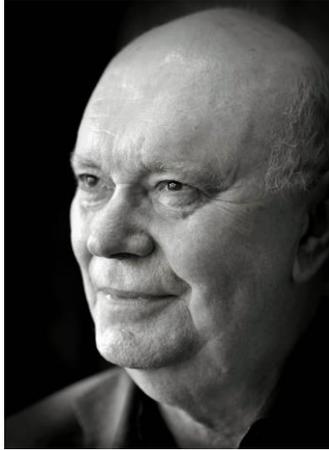


ALAN AYCKBOURN Syndicated Interview

Confusions and Hero's Welcome



Wednesday 13 – Saturday 23 January at Guildford's Yvonne Arnaud Theatre

In 2016, the Stephen Joseph Theatre, Scarborough in association with Guildford's Yvonne Arnaud Theatre is on national tour with Alan Ayckbourn's 79th play *Hero's Welcome* and a revival of his 1974 comedy, *Confusions*. Here he talks about reviving one of his classic works and his latest world premiere production.

***Confusions* is one of your most popular plays, what are your thoughts on returning to it 41 years on?**

It's only the second time I've directed *Confusions*. I've never got round to reviving it myself, but I think it's been managing alright, ticking away doing quite nicely for itself!

In 2014, you made a rare return to the one act form with *Roundelay*, which - like *Confusions* - featured five one act plays. How do they compare?

It is an interesting discipline to write to that sort of length as the construction is quite demanding. Looking back, I find it interesting that when I wrote *Gosforth's Fete* for *Confusions*, I was still writing something so situation-driven. These days I tend to get sucked sideways by character.

When I was writing *Confusions*, I was at a phase in my writing career when I could still write those 'and then this happens' type of plays. *Confusions* is an interesting stepping stone for me as you can see where the future is - *Absent Friends* - but you can also see the past - *How The Other Half Loves* - which is pure situation.

Where did the idea for *Confusions* come from?

Confusions was also written for the five actors who were currently the company. I wrote them a little showcase really. It was written at a time when I wanted theatre to primarily show off actors, I still do really, but in those days I thought people loved the idea of actors playing different roles and becoming different people.

There is something marvellous about that which is still peculiarly theatrical; you don't get that impression from movies and television in quite the way you do on stage. I think this is partly because you take the magic for granted in a sense on screen with computer generated images and special effects. But if an actor becomes someone right in front of your very eyes or changes from one person to another, you can still believe there's a bit of magic somewhere.

***Hero's Welcome* is your latest play, what can you tell us about it?**

Hero's Welcome is about the prodigal son, Murray, coming back to his home town. He's one of my anti-heroes really, a squaddie who has got all the good qualities that I like; he trusts people and he's honest with people - although he got trapped in his early days by the machinations of sexual politics and ran away at the altar, not

the best time to run away from a woman. If you're going to run away, run away before! He's returning to the 'scene of the crime' for the first time since he left.

Presumably the scorned woman is waiting in the wings?

Indeed. I'm always fascinated by what time does to people. Murray left his fiancée Alice at the altar, when she was glamorous, desirable and used to put her finger up to society. Twenty years later, she's the mayor and married to the safest sort of man - a loving, doting type who's completely obsessed with model railways.

And just to keep things interesting, Murray doesn't return alone.

Murray returns with his new bride, Baba. She is another interesting character. She is the moral compass of the play who starts as a tiny element and then grows. She has a huge effect on the slightly listless inhabitants of the town. She has a brain to run rings around Murray, in the nicest possible way. During the course of the play it's fun to see how she grows.

You frequently revisit and delve deeper into themes from other plays, are there any recurring motifs in *Hero's Welcome*?

I've revisited one of my fascinations, male rivalry. That was there originally in *Time And Time Again*, at the end of which the two guys completely forgot what they were competing for - which was the girl! Undeterred, they just carried on competing while she just said, 'Oh, to hell with this!' I just find that streak in men fascinating - I think it probably does exist in women but it's not the same and they go about it in different ways.

Blokes will just bet each other for no real reason: 'I bet you can't get over that fence!' I knew someone who would look around a room and then say, 'I bet you can't flick that beer mat into the waste paper basket'. Before we knew it, we'd started this incredible game, flipping mats, and if they landed on the table it was -3 points, if it landed in the basket it was +15 points. There was this incredible points system within minutes and we would play it for hours!

Hero's Welcome explores the male rivalry between Murray and an old friend, Brad, who is hugely competitive. Murray is a non-competitor really and always hates it if he wins. But he's also been in the army, so you just don't challenge him to a physical fitness match, because the guy's absolutely fine-tuned! But Brad will go to any lengths to win whilst Murray doesn't intend to win.

You've written several soldiers into recent plays such as *Private Fears in Public Places* and *Arrivals & Departures*, yet it's a relatively new trend for you. Is there any reason for this?

I've known people who have joined up at an incredibly young age at 17 or 18. They went straight into the services and they're looked after in an incredible way and scheduled to within an inch of their lives. Suddenly they come out and they've absolutely no compass and don't really know what they're doing. They're waiting for someone to say 'fall in, follow me.' Murray's a little bit like that, although he's still got a little bit of momentum. I'm just enlarging my canvas and bringing in a few more people.

Your last play, *Roundelay*, was one of your more experimental plays in which the structure changed every night. Should we expect the same of *Hero's Welcome* or is it a more traditional narrative?

It's a good old straight four-scene play with a beginning, middle and an end. It does have - like *Life Of Riley* - a fixed multiple locations set, which is something I like when I have a complex narrative that needs telling quite easily. You've got one room for each location, so hopefully we can keep the story rolling.

Tickets for *Hero's Welcome* and *Confusions* are on sale now! You can book yours by calling the Yvonne Arnaud Theatre Box Office on (01483) 44 00 00 or by visiting the website at www.yvonne-arnaud.co.uk