level that is often difficult to present in contemporary situations. As Allen says, it allows for the dramatic exaggeration of current issues, but by removing events from the immediate timeframe it also creates a platform from which a sharper, more critical commentary can take place. Similarly the use of future technology, in particular robots with human characteristics, allows Ayckbourn to comment on human behaviour in a

more detached manner than would be possible with real human beings, and allows him to present the intricacies surrounding human relationships from a completely new perspective. In his 1987 play, *Henceforward*, Ayckbourn demonstrates his love of gadgetry and advanced technology by using his long standing interest in sound as an opportunity to introduce a complex music console with advanced sampling capabilities into the narrative, and it is in this play that we are first introduced to a robot in the form of an obsolete automated child minder called Nan 300F. The robot was to become a common character type in Ayckbourn's plays and would appear again in his children's play *Callisto 5* (later reworked as *Callisto 7*), and as a leading role in his 1998 play *Comic Potential*. It was, however, the time machine - the ultimate gadget for someone as fascinated with time as Ayckbourn appears to be - that was to open up a new set of possibilities in terms of dramatic action and narrative.



Communicating Doors and Time Travel

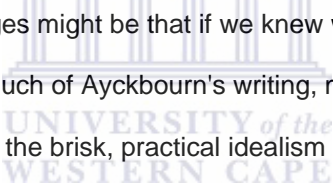
As was evident in *Sisterly Feelings*, *Communicating Doors* is yet another example of how the form and content of the play are merged to form one synchronistic whole:

Here again, theme very much dictated that we would need to play games with time. The theme after all was that of lives changed by different actions or series of choices.

[Ayckbourn: 2004: p25]

There are obvious parallels that can be drawn with *Intimate Exchanges*, in terms of exploring the choices and options available to the characters. In *Intimate Exchanges*, the characters could not go back in time to change a particular decision that they made. In

this way they could never see the effect of “what might have happened if”. It is only the audience that experiences the outcomes and consequences of the different decisions made. In *Communicating Doors* however, the device of a time-travelling machine affords the characters an opportunity to change past events, as they are given a second chance to alter their actions. The second decision will have the benefit of being informed by full knowledge of what occurred the first time around. This information, pieced together by the characters through the course of the play, gives them a sense of agency that was often lacking in the characters of *Intimate Exchanges*. The knowledge they receive about the future gives them a purpose, and enables them to work together in order to help change the lives of others, at the same time unwittingly altering their own fortunes:



[One] of the play's messages might be that if we knew what the future held, we could change it. ... It is, like so much of Ayckbourn's writing, more about the choice of good over evil and, embodied in the brisk, practical idealism of Ruella, it applauds the will to do good rather than take the less daunting option and turn away. It is Ruella's decisive action rather than any sci-fi magic that actually gives the story its momentum.

[Allen: 2004: p163]

It is the team-work of the three women in the play which results in the altering of history. The time-travel device is used as the means of connecting them, but Ayckbourn uses it as a metaphor (as the title of the play also implies) for communication. The communicating door is a common term for a door inter-connecting two adjoining hotel rooms.

Ayckbourn maintains the notion of the inter-connection, but substitutes the connection across space with one across time. The play is in many ways, in spite of its obvious comedy, set firmly in the genre of a thriller (again the film influences appear, notably

with a play on the shower scene from Hitchcock's *Psycho*). It is the constant threat of menace and the attempt to escape the immediate danger that helps the women to form a close bond. The fact that they have to pass through time in order to communicate suggests that there is some overwhelming force that is connecting them. The three women have been brought together for a specific reason, to serve a common purpose; to assist each other in changing their lives for the better:

Ruella: Don't you see? It's all to do with time.

Poopy: Time I was going home.

Ruella: Phoebe, you can't get home. Can't you see it's a – what did they used to call it – a time warp. We're from different times. For you it's 2014, for me it's 1994, and for Jessica it's – whatever – it looked as if it was their honeymoon night – when would that have been? – 1974? Yes, that would follow – twenty-year gaps. Of course. And somehow – across time – we've – linked. Been linked. You, me and her.

Poopy: (*stunned*) You, me and her ...

