

# Absurd Person Singular



The *Alan Ayckbourn* Guides

Compiled & researched by  
Simon Murgatroyd



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# **Absurd Person Singular**

An authorised guide to  
Alan Ayckbourn's Absurd Person Singular

Written, compiled and researched by  
Simon Murgatroyd

# The Alan Ayckbourn Guides

The Alan Ayckbourn Guides are a series of publications relating to some of the most significant of the playwright Alan Ayckbourn's plays. They are a combination of information, education and resource guides incorporating general and detailed histories, interviews, background notes, discussion points and other useful material pertaining to the plays.

Each publication is designed to serve a wide audience from general interest in the plays to students looking to study and discuss the plays.

The Alan Ayckbourn Guides are produced and compiled by Simon Murgatroyd and approved by Alan Ayckbourn. Simon Murgatroyd is the archivist for The Bob Watson Archive at the Stephen Joseph Theatre, Scarborough.

## **Absurd Person Singular (The Alan Ayckbourn Guides)**

Written and researched by Simon Murgatroyd © 2007

Published in 2007 by The Bob Watson Archive at the Stephen Joseph Theatre, Scarborough. (email: [simon.murgatroyd@sjt.uk.com](mailto:simon.murgatroyd@sjt.uk.com))

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# Absurd Person Singular

## - The Alan Ayckbourn Guides -

### Index:

#### I. Introduction To Absurd Person Singular

Timeline	4
Absurd Person Singular: A brief introduction	5
Alan Ayckbourn: A biography	6
Major Production Details	8

#### II. The Play

Synopsis	9
Absurd Person Singular: An in-depth history	10
The critical reaction (world premiere)	15
The critical reaction (London premiere)	16
The Broadway experience	18
The critical reaction (Broadway premiere)	20

#### III. Writing The Play

The writer on writing	22
Off-stage on-stage	25

#### IV. Producing The Play

Designing Absurd Person Singular	26
Directing Ayckbourn	27
Acting Ayckbourn	28

#### V. Final Thoughts

Alan Ayckbourn on Absurd Person Singular	29
The academic perspective on Absurd Person Singular	31

#### VI. Further Reading

Further reading & bibliography	32
Footnotes	33

## Part I: Introduction To Absurd Person Singular

### Absurd Person Singular: A Timeline

26 June 1972

*Absurd Person Singular* world premiere at The Library Theatre, Scarborough

14 July 1973

*Absurd Person Singular* London premiere at the Criterion Theatre

22 January 1974

*Absurd Person Singular* receives the Evening Standard Award For Best Comedy

1974

*Absurd Person Singular* acting edition published by Samuel French Ltd

30 September 1974

The London production transfers to the Vaudeville Theatre, London. The play closes on 1 November 1975

8 October 1974

*Absurd Person Singular* Broadway premiere at the Music Box Theatre, New York. The play closes on 6 March 1976

3 February 1976

The first major tour of *Absurd Person Singular* launched at Wimbledon Theatre, starring John Thaw

1976

*Absurd Person Singular* released to repertory theatres

5 March 1977

First broadcast of the BBC Radio adaptation of *Absurd Person Singular* on BBC Radio 4

1 January 1985

First broadcast of the BBC television adaptation of *Absurd Person Singular* (repeated 21 December 1987)

20 December 1989

Alan Ayckbourn revives *Absurd Person Singular* at the Stephen Joseph Theatre In The Round, Scarborough

1990

Alan Ayckbourn's revival of *Absurd Person Singular* goes on tour

15 May 1990

Alan Ayckbourn's revival of *Absurd Person Singular* opens at the Whitehall Theatre, London. It closes on 16 March 1991

25 January 1994

21st anniversary of West End production marked by Mobil Touring Theatre production

30 October 2007

Alan Strachan directs *Absurd Person Singular* at the Theatre Royal, Windsor.

## Absurd Person Singular: An Introduction

When *Absurd Person Singular* was premiered in June 1972, it marked a radical change of direction for Alan Ayckbourn and would typify the direction of his writing in the years to come. At the time, Alan was still largely regarded as a farceur; his comedies *Relatively Speaking* and *How The Other Half Loves* had been huge successes in London but gave no indication of what was to come and were largely regarded as enjoyable, if insubstantial, farces. Only when *Time And Time Again* opened in London in 1972 would these preconceptions begin to be challenged. With *Absurd Person Singular*, the assumption Alan was just a farceur would be shattered.

*Absurd Person Singular* was different to what had come before it - even from the more serious *Time And Time Again* - as it is identifiably Alan's first fully realised tragi-comedy. It is a play which walks a fine line between comedy and tragedy, capable of generating huge laughter from an audience who may later wonder how they could have laughed at such appalling characters and circumstances. This guilty laughter would become a characteristic of many of Alan's most successful plays.

The play opened at The Library Theatre, Scarborough, in 1972 in a production directed by the author. The title had been announced several months before Alan actually wrote the play and has absolutely no connection to the play itself; it was the title of a previously abandoned play and Alan had liked the title if nothing else. Difficulties when writing the play led Alan to relocate the entire action to the kitchen, making it the first of his self-dubbed "off-stage plays". It received mixed notices in Scarborough but was a great success with audiences.

The play transferred to London in 1973, produced by Michael Codron who had previously produced *Time And Time Again*. That play's director, Eric Thompson, was brought back on board having established a good relationship with Alan and shown an appreciation of how to direct his work. It also reunited Alan with Richard Briers, who had appeared in the West End production of *Relatively Speaking*. *Absurd Person Singular* was an extraordinary success in London and ran for over 30 months with three casts. It received the Evening Standard Award for Best Comedy, the first of many awards for the playwright.

In 1974, Eric Thompson took the play to America and opened it on Broadway with an American cast. It was a similarly acclaimed production and ran for two years. Until *Private Fears In Public Places* in 2005, it was widely held to be the most successful Ayckbourn production to be seen in New York.

As one of Alan's most successful plays, it naturally attracted the interest of other media. The BBC adapted it for radio in 1977 and for television in 1985. The latter had a strong cast which included Michael Gambon.

Alan Ayckbourn revived the play in 1989 at the Stephen Joseph Theatre In The Round. Again well received, after a short national tour, the producer Bill Kenwright picked it up for the West End. Although the play ran for just short of a year and received positive reviews, it was not a financial success.

In 2007, Bill Kenwright revived the play at the Theatre Royal, Windsor, with Alan Strachan as director and a heavy-weight cast which included Lia Williams, Jane Horrocks and David Bamber. Earlier the same year, Strachan had received practically universal praise for his touring revival of Alan Ayckbourn's *How The Other Half Loves*.

Although regarded as a classic Ayckbourn virtually from the start, *Absurd Person Singular* has been ripe for re-evaluation since the 1980s - particularly with regard to the unassailable rise of the monstrous Hopcroft couple. Many observers have noted that Alan's aggressive entrepreneurial couple, Sidney and Jane, foretold the aspirations of the middle-class and the social changes that were to occur in the following decade as Margaret Thatcher came to power.

*Absurd Person Singular* remains one of Alan's most popular works and comes from the period of Alan's writing career when he can safely be said to have created five classics of 20<sup>th</sup> Century British theatre in a row: *Absurd Person Singular*, *The Norman Conquests* trilogy and *Absent Friends*.

## Alan Ayckbourn: A Biography

Alan Ayckbourn is the Artistic Director of the Stephen Joseph Theatre and one of the world's most popular and prolific professional playwrights. He has written 71 full length plays and more than 20 other revues and plays for children. He is also an internationally acclaimed director, who Arthur Miller said directed the definitive version of his play *A View From The Bridge*.

Alan was born in Hampstead, London, on 12 April, 1939. His mother was the novelist Mary 'Lolly' James and his father Horace Ayckbourn, lead violinist with the London Symphony Orchestra. Alan was educated at Haileybury public school in Hertford. At 17, he left school and joined the theatre impresario Sir Donald Wolfitt's acting company for three weeks, working as an acting assistant stage manager for the production *The Strong Are Lonely*. From there he went on to a stage management job at the Connaught Theatre, Worthing, before moving to the Thorndike Theatre, Leatherhead. He would also act at both theatres. In Leatherhead, he met Rodney Wood who took Alan to see a production of *Huis Clos* in London, performed in the round by Stephen Joseph's Studio Theatre Company. Rodney asked Alan to join him stage-managing for this company at their summer base at the Library Theatre, Scarborough – actually the converted concert room on the first floor of Scarborough's Public Library.

Stephen Joseph got on well with Alan and became a mentor to the young man with Alan both stage-managing and acting with the company. His acting inadvertently led to his first professional commission as a writer when in 1958, Alan complained to Stephen about the roles he was playing. Stephen threw down the gauntlet that if Alan wanted better roles, he should write one himself. Alan wrote *The Square Cat*, which was a big success for the company in the summer of 1959. Stephen immediately commissioned a second play, *Love After All*, for the winter of 1959.

Alan continued to act and write for the Studio Theatre Company in Scarborough until 1962 when he was involved in the formation of the Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent, with Stephen Joseph and Peter Cheeseman. He premiered two plays there, *Christmas V Mastermind* and *Mr Whatnot*. The latter was produced in London in 1964 and received such a critical mauling that Alan joined the BBC in Leeds as a radio drama producer.

Alan directed his first play in 1961, *Gaslight*, at the Library Theatre and continued writing, producing *Meet My Father* for Scarborough in 1965. This would be a turning point in his life. In 1967, the play – retitled *Relatively Speaking* – opened in the West End and was a phenomenal hit. In the same year Stephen Joseph died and Alan, alongside Ken Boden, Alfred Bradley and Rodney Wood, worked together to keep the Library Theatre alive. Although Alan was closely involved with the theatre during this period, both writing, directing and choosing plays for the company, he would not formally take on the role of Artistic Director (then called Director of Productions) until 1972, a position he has retained ever since - aside from a two year hiatus between 1986 and 1988 when he became a visiting director at the National Theatre. Since 1977, he has directed all the West End premieres of his plays and is internationally renowned for his writing. Plays such as *The Norman Conquests* trilogy are now regarded as classics of 20th Century British theatre. His plays are often described as being



Alan Ayckbourn in the Stephen Joseph Theatre (Tony Bartholomew © 2005)

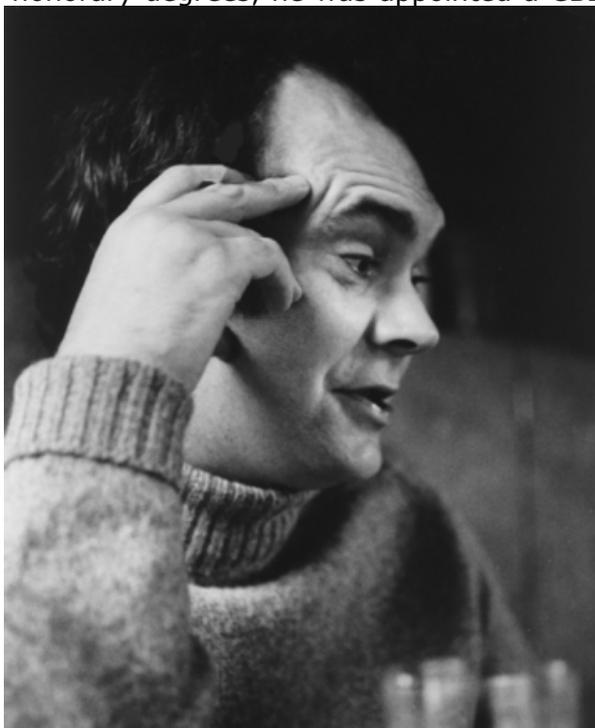
middle-class and suburban, although this is a rather dated view of his work. While the description would be generally correct for his work during the 1960s and 1970s, since the 1980s Alan's work has become ever more expansive, dealing with wider social issues and often utilizing more fantastic ideas and settings to explore his themes. He has also become a passionate advocate of writing for families and young people and has written more than a dozen full length plays for that audience, together with a number of one-act plays for children. If one was to generalize about Alan's large body of work over five decades, it would be that he writes about men and women, their relationships and their general inability to live with each other. His work is also characterized by its tragi-comedy themes and his constant willingness to experiment with stage time and space. This has led the renowned critic Michael Billington to label him as one of the few British playwrights to be constantly pushing the envelope of theatre.

