

Alan Ayckbourn and *Woman in Mind*

by Susan Myer Sifton, May 2015

Background and Theatre Experience

Alan Ayckbourn was born in 1939 in Hampstead, London. His mother was Irene Worley, also known as Lolly, a journalist and romance writer who published under the name Mary James. (!!!!) His father, Horace Ayckbourn, was an orchestral violinist, who served for some time as the deputy leader of the London Symphony Orchestra. His parents, who separated shortly after World War II, never married. Ayckbourn was conceived while they were married to other people.

Towards the end of WWII and while Ayckbourn was not yet school-aged, he and his mother moved from London to Middlesex, and then to a country home in Sussex. There he enjoyed two idyllic, and what his biographer, Paul Allen would call in *Grinning At the Edge*, “profoundly formative years”. He and his mother would spend their days sitting at the kitchen table, she typing furiously away at her stories while he pecked at the small typewriter she bought him. Thus, “two important images were united,” Allen writes, “that of the woman being the breadwinner, and that of writing being a perfectly rational way of winning that bread.” Moreover, Allen continues, “... it meant that he [Ayckbourn] interpreted the adult world through a woman’s experience,” which he declares, “... is the single most important explanation for his [Ayckbourn’s] sympathetic but far from idealized writing of parts for women.”

Ayckbourn’s first school was a convent, a common place at that time to educate children, as they were thought to provide a better education as well as proper discipline. It was right across the street from his home, the female students outnumbered the males 10 to one, and all the teachers were nuns. When Alan defaced his books in a fit of pique, his mother decided he had languished too long in a world of women. She felt he needed the discipline of a male boarding school, so she sent him to Wisborough Lodge in West Sussex. It was within walking distance, but he nevertheless stayed there through the week, coming home on weekends. That soon ended in 1948, when his mother married her bank manager, Cecil Pye. Alan would remain at the school throughout the week except during school holiday.

His brief but consistent witness to Lolly’s and Cecil’s volatile and truly miserable marriage, his closeness to the failed relationship of Lolly and Horace’s before that, and his exposure during his term breaks to Horace’s and his second wife, Daphne’s, faltering marriage gave the young boy plenty of grist for his future literary mill. By the time he reached adolescence, he had been provided enough fodder for the malfunctioning married couples that consistently people his plays.

At 13, Ayckbourn transferred to Haileybury and Imperial Service College, located between London and Cambridge in hundreds of acres of rural Hertfordshire. Though he was largely bullied and quite unhappy in his first two years there, his last two years would change his life forever. That’s when he got involved with the

Haileybury Shakespearean productions, which were run by a master called Edgar Matthews. Matthews was a friend of the glitzy, egotistical actor-manager Sir Donald Wolfit, who is represented as the character "Sir" in Ronald Harwood's play and movie *The Dresser*.

In Ayckbourn's Junior year (16th Form) Matthews cast him in a small part in *Romeo and Juliet*, which toured Holland. The school play the following year, *Macbeth*, would tour the US and Canada. This clinched Ayckbourn's ambition to work in professional theatre. When it came time for him to take his advanced exams for preparation for university, he told the headmaster at his public school that he was going into theatre instead. "He slammed the careers book shut," Ayckbourn says, "and told me if I wanted to make an ass of myself, go ahead." So, in 1956, at the age of 17, he found what he calls his "back door into theatre".

Matthews had given him a letter of recommendation that gave him entrée into Wolfit's company, doing anything he was asked – moving and painting scenery, setting props, assisting the stage manager – all the while hoping to be thrown a bone to act in one of the productions. When theatre companies "ran out of money when they were running their production," Ayckbourn says, "they often slipped you in quite cheaply, handing you a small part."

Still only 17, Ayckbourn was Wolfit's Assistant Stage Manager. From there, he went on to work at other small theatre companies until he landed in Scarborough, where he would work for Stephen Joseph at his Library Theatre.

In 1959, his first two plays, *The Square Cat* and *Love After All*, both written under the pseudonym Roland Allen, were produced by the Library Theatre in Scarborough. He has gone on to write more than 70 full-length plays to date, some of which are musicals, as well as five One-Acts, five adaptations, 11 revues, seven plays for children and young people, and a screenplay. *Invisible Friends*, one of his plays for young people, was produced in 1989. It is a youth version of *Woman in Mind* whose protagonist is a teenaged girl. Nine films were made from his plays, and most of the hundreds of songs he has written are part of established revues or his own plays. He has dozens of other works: poems, a book and plays that were never performed.