Ruella: It explains it, anyway

Poopy: Why should we link? What links us? [p49]

Although the precise answer to this question does not become apparent until the very end of the play, it is the fact that the characters realize from an early stage that they have, in some way or other, been linked, that spurs them into decisive action. The notion that the three characters have been specially selected for the task at hand is confirmed by the fact that the time machine, in the form of the communicating door, is not indiscriminate, as it appears to work only for some characters and not for others. In addition to this it only allows them to travel back to one specific, carefully calculated moment in time (twenty

years earlier) and then, having taken action, to return to their own time. In this way, Poopay must travel back in order to prevent the murder of Ruella, who in turn must travel back to warn Jessica about her imminent demise, creating a chain of connection back through time. As Ruella explains to Poopay:

I have a suspicion there may be a limit to the distance we can travel individually. Interesting. If we really wanted to go back a long way, say to Shakespearian times, for instance, we'd have to set up a sort of relay team, with different people handing over every twenty years. [p59]

The analogy of a relay team is apt, as not only must each of the women exert every effort in playing their part in reaching the final goal, but the handing over of the baton becomes crucial if the chain is not to be broken. It is Ruella, who is at the centre of the chain who takes it upon herself to convince the other two that they must take positive action if they are to save their own lives. She shows persistence in returning to 1974 for a second time, in order to warn Jessica that she is in danger of being drowned in 1981. She has the presence of mind to leave behind a note, only to be opened after the birth of Jessica's first child, which contains sufficient information to convince Jessica that Ruella has in fact traveled back through time to warn her of her untimely death. Ruella also plays an important role in calming the extremely frightened Poopay, and persuading her to fight on, even if the odds appear to be against them:

Ruella: Come on, now. Maybe we can change things

Poopay: (*crying*) We're all dead, that's what it is. We've died and gone to hell. To a hotel in hell.

Ruella: I mean, things can alter. Things have already altered. You're here. That's certainly altered things for me. At least now I know I'm going to get pushed out of a window. Not a lot of help, but it's something. And as for Jessica – well, I've wrecked her wedding night, poor girl. That's a start, surely?

Poopyay: How can we change anything? We can't.

Ruella: That's a very feeble attitude, I must say.

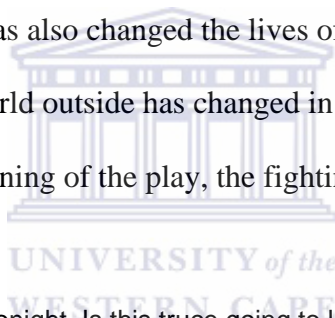
Poopyay: What will be, will be ... Que sera –

Ruella: Oh, don't be so pathetic. Come on, shape up, girl. We're going to win this. We're going to fight it, we're going to win it. Otherwise why were we given this chance, eh? Tell me that. The first thing we have to do is alert Jessica. I don't think she's in any immediate danger. If she's on her honeymoon now in '74, she didn't drown till – 1981. Gives her a good seven years. Still, she ought to be forewarned. And maybe any different action she takes – subsequently – could affect things for us. [p50]

Ruella, as the pivotal character, realizes the significance of the chain of connection that has been formed, and the power they now have to alter the future. She also realizes the difficulty she will have in convincing the others (Jessica in particular) to take their place in the chain. She would need to do more than communicate information about events that would happen in the future - she would have to gain the trust of a complete stranger. As Jessica tells Ruella, in an attempt to explain why she waited until the last possible moment to prevent her from being pushed out of the window:

Even till just now I wasn't a hundred per cent sure. I mean, since you warned me against events that in the end never happened – thank God – because I avoided them, I had no real way of knowing if they ever would have happened anyway. If I hadn't avoided them. Do you see? [p113]

Even though Ruella had predicted the precise details about the birth of Jessica's baby, it still required a leap of faith on the part of Jessica to take corrective action to change something that may or may not have occurred. Here, Ayckbourn appears to be suggesting that there are times in life when blind faith may be what is required, and that sometimes we need to open ourselves to possibilities beyond our normal perception. In the end, it is the trust that the women place in each other, and their willingness to believe in their combined power and individual resourcefulness, which forges the chain of connection. At the end of the play, not only have the three women changed their own fortunes, but the ripple affect has also changed the lives of those close to them. There is even the suggestion that the world outside has changed in some small way. Instead of the gunfire shots heard at the beginning of the play, the fighting appears to have stopped:



Poopyay: Quiet out there tonight. Is this truce going to last?

Reece: It might this time. We live in hope. Lewisham have agreed to sign. It's only Croydon being difficult as usual ... At least everyone's still talking. That's the important thing. We're having another go at them tomorrow.