Alan is also committed to theatre-in-the-round, for which he has written the vast majority of his plays. It is always worth remembering that when he stages a play in London or any are performed in the proscenium arch, it is a step away from the author's original intention. It has frequently been stated that the definitive production of Alan's plays is the premiere production in the round in Scarborough.

Alan has a close relationship with Scarborough, where he lives and has worked for most of his professional career. He has been artistic director of what is now the Stephen Joseph Theatre since 1972 and has premiered all but four plays (*Christmas V Mastermind*, *Mr Whatnot*, *Jeeves* and *A Small Family Business*) in Scarborough.

More than half his plays have gone on to London to be produced in the West End or at the National Theatre. At one point in 1975, he held the record for having the most professional productions being performed simultaneously in the West End (*The Norman Conquests*, *Absurd Person Singular* and *Absent Friends*). His work has been translated into more than 35 languages and his plays are regularly performed throughout the world.

He has received more than 25 awards and honours including an Olivier, a Moliere, the Variety Club of Great Britain Playwright of the Year and the Writers' Guild of Great Britain Lifetime Achievement Awards. The 1992 Cameron Mackintosh Professor of Contemporary Theatre at Oxford University, he is now Visiting Professor at the University of Hull. In 1994, he received a Montblanc de la Culture Award for Europe for 'establishing a thriving theatrical tradition in Scarborough and for his dedication and commitment to it'. In addition to holding a number of honorary degrees, he was appointed a CBE in 1987 and in 1997 was knighted for services to the theatre.



Alan Ayckbourn in 1972, the year *Absurd Person Singular* opened.  
Scarborough Theatre Trust © 1972

Alan's plays have been regularly produced in America and more than 10 of his plays have been produced on Broadway and Off-Broadway. In 1975 he held the record of having the most plays simultaneously running on Broadway (*The Norman Conquests* and *Absurd Person Singular*) His greatest success in America came in 2005, when Alan took his Scarborough company to the 59E59 Theaters' Brits Off Broadway Festival to present *Private Fears In Public Places*. The month-long run was an unprecedented success receiving great acclaim from audiences and critics alike. The New York Times proclaimed it "altogether wonderful" and the cast "flawless".

In February 2006, Alan suffered a stroke but later that year was directing his then latest play *If I Were You* and co-directing a revival of *Mr A's Amazing Maze Plays* at the Stephen Joseph Theatre, Scarborough. Alan Ayckbourn is to step down as Artistic Director of the theatre in 2008, although he intends to continue directing the premieres and revivals of his plays at the theatre.

Simon Murgatroyd © 2007

## **Absurd Person Singular Major Production Details**

### **Absurd Person Singular World Premiere**

Opening night: 26 June 1972

Venue: The Library Theatre, Scarborough

#### **Cast**

Jane Hopcroft	<i>Philippa Urquhart</i>
Sidney Hopcroft	<i>Piers Rogers</i>
Ronald Brewster-Wright	<i>Christopher Godwin</i>
Marion Brewster-Wright	<i>Matyelok Gibbs</i>
Eva Jackson	<i>Jennifer Piercey</i>
Geoffrey Jackson	<i>Ray Jewers</i>

#### **Production Staff**

Director	<i>Alan Ayckbourn</i>
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### **Absurd Person Singular London premiere**

Opening night: 14 July 1973

Venue: The Criterion Theatre, London

#### **Cast**

Jane Hopcroft	<i>Bridget Turner</i>
Sidney Hopcroft	<i>Richard Briers</i>
Ronald Brewster-Wright	<i>Michael Aldridge</i>
Marion Brewster-Wright	<i>Sheila Hancock</i>
Eva Jackson	<i>Anna Calder-Marshall</i>
Geoffrey Jackson	<i>David Burke</i>

#### **Production Staff**

Director	<i>Eric Thompson</i>
Design	<i>Alan Tagg</i>
Lighting	<i>Mick Hughes</i>

### **Absurd Person Singular 1989 Revival**

Opening night: 20 December 1989

Venue: Stephen Joseph Theatre In The Round, Scarborough

#### **Cast**

Jane Hopcroft	<i>Lesley Meade</i>
Sidney Hopcroft	<i>Richard Kane</i>
Ronald Brewster-Wright	<i>Donald Douglas</i>
Marion Brewster-Wright	<i>Moir Redmond</i>
Eva Jackson	<i>Robin McCaffrey</i>
Geoffrey Jackson	<i>Jeff Shankley</i>

#### **Production Staff**

Director	<i>Alan Ayckbourn</i>
Design	<i>Michael Holt</i>
Lighting	<i>Francis Stevenson</i>

### **Absurd Person Singular 1990 London Revival**

Opening night: 15 May 1990

Venue: Whitehall Theatre, London

#### **Cast**

Jane Hopcroft	<i>Lavinia Bertram</i>
Sidney Hopcroft	<i>Richard Kane</i>
Ronald Brewster-Wright	<i>Donald Douglas</i>
Marion Brewster-Wright	<i>Moir Redmond</i>
Eva Jackson	<i>Jennifer Wiltsie</i>
Geoffrey Jackson	<i>Jeff Shankley</i>

#### **Production Staff**

Director	<i>Alan Ayckbourn</i>
Design	<i>Michael Holt</i>
Lighting	<i>Francis Stevenson</i>

## Part II: The Play

### Absurd Person Singular: Synopsis

*Absurd Person Singular* play is set over three Christmases in the kitchens of three couples: Sidney Hopcroft, an ambitious tradesman, and his submissive wife Jane; architect and adulterer Geoffrey Jackson and his depressed wife, Eva; Ronald Brewster-Wright, a banker, and his alcoholic wife Marion. The three couples range from working to upper class.

'Last' Christmas is set at Sidney's house, who hopes to persuade the others to invest in his business – although both Geoffrey and Ronald are obviously dismissive of the man and dislike him. Throughout the scene, Sidney's unfeeling treatment of Jane becomes apparent, as does the way she rises above it. It also becomes obvious that Geoffrey and Eva's marriage is on the rocks and that in Ronald, Geoffrey sees the potential for help with a new commission for a shopping centre. Unseen in the lounge, Dick and Lottie Potter hold sway with their raucous jokes, forcing the others to seek refuge in the kitchen. By the end of the act Jane has been locked out of the kitchen in the pouring rain only able to return when the party, declared a success by Sidney, is over.

'This' Christmas is spent at Geoffrey and Eva's flat. Geoffrey's fortunes have fallen and Eva spends most of the act attempting to commit suicide in ever more desperate, domestic ways. Jane mistakes her attempts to gas herself for cleaning and takes over scrubbing the oven; the tablets Eva loses down the sink leads Sidney to offer to help with the plumbing – getting soaked as result; when Eva tries to hang herself, Ronald thinks she's trying to change the light-bulb and takes over - electrocuting himself in the process. In despair, she starts singing a Christmas carol as Geoffrey arrives with a doctor in tow. Amid the chaos, Marion has been getting increasingly drunk and the Jackson's rabidly aggressive and unseen dog, George, has attacked Dick and effectively trapped them all in the kitchen.

'Next' Christmas is at Ronald and Marion's house, where Marion tends to lock herself in her bedroom to be comforted by alcohol, leaving Ronald bewildered and lost in his own home. The roof of Geoffrey's shopping centre has collapsed and, ironically, he is now dependent on Eva. The two couples meet for a Christmas drink but try to hide when Sidney and Jane turn up uninvited. The couple have come up trumps in the interim and are now on the rise. Once in the kitchen, it transpires Ronald, who was dismissive of them in the first act, has to court them to keep their business and Geoffrey desperately needs them to employ him as an architect to keep his career alive. Having dished out wildly inappropriate Christmas presents and with the fortunes of all couples now completely reversed, Sidney finally gets his wish for party games and makes everyone dance – literally - to his tune.



*The Hopcrofts, Jacksons and Brewster-Wrights in the original production of Absurd Person Singular at The Library Theatre, Scarborough (left to right): Philipa Urquhart, Piers Rogers, Jennifer Piercey, Ray Jewers, Matyelok Gibbs & Christopher Godwin.  
(Copyright: Scarborough Theatre Trust 1972)*

## Absurd Person Singular: An In Depth History

"This is the big one. The one that shows his [Ayckbourn's] fascination with the desperation behind English social rituals interlocking with his well-oiled comic craft.... In this one, form and content meet in perfect harmony."<sup>[1]</sup>

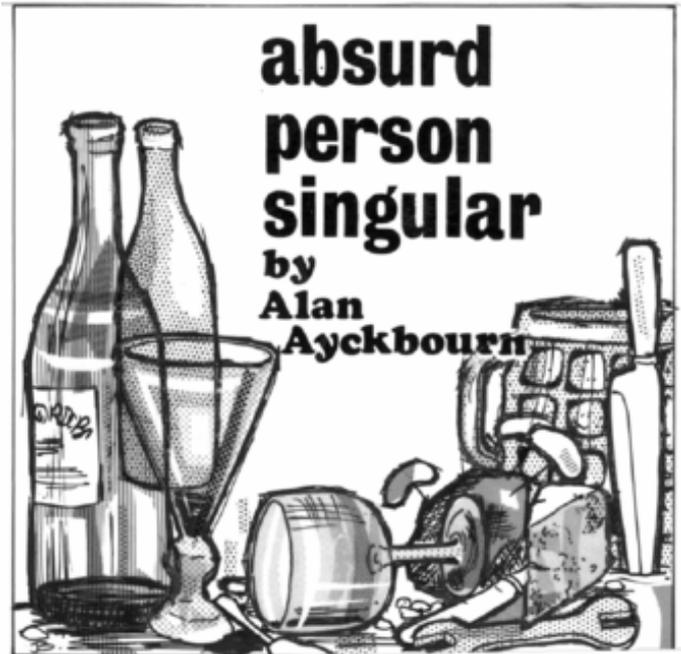
By 1972, Alan Ayckbourn's reputation as one of Britain's most promising and successful playwrights was firmly established. His plays *Relatively Speaking* and *How The Other Half Loves* had been huge successes in the West End and the clamour to produce them by repertory theatres both at home and abroad had quickly cemented both the plays' and the playwright's reputations.

His latest play, *Time And Time Again*, had premiered at The Library Theatre, Scarborough, in July 1971 and had marked a departure in direction from the high comedy of the previous plays. *Time And Time Again* saw Alan exploring a character-driven plot, eschewing many of the technical tricks seen in *Relatively Speaking* and *How The Other Half Loves*. His next play would continue down the path of a character-driven plot but would also draw in elements of farce and, to all intents, tragedy. The result, *Absurd Person Singular*, was Alan's first tragi-comedy, a genre that would become synonymous with Alan and some of his finest writing.

*Absurd Person Singular* [Absurd forthwith]

is notably the first play Alan wrote under the auspices of Artistic Director of The Library Theatre, Scarborough. Although he had been Director Of Productions and responsible for the theatre in both 1969 and 1970, it was only after a year's hiatus (largely due to his involvement with the American production of *How The Other Half Loves*) that the position became a permanent one. In 1972, he would formally be named Artistic Director: a position he would keep until his retirement in 2008. As has frequently been noted, Alan's habit at this time was to write his plays to the latest possible deadline. As with previous plays, this meant he had to submit a title for promotional purposes long before his pen had ever touched paper. The title was plucked from an earlier abandoned play and ambiguous enough to suit whatever play Alan would eventually write. As a result, *Absurd's* title has no connection to the actual play despite many clever suggestions over the years as to its meaning. Ultimately it is little more than a stock title.

