

# InsideOUT

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## SEASON'S GREETINGS

By Alan Ayckbourn

Directed by Gavin Cameron-Webb

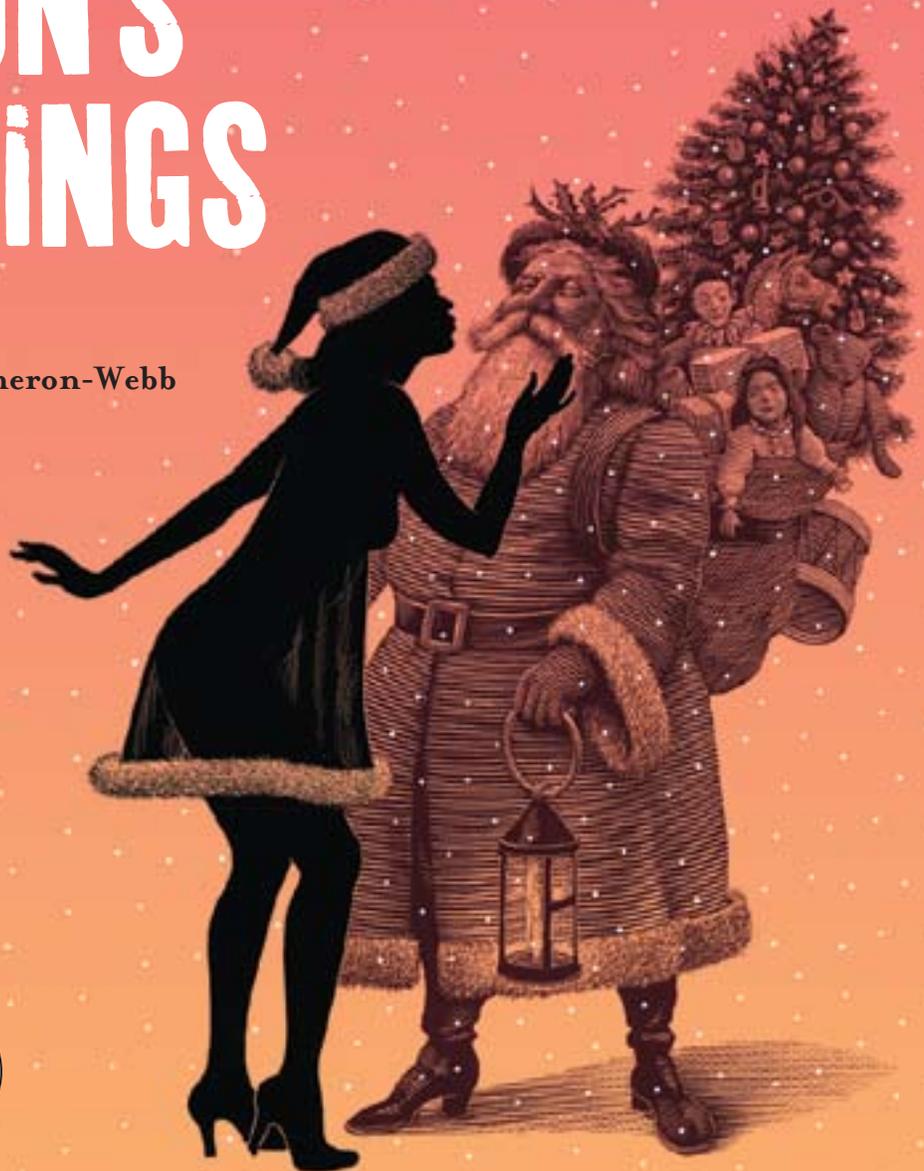


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## Synopsis

*Christmas is the time when we make whoopee  
and commit suicide and when families come  
together in an often doomed attempt at festivity.*