Poopyay: Then try and sleep. We're all relying on you. [p123]

Reece, it appears, has changed from a corrupt businessman and a murderer, and has now become a peace negotiator. From an intensely personal story of three lives, Ayckbourn has given us a glimpse of the larger picture. Just as the three women could not work in isolation to bring about change, but needed to form a connecting chain, so we see how we

are all in some way connected, and that the actions of individuals can have far reaching consequences that move beyond private expectation.

Social and Political Commentary

Ayckbourn uses the future setting in a subtle way. His future scenes are not usually drawn in the fantastic mould of science fiction, the costumes remaining very low key and not dissimilar to the current fashions, suggesting that whilst technological innovation has advanced significantly, cultural changes may be less easy to detect. The familiarity of the cultural landscape therefore presents a future which still retains some link with the present. As Paul Allen says, in the production planning of *Communicating Doors*, “there would be nothing ‘Star Trek’ about the clothes for 2014” [2001: p266]. Nevertheless, in both *Communicating Doors* and *Henceforward* there are touches that place the setting firmly, if not obtrusively, in the future. By merely hinting at the differences between our own time and his imagined future, Ayckbourn maintains a sense of realism that might have been lost if he had taken a more fantastical approach. As Allen remarks about *Communicating Doors*:

The future is very lightly sketched in; more of a constant undertone than the subject of the play, like the distant sound of gunfire and the casually dropped information that Big Ben has been blown up. [2004: p162]

The main set of the hotel suite, however, remains exactly the same from 1974 through to 2014. This is necessary due to the nature of the plot – the characters must not immediately deduce that they have in fact travelled through time and not simply into the adjoining suite - but at the same time it presents a consistency that suggests that whilst

the details may change, the fundamentals of human behaviour do not. In *Henceforward*, Ayckbourn had the opportunity to produce a futuristic set, but opted once more to suggest the future in a less obvious way, the video surveillance equipment and Jerome's sound console being the only real concession to updating the otherwise very ordinary flat. Other touches such as the self-heating meals help to shift the setting forward. By introducing technology that was already available and in existence (but not, in 1987, in people's own homes) there was a sense of credibility about the setting that made it very believable. The audience knew that the play was set in the future, but a future that was not too distant. This made the predictive nature of the play much more potent. Almost twenty years on from the play's first production, it is interesting to see that the video surveillance camera has become common place in many homes, and the sounds created by the music sampling equipment used by Jerome (which formed a major part of the original production's total budget) can now be produced on any home computer with the appropriate software. More importantly, there were other devices that Ayckbourn used in the play, to move it forward in time, that have a much greater social significance. As quoted earlier, Paul Allen's suggestion that the future allows Ayckbourn to exaggerate current events dramatically is very evident. In 1987, concern over the spread of AIDS was becoming a preoccupation in Britain, and Ayckbourn took the opportunity to address the seriousness of the issue, by commenting on it through the following predictive scenario where, as Jerome and Zoë prepare to move into the bedroom, the spontaneity of the situation is somewhat overshadowed by formal processes that must be adhered to:

Jerome: (*Watching her*) Are you alright?

Zoë: (*Having difficulty*) Yes, I was – I was just going to show you my – Show you my –
(*She produces a string of plastic credit-type cards from her thigh wallet*). There. Better
get it over with. (*Pointing to one green card in particular among the string of others*). My
Green Card. OK?

Jerome: Oh, yes ...

Zoë: I had a full check. Last month. I'm all clear. CBH 1.

Jerome: Fine. Good. Congratulations.

Zoë: Well you can't be too careful. Can you? [p43]

The lawlessness that prevails (as in *Communicating Doors*, very much in the
background) throughout the play, is also an attempt by Ayckbourn to comment on the
current state of society:



Zoë: There were these terrifying girls, you see....

Jerome: Girls?

Zoë: Who attacked me. Just now. On my way here.

Jerome: Attacked you?

Zoë: Girls. Women. I don't know.

Jerome: What did you do to them?

Zoë: (*Rather indignantly*) I didn't do anything. I was just quietly walking here from the
station. It was a lovely day and I -

Jerome: Walked?

Zoë: Yes.

Jerome: You walked from the railway station to here?

Zoë: Yes. I've just said. And then these monsters ... came from nowhere. What sort of
area is this? Don't you have any police at all? Any security patrols?

Jerome: Not any more.

Zoë: Neighbourhood vigilantes?

Jerome: Not lately.

Zoë: You mean, this area is not protected? At all? What about this building?