Ayckbourn didn't go to university or drama school and yet he has been an Oxford professor of contemporary drama and is one of the most widely produced playwrights of our time. His prolific catalog of work has been translated into 40 languages and performed all over the world. Nearly 50 of his plays have been produced in the West End, and 10 have been on Broadway. His plays have won Molière, Tony and Olivier Awards. In addition to writing, he acted earlier in his career and has directed hundreds of plays, including most of his own. In 1987, he was appointed a CBE (Commander of the Order of the British Empire) and was knighted ten years later for his services to theatre. In 2010, he won a Tony Award for lifetime achievement.

In 1972, he was made Artistic Director of the Library Theatre in Scarborough, England, and remained so until 2009. The appointment followed the death of its founding Artistic Director, Stephen Joseph, after whom it was later named. Joseph has been called Ayckbourn's mentor, and had an enormous effect on his career: he challenged him to write his first play and commissioned those that followed. Joseph was a strong proponent of theatre in the round, and staged all the plays in Scarborough that way. To this day, with the exception of the few plays he hasn't written for the Scarborough theater, Ayckbourn writes his plays for the arena stage, contending that if they are done elsewhere, they are still best staged in the round.

Where Stephen Joseph influenced Ayckbourn's creative trajectory, the agent Margaret Ramsay became one of the people most responsible for his career. She took him on in 1964, when his play *Mr. Whatnot* was optioned for London. She renegotiated his contract with the play's producer, the first of many in which the playwright-producer relationship would prosper. Interestingly, Ramsey was also the agent for Joe Orton, whose play, *What the Butler Saw*, was part of Jewel's 2013/14 season. Ramsay did the same with Orton as she did with Ayckbourn: she recognized the potential in a little-known playwright and was instrumental in his subsequent vast success.

Woman in Mind

Woman in Mind, which made its debut in May 1985 at the Stephen Joseph Theatre-In-The-Round, is Ayckbourn's 32nd play. Lloyd Evans of *The Spectator* wrote, "At its 1985 première, the play was hailed as a macabre and daring departure for the bourgeoisie's favorite satirist". It planted him firmly in his admitted "dark" period, which includes, among others, *Henceforward* and *A Small Family Business*, both produced in 1987. The playwright has said that his plays moved "deliberately" away from farce and towards a darker, more serious comedy, but are "still funny". Peter Hall, who founded the Royal Shakespeare Company and was a director at the National Theatre during the time Ayckbourn directed there, applauded this new tenor for Ayckbourn's plays, saying, "The bleaker they have become the better they are". He called them "documents of our age".

Woman in Mind darkens Ayckbourn's comic approach with disturbing realities about middle-class life: dashed expectations, the widening distance between couples in long-term marriages, estrangement from adult children, unwanted in-laws sharing the home, and the waning of a traditional wife's nurturing role as she ages, contributing to her sense of isolation and purposelessness. Critics and audiences, accustomed to the levity of Ayckbourn's more commercial comedies for his Scarborough company's resort-town stage, complained about the play's depressing ending. Given the themes, the ending was inevitable; there could be no quick fix or happily-ever-after.

Early versions, and even some performed now, subtitle the play *December Bee*, which is Susan's garbled "Remember me?" It's a plea for recognition, which she repeats throughout the play. This struggle to be recognized within the marital and

also the family unit (*Invisible Friends*) is a recurring element in Ayckbourn's work, identified as "man's inhumanity to women". Yet, it's not just Susan who suffers from not being seen. Gerald may say that he is fine with his and Susan's physical and emotional distancing, but his false modesty about his book ("it's a small little venture") suggests that he still desires appreciation. Bill's wife doesn't seek his medical advice, but instead that of his partner, whom she sees frequently with imagined ills. She has encouraged him to shift his attentions away from her and towards macramé, relegating him and his hobby to the spare bedroom where he works all night, apart from her. It's no accident that Bill is the first to ask, "December Bee?" Muriel's dreadful cooking seems less like absentmindedness and more a misguided cry to be appreciated. Lucy, the "Susan" of Ayckbourn's parallel youth play *Invisible Friends*, is being so grossly ignored by her family, she invents an alternate loving and attentive family.

What's eating Susan – Gerald's lack of affection, her son's tacit rejection of her through his self-imposed silence, her weariness of her domestic tasks – though legitimate, is merely the tip of a deeper unhappiness. The "joyous part" of her life with Gerald is gone, and he doesn't even seem to miss it. She doesn't want her son, Rick, to sell his bedroom furniture because "that's all that's left of him ... he'll have gone completely". She laments, "I don't know what my role is these days. I don't any longer know what I'm supposed to be doing. I used to be a wife. I used to be a mother. And I loved it. People said, 'Oh, don't you long to get out and do a proper job?' And I'd say, 'No thanks, this is a proper job, thank you. Mind your own business.' But now it isn't anymore. The thrill has gone."