The summer season of 1972 consisted of David Campton's new adaptation of Sheridan le Fanu's classic vampire tale *Carmilla*, *Absurd Person Singular*, Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* and Peter Blythe's new play *Tom, Dick And Harry*. All were to be directed by Alan and would utilise an acting company of three men and three women. Rehearsals initially took place in London with two weeks set aside for *Carmilla*; the play was to be premiered at the recently opened Sheffield Crucible for a week-long run before transferring to Scarborough. Before rehearsals, the cast convened at Alan's London flat and were naturally keen to find out more about the new play; their questions apparently met with ambiguity as he had not yet written a word of the text! Rehearsals began for *Carmilla* with Alan directing during the day and writing during the evening. The mystery of the forthcoming play only deepened by apparently random incidents such as Alan asking whether anyone knew of any good forfeits: "People in the cast wondered what was going on!"<sup>[2]</sup>



When *Absurd Person Singular* was first produced, the Library Theatre did not have production specific posters and programmes carried only a generic Theatre In The Round logo. This rarely seen image was used for promotional flyers. (Copyright: Scarborough Theatre Trust)



The Programme for the original London production of *Absurd Person Singular* in 1973.

Writing the play was not without its problems. Although the structure of the play – three acts set over three Christmas parties – was in place, Alan was unhappy with what he was writing. The play was set in three living rooms, the parties themselves being centre-stage. Ten pages in and Alan realised the first party was “a very boring affair, very tedious”<sup>[3]</sup> and he made a crucial decision. The play was relocated to the kitchens, the backstage area as such, where the real action and insight into these characters was taking place. “The really interesting things, the things people want to say to each other in private were said in here by the sink. Besides, given that the other room contained Dick and Lottie Potter, it seemed an audience would only thank me for keeping us all out here, away from his jokes.”<sup>[4]</sup> Once the play was relocated to the kitchen and Dick and Lottie were confined to an off-stage presence, the play took off. The play was completed in time for rehearsals to begin in Sheffield before continuing in Scarborough.

Although Alan was aware he was venturing into new territory with the play, even he was surprised he had written such a dark and uncompromising play. “[I] Suddenly realised it was quite a chilly ending – I hadn’t thought of it that way... It was like the director finding out why the writer had written it, quite funny really. I thought, phaw, don’t know how they’ll take this, chaps. Quite different.”<sup>[5]</sup> The second act also concerned Alan as he wondered how an audience would accept the plight of Eva and her desperate attempts at suicide. Although Alan as a

writer had ensured the comedy was never at Eva’s expense, when directing he emphasised her intentions were nothing less than deadly serious and that the humour of the act came from the oblivious intentions of everyone else.

The play, performed in the round, opened on 26 June 1971 at the Library Theatre and it was immediately obvious to the playwright there was a problem. “I confess that it was, when it opened, half an hour too long. By the second night that had been remedied with some quite severe cutting. As it played in, too, it also gathered confidence and speed as the cast began to sense that they had a success. Audiences grew in size, and nightly response became increasingly enthusiastic.”<sup>[6]</sup> Although only one review exists in archives for the original production, *Absurd* was apparently greeted by mixed reviews but was well-received by audiences and contributed significantly to what Alan reported as a “very successful”<sup>[7]</sup> season, a much needed respite for The Library Theatre which had made a loss the previous year.

Of note is the fact Alan went straight from *Absurd* to directing Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya*, a play which noted Ayckbourn writer Michael Billington feels has much in common with *Absurd*. “[The second act] catches one exactly the same way as Vanya’s attempted shooting of the professor in *Uncle Vanya*, which for Vanya himself is an expression of accumulated rage but which, for everyone else, is comically absurd.”<sup>[8]</sup> Alan’s interest in Chekhov’s work is well known, but Billington was the first to compare his writing with the work of Chekhov.

Alan’s agent Margaret Ramsay – or Peggy as she was more commonly known – was quick to see the play in Scarborough. Peggy had been nurturing Alan’s career for many years and he respected her opinions and judgement. She declared the middle act was “stunning”<sup>[9]</sup>, however she was less taken by the Hopcrofts and their dominance of the final act; a view that would be mirrored by Alan’s London producer Michael Codron. With hindsight, the Hopcrofts turned out to be the most dramatically interesting of the couples as they demonstrate a prescient glimpse of the dark side of capitalism that would fully develop in the United Kingdom after Margaret Thatcher came to power in 1979.

Although Codron had his doubts about aspects of the play, he was still keen to produce it. This was no doubt buoyed by the fact Alan was pleased with Codron's production of *Time And Time Again*, which had opened at the Comedy Theatre on 16 August 1972. Although this was not the financial success of *Relatively Speaking* and *How The Other Half Loves* – both produced by Peter Bridge – Alan felt it did far more justice to his play. While *How The Other Half Loves* had been an enormous financial success, Alan had serious reservations about how the play was treated, particularly in making it a star vehicle for the actor Robert Morley who had seriously upset the play's balance and subtleties. In contrast, Codron had found a sympathetic and talented director in Eric Thompson for *Time And Time Again* and Tom Courtenay's casting was seen as a stroke of genius. Alan was so delighted he hoped the same production team could be brought on board for *Absurd*.<sup>[10]</sup> Unfortunately this decision did not sit well with Alan's original producer Peter Bridge who felt he had a strong claim to the new play and who Peggy felt was bullying Alan to let him produce future plays.<sup>[11]</sup> While Peggy dealt with the conflicting demands for Alan's talents, Michael Codron agreed to produce *Absurd* in London and brought Eric Thompson on board as director.

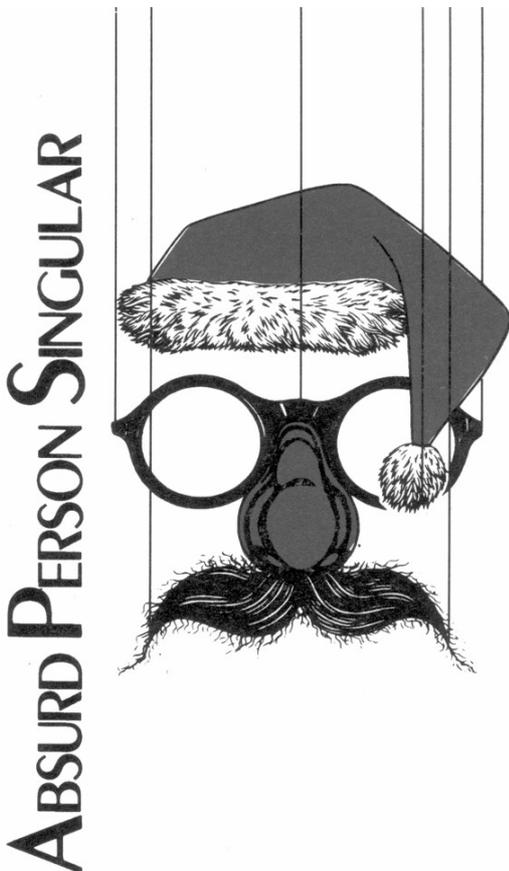
Although Alan was against the casting of stars in his plays, initial suggestions from Thompson and Codron mentioned bankable names who they felt would not only serve the play well, but would also be a draw themselves. This included the husband and wife team of John Alderton and Pauline Collins (who would appear in the London premiere of *Confusions* in 1976), George Cole and Sheila Hancock. Only the latter would actually be cast, taking the role of Marion. There was a casting coup when Richard Briers was contracted to play Sidney Hopcroft or the "little fascist" as Briers thought of him.<sup>[12]</sup> Briers had been in the London premiere of *Relatively Speaking* in 1967 and since then had become a hot property. The role of Sidney was against type, although Briers would go on to give a largely acclaimed performance.

Set over three acts – something of an anachronism today, but still common when the play was written – *Absurd* offered a design challenge for the London production. In the original production the props had been moved and redressed to portray the three different kitchens,

which was not really practical for a West End production. The problem was solved by installing a revolve at the Criterion Theatre which was only utilised between acts – something which appeased Codron who was not keen on using such technology.

With Hancock and Briers in place, a strong cast was rounded out by Bridget Turner, Michael Aldridge, Anna Calder-Marshall and David Burke. The show opened on 14 July 1973 at the Criterion and became the biggest hit yet of Alan's burgeoning career. The reviews were predominantly excellent and any perceived drawbacks were tempered by the enthusiasm for the play as a whole. Any worries Alan had about how the darkness would play seem misplaced; critic Michael Billington best summed up the general feeling when he wrote: "What makes the play rewarding is that underneath the bubbling fun you get quite a sharp pain of human fun and misery."<sup>[13]</sup> Many critics predicted a long-running success and they were not wrong: *Absurd* would run until 1 November 1975 and have three changes of casts. On 22 January 1974 it won the Evening Standard Award for Best Comedy, the first of many awards Alan would receive. Peter Hall, artistic director of the National Theatre, also saw it and thought it was a "remarkable evening"<sup>[14]</sup> and asked Alan to consider writing a play for the National, which would eventually emerge as *Bedroom Farce*.

Despite the award and a strong box office, Codron was amazed to learn in July 1974 that the owner of the Criterion Theatre, Donald Albery, was exercising his right to end the play's run in order to put the new Ray Cooney farce *There Goes The Bride* into the theatre.



The poster image for Alan Ayckbourn's 1989 Revival. (copyright: Scarborough Theatre Trust)



*Nicky Henson, Geoffrey Palmer, Prunella Scales, Michael Gambon, Maureen Lipman and Cheryl Campbell in the BBC television adaptation of Absurd Person Singular. (copyright: BBC)*

Irritated by having to either prematurely close the play or make an expensive move to another theatre, Codron arranged to move *Absurd* to the Vaudeville Theatre on 30 September 1974, two days after it closed at the Criterion with Alan directing the new cast. It would run for more than a year at the new venue and Albery was later to admit that he might have misjudged *Absurd's* popularity.<sup>[15]</sup>

The audience reaction to the play was strong and Alan recalls it being the first play where it elicited a notable personal reaction – something that would be common with later plays such as *Woman In Mind*: "After one matinee there was a man who had to come and lie down in Richard Brier's dressing room because of the last scene where Sheila Hancock played the alcoholic. He kept saying: 'That was my wife'. He stayed there for an hour and a half, Richard was so embarrassed, there was this man sobbing quietly on his sofa, and other people kept popping round the door and saying 'Terribly funny, Dickie. Laugh a minute.'"<sup>[16]</sup>

The success of the play did not go unnoticed and there was soon interest from America in transferring the play to Broadway.<sup>[17]</sup> The play opened at the Music Box Theatre on 8 October 1974 with Thompson directing a strong American cast. The show was a genuine success and ran for 592<sup>[18]</sup> performances becoming the most successful comedy on Broadway by a British playwright since Noel Coward's *Blithe Spirit*, which ran from 1941 to 1943. It remains the most successful Ayckbourn play to have been produced on Broadway.

Back in England, the success of the play led to a quick publication of the script by Samuel French Ltd in 1974, although Peggy was also courting the publishers Faber & Faber in the hopes they would produce a mass market edition of the play. Impressed by the play but unsure of the appeal of Alan's scripts, the company declined. Despite all his success, Alan had to wait until 1975 for a mass market publication of his plays, when Chatto & Windus published *The Norman Conquests*. They would follow this up in 1977 with *Three Plays*, which included *Absurd*. Faber would eventually publish Alan's plays starting with *A Chorus If Disapproval* in 1985. There was even interest in a film version of the play: although this would ultimately come to nothing, the value of the property in Peggy's mind can be seen as the suggested price for the rights was \$400,000 and 10% of the profits.<sup>[19]</sup>

When the London run closed, Codron was keen to capitalise on the play's success and a tour was organised opening at the Wimbledon Theatre on 3 February 1976. The production was directed by Paul Eddington but based on Eric Thompson's London production and featured

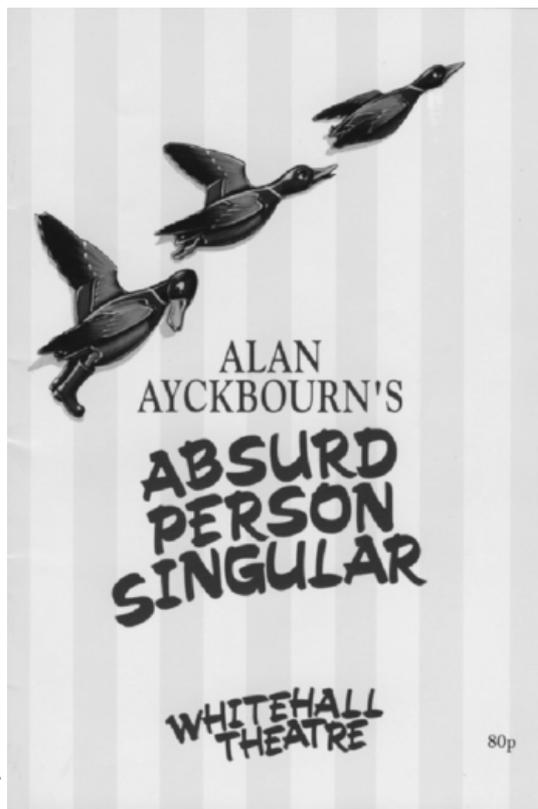
John Thaw, Richard Coleman, Josephine Tewson, Paul Greenwood, Barbara Morton and Brenda Cavendish. Rights for repertory theatre performance were granted in 1976, although special dispensation had been given by Codron and Albery to the Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent, to produce the play from 10 September 1975. Amateur rights to produce the play would be released on 1 September 1977 and it was quickly picked up by amateur companies.