—Michael Billington,  
Alan Ayckbourn

It is Christmas and the Bunkers are gathering the usual suspects for the holiday's convivialities. In their large, upscale suburban home, Neville Bunker, an easygoing owner of a couple of successful local electronics stores, and his wife Belinda, already war-weary from the annual ritual, host the family and friends. The guest list includes Phyllis, Neville's alcoholic sister who cooks the Christmas Eve dinner between swigs; Dr. Bernard Langstaff, her hapless physician husband and frustrated puppeteer; Uncle Harvey, an opinionated retired security officer; Eddie, a former employee of Neville's and his pregnant wife Patti; Rachel, Belinda's spinster sister and Clive, her invited guest and a successful novelist. In this engaging collection of familiar types there are enough fractious dispositions to set off a fireworks factory. No one in the house is immune from the calamities of Christmas time.

*Season's Greetings is a play about love  
and about how unfair it is.  
And success and failure.  
And jealousy and self-deception.  
And greed and envy and lust and gluttony.  
Just an average family Christmas.*

—Alan Ayckbourn,  
program notes to *Season's Greetings*

# The Playwright: A Biography

**A**lan Ayckbourn was born in Hampstead, London, on April 12, 1939. His mother was the novelist Mary “Lolly” James and his father, Horace Ayckbourn, was lead violinist with the London Symphony Orchestra. His father died when Alan was only four; in 1947 his mother married Cecil Pye, a bank manager. Their ten-year marriage was stormy and tumultuous, but it contributed to Ayckbourn’s view of suburban family life.

Ayckbourn was educated at the historic Haileybury public school in Hertford. However, at 17, he left school and joined the renowned theatre impresario Sir Donald Wolfitt’s acting company for three weeks, working as an assistant stage manager for the production, *The Strong are Lonely*. From there he went on to a stage management job at the Connaught Theatre in Worthing before moving to the Thorndike Theatre in Leatherhead. In Leatherhead he met Rodney Wood who asked him to stage-manage with him at the Library Theatre in Scarborough, run by Stephen Joseph.

**J**oseph liked Ayckbourn so much that he became his mentor, allowing the young man to both stage-manage and act with his company. His acting inadvertently led to his first professional commission as a writer when, in 1958, Ayckbourn complained to Joseph about the roles he was playing. Joseph challenged Ayckbourn by saying if he wanted better roles, he had better write them himself. Subsequently, Ayckbourn wrote *The Square Cat*, which was a big success for the company in the summer of 1959. Joseph immediately commissioned a second play, *Love After All*, which opened in the winter of 1959.

Ayckbourn continued to act and write for the Studio Theatre Company in Scarborough until 1962 when he became involved in the formation of the Victoria Theatre at Stone-

on-Trent with Stephen Joseph and Peter Cheeseman. He premiered two plays there, *Christmas V Mastermind* and *Mr. Whatnot*. When the latter play received a critical mauling in London, Ayckbourn went to work as a radio producer for the BBC in Leeds. He also directed his first play in 1962, *Gaslight*, at the Library Theatre, and continued writing, producing *Meet My Father* for Scarborough in 1965.

**T**his would be a turning point in Ayckbourn’s career. In 1967, this play—retitled as *Relatively Speaking*—opened in the West End and was a phenomenal hit. In the same year Stephen Joseph died and Ayckbourn, working alongside Ken Boden, Alfred Bradley and Rodney Wood, worked together to keep the Library Theatre alive. Although Ayckbourn was closely involved with the theatre during this period in both writing, directing and selecting plays for the company, he would not formally take on the role of Artistic Director until 1972, a position he has retained ever since.

Ayckbourn is internationally renowned for his plays. Indeed, *The Norman Conquests* is regarded as a classic of 20th-century British theatre. His plays are often described as being middle-class and suburban, although this is rather a dated view of his work. While the description would be generally correct for his work during the 1960s and 1970s, since the 1980s, Ayckbourn’s work has become ever more expansive, dealing with wider social issues and often utilizing more fantastic ideas and settings to explore his themes. If one were to generalize about his large body of work that now covers practically five decades, it would be that he writes about men and women, their relationships and their general inability to live with each other. His work also is characterized by its tragi-comic themes and his willingness to experiment with stage time and space.