Jerome: The security staff kept being found dead. It got very expensive ... [p13]

As Ayckbourn points out, by removing the action (if only marginally) from the current time frame, the action becomes sufficiently detached from our immediate world view to allow for the satire and social commentary to work to greatest effect. Ayckbourn had demonstrated this very early in his career with his 1961 play *Standing Room Only*. Stephen Joseph had suggested to Ayckbourn that he write a play dealing with the problem of over-population, an issue with which he had become preoccupied. Joseph had wanted a play set on Venus, but Ayckbourn deliberately avoided this option and chose instead to place the play in a setting and a time closer to his own. The issue of overcrowding was addressed not through the science fiction of a dying planet and journey through space to find an alternative home, but through the story of an individual family whose daughter is forced to give birth on a double-decker bus which has become the family's home due to a permanent grid lock on Shaftesbury Avenue. As Paul Allen points out "the play ends up celebrating a new birth rather than restraint". *Standing Room Only* became a play which was more concerned with a localized issue; that of government intervention and control, than with the larger global concern that Joseph had originally anticipated. The current world thus becomes very thinly disguised as some future landscape, on which the writer can then comment freely:

Sci-fi doesn't have to be Star Wars scale. It can be very simple. Some of the very best stories are the simplest. It allows you to re-write your own world and, as with the novel, to write sharp satire, social warning and comment. Someone said they were the nearest thing to morality tales of our time. It's not used as much as it could be but it depends what you mean by science fiction. [Ayckbourn in Glaap: 1999: p115]

As discussed in the first chapter, Ayckbourn has never been considered to be an overtly political writer. Yet in spite of Ayckbourn's own reluctance to cast himself in the political mould, it was during the 1980s that others began to view him as an important political commentator, a development which began with *Way Upstream*, and which became most evident in 1987 with *A Small Family Business* (the play immediately preceding *Henceforward*), which was described by playwright Mark Ravenhill as the "central political play of the decade". Ayckbourn saw himself more as a social than a political commentator, using satire as one of his most effective comic tools. However, it is in his plays set in the future that Ayckbourn comes closest to making an intentional political statement. It is perhaps no coincidence that plays such as *Way Upstream* and *A Small Family Business* emerged at a time when Ayckbourn was becoming increasingly disillusioned with the way in which the country was being governed. However, this was perhaps as much to do with Ayckbourn's increasing cynicism with the political process per se, as it was to do with the specific policies of the incumbent party. Where many playwrights in the 1970s and 1980s chose to write in support of the policies espoused by (in particular the left-wing) political parties, Ayckbourn's work was seen to take a more centralist approach. Many read this as a direct endorsement of the politics of the SDP, whose formation happened to coincide with the writing of *Way Upstream*. Ayckbourn

himself was quick to deny this. Although acutely concerned with social issues and the role of government, Ayckbourn addresses them through non-partisan means, taking care not to align himself to any particular party politics:

You have to comb to find a difference between the Labour and the Tory Party.... They're obsessed with low taxation, both parties, ... Hospitals and schools are in a shambles. The infrastructure is crumbling. [Ayckbourn in Glaap: 1999: p192]

In *Henceforward*, Ayckbourn uses the immediate future as a means to present his prediction of the degeneration of society. The current infrastructure, which Ayckbourn sees as “crumbling” is shown to have finally collapsed, and those sections of society that Ayckbourn sees as being increasingly marginalized are shown to have been finally cut loose from the more affluent sectors and abandoned completely by what passes for government. In *Communicating Doors*, a similar picture of the break-down of society is presented, with well-known London boroughs presented as factions engaged in civil war. Although ostensibly an entertaining comedy thriller, as Ayckbourn points out:

It's actually a play with a simple plot and fairly simple message, made interesting by its complicated narrative structure brought about by the use of time.

[2004: p25]

It is also a sharp social commentary and was seen by some critics to contain an important political message. Although not necessarily party political, the play can certainly be read as being anti-government, as it becomes difficult to separate the play from the context out of which it grew:

In 1990 one of the biggest riots ever seen in central London had developed at the end of a demonstration against Government efforts to reform local taxation by introducing what was quickly dubbed the Poll Tax. The same year, Mrs. Thatcher resigned as Prime Minister and her successor, John Major, abandoned the tax. But once again the country had been polarized between the more affluent communities (who would have benefited from the reform) and the traditional post-industrial areas where poverty and disaffection were concentrated. These hostilities turn up in a much more generalised form in the background to the action in *Communicating Doors*. [Allen: 2004: 157]