Without Gerald and Rick's need for her, without sex and closeness with her husband, "everything else rather loses its purpose", Susan says. Missing for her now is the sense of having lived a full and accomplished-enough life to leave a legacy. Gerald's is his book, although it will be destroyed by the end of the play. Bill's is perhaps the lives he has saved, or at least, has made more healthy and comfortable. But what is Susan's? Her husband doesn't need her for companionship or sex and he belittles the work she does to maintain the home. Her son hasn't spoken to her in two years and when he finally does, it's to tell her he's married to a woman he won't allow her to meet, and with whom he is going to Thailand immediately.

Susan's sense of purposelessness and therefore worthlessness, and of disappearing and of leaving no lasting mark, are a mitigating factors in many suicides among women in their 50s, particularly those who have been traditional homemakers most of their lives and whose children have grown and left the home.

In her article, "Ayckbourn's Women", Felicia Hardison Londré writes, "Until the appearance of Susan in *Woman In Mind*, his [Ayckbourn's] women characters have generally been defined within the context of the couple." This departure contributed to Ayckbourn's reputation as a playwright whose women characters have an authentic voice. Reviewers of the London production of *Woman in Mind* in 1986 were consistently impressed with the character of Susan. Victoria Radin wrote in

The New Statesman that despite “the terrain of Alan Ayckbourn’s tight-arsed suburban archetypes”, his Susan was drawn with “imaginative sympathy ... a greatly appealing Everywoman” who would “haunt” her “for some time”. Joan Smith wrote in *Today*, “Ayckbourn’s Susan speaks for all the women who have been driven to the brink by the dreariness of their lives. If you want something to make you think, see it”.

Michael Billington of *The Guardian* has called Ayckbourn, “England’s finest feminist writer”, and consistently represents him as a latter-day Chekhov or Ibsen, due to his ability to explore the problems of women trapped by husband, house and domestic security. He describes *Woman in Mind* as “one of the most sympathetic, imaginative, and compassionate accounts of womanhood since the war”. Theatre critic Martin Bronstein said in 1981 that Ayckbourn was “the only contemporary playwright who shows the real plight of the average woman in today’s world.”

Many would disagree with Bronstein, and cite Ayckbourn’s contemporary, Caryl Churchill as more deserving of the quote. By sheer proliferation of his works and their mainstream acceptance in England, Ayckbourn’s influence can’t be denied. His plays have proven of particular interest to women, as evidenced by the following excerpt from a 1990 interview with Julia McKenzie, the original Susan in *Woman in Mind*, that was part of a BBC documentary on Ayckbourn:

We had some sad but very moving things happen during *Woman in Mind*. I know one night we'd finished the play and she [Susan] had had this final breakdown and talks gobbledegook, and when we'd all left the stage, there was a woman sobbing a couple of rows back, sobbing and sobbing and sobbing, and her son was sitting next to her, saying 'Mum! Mum! Come on!', and she - you know - suddenly her life had been presented to her, and let's hope it helped - I mean, let's hope by seeing it presented that way it helped

Ayckbourn would deny a feminist, or for that matter, any agenda. In his article, “Bard of the English Bourgeoisie” for the *New York Times Magazine* in 1990, Mel Gussow begins an interview with Ayckbourn by quoting from critic John Russell Taylor, who wrote in a 1978 book about English playwrights, “Of all our younger dramatists, he is the one who has most consistently and uncompromisingly avoided any suggestion of deeper meaning in his plays.” Ayckbourn responded, amused, “I fooled him”. He then explained, “One of the reasons people come to my plays is that they don’t feel that someone is telling them how to live their lives. Having said that, I hope I do say certain things about the human condition. I’ve had to steer between Vacuous Empty Entertainment and Sit Down, Shut Up, This is Doing You Good Theater”.

Ayckbourn sees the human condition as a comedy, and populates his plays with imperfect people like himself. “Most of us are flawed and don’t have eternally happy relationships. I think people may come out of my plays saying, ‘Well, we may have a bad marriage, but it’s not as bad as that one.’ ”

It has been said that Ayckbourn will defy his critics, and that his comic chronicling of middle-class life will survive long past many of the current avant-gardists. Who knows? After all, he surpassed Shakespeare's canon when he wrote his 39th play, *Body Language* in 1990, and this year, *The Bard of the English Bourgeoisie* doubled The Bard's efforts with *Hero's Welcome*.

A complete listing of Alan Ayckbourn's plays, including descriptions and production histories, can be found on his official website, www.alanayckbourn.net. The site has all kinds of information, including biographical information, a chronology of his personal and theatre life and his notes on his plays. I also have several books and articles on Ayckbourn that I am happy to share.