

Alan Ayckbourn: A Biography (updated January 2012)

If reproducing this article in any media, please credit:

'Source: Alan Ayckbourn's official website - www.alanayckbourn.net'

Alan Ayckbourn: A Biography

Alan Ayckbourn is one of the world's most popular and prolific professional playwrights. He has written 76 full length plays and more than 20 other revues and plays for children. He is also an 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 Irene Maud Worley – better known as the novelist Mary James - and his father Horace Ayckbourn, lead violinist with the London Symphony Orchestra.

Educated at Haileybury, Alan left school at the age of 17 to pursue a career in the theatre immediately gaining a job with the theatre impresario Sir Donald Wolfitt. He was with the company for three weeks as an acting stage manager for the production *The Strong Are Lonely* at the Edinburgh Festival. Alan went on to work at theatres in Worthing, Leatherhead and Oxford, before being employed in 1957 as a stage manager and actor at the Library Theatre, Scarborough.

The Library Theatre had been founded in 1955 by Stephen Joseph and was home to the UK's first professional theatre in the round company, Studio Theatre Ltd. Alan was inspired by Stephen Joseph, who became a mentor to the young man and encouraged him to both write and direct. Alan's first professional writing commission was inadvertently inspired by his acting career when he complained about a role he was playing; Stephen threw down the gauntlet saying that if Alan wanted better roles, he should write one himself. Alan wrote *The Square Cat*. This was a success for the company in the summer of 1959 and Stephen immediately commissioned a second play, *Love After All*, for the winter of 1959.

Alan continued to act and write for the Library Theatre until 1962 when he was involved in the formation of the Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent, with Stephen Joseph and Peter Cheeseman. This was the country's first permanent professional theatre in the round and Alan 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 retreated to the BBC in Leeds as a radio drama producer where he worked between 1964 and 1970.

Alan continued writing, though, and produced *Meet My Father* for the Library Theatre 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. It launched him into the public eye and in quick succession, plays such as *How The Other Half Loves*, *Absurd Person Singular* and *The Norman Conquests*, established Alan Ayckbourn as one of the country's most popular and successful playwrights. As of 2012, he has written 76 full length plays, more than half of which have transferred to either the West End or 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.

Stephen Joseph died in 1967 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 become Artistic Director until 1972. Apart from a two year hiatus between 1986 and 1988 when he became a visiting director at the National Theatre, he remained Artistic Director until retiring from that role on 31 March 2009.

Concurrent to this, Alan's directing career also flourished. He directed his first professional play in 1961, *Gaslight*, at the Library Theatre and directed one of his own plays for the first time in 1963. Since 1967 he has directed the world premieres of all his plays and since 1977, he has directed practically every West End premiere of his plays. Since 1961, Alan has directed more than 260 productions and is considered one of the world's pre-eminent directors of in the round staging.

He is hugely committed to theatre-in-the-round, for which he has written the majority of his plays. It is always worth remembering that when he stages a play in London or they 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, where he has premiered all but four of his plays.

Alan Ayckbourn has received more than 35 awards and honours including two Oliviers, a Tony, two Molières and Lifetime Achievement Awards from both the Variety Club of Great Britain and the Writers' Guild of Great Britain. He was the 1992 Cameron Mackintosh Professor of Contemporary Theatre at Oxford University and is also the recipient of 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 2009, he was inducted into American Theater's Hall of Fame and received the prestigious Society's Special Award at the Laurence Olivier Awards. The holder of a number of honorary degrees, he was appointed a CBE in 1987 and in 1997 was knighted for services to the theatre.

In 2010, he received the prestigious Special Tony Award for Lifetime Achievement in the Theatre. His plays have been regularly staged in America and more than 10 have been produced on Broadway and Off-Broadway. In 1975 he held the record for having the most plays simultaneously running on Broadway (*The Norman Conquests* and *Absurd Person Singular*). However, he would probably consider his greatest success in the States came in 2005, when he 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 2007, his production of *Intimate Exchanges* also toured to the Festival where it broke box office records at 59E59 Theaters and received a Drama Desk nomination for Outstanding Play. Since then he has also toured *My Wonderful Day* in 2009, which also received a Drama Desk Outstanding Play award nomination, and *Neighbourhood Watch* in 2011 to the festival.

In February 2006, Alan suffered a stroke leading to the announcement in June 2007 that he would step down as the Artistic Director of the Stephen Joseph Theatre. He would officially step down in 2009 but continues to be committed to premiering and producing plays at the venue.

Copyright: Simon Murgatroyd