As Allen points out, the faction fighting and the unrest are there primarily as a backdrop to the play, and yet they are at the same time integral to the play's central message. They help to form the connection between the personal narrative of the characters and their link to the larger world outside. As discussed earlier in the chapter, change cannot happen on a purely personal level without creating a ripple effect into the world we inhabit. Ayckbourn thus presents social comment through the personal stories of the individual. He re-addresses the issue of corporate corruption (as first explored in a *Small Family Business*), by incorporating it into the narrative as the motive for Reece murdering his two wives. In Ruella's story Ayckbourn tackles the issue by exploring the consequences of speaking out against such corruption. In the first scenario she is prevented from whistle blowing, as she is conveniently disposed of by Reece's business partner Julian before she is able to implicate the two of them in any corrupt activity. As she travels back in time she is able to expose their dealings to Jessica, who is then able to use the information to change the future. The women are able to prevent Ruella's death by removing the corrupting influence of Julian. Once he has been disposed of, Reece no

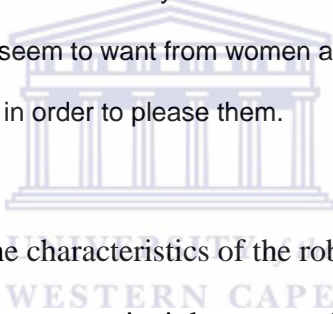
longer feels pressured into making shady business dealings and as we see by the end of the play becomes a completely different person; one who is helping to change society for the better, rather than someone who is gaining wealth only at the expense of others. The character of Julian is representative of not only the corrupt elements in society but the capitalist attitudes of growth at almost any cost which prevailed during the late 1980s, whilst Reece's character serves as a warning to demonstrate the ease with which individuals can get drawn into the corporate philosophy of wealth creation and lose sight of their moral and ethical value systems in the process.

Man and Android

Whilst the large corporations were certainly flourishing during the Thatcher era, it was the politics of individualism espoused by the government that was of concern to Ayckbourn. In *Henceforward*, in particular, he suggests that the interest of society as a holistic unit has been subordinated in favour of the needs of the individual. Ayckbourn uses the character of Jerome, a self-absorbed musician, to represent the way in which individuals have shut themselves away from the more disagreeable elements of society. This provides Ayckbourn with a platform to explore the complex issues surrounding relationships. Jerome has cut himself off from the outside world and by doing so has forgotten how to communicate and relate to those around him. His relationships with his wife and daughter have failed, largely due to his obsession with his work, and when he does manage to make a connection with Zoë, that relationship too is destined to end before it has even begun, when she discovers that he is surreptitiously taping her in order to use the sounds in his latest composition. What Jerome fails to understand is how this

might infringe on Zoë's privacy, his sole concern being the collection of the exact sound he requires for his new piece. No longer able to relate to other humans, Jerome forms a connection with a robotic child minder, who he initially models into a likeness of his wife, Corinna, and subsequently into a likeness of Zoë, after she too has abandoned him. In each case, it appears that Jerome is trying to find a replacement for the women in his life in a machine that he is able to manipulate and mould into his perfect partner:

The science-fiction element has been integrated in a particularly effective way: when Jerome tells Corinna and Mervyn that Nan 'has more dignity, more sense of loyalty and responsibility than any other 50 women you can name put together', he is identifying very precisely what some men seem to want from women and, perhaps more sadly, what some women will try to be in order to please them. [Allen: 2004: p119]



Jerome has the ability to alter the characteristics of the robot with a few technical adjustments and believes that the same principles can apply to a human being. His relationships fail precisely because he is attempting to alter his partner to fit his needs, in much the same way that he is able to re-programme Nan to perform new tasks for which she was never intended. However, there is a limit to the alterations Jerome can make; he cannot, for example, fix her "limp" without a replacement part which has now become obsolete. There are also disturbing personality traits that are demonstrated by Nan; a function of the faulty construction and design which resulted in her being taken off the shelves and out of circulation, and which emerge at inopportune moments and threaten to send her out of control. What Ayckbourn shows us is that robots, having been built and

programmed by humans also prone to error and are only as reliable as the people who designed them:

Although Nan is a robot, she is also defective (like human beings) and still retains aspects of what she was before Jerome modified her. Her 'personality' is being interfered with in a simplified form of what Jerome has done to the likable Zoë

[Allen: 2004: p119]