*Continued on next page*

Ayckbourn is credited with having written more than 70 plays in 47 years (Shakespeare wrote 37). He has garnered many awards in England, including an Olivier, a Molière, Playwright of the Year in 1974 and the British Guild of Writers' Lifetime Achievement Award. He is Freeman of the Borough of Scarborough, was appointed Commander of the British Empire in 1987 and knighted for his services to theatre in 1997. His most recent play is *Improbable Fiction*.

Though he has not similarly been honored in America, his plays have been produced regularly in this country. More than ten of them have reached Broadway or off-Broadway. His

latest American success came in 2005, when Ayckbourn took his Scarborough company to 59e59 Theatre's Brits on Broadway season to present *Private Fears in Public Places*. The month-long run was an unprecedented hit, garnering huge critical and commercial praise. *The New York Times* proclaimed it as "altogether wonderful" and the cast as "flawless."

<http://sjtarchive.Ayckbournayckbourn.net/ayckbourn/experiences.html>

White, Sidney Howard. *Alan Ayckbourn*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984.

## Alan Ayckbourn: Commentaries

*His plays raise suburban absurdities to the level of universal anxieties.*  
—Bernard Nightingale, critic.  
*New York Times*: March 25, 1979

Alan Ayckbourn may be under-appreciated as a playwright because the number of plays he has written is impressive: 35 plays presented in London's West End or by national companies; translation into over 30 languages and into vastly different cultures. No living playwright can match these figures and very few can who are dead. Though historians may leave him out of their assessments of major developments in dramatic theory, he is valued by the people who spend their money on tickets "in the keen anticipation of a life-enhancing, however pessimistic, night in the theatre."<sup>1</sup>

Ayckbourn is called England's greatest *farceur*. His contribution to the art of farce is his keen knowledge of the wide English middle class and its characteristic polite deferences and hesitations. He explores the

famous British "unflappability" in the face of mounting pressures and incongruities until that facade cracks. What his characters say is often very funny but significant, for he has a remarkable insight into the present lives of those he portrays.

Michael Billington in his book on Alan Ayckbourn compares him to Chekhov because he has the ability "to fuse contradictory emotions."<sup>2</sup> This is seen in *Season's Greetings* in the character of Bernard, the hapless doctor, in his conflict with Uncle Harvey, the former security guard. Act I is full of snide remarks about Bernard's puppet shows, an epic he presents every Boxing Day.

In Act II, Bernard's rehearsal goes completely awry, and the mild-mannered milquetoast turns into a petty tyrant. When the jeering Harvey tosses the wolf puppet into the air and knocks over the scenery, Bernard calls him "a bigot, a racist, a chauvinist, an ignorant, insensitive, narrow-minded, intolerant humorless wort." (play, p. 69.) The audience that has been mocking Bernard right along with Harvey now feels sympathy for this unappreciated man who has sacrificed time

and money to produce entertainment for the children as well as protect his alcoholic wife.

Ayckbourn always tries to set his plays in numerous and unlikely places. *Season's Greetings* is no exception for it is largely set in the hallway. We are aware of what people are up to in the dining and living rooms, but in the hallway people are forever coming and going, crossing, barging upstairs or downstairs, and the manner in which they do it is indicative of some mood. Bernard schleps through the halls with his cumbersome puppet theatre; Patti shouts at Eddie from the stairway; Rachel stands in the hallway at dawn ready to transport her hoped-for writer boyfriend to the train—all these and many other moments indicate that “for Ayckbourn life is made up of myriad tiny crises.”<sup>3</sup>

Ayckbourn says all “his plays end on minor chords.”<sup>4</sup> In *Season's Greetings*, there is no happy ending, though the playwright wanted to write a Christmas play about the traditional icons: “log fires, Christmas trees, candlelight, and excited children’s faces.” But in a cast of nine adults, “the children getting over-excited and fighting over their toys, clamoring for attention, bullying, sneaking and crying, are those aged between 25 and 70.”<sup>5</sup>