Although the film version of *Absurd* was never made, there were other media adaptations of the play. In 1977, the play was commissioned by Shaun McLoughlin for Saturday Night Radio on BBC Radio 4 and directed by Kay Patrick, who had previously directed *Relatively Speaking* for the radio. Of course given the nature of the second act, *Absurd* is not an obvious piece for radio adaptation and McLoughlin requested permission to add dialogue for the second act to give voice to Eva's inner-thoughts as she silently attempted to commit suicide.<sup>[21]</sup> Alan agreed to the changes, but was unable – or unwilling – to write them himself and left it to the BBC. The play was broadcast on 7 March at 8.30pm and the cast included Judy Parfitt, Stephen Murray and Christopher Godwin. Alan's reaction to the adaptation is not recorded, although rights to repeat the play were not granted by Peggy and the radio play has not been heard since.

More successful was the BBC's television version of the play for New Year's Day 1985. The adaptation featured a strong cast which included Michael Gambon, Geoffrey Palmer, Prunella Scales, Maureen Lipman, Cheryl Campbell and Nicky Henson. Although not the strongest filmed adaptation of Alan's plays, it is still a solid one which stays true to the spirit of the original with minimal cuts to the script. The play was directed by Michael Simpson, who would go on to direct the acclaimed television adaptation of *Season's Greetings*, and was repeated on 21 December 1987.

Alan Ayckbourn revived the play in December 1989 at the Stephen Joseph Theatre In The Round, Scarborough. The production was well-received with many critics noting the prescience of the play with regard to the social changes in the UK during the '70s and '80s. Unfortunately, the actress playing Marion - Moira Redmond – injured her back early in the play's run and Heather Stoney was drafted in to read the part while a replacement was found. Lavinia Bertram, who had just seen this production, returned to London to find a message asking if she could play Marion until Redmond recovered. Coincidentally, plans had already been made to transfer this production to London with practically the same cast but with Lavinia taking over Lesley Meade's role as Eva, playing opposite Redmond as Marion. Alan re-directed the play for a national proscenium arch venue tour. The play was then scheduled to move into the West End, produced by Bill Kenwright, and following a short try-out tour to Northampton, Wimbledon and Guildford, the play opened at the Whitehall Theatre on 15 May 1990. The reviews were good but not outstanding and The Observer's comment that the play was "slightly over-strained and under-cast"<sup>[23]</sup> seemed to be the consensus of many reviewers no matter how much they enjoyed the production. The play ran until 16 March 1991 but it was not a success with Kenwright reporting the losses were "enormous"<sup>[24]</sup> with an approximate figure of £150,000<sup>[25]</sup> being mentioned at one point.

Although Alan has not revived *Absurd* since, the play continues to be popular and in 1994 the 21st anniversary of the London production was marked by a tour by the Mobil Touring Theatre. In 2007, the play was revived by Kenwright at the Theatre Royal, Windsor, directed by Alan Strachan, fresh from an acclaimed tour of *How The Other Half Loves* earlier that year. *Absurd Person Singular* remains a classic Ayckbourn play and the first pointer of where Alan's interests as a playwright lie. It is the first of Alan tragic-comedies and stands as a crucial play in his development as a playwright.



*The programme for the 1990 London revival at the Whitehall Theatre.*

## Absurd Person Singular Reviews (World Premiere)

*There is only one surviving review of the original production of Absurd Person Singular held by The Bob Watson Archive, Scarborough, and Alan Ayckbourn's personal archive. This review is reprinted below followed by the reaction to the London production over the next two pages.*

**Sunday Times, 27 August 1972**

Probably the hottest place in Scarborough at present is the Library Theatre, a smallish square Georgian room above the public library, packed with holidaymakers of all ages for a new play by Alan Ayckbourn, the highlight of the theatre in the round season.

Ayckbourn's plays usually end up in the West End after their Premiere in Scarborough (he has two there at the moment and this new mixture of farce and comedy of manners will no doubt follow them). It shows the rise of an unappetising entrepreneur and the corresponding decline of the notabilities who at first snub him and then are made - literally - to dance to his tune in a hilarious game of forfeits. The playwright is also the director and has had the amusing idea of setting all the three acts in the kitchens of the various families involved, though it seems rather wilful to choose a theatre in the round and then barricade the cast off from the audience by running sink units and fridges all around the acting area.

The importance of the Library Theatre, apart from Ayckbourn's writing and active support (he is the theatre's artistic director), is precisely that it is in the round, the creation of the late Stephen Joseph when he was a lone voice crying in the proscenium wilderness whose advocacy has led to a general opening out of the stage: it would be a deserved tribute to Joseph's devoted labours as well as to the quality of the present work if the Council could bring itself to establish a permanent theatre in the round in an area largely given over to the juggernaut Bingo. Meantime East Coast visitors can steal a march on London theatregoers and enjoy a bright and bracing example of the Theatre of the Ozone.

John Whitley



*The three kitchens of Absurd Person Singular: the Hopcrofts in Act 1 (top left); the Jacksons in Act 2 (centre) and the Brewster-Wrights in Act III (above).  
Copyright: Scarborough Theatre Trust 1972*

## **Absurd Person Singular (London Reviews)**

### **Daily Express (Herbert Kretzmer)**

Ayckbourn does not go all out for witticisms, but depends instead upon a swift, logical build up of complicated, if trivial events.... Playwright Ayckbourn juggles his characters with some dexterity and no little cruelty. Almost all the hilarity of his three-act play derives from the idea of people being impervious to the desperate plight of a woman in their midst. Ayckbourn is a dramatist of minimal mercy.

### **Daily Mail (Jack Tinker)**

Like all the best, it works on one clean and lean idea while uncovering the isolation of the human soul. (As the title here so aptly suggests).... By a miracle of conjuring, writer, director and cast conspire to transform a silent and systematic attempt at suicide into one of the funniest second acts the West End can currently boast.

### **Daily Telegraph (John Barber)**

What is remarkable about Alan Ayckbourn's comedy at the Criterion Theatre is that it contrives to be simultaneously hilarious and harrowing. Literally, it is agonisingly funny.... Mr Ayckbourn harrows us not with skeletons in the cupboard but with the anguish of the blocked drain, the squashed trifle and the quietly breaking heart.

### **Drama (J.W. Lambert)**

The piece is enormously enjoyable as well as lethal in its portrait of six assorted middle-class English.

### **Evening Standard (Milton Shulman)**

[Ayckbourn] has written one of the funniest, if not the funniest, comedy in town and I expect it will be a very long time before another first night replaces it at the Criterion.... *Absurd Person Singular* is one of those deft and ingenious comedies that seems to have been whipped up miraculously out of thin air.

### **Financial Times (B.A. Young)**

There's no plot at all, though there's some development of character, as much apparently for the author's convenience as anything. But with no more tension than can be created by the delayed resolution of domestic mishaps, the play kept me attentive the whole evening.... The evening left me weak with laughter.

### **The Guardian (Michael Billington)**

Alan Ayckbourn's *Absurd Person Singular* is a blithely funny play built round the old critical cliché that farce and tragedy are simply opposite sides of the same coin. Each act is set in the kitchen of a small-town married couple at Christmas; and as the disasters accumulate, the panic intensifies, and the social relationships disintegrate, the audience laughs all the louder. But at any moment it would only take one small push to send the whole situation toppling into the direst situation.... What makes the play rewarding is that underneath the bubbling fun you get quite a sharp sense of human pain and misery.

### **New Statesman (Benedict Nightingale)**

If you wish to see a truly hideous example of this genre (farcical comedy), torment yourself with *No Sex Please, We're British*, still (incredibly) running at the Strand; and, if you wish to know what can still be made of it, treat yourself to *Absurd Person Singular*. (1) It is very funny, with plenty of incident and confrontation. (2) These incidents are not capriciously superimposed on the action, but emerge naturally from the conflict of character. (3) The characterisation is apt, intelligent, and actually develops as the evening proceeds. (4) This development is towards no set conclusion, no conventional reconciliation, but the kind of suggestive and sardonic irresolution we expect of plays at the Royal Court or Open Space.

### **New York Times (Clive Barnes)**

It is a lovely piece of work. But the entire evening, with its misery coated over with the paint of a smile, is very rewarding and amusing. It is beautifully directed by Eric Thompson.

### **Punch (Jeremy Kingston)**

The interplay of situations, a strong formal framework and the variations within this are shapely as well as funny.... The familiar bounds have shifted a little. Farce is mixing with comedy (two very different spirits) and serious events add a dash of unexpected bitterness.

### **Sunday Telegraph (Frank Marcus)**

If you collect your thoughts sufficiently amid the paroxysm of laughter, you will find in this new play, a more clear-eyed and devastating mirror image of the unpleasant and unacceptable face of capitalism than anything enacted on the stages of our so-called committed theatres.... So far, I have not read any critical assessments, erudite analyses, or theses on the work of Alan Ayckbourn. Our academics and pontificators have been strangely silent. This, however, does not prevent *Absurd Person Singular* from being the best comedy in town, and Mr Ayckbourn from having the last laugh on all of them.

### **Sunday Telegraph (Frank Marcus - from his review of Trevor Griffith's *The Party*)**

The only truly radical play in London [is] Alan Ayckbourn's *Absurd Person Singular*, where behind the veneer of laughter, present day class differences and their fluctuations are exposed with a devastating exactitude. The characters are believable too.

### **The Stage**

Alan Ayckbourn has the writer's supreme gift of being able to successfully coat the wryly bitter pill of social comment with a delicious confection of drollery.... [An] Exquisitely funny play.

### **The Times (Charles Lewson)**

For all his frenetic invention, Ayckbourn does not allow his characters freedom to develop.... In his detachment from his creatures, Ayckbourn is rather like the second act characters who pursue their obsessions oblivious to the fact that someone in their midst is trying to kill herself... I found this a coldly amusing show.

### **Time Out**

It's a bleak vision of dishonest and petty suburbia—the audiences were rolling about but they looked like a thousand cases of appendicitis. A must.

### **What's On**

None of these situations may seem, on the face of it, to contain the stuff of hilarity. But one person's pain is another's pleasure, and two acts, at least, are immoderately funny in a cruel sort of way.



*Images from the original West End production of Absurd Person Singular. Copyright: To be confirmed 1973*

## The Broadway Experience

During his long career, Alan Ayckbourn has had few genuine hits in New York. *Absurd Person Singular* stands as his most successful Broadway<sup>[1]</sup> production and one that is still remembered today.

Prior to *Absurd Person Singular*, only one of Alan's plays had been produced on Broadway. *How The Other Half Loves*, featuring Phil Silvers of *Sergeant Bilko* fame, opened in March 1971 and was a respectable success but had hardly made Alan a household name.

In 1973, *Absurd Person Singular* opened in London and quickly looked set for a long and successful run. As a result, it was only natural the play's producer, Michael Codron, should look to transfer the play to Broadway to capitalise on its success. Codron teamed up with The Theatre Guild, specifically Philip Langner and Armina Marshall, and the John F Kennedy Centre For The Performing Arts, to produce the play in New York. Founded in 1919, the Guild's original purpose was to produce non-commercial plays by American and foreign playwrights and it was responsible for a number of significant premieres on Broadway.

