



BROWSE



Alan Ayckbourn: Grinning at the Edge (review)

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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***Alan Ayckbourn: Grinning at the Edge.* By Paul Allen.** New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, Inc., 2002; pp. 337, \$35.00 cloth.

Alan Ayckbourn, the subject of Paul Allen's new biography, is England's most commercially successful living playwright, having written over sixty plays, thirty-five of which have played in the West End or at the National

Theatre. Yet Ayckbourn himself resists celebrity status, as Allen demonstrates in an anecdote about autograph hunters at the musical *By Jeeves* who, having secured autographs from the actors and composer Andrew Lloyd Weber exclaimed, "We've got everyone now!" as they brushed past the unrecognized Ayckbourn, author and director of the show. An embarrassing moment, perhaps, but Ayckbourn not only accepts anonymity, he seems to prefer it. Despite Paul Allen's best efforts to drag his grinning subject into the lime light, Ayckbourn determinedly hides in the wings.

Allen thoroughly chronicles Ayckbourn's extraordinarily productive professional career. This is no small feat, since Ayckbourn's normal pace entails a show in London while rehearsing another in Scarborough and writing a new one in his spare time. Allen negotiates all this activity and the large cast of characters in Ayckbourn's life with skill and avoids overwhelming the reader with detail. The author is at his best when discussing the plays in production. He has seen many of Ayckbourn's plays, both in Scarborough and in London, and he offers valuable critical assessments and comparisons. He conveys both the humor and the pain at the core of the plays and deftly manages the signature conceits in Ayckbourn's plays that are instantly clear on stage but difficult to appreciate in the telling (such as all three floors of a house being represented on the stage floor simultaneously). Given the generally high quality of Allen's production criticism, it is a pity that he could not have provided more, but considering Ayckbourn's output, it was probably necessary to sacrifice depth for breadth.

While Allen succeeds in conveying a feeling for the plays in production, a reader looking for serious scholarly analysis of Ayckbourn's work will not find it here; this is a popular biography for a general audience. This perhaps explains why Allen succumbs to the biographer's temptation to mine the plays for psychological insights into his subject. This approach probably has as much validity for Ayckbourn as it would for any other artist, but Allen's relentless search for biographical parallels between Ayckbourn and his characters becomes tedious and even a little absurd. "Jerome's flat [in *Henceforward*] is described as revealing his contradictions: immaculate and lovingly kept technical equipment, but a living area heaped with discarded clothes, food, coffee mugs—the signs of someone who lives alone and has stopped caring much'. [Ayckbourn's] living conditions are in beautiful order, but maybe they wouldn't be if he lived on his own" (230). Then, discussing the play *Man of the Moment*, Allen writes, "You have to look quite hard to find elements of [Ayckbourn] in the characters of Vic and Douglas..." (238). Allen never questions that those elements will be found nor does he consider that this method of inquiry might be fallacious.

Unfortunately, this exercise in literary psychoanalysis fails; Allen never penetrates Ayckbourn's public persona. This is often the downfall of authorized biographies—Allen even thanks Ayckbourn's wife, Heather Stoney, for cooking for him while he researched her scrapbooks. No wonder, then, that disturbing tidbits make their way into the story only to be breezily dropped. Comparing Ayckbourn to his character Dafydd in *A Chorus of Disapproval*, Allen writes, "Did [Ayckbourn] feel himself in trouble? He had become seriously involved with another actress, installing her in a flat in London, which obviously threatened his relationship with Heather and made other actors uncomfortable. But all evidence is that it is not current experience that he uses in his plays" (209). We hear no more about this actress. **[End Page 367]**

With critical objectivity off the table, Allen might have given the reader a...

rience here, referring the reader to his book, *Legislative Theatre* (Routledge, 1999). To his great satisfaction, *Theatre of the Oppressed* has become institutionalized in the Brazilian political process. In his final chapter, he promises that he is already at work on the next volume—*Closing Statements*—although “nothing ends, you can be sure” (349).

Hamlet and the Baker's Son is written with a spirit of generosity and sincere affection for Brazil and its theatre. Despite the book's sometimes confusing and impressionistic style, the intense vitality and shrewd accuracy of observation of the human condition that are Boal's trademarks shine through and reward the reader with a deeper understanding of one of the most influential theatre innovators of our time.

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