



Creative Writing

Alan Ayckbourn and Staging

Derek Neale

Because he runs a theatre and because he directs plays, Alan Ayckbourn has a finely tuned awareness of stages and staging. He's particularly fond of one type of stage.

Alan Ayckbourn

A genuine theatre in the round. And it has lots of sort of theoretical objections – 'Oh, some of the actors have got their backs to you' and 'Some of the time I'm on the wrong side of it' but in fact, in the end, it has so many advantages, it allows actors to play to each other, genuinely play to each other and not, as they tend to do on the pros because that's the way it is, having to share it with the audience, I mean, they do share it with the audience but in a different way in the round. And the one thing about it which is interesting is because people are literally all the way round, and a good theatre in the round encourages one block of audience who are facing the other block of audience to be in collusion with the event, doesn't mean you spend your whole evening nodding and smiling at them, but at a, say, a funny moment which happens between you, as it were, between me in Block A and the other people in Block C facing me, we share that laughter together. And it becomes in, if you use the old theatre phrase, a shared experience, and we are never far away from knowing, in that extraordinary way theatre has, that we're all conspiring to create this evening, and we're all, in a sense, suspending our disbelief so that, we saw Henry V the other night in the round, and of course, that's the classic theatrical play, when the chorus comes on and says I want you to suspend your disbelief; we don't have anything like scenery that's necessary and we're going to take you to France, we're going to take you back again, and almost, it's the classic theatre in the round experience really. So we need your imagination, folks, and you're going to have to do a lot of the work for us, and we'll try and do the rest with the acting. And that's really what any play in the round says in a way; it may not say it quite as directly as Shakespeare says it but it does say, 'This is a flat', you know, 'This is where people live' or 'This is a garden'. And 'We're going to give you a little bit of a suggestion'. Often, the great scenic effects from theatre in the round are sound, it can create an instant feeling of birdsong, garden, whatever, and a bit of light is very important and lighting and sound are two pretty well instant scenic effects. You know, you can change in a split second a scene from a garden to a prison with a light change and a sound effect. We're about to revive a play of mine that, which is an absolute nightmare to technicians called *Way Up Stream* when we flood the auditorium with water. And the reason for flooding it, it can be done with blue silk or whatever, but it's not half as fun, and everybody gets involved, the actors like working on water, the audience love the idea of water and the lighting man goes mad with water, they love it, they can bounce their light off it, they can make it look pretty and all this stuff and the technicians like working with it really, although it's a sort of mixed blessing but it also allows, once you've flooded the stage, you can then allow it to pour with rain, it's the classic theatre in the round experience really.