Eric Thompson, director of the London production, agreed to direct it for Broadway with an American cast – which caused some initial confusion as Alan was not told whether the play was to be Americanised in location and / or characters<sup>[2]</sup> and no doubt feared a repeat of a previous painful attempt to produce *Relatively Speaking* for America.<sup>[3]</sup> Alan also had misgivings as Philip Langner had some vocal issues with the play, despite investing in it.

In a lunch with Alan, Langner had seriously suggested acts two and three be swapped so the play ended on a comic high. Alan refused as the play had been written with a dark dying fall and when contracts were signed it forbade any major changes to the play and noted: "[The] Guild shall not make nor permit others to make any alterations in the text of said Play without the written approval of the Author"; the contract also forbade major changes to the action and structure of the play.<sup>[4]</sup>

Despite this, in pre-production Langner suggested to Thompson "the set should collapse at the end of the third act to give the show a big finish"<sup>[5]</sup> and that drawers and cupboards in the second act should jam to make it obvious how inadequate Geoff was as an architect. That these would not go down well were, according to the director, met with the rebuke that Alan was contractually obliged "to make such alterations and additions as the Producers deem necessary."<sup>[6]</sup> Alan was naturally furious with this news and could not understand why The Theatre Guild was producing the play if they were so unhappy with it. Codron, who Thompson had also contacted, was quick to set the record straight and dismissed Langner's intimation of Alan's obligations by quoting the above clause at him. He also subtly noted it was in everyone's interest for this play to go well as The Theatre Guild had already expressed interest in producing *The Norman Conquests*, which had recently opened in London.

The cast was remarkably strong and featured Tony award winners Richard Kiley, Sandy Dennis and Larry Blyden, the Golden Globe and Emmy award winning Geraldine Page and two well known actors Carole Shelley and Tony Roberts. Alan himself commented: "They were all top-rate actors who very cannily knew how to play a New York audience."<sup>[7]</sup> The play was set in England with English characters with the only notable deviation being the acts were subtitled "Christmas Past", "Christmas Present" and "Christmas To Come."

The play opened in late August for a week-long try-out at the Westport Country Playhouse, which had coincidentally staged the American premiere of *Relatively Speaking* in 1967. The play had a record-breaking run before moving to the John F Kennedy Centre in Washington from 4 to 28 September. This also sold out and was greeted by several strong reviews.

The play moved to New York on 27 September and Alan was brought in to help promote the play and, Langner hoped, to edit acts two and three and add some humour to the final act.<sup>[7]</sup> Whether Alan did this or not is unrecorded, but the published American script offers little evidence for any major alterations and in an interview, Alan noted: "I personally haven't done anything with it."<sup>[9]</sup>

The play opened on 8 October 1974 at the Music Box Theatre to excellent reviews and it was soon obvious this was a genuine Broadway hit. The notable cast combined with the strong reviews for the play quickly led to strong a box office. Rather unfortunately, for whatever reasons, The Theatre Guild had not put Alan's name on any promotional material or even the programme cover. As a result, the only identifiable people concerned with the play were the

actors.

Even though the play was a success, Langner's views on swapping the two acts led to the very famous story that statisticians were brought in to count the laughs in the play. Preposterous as the story sounds, the figures are held in Alan Ayckbourn's personal archive and can be revealed here.<sup>[10]</sup>

6 November Performance	Act 1	Act 2	Act 3
<b>Chuckles</b>	149	130	95
<b>Belly-Laughs</b>	56	41	28
<b>Roll-Em In The Aisles</b>	--	4	1
<b>Total</b>	205	175	124
<b>Entire Total</b>	<b>504</b>		

Quite what Langner intended to prove is a mystery. The experiment was conducted six weeks after the play had opened and all it confirms is there are fewer laughs in the third act than the second; something which Alan was patently aware of as the play had deliberately been written that way.

The success of the play was reflected when the Tony Award nominations were announced with Larry Blyden, Geraldine Page and Carole Shelley all nominated in the Best Featured actor category. The play was also nominated for the Drama Desk Outstanding New Play (Foreign) and while the play did not win any of these awards, it demonstrated Alan had his first true major hit on Broadway.

The play would run until March 6 1976 and during that period it became the longest running comedy on Broadway at that time. The cast stayed with the production for the entire run except for Sandy Dennis who dropped out in May 1975, but then promptly returned for the rest of the run from November 1975. On 28 January 1976, a month before it closed, 45th street was renamed Ayckbourn Alley for the day to mark the fact Alan had four plays running on Broadway with *Absurd Person Singular* and *The Norman Conquests* trilogy.

*Absurd* ran for 592 performances and was the most successful comedy on Broadway by a British author since Noel Coward's *Blithe Spirit*, which ran from 1942 to 1943. It was, according to Philip Langner, who was seemingly obsessed by statistics, the 141st longest running production to have been mounted on Broadway at that time.

Despite the success of *Absurd Person Singular*, it did not propel Alan to the heights of fame he had achieved in London. Although *The Norman Conquests* opened in 1976, again directed by Eric Thompson, it did not reach the same magnitude of success and Alan did not achieve as high a profile hit in New York again until 2005. Then he took the Stephen Joseph Theatre's production of *Private Fears In Public Places* to the Brits-Off-Broadway festival, which generated a once-in-a-lifetime reception and reviews.

Coincidentally a revival of *Absurd Person Singular* opened on Broadway soon after on 18 October 2005. It closed on 4 December 2005 having received some unflattering comparisons to the original Broadway production and perhaps suffering from the success of *Private Fears In Public Places*, which had shown American audiences how Ayckbourn plays should be directed and performed.

It certainly could not touch the success and obvious affection for the original production: Alan's original and still most successful Broadway production.

**PLAYBILL**  
THE MUSIC BOX

**Absurd Person Singular: Broadway Production**



Venue: Music Box Theatre, New York  
 Premiere: 8 October 1974  
 Closed: 6 March 1976  
 Director: Eric Thompson  
 Design: Edward Burbridge  
 Lighting: Thomas Skelton

**Cast**  
 Jane: Carole Shelley  
 Sidney: Larry Blyden  
 Ronald: Richard Kiley  
 Marion: Geraldine Page  
 Eva: Sandy Dennis  
 Geoffrey: Tony Roberts

## **Absurd Person Singular (The New York Times Review)**

*Absurd Person Singular* had a phenomenally successful run on Broadway and a number of notable reviews. Then, as now, the most influential critic was from The New York Times. Here critic Clive Barnes' expansive review is reprinted in its entirety offering an insight into how the play was perceived and received in America. It is worth noting Barnes was one of the few American critics who saw both the London and the New York productions and was able to compare the two.

### **'Absurd Person Singular', Comedy**

We have a new fun house in town. It is called *Absurd Person Singular*, has been constructed by Alan Ayckbourn and was unveiled at the Music Box last night. And it is singularly absurd, although the hilarity is gentle rather than riotous. It is a British play, and it admirably demonstrates the difference between British and American humor. But more of that later.

The play is set in three kitchens, at three Christmases: Christmas Past; Christmas Present and Christmas to Come. Three Christmas Eve parties, all with the same six people. Yet circumstances change with time, and over a few years people can develop or decline quite radically.

The first is the kitchen of Sidney and Jane. Sidney is a small store owner, Jane collects dust. She knows that cleanliness is next to godliness but imagines that cleanliness has come out on top. They are waiting for their guests. Ronald is an aging bank manager who has no way with women, but can read anything, even instruction manuals for washing machines. His wife, Marion, is lush - but in the way of gin rather than greenery. The undersexed sextet is completed by the one swinger, a failing architect, Geoffrey, whose affairs stand up better than his buildings, and his wife, Eva, a catatonic kitten who has plenty to be catatonic about.

This is brilliantly polished comedy, a style of play that has fallen on bad times, with most of the bad times being administered by television. But this is not the pap and pablum of TV situation comedy, with its canned laughter and frozen gags. Mr. Ayckbourn is simply fascinated by people and their craziness. He likes to mastermind social embarrassment and has an unblinking insight into the subtly shaded contour maps of small-town society.

These three horrific Christmas Eves - each the kind of Christmas party that gives Halloween a good name - are quite dazzlingly funny in their own uneasy right. Beneath the play's realistically characterized humors, lie genuine characters who are developed and exposed, and a genuine story cleverly seen only in the flash-lit vignette of a party photographer.

Thus we note the rise of Sidney, the grossly insensitive self-made man busy self-making himself, the decline of the failing architect, Geoffrey, and the blissful descent of Marion into an alcoholic haze. Not that Mr. Ayckbourn, when needed, cannot turn out a clever set piece that has something more than its cleverness to commend it. In the second Christmas we have the architect's wife staring bleakly into the past, writing successive suicide notes, and trying, desperately, to do away with herself.

Is this black comedy? On the contrary it is sky-blue-pink comedy. As Eva - with her face looking like an unpublished book from Dostoyevsky - scribbles out her farewell notes, tries to jump from a window, impale herself on a carving knife, finish herself off with pills or hang herself from a lamp bracket, the party goes on around her. No one notices what she is trying to do. In the end to get any attention she has to get smashed and start singing "On the First Day of Christmas." This is not realistic but it has true-blue understanding of the psychology of the girl. It is also supported by the most observantly happy touches, such as the house-proud housewife seeing the hopeful suicide with her head in the gas oven and instantly presuming that she is trying to clean it.

Mr. Ayckbourn has been called the British Neil Simon, and in his stature there is some similarity. However, and this brings us to the contrast between British and American humor, Mr. Simon relies much more on jokes, wisecracks and one-liners. Mr. Ayckbourn hardly ever tells a joke as such. He gets his laughs by having a blousy but upper-class wife wander into an emergently middleclass kitchen and throatily declare: "Isn't this such a dishy kitchen!" I assure you on stage it's funny.

Eric Thompson has directed many Ayckbourn comedies, and by now it is sometimes difficult to see where Mr Ayckbourn finishes and where Mr. Thompson begins, which is just as it should in this kind of comedy. Mr Thompson, who also staged the play in London, has broadened it slightly for America. The acting is not any worse - in some respect it might be thought preferable - but the pace is slightly faster and the performance more emphatic. Perhaps Mr Ayckbourn and Mr. Thompson are trying to tell us something.

The cast is uniformly excellent, and can only be saluted in order of appearance. Carole Shelley's maniacal squirrel of a housewife is as splendid as Larry Blyden's tellingly accurate portrait of a man looking for room at the top. Richard Kiley (who has an hilarious shtick with an electric current that must be seen to be believed) is adorable as the bank manager, and Geraldine Page oozes raw gin and bitchy sympathy as his wife. The final couple is equally up to this mixed doubles, with Sandy Dennis fiercely implacable as the architect's wife, and Tony Roberts urbane foolish as the pup of an architect with more ethics than morals.

This is a fluffy, nearly inconsequential play, but one that does have a few thoughts buzzing away in its pretty head. Certainly it is the best comedy Britain has sent us in years and years. Perhaps impresarios will now realize that this is more to the American taste than sex epics such as *No Sex Please Mrs. Markham* *You're Treading on My Toe!*

Clive Barnes

New York Times, 9 October 1974



Sandy Dennis, Geraldine Page and Carole Shelley in "Absurd Person Singular."

*Al Hirschfeld's cartoon of the leading ladies of the Broadway production of Absurd Person Singular for the New York Times, 20 October 1974.  
(Copyright: Al Hirschfeld / New York Times 1974)*

## Part III: Writing The Play

The following introduction to *Absurd Person Singular* was first published in the Longman student edition of *Absurd Person Singular*. Within it Alan Ayckbourn extensively discusses the process of writing and rehearsing *Absurd Person Singular*.

### The Writer On Writing

The kingdom of the Hopcroft is at hand...