In *Henceforward*, Ayckbourn shows us how difficult it is to live without human contact and that without connecting with others our own creative life force will eventually dry up and die. When, like Jerome, we choose to operate in isolation, even the machines we turn to are modeled on the human form, and are intended to work interactively. When Nan, who has been designed with the specific purpose of looking after children, finds herself without a child to care for, she attempts to find a surrogate in the form of any adult who enters the flat. When deprived of all human interaction, she becomes unstable and lacking any further purpose, finally shuts herself down:

The world it conjures up is that of a man who, for the sake of his work, has neglected human ties and barricaded himself into a creative cell, only to discover that he has cut off his creative sources. The play makes the doubly despairing statement that human beings do each other so much damage that they would be better off living with amiably programmed machines; and that, without human models, even machines expire like the finally exhausted Nan.

[Page: 1989: p81]

At the very end of the play, we also see the necessity of human interaction to complete the creative process. Jerome is faced with the choice of leaving with his wife and daughter, abandoning Nan and his musical equipment, or staying behind to complete his composition. He is about to leave when Corinna tells him that she loves him. As she utters the words, Jerome realizes that this is the exact sound he has been searching for. The sampling machine, for all its technological advances, can only work when fed with human emotion. With the Daughters of Darkness about to storm the building, Jerome returns to his console to finalise his work. By re-establishing his relationship with his family, he is moved to perform at his creative best, but in the process of retreating once more into his music, he is bound to destroy the very source of his inspiration.



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Appendix 1

Plays by Alan Ayckbourn

| <u>Year</u> | <u>Play</u> |
|-------------|--|
| 1959 | The Square Cat |
| 1959 | Love After All |
| 1960 | Dad's Tale |
| 1961 | Standing Room Only |
| 1962 | Christmas v Mastermind |
| 1963 | Mr Whatnot |
| 1965 | Relatively Speaking |
| 1967 | The Sparrow |
| 1969 | How The Other Half Loves |
| 1970 | Family Circles |
| 1971 | Time And Time Again |
| 1972 | Absurd Person Singular |
| 1973 | Table Manners } |
| 1973 | Living Together } The Norman Conquests |
| 1973 | Round And Round The Garden } |
| 1974 | Absent Friends |
| 1974 | Confusions |
| 1975 (1996) | Jeeves (By Jeeves) |
| 1975 | Bedroom Farce |

| | |
|-------------|---------------------------|
| 1976 | Just Between Ourselves |
| 1977 | Ten Times Table |
| 1978 | Joking Apart |
| 1979 | Sisterly Feelings |
| 1979 | Taking Steps |
| 1980 | Suburban Strains |
| 1980 | Season's Greetings |
| 1981 | Way Upstream |
| 1981 | Making Tracks |
| 1982 | Intimate Exchanges |
| 1983 | It Could Be Any One of Us |
| 1984 | A Chorus Of Disapproval |
| 1985 | Woman In Mind |
| 1987 | A Small Family Business |
| 1987 | Henceforward |
| 1988 | Man Of The Moment |
| 1988 | Mr A's Amazing Maze Plays |
| 1989 | The Revengers' Comedies |
| 1989 | Invisible Friends |
| 1990 | Body Language |
| 1990 | This Is Where We Came In |
| 1990 (1998) | Callisto 5 (Calisto 7) |
| 1991 | Wildest Dreams |



| | |
|------|--------------------------------|
| 1991 | My Very Own Story |
| 1992 | Time Of My Life |
| 1992 | Dreams From A Summer House |
| 1994 | Communicating Doors |
| 1994 | Haunting Julia |
| 1994 | The Musical Jigsaw Play |
| 1995 | A Word From Our Sponsor |
| 1996 | The Champion Of Paribanou |
| 1997 | Things We Do For Love |
| 1998 | Comic Potential |
| 1998 | The Boy Who Fell Into A Book |
| 1999 | House |
| 1999 | Garden |
| 2000 | Vitual Reality |
| 2000 | Whenever |
| 2001 | GamePlan } |
| 2001 | FlatSpin } Damsels In Distress |
| 2001 | RolePlay } |
| 2002 | Snake In The Grass |
| 2002 | The Jollies |
| 2003 | Sugar Daddies |
| 2003 | Orvin – Champion Of Champions |
| 2003 | My Sister Sadie |



| | |
|------|--------------------------------|
| 2004 | Drowning On Dry Land |
| 2004 | Private Fears In Public Places |
| 2004 | Miss Yesterday |
| 2005 | Improbable Fiction |
| 2006 | If I Were You |