*Absurd Person Singular* was the fourth of my plays to be performed in London's West End although, like its predecessors, it started life in Scarborough in a modest 250-seat theatre-in-the-round. The auditorium was a makeshift affair; borrowed seats on rickety rostra in a small airless room of the public library. On the hot evenings, senior citizens would be supported from the theatre gasping for fresh sea air. Small children would, when carried away by the action, occasionally slip through the gaps in the seating and require rescuing. The stage floor was parquet and treacherously polished; the walls covered in untouchable, light green flock wallpaper. All in all an unpromising venue to present - as we saw it at the time - new work in new ways to new audiences.

For, despite the fact that the company - the brainchild initially of its founder, Stephen Joseph - had been running for fifteen years, theatre in the early seventies was still thought of largely as something done on a picture-frame stage, set apart from the audience. Heaven knows why. The proscenium arch was, as Stephen pointed out at the time, a comparatively recent invention in the overall scheme of things. Certainly the Greeks or the Elizabethans would have looked on it with some amazement.

Here we were, then, in the unlikeliest of towns in the most improbable of buildings presenting plays in an unusual setting with young unfamiliar casts to largely non-theatrical audiences. I can't pretend it wasn't a challenge. When we produced some particularly dark play - a verse drama about a young girl's journey to suicide was such a one, I seem to remember - on an especially bright seaside day, it was not uncommon to find ourselves performing to crowds of eight or nine.

The problem was that, on top of all the other disadvantages we were saddled with, our policy was wherever possible to present new work by new authors.

It was against this hand-to-mouth, improvised theatrical background that I was encouraged to write. First, during the late fifties and early sixties until his premature death in 1967, by Stephen Joseph himself; and then, as I gathered confidence, through my own volition. By 1970\*, with seven or eight plays behind me - three of them international successes - I had taken over the Artistic Directorship of the Scarborough theatre. As a director, I was enjoying myself enormously, playing with this new toy I had somewhat fortuitously inherited. As a writer, though, I was anxious - whilst still working under the general heading of comedy - to explore fresh territory. I'd established through my earlier work (especially *Relatively Speaking* and *How the Other Half Loves*) that I could construct plays and that I could make audiences laugh. More important, they were coming back and what's more bringing their friends. Which meant that the tiny Library Theatre was now beginning to fill - not only for my plays but, as people got to hear about the company, for those of other, newer writers as well. I wrote *Absurd Person Singular*, I remember, as I tend to write most of my plays, in a great hurry. It was due to be the second production of the 1972 Scarborough season. Before that, for two weeks in London we rehearsed, with me directing, a new version by David Campton of the classic vampire tale, *Carmilla*. During the evenings, throughout that fortnight, I wrote *Absurd Person Singular* for the rehearsing company of three men and three women. We opened *Carmilla* at the end of the fortnight for a one week pre-Scarborough 'tour' in the

studio of the newly opened Sheffield Crucible Theatre. There we also started rehearsals for *Absurd* before moving on to Scarborough where, a week or so later, we finally opened the play to goodish, if not universally good, reviews.

I confess that it was, when it opened, half an hour too long. By the second night that had been remedied with some quite severe cutting. As it played in, too, it also gathered confidence and speed as the cast began to sense that they had a success. Audiences grew in size, and nightly response became increasingly enthusiastic.

Yet in rehearsal we had had our doubts - me most of all. The first act, at Sidney's and Jane's, seemed safe enough. I was pleased to have discovered the idea of 'offstage-action', to be sure. It seemed an interesting solution to set the scene apparently in the wrong room (the Hopcroft's kitchen), in what was strictly speaking a 'backstage' area. Where we should have been, surely, was in the sitting-room. That's where the main action was happening - or so it seemed. Of course, it rarely was. The really interesting things, the things people want to say to each other in private were said in here by the sink. Besides, given that the other room contained Dick and Lottie Potter, it seemed an audience would only thank me for keeping us all out here, away from Dick's jokes.

None the less, although the act had one or two original constructional notions, it departed very little from the conventional lines of the comedy I had attempted earlier. Relating the play over three Christmases gave the play a sense of progression and, at the same time, a unity. I also liked the idea, following our glimpse of Jane's shiny, new-pin culinary unit in Act 1, of setting all the acts in various kitchens. It appealed to my sense of symmetry, besides supplying further dramatic unity. In addition, it was an ideal way to indicate the different social level that each of the three couples inhabited. Nowhere in the house says more about a person's habit and background, the nature of their day-to-day existence, than their kitchen. All well and good, so far.

It was in Act 2 that unknown, untried elements were introduced and fears began to arise. The idea of having the second act of a comedy centring on a woman trying to commit suicide (echoes of earlier verse dramas) seemed potentially very dangerous. Would we be accused of insensitivity and bad taste? Would the audience on the first night be filled with people trying to recover from their own unsuccessful suicide bids?

To counteract any charge that I was using human tragedy as a cheap way to get laughs - which was never my intention, of course - I resolved that, whatever happened, the humour would never be directed against the luckless Eva herself. The comedy would spring from a genuine, unmalicious misunderstanding; it would arise from the other misguided blunderers who had totally misread her intentions.

Indeed, as performances went by, I was to learn a vital comic lesson: namely that a single, truthful, serious event can become funny when set alongside a parallel series of equally serious, but contrasting events. The secret of the comedy in the second act (though I don't lay claim to having invented it!) is that all the characters - Eva, Sidney, Jane, Ronald, even the inebriated Marion - are behaving in a truthful, logical manner. All are unaware of the comedic possibilities of their plight. In order to appreciate it, they would need to be standing well back from it all; indeed, to be where we, the audience are.

More important, by taking their own situations entirely seriously, they present us with a choice of whether to laugh or sympathise: to recognise and relish or to identify and anguish. During the London run, Richard Briers, who played the ultimately crowing, vengeful Sidney with such demonic glee, told me that for every two visitors who came backstage to his dressing room, wet-eyed from seeing a performance, one blamed his or her condition on laughing, while the other blamed it on the shock of recognising either a close relative, or worse still, him or herself.

The second act became, despite our fears, the comic high point of the play.

In Act 3, I was again moving into fresh territory. The tone here is much more muted. A cold, bleak icebox of a kitchen. A dead central heating boiler and a dead marriage. Ronald, ironically, having lost any feelings he ever had, mournfully reads a soft porn novel with little sign of pleasure. Dick and Lottie have taken away for Christmas the sons he and Marion have never understood or bothered to communicate with much.

The underdogs are baying outside. Sidney and Jane are soon to arrive and demand that the others dance, literally, to the Hopcroft tune. Geoff and Eva have, meantime, fought each other to a standstill. Eva, now withdrawn, no longer presents anyone, most especially Geoff, with a vulnerable emotional target - or, conversely, with the smallest glimmer of warmth. Geoff, for his part, is emasculated by the failure of his work and the ultimate hollowness of his sexual infidelities.

Not perhaps the most promising of material upon which to build the last act of a comedy. Yet there is laughter, if of a more salutary kind. By now, we can no longer hide the fact entirely that we are not heading for the happiest of endings. Marion's emergence like a drunken spectre at a wake provides the final bleak-comic moment. All have been brought down by a weakness in their character. Marion through her vanity, Ronald his remoteness and indifference, Geoff his sexual and professional arrogance and Eva her self-centred self-obsession.

Only Sidney and Jane survive - but at what cost? Through an increasingly loveless, unfeeling, social-climbing partnership where the pursuit of material success is everything.

And the moral? Not that the Hopcrofts of this world will always rise and conquer. They needn't. But given the world we have where materialism does often seem to matter most, given what flawed emotional muddles most of us are anyway, the odds seem stacked heavily in favour of those with the least feelings or scruples and those with the strongest, most uncaring ambitions. I wheel and deal, therefore I am. Beware: the kingdom of the Hopcroft is at hand!

"I mean, in this world it's dog eat dog, isn't it? No place for sentiment... when the chips are down its every man for himself and blow you Jack, I regret to say."

Alan Ayckbourn

\* Alan Ayckbourn actually became the Artistic Director (Director Of Productions) in 1972.



*Images from Alan Ayckbourn's original 1972 production at The Library Theatre, Scarborough (copyright: Scarborough Theatre Trust)*

## Off-Stage On-Stage

*Absurd Person Singular* is notably Alan Ayckbourn's first off-stage play; a play which eschews the obvious setting for somewhere ultimately more revealing.

The play was originally set in the living rooms of the three couples, showing both the actual parties and, presumably, the fourth couple Dick and Lottie Potter. Quickly realising the play was not working, Alan decided to move the action into the kitchen instead, thus removing the tedium of showing three parties. It also took Dick and Lottie out of view, who arguably might have absorbed all attention had they been left on stage. In his book on Alan, Michael Holt offers Alan's explanation for the change: "There is far more comedy, he [Ayckbourn] insists, offstage than on. The social mask is most likely to be dropped here and the true picture of the occasion revealed." For example, in the apparent privacy of the kitchen, Sidney feels comfortable approaching Ronald about his business plans - which is ultimately the real motivation behind the first party. Moving the action to the kitchen, as Ayckbourn himself notes, is also a simple way of dispensing with all the introductory pleasantries and social niceties that would otherwise be an obligatory part of a party.

The kitchen is generally not the centre-stage of a party and while the living rooms would have been cleaned and tidied for the guests, the kitchens are out-of-sight and act as a staging area. As a result, the kitchens of *Absurd Person Singular* offer additional insight into their owners and vividly illustrate the decay of society that has been argued as one of the predominant themes of the play.

The Hopcrofts' kitchen is meticulous and modern, the Jackson's kitchen shambolic and the Brewster-Wright's kitchen antiquated and largely not functioning. If we examine the kitchens with regard to the characters, we see their owners reflected in them. Spotless and well maintained, over-loaded with the latest gadgets, the Hopcroft kitchen shows Jane's obsessiveness and Sidney's controlling streak. Nothing is out of place, everything perfect. Sidney's aspiration to rise the social ladder reflected in the abundance of mod-cons, which - at least to his mind - reflects how he feels wealthy and influential people's kitchens should be while implying how successful he is. Of course, no-one is taken in by this and it also reflects the sterility of the couple's relationship. There is no warmth or human touch in this kitchen.

The Jacksons' kitchen is a better reflection of a socially successful couple. Trendy in an understated way, yet uncared and unkempt. Geoffrey has no need to try and prove his success, he is not proving a point. It is also a snapshot of Geoffrey and Eva's relationship: there is little care of this kitchen and as little regard for it as Geoffrey has for Eva and Eva has for herself.

The Brewster-Wrights' kitchen is set in the past, the Aga cooker a reflection of a couple that has not moved with the times. The kitchen, like the couple, is dysfunctional.

As has been noted, moving the play 'off-stage' removed Dick and Lottie Potter, but allowed Alan full rein with off-stage characters that by the end of the play feel every bit as real as the on-stage characters. Dick and Lottie cleverly indicate the party is actually taking place and make it clear why people want to escape into the kitchen. Dick and Lottie in effect provide the reason why the first act is set in the kitchen as everyone wants to escape them. A third off-stage character is George, the dog. In the first act he is stuck in the Jacksons' car and less important, but in the second act he takes the place of Dick and Lottie as the reason why everyone is in the kitchen. The couples are trapped due to this practically rabid dog patrolling the hallway. The combination of off-stage characters also leads to the extremely vivid moment where Dick Potter is savaged by George. So clearly have these characters and their actions been built up, the moment is almost as vivid as had it been shown on stage.

This would be the first time Alan would write an off-stage play, but he would return to the device in later plays such as *Bedroom Farce* (where Dick and Lottie again lurk off-stage) and *Just Between Ourselves*. Arguably, Alan develops the idea of the off-stage play to its limits as well in *The Norman Conquests* and *House & Garden* where the audience witness the same characters in the same period over several locales.

## Part IV: Producing The Play

### Designing Absurd Person Singular

*Absurd Person Singular* is not Alan Ayckbourn's most complex play to stage but it does pose challenges. The play is set in three palpably different kitchens over three acts. The sets are static for each act with the change from one kitchen to the next occurring between acts.

The play was first performed, in-the-round, at The Library Theatre, Scarborough. The venue had only two stage entrances - hence there are only two exits from each of the kitchens in the play. There were minimal facilities, limited budgets and, being in-the-round, the set could be no taller than waist height. Studio Theatre Company member Heather Stoney recalls: "The same units were used in all three sets - simply moved around in a different configuration as was the gas stove, which was dirtied for the second act."

During the second act, when Eva tries to commit suicide, the light fitting was lowered via a cable and the actress playing Eva mimed opening the window: sound effects being used to indicate whether the window was open or closed. Other simple effects such as different chairs also helped to differentiate the kitchens.

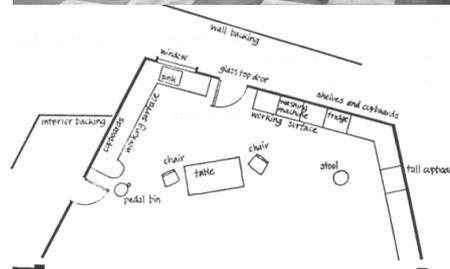
This then is the simplest - and cheapest - means of staging the play and was in mind when the play was written. When the play opened in London, it was performed in a proscenium arch space at the Criterion Theatre. The set was designed by Alan Tagg, who decided to install a revolve into the stage containing the substantive part of all three kitchens. The acting space was quite small as a result of having three kitchens on the revolve, but a clever design meant this was not necessarily obvious. An example of the first act kitchen, reprinted from the Samuel French acting edition, can be seen on the right.

When the play premiered on Broadway, the budget had obviously increased as the play utilised two revolves, adjacent to each other, in a set designed by Edward Burbridge. The corner view of the kitchen was retained - as used in London - but the majority of each wall was on its own revolve. The illustration on the right shows each revolve held a triangle, each side being a different kitchen wall. Obviously the double revolve meant that a far larger set could be used incorporating the whole of the stage. The areas of the kitchen not on the revolve were installed with flippers or slides so new surfaces or areas could be revealed. The Act III entrance hall was hidden behind cabinets which slid aside for the final act. Technically this is the most demanding of the sets, yet undoubtedly offers a versatile set for a large stage.

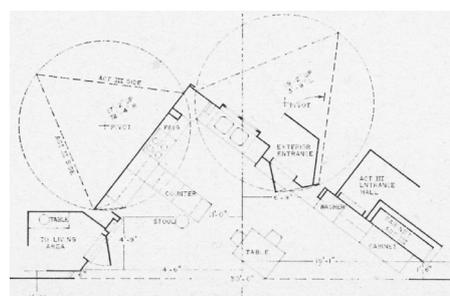
Of course there is no definitive way to stage the play, but each of these three major productions tackled the play in an equally valid way. When it was revived by Alan Ayckbourn at the Stephen Joseph Theatre In The Round in 1989, the staging was much as the original demonstrating perhaps that more complex is not necessarily better.



*Images of the Hopcroft kitchen from the original production (above and below). Copyright: Scarborough Theatre Trust*



*Alan Tagg's design for the Hopcroft kitchen for London. Copyright: Samuel French Ltd*



*Edward Burbridge's two revolve design for the Hopcroft kitchen for Broadway. Copyright: Samuel French Inc*

## Directing Ayckbourn

*This article by Alan Ayckbourn explores the challenges of Absurd Person Singular for both director and actor.*

*Absurd Person Singular* suffers (if that's the word) from a reputation for being a very funny play. And yes, indeed in my first production of it in Scarborough in 1972 and the subsequent fine West End production by Eric Thompson in 1973, it did elicit huge laughs from the audiences (and even critics!) who saw it. But the reason it did this – and the reason that sometimes in later productions it doesn't or the reason the laughter wears a little thin – is that it was played with intense seriousness and even a certain venom.

In common with my later plays where the mix is much more obvious, it was an early attempt by me to run the contrasting strands of theatrical darkness and light almost parallel. This is especially evident in the second act of course. The comedy there entirely relies on the fact that Eva intends to kill herself. Once we, the audience, fail to believe that she has real death in mind (however pathetic her attempts), the tension evaporates and then so does 90 per cent of the laughter.

So it is in the first act with Jane and Sidney. What Sidney does to Jane is appalling. It is an act of calculated betrayal. In his anxiety to "make it" he is quite prepared to sacrifice the poor woman. It is a small gesture in the grand scale of things – a few minutes standing out in the rain, what's that after all? – but it is a symptom of something infinitely more sinister. Men who do that are men who will eventually rise ruthlessly to the top and finish up locking us all out in the rain.

Yes, it is a comedy and I hope people will laugh, of course I do, but it is also a sad savage reflection on the way we treat each other and the way, certainly in this life, the meek are very, very unlikely to inherit the earth.

Of course the really awful thing about Act I is meek Jane's little rebellion that follows her final entrance – all of two lines – which is ruthlessly crushed by Sidney. Probably the last time she ever argues with him. From then on she follows him, a long suffering acolyte, enjoying the riches that accrue but in return having given up any shred of individuality or self determination.

Now, if that all sounds hopelessly heavy and ponderous, my apologies but that is really the way you have to approach my plays. In general, the more seriousness, the more truth you bring to bear on the characters, the more they will bear fruit later.

In my own rehearsals I am somewhat of a joke in that I never allow us to dwell for a second on the subject of possible audience laughter. For, in truth, I have found that the more we disregard it, the more readily the laughter flows. And if it doesn't, well we have a very serious moment in its place.

Jane's return to the kitchen is very sad - and I think a lot of people, especially the women in the audience – might even be angered by it. How dare he treat her like that? Why the hell doesn't she punch him on the nose? Indeed, if you try to make it comic in the wrong way you may merely serve to antagonise them. Are they expecting us to find this funny? Because we don't.

But of course that is an isolated instance. And it is my hope that in any production it is indeed isolated. Really – if I can give a yardstick – it is this: You should never, never in your performance (in anyone's performance) have a single moment in the entire evening where a laugh becomes the be all and end all. You should always have the safety blanket of dramatic truth to sustain you. If you're ever caught bending this in pursuit of the gratuitously comic then you'll find you're on a downwards path to nowhere. And don't let anyone encourage you to do so or tell you otherwise.

To conclude: A small anecdote.

Years ago I wrote a play called *Absent Friends*. Very low key and very naturalistic in tone. In it there's a character called Evelyn, a dour, dry, cynical girl given to sudden deflatory one-liners every five minutes or so in the way that only people of that age can do. For the first production I cast a wonderful young actress who had been working a lot in serious unsmiling community theatre doing socially significant community drama. She joined my regular team,

most of whom had worked together for years. As a result, we talked in rehearsal even less about the potential comedy than usual. We just rehearsed the play in all its seriousness and the young actress sat throughout the proceedings solemn faced and totally absorbed, watching whenever she wasn't called, and developing the most fascinating character besides. The first night came and the audience within the first few minutes found her a riot. She had only to open her mouth and the house came down. She continued through the first act, deadpan and throwaway.

In the interval, I broke my usual rule and went back to see her to say how well she was doing. She was in floods of tears. I'm sorry, she said, I can't stop them laughing. I'm trying my best. I explained gently that it really wasn't a worry. That they were meant to laugh. She looked totally flummoxed. Are they?

A few days later I came back to see the show again. Alas, she had discovered comedy. Playing, of course, to half the laughs and with twice the effort. Her innocence was gone. Aaah!

© Alan Ayckbourn

## Acting Ayckbourn

This abridged article explores Alan Ayckbourn's thoughts on how to act in his plays—particularly those with farcical elements such as *Absurd Person Singular*.

The mistake that's made is that people imagine that somehow farce has to be played louder, faster, broader - and suddenly they throw all credibility away. I have a campaign at the moment for slow, quiet farce. I don't see why farce has necessarily to be loud or fast. It has to be paced well, but that does not necessarily mean all loud or all fast.

The middle act of *Absurd Person Singular* is sometimes a trap, but one should bear in mind that all the characters are in their own terms acting totally logically. Leave it to us, the audience, to laugh, if we see the funny side; and leave it to the dramatist, if he's done his job properly, to point the absurdity. The actors don't need to react; they can continue to play their own role within that scene . . . there's still a woman trying to kill herself, which she is still quite serious about, and there's still a man trying to unblock a sink. What turns an audience off, I think, is when actors are in effect saying "Aren't I funny?"

Farce playing is not as mysterious as it's sometimes made out to be. It's difficult, but there's a sort of mystique about farce, which makes everyone very nervous about it. Some of the best performances I've had in farce and comedy are from actors who've never played it before.

A lot of my plays start quite low key, and I slowly "jack them up" into quite high-key stuff. *The Normans* has a sort of climax in the middle, where it becomes quite broad - though it should still be played as comedy, not farce. Of course one can have big moments, but you must have explored the truth in order to reach them. What often happens with an actor who is not naturally an expert farceur is that he has seen somebody playing farce and then tries to copy the externals. He forgets that the great farce players have a sort of inner logic and truth about them that makes them, for the time you are watching, totally believable. So many actors go wrong in trying to play farce because of certain "distractions". For example, Ralph Lynn had very large hands and a very comic personality, and he did things truthfully from his own viewpoint, but which any other actor copying would be phoney. But he uses his own particular physical peculiarities to create laughter. People following him think he got laughs by doing "funny things" - but in fact he got laughs by doing things his way.

Alan Ayckbourn © 1978

## Part V: Final Thoughts

### Alan Ayckbourn's Thoughts On Absurd Person Singular

#### Introduction To The Published Edition

*Absurd Person Singular* - the title was originally intended for a play I didn't write and subsequently, because I rather cared for it, given to the play I did write - was first produced in Scarborough in 1972.

At that time, I remember, I was becoming increasingly fascinated by the dramatic possibilities of offstage action. Not a new device, granted, but one with plenty of comic potential still waiting to be tapped. Very early on in my career as a dramatist I discovered that, given the chance, an audience's imagination can do far better work than any number of playwright's words. The offstage character hinted at but never seen can be dramatically as significant and telling as his onstage counterparts. Offstage action is more difficult. Unless care is taken, if the dramatist chooses to describe rather than show his action, the audience can rapidly come to the conclusion that they're sitting in the wrong auditorium.

Thus, when I came to write *Absurd Person* and started by setting the action in Jane and Sidney Hopcroft's sitting room, I was halfway through the act before I realized that I was viewing the evening from totally the wrong perspective. Dick and Lottie were indeed monstrously overwhelming, hearty and ultimately very boring, and far better heard occasionally but not seen. By a simple switch of setting to the kitchen, the problem was all but solved, adding incidentally far greater comic possibilities than the sitting room ever held. For in this particular case, the obvious offstage action was far more relevant than its onstage counterpart.

As a footnote: since I was writing about parties and guests arriving, it also relieved me of the tedium of all that hallo-how-are-you-good-bye-nice-to-see-you business.

*Absurd Person*, then, could be described as my first offstage action play. It is also, some critics have observed, a rather weighty comedy. Its last scene darkens considerably. I make no apologies for this. As I've grown in confidence as a dramatist (confidence, that is, that I can get most of the techniques right most of the time), I have also grown in the conviction that I owe it to the characters I've created to develop and therefore to a certain extent to dictate how a play should run.

I've always had an aversion to comedies that rely upon natty, superimposed denouements in order to round off the evening. Why comedies should have to do this whereas dramas are allowed to finish as they like is beyond me. As a nation, we show a marked preference for comedy when it comes to play-going, as any theatre manager will tell you. At the same time, over a large area of the stalls one can detect a faint sense of guilt that there is something called enjoyment going on. Should we, people seem to be asking, be sitting here laughing like this? It's to do with the mistaken belief that because it's funny, it can't be serious - which of course isn't true at all. Heavy, no; serious, yes. It would therefore seem unwise to compound this guilt feeling by artificially resolving the play. In other words, it can be funny, but let's make it truthful.

Alan Ayckbourn Scarborough 1976

#### Miscellaneous Quotes By Alan Ayckbourn

"Despite its enormously long running time that night - I think our technical staff were stretched to their limits creating three kitchens on the first floor of a library - it remains one of the most successful first performances of mine that I've ever not sat through. It was, I suppose, particularly satisfying because it was the first time I'd ever had the courage, as a writer, to weave some slightly darker threads in amongst the comic tapestries. In fact, the first time I allowed the characters their own destinies rather than like, say, the puppet master I'd been in *Relatively Speaking* to dictate their destinies. It's ironic in retrospect that having

voluntarily given up that role as a writer, I handed it to one of the characters, Sidney Hopcroft.

"The play also contains two of my own personal favourite offstage characters, Dick & Lottie Potter. I always feel that whatever criticisms may be levelled at me now and in years to come, in my defence I can say that at least I left the Potters in the wings. This was not always the case. When I first started the play it was intended that it should be set in the sitting rooms of the three households. After only a few pages, along with the rest of my characters, I fled to the kitchen in order to escape the awful Potters."

"Despite an initial hostile review in *The Guardian*, this show has been a success everywhere, even on Broadway. It ran for ages in London and had at least three different casts. It got me accepted eventually, in some quarters anyway, as a 'serious' dramatist. It was also the first play of mine Peter Hall saw. Shortly afterwards he asked me to write something for the new National Theatre."

"In *Absurd Person Singular* I've tried to explore people a little more, and at the same time to put back some of the high jinks. When I'd written it someone said, 'What's the second act?' I said 'It's about a woman committing suicide'. But it's a farce situation because nobody knows that she is. She puts her head in the oven and they think she's trying to clean it. And they're all trying to help, and all for the wrong reasons. You have to be careful if you're going to write about suicide, but it's funny if you see why they're doing it, and feel sorry for them. One of the great touchstones for me is whether I feel for them. I've got at least to love them while I'm writing them and understand why they're like they are."

"[Concerning Eva's silence in Act Two] It's two-fold, it's a comic motif and it's also, I think, a genuine character motif. She has nothing to say, and it gives her, dramatically, an innate desperation, at the same time quite a comic madness until the very end of the scene when she starts to sing... that's the first sound. Dramatically that's a pleasing thing to happen."

"I'm really showing how sad it is that people can try to be nice and that it sometimes doesn't work. I'm saying that a lot of the worst things that happen in life are the result of well-meaning actions."

## The Academic Perspective On Absurd Person Singular

*Absurd Person Singular* is arguably the first Ayckbourn play to be taken seriously both critically and academically. Assumptions Alan was merely a farceur were challenged by the play and, as these extracts demonstrate, it is one of the most analysed of Alan's plays.

"Ayckbourn had already proved with *Relatively Speaking* that he was a natural farceur with an uncommon flair for comic invention. But in *Absurd Person Singular* he harnessed this to a brilliant and serious social metaphor and started to explore themes which were to preoccupy him for many years: English insensitivity and casual cruelty; the sterility of English middle-class family life and the festive rituals that are such a gruesome part of it."  
Stephen Unwin, 'A Pocket Guide to 20th Century Drama'

"...Blackly comic in its depiction of human selfishness, Ayckbourn's skill is at a pitch of ferocity seldom surpassed, even by his own prodigious standards."  
Ibid

"*Absurd Person Singular* shows Ayckbourn at a fascinating point in his development, revealing himself as both comic virtuoso and astute social commentator. The play's exploration of the middle-classes discovering an entrepreneurial streak foretold the social changes that were to overtake England in the decade that followed. It would be hard to think of a play that caught this seismic moment with greater hilarity of pain than *Absurd Person Singular*."  
Ibid

"With class warfare at the forefront of the play, the dramatist allows at least equal time to another raging battle so evident in his work, the battle of the sexes."  
Albert F Kalson, 'Laughter In The Dark'

"*Absurd Person Singular* is as cruel as it is laughable. For as it moves across its three acts, it traces the disintegration of a comfortable social order and its transformation into a meritocracy. Here values are less certain, and the bully and the venal can triumph."  
Michael Holt, 'Alan Ayckbourn'

"[*Absurd Person Singular*] is more than a period chronicle, and also rather more than a sceptical study of marriage and relationships. It is about the change and the decay to which we are all eventually subject. 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."  
Benedict Nightingale, 'An Introduction To 50 Modern British Plays'

"Ayckbourn has steadily transformed the subject matter of comedy and farce making them a vehicle for stringent psychological analysis, especially of the waste lands of the middle-class sensibility."  
Richard Allen Cave, 'New British Drama In Performance In The London Stage 1970-1985'

"The first act is merely farcical.... The second act is closer to black comedy.... [The third act] was Ayckbourn's most savage act to date; as audiences laughed they were also aware of the horror of humans bound up in themselves and in a meaningless dance symbolizing the social round or life itself.... It marks a further trend in [Ayckbourn's] trend towards social satire...."  
Oleg Kerensky, 'The New British Drama'

"Ayckbourn has here written a farcical tragedy in which death and destruction are never far away.... It is also a play in which the laughter winds down rather than up; in which Ayckbourn handles despair more nakedly than ever before; and in which change and decay are perceptibly in the air."  
Michael Billington, 'Alan Ayckbourn'

## Part VI: Further Reading & Footnotes

If you are interested in finding out more about *Absurd Person Singular*, the following books and articles may be of interest.

\* indicates no longer in print

### Playtexts

#### **Absurd Person Singular**

Samuel French, 1974, ISBN 0573010234

#### **Absurd Person Singular - Longman Study Texts**

Longman, 1991, ISBN 058201638X

#### **Three Plays**

*Absurd Person Singular, Absent Friends, Bedroom Farce*  
Penguin, 1979, ISBN 0140481508

### Books

#### **Paul Allen: A Pocket Guide to Alan Ayckbourn's Plays**

pp.26-29 (Faber & Faber, 2004, ISBN 0571214924)

#### **Paul Allen: Alan Ayckbourn - Grinning at the Edge**

pp.135-139 (Methuen, 2001, ISBN 0413731200)

#### **Michael Billington: Alan Ayckbourn (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed)\***

pp.57-68 (Palgrave, 1990, ISBN 0333498976)

#### **Bernard F Dukore (editor): Alan Ayckbourn\***

pp.44-55, 103-113, 137-151 (Garland Publishing, 1991, ISBN 0824057597)

#### **Albert-Reiner Glaap: Ayckbourn Country (1<sup>st</sup> Ed)\***

pp.33-44 (Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 1999, ISBN 3884763490)

#### **Michael Holt: Alan Ayckbourn**

pp.19-23 (Northcote Press, 1999, ISBN 0746308590)

#### **Albert E. Kalson: Laughter In The Dark\***

pp.94-96 (Associated Universities Press, 1991, ISBN 0838634796)

#### **Oleg Kerensky: The New British Drama\***

pp.119-120 (Hamish Hamilton, 1977, ISBN: 0241896282)

#### **Benedict Nightingale (editor): An Introduction To 50 Modern British Plays\***

pp.431-438 (Pan Books, 1982, softback, ISBN 0330266799)

#### **Malcolm Page: File On Ayckbourn\***

pp.26-30 (Methuen, 1989, ISBN 0413420108)

#### **Stephen Unwin: A Pocket Guide to 20th Century Drama**

pp.196-200 (Faber, 2001, ISBN 0571200141)

#### **Ian Watson: Conversations With Ayckbourn\***

pp.72, 76 (Faber and Faber, 1988, ISBN 0571151922)

***Sidney Howard White: Alan Ayckbourn\****

pp.49-56 (Twayne Publishers, 1984, ISBN 080576870X)

**Articles**

**The Alan Ayckbourn Interview**

Joan Buck, 'Plays And Players', September 1972

**Line And Deadlines**

Philip Oakes, 'Sunday Times', 3 June 1973

**Alan Ayckbourn**

Ronald Hayman, 'The Times', 4 July 1973

**The Man Who Is Serious About Joking**

Harry Mead, publication unknown, 21 July 1973

**Introduction To Three Plays**

Alan Ayckbourn, 'Three Plays', Penguin, 1979

**The Essentially Ambiguous Response**

Anthony Masters, 'The Times', 4 February 1981

**Interview With Alan Ayckbourn**

Richard Hummler, 'Variety', 12 June 1985

**The Writer On Writing**

Alan Ayckbourn, 'Absurd Person Singular - Longman Study Texts', 1989

***Absurd Person Singular* programme note**

Christopher Godwin, 'Autumn / Winter Season 1989 -90 programme', Stephen Joseph Theatre In The Round, Scarborough

**Ayckbourn's Plays In New York**

Holly Hill, 'Alan Ayckbourn', Garland Publishing, 1991, pp.137-151

**Upsetting The Balance**

Susan Rusinko, 'Alan Ayckbourn', Garland Publishing, 1991, pp.41-55

**Ayckbourn's Men**

Richard Hornby, 'Alan Ayckbourn', Garland Publishing, 1991, pp.103-113

**Other Media**

**Alan Ayckbourn's Official Website: [www.alanayckbourn.net](http://www.alanayckbourn.net)**

The website has a section dedicated to *Absurd Person Singular* and various programme notes for the play written by Alan Ayckbourn.

**Absurd Person Singular**

*Absurd Person Singular* has been adapted for both radio and television by the BBC. As of 2007, neither adaptation has been made commercially available.

## Footnotes

### Absurd Person Singular: An In-Depth History

- [1] Michael Billington, 'Alan Ayckbourn', pp.57
- [2] Ian Watson, 'Conversations With Ayckbourn', pp.76
- [3] Albert-Reiner Glaap, 'A Guided Tour Through Ayckbourn Country', pp.40
- [4] Alan Ayckbourn, introduction to 'Three Plays'
- [5] Paul Allen, 'Grinning At The Edge', pp.136
- [6] Alan Ayckbourn, introduction to 'Absurd Person Singular - Longman Student Edition'
- [7] Scarborough Theatre Trust minutes, annual general meeting 20 May 1973
- [8] Billington, pp.60
- [9] Correspondence from Margaret Ramsay to Alan Ayckbourn, 11 July 1974
- [10] Correspondence from Margaret Ramsay to Peter Bridge, 11 August 1972
- [11] Ibid
- [12] Allen, pp.136
- [13] Michael Billington, 'Absurd Person Singular', The Guardian 5 July 1973
- [14] Correspondence from Peter Hall to Alan Ayckbourn, 29 August 1973
- [15] Correspondence from Donald Albery to Michael Codron, 19 September 1974
- [16] Anthony Masters, 'The Essentially Ambiguous Response', The Times, 4 February 1981
- [17] Further details in *The Broadway Experience* on pp.18 of this publication
- [18] This figure is sometimes given as 591 performances. For the purposes of this publication, the figure given by the official press release announcing the end of the play is given
- [19] Various correspondence from Margaret Ramsay, 1974 - 1975
- [20] Alan Ayckbourn personal correspondence, 16 October 1975
- [21] Correspondence from Shaun MacLoughlin to Alan Ayckbourn, 28 October 1976
- [22] 'Theatre Stages A Surprise', Scarborough Evening News, 5 January 1990
- [23] 'Absurd Person Singular review', The Observer, 27 May 1990
- [24] Correspondence from Bill Kenwright to Tom Erhardt, 18 January 1991
- [25] Correspondence from Bill Kenwright to Keith MacFarlane, 18 January 1991

### The Broadway Experience

- [1] While it could be argued Alan Ayckbourn's production of *Private Fears In Public Places* was as much - if not more - of a success, it was presented Off-Broadway.
- [2] Correspondence from Alan Ayckbourn to Margaret Ramsay, 12 February 1974
- [3] For further details about this, *The Alan Ayckbourn Guides: Relatively Speaking* can be downloaded from [www.alanayckbourn.net](http://www.alanayckbourn.net)
- [4] Correspondence from Michael Codron to Philip Langner, 2 July 1974
- [5] Correspondence from Alan Ayckbourn to Margaret Ramsay, 30 June 1974
- [6] Ibid
- [7] Richard Hummler, interview with Alan Ayckbourn, Variety, 12 June 1985
- [8] Correspondence from Philip Langner, 12 September 1974
- [9] Interview with Alan Ayckbourn, New York Times, 20 October 1974
- [10] Figures drawn from document entitled 'Absurd Person Singular, evening performance 6 November 1974, Music Box Theatre, Laugh count'. The statistics were compiled by Dennis Scanlon and Robert Katulak