Though Ayckbourn’s themes range from disillusionment with marriage, dislike of do-gooders, sympathy for the feckless and incompetent, his opinion

is different. “My biggest recurrent theme is that people do care about each other; it’s just that they handle each other with boxing gloves half the time and not with kid gloves.”<sup>6</sup> This can be seen in the Belinda-Neville relationship, in Eddie and Patti’s marriage and the way Harvey treats everyone. Ayckbourn said: “I think people should treat each other well. And unfortunately, in this world, it’s getting more and more difficult to treat people nicely, because the suspicions are growing rather than diminishing. That is greatly sad.”<sup>7</sup>

Allen, Paul. *Alan Ayckbourn: Grinning at the Edge*. London: Methuen Publishing, 2001.

Billington, Michael. *Alan Ayckbourn*. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1983.

Watson, Ian. *Conversations with Alan Ayckbourn*. London: Macdonald Futura Publications, 1981.

White, Sidney Howard. *Alan Ayckbourn*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984.

1. Allen, p. 114.
2. Billington, p. 153.
3. Billington, p. 154.
4. Watson, p. 171.
5. Allen, p. 196.
6. Watson, p. 120.
7. Watson, p. 114.

# A Brief History of *Farce*

**F**arce is an exaggerated form of comedy that takes its impetus from fast action, visual effects and convolutions of plot; the more complicated and illogical the better. Its heroes are clowns or become clowns in the course of the action; it is their foibles and stupidities that are the major source of humor.

God hath chosen the foolish things  
of the world to confound the wise.

—*Corinthians, I: 27*

Farce is one of the oldest forms of comic drama. It is the predecessor of high comedy, having evolved from the primitive slapstick and folk dramas of the ancient Greeks. As early as the fifth century BC, farcical playlets full of foolishness and bawdy humor were being performed and inspired such writers as Aristophanes (445-385 BC) who borrowed their jokes, antics and broad hilarious style. However, the word “farce” derives from the Latin *farcire* meaning “to stuff”—a reference apparently to the padding used to exaggerate the bellies and bosoms of the ancient actors.

**T**he Greek farces influenced the Roman writers of comedy, especially the most prominent, Plautus (c. 251- c. 184 BC.). But they also found a rich source of inspiration in the peasant farces that were performed in the marketplaces of Southern Italy. These Atellan farces (named for Atella, the town of origin) or *fabulas*, consisted of improvised skits using such stock figures as the drunk, the glutton, the fool or the coward as portrayed by a troupe of actors wearing flamboyant or obscene costumes and masks. The improvisations were strung together by comic plot devices such as mistaken identity, masquerade, female impersonation and/or intrigue.

Boisterous, farcical comedy was a popular component in the mystery and miracle plays performed in European marketplaces during the Middle Ages. In 16th-century Italy the *Commedia dell'Arte* revived many of the characters, techniques and traditions of the Atellan rustic farce. Traveling troupes spread this revival throughout Europe. In England they influenced Shakespeare who included elements of *commedia* farce in some of his most serious plays. In France Molière borrowed a great deal from *commedia* and elevated farce to the level of high art.

Farce continued to be popular in the 18th and 19th centuries. Farcical sketches often preceded a long tragedy or melodrama as a curtain raiser and became part of the vaudeville shows popular in France, England and the United States. At the same time Gogol, W.S. Gilbert, George Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde were writing the full-length classics of farce. The great French farces were created by Labiche, Courteline and Feydeau.

They kept the inherited stock characters and situations, but their characters took on the manners of the Victorian period. Drawing rooms, salons and hotel bedrooms became the preferred environments. Sex, marriage and money were the motivating factors of the plot and the members of the *haute bourgeoisie*, the upper middle class—lawyers, physicians, civil servants and others with a certain authority and position in society to uphold—were the characters doomed to being made ridiculous.

**I**n the 20th century farce came to the side of the “little man” embodied best in the art of Charles Chaplin, Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd. Chaplin in particular represented the best downtrodden person “alone against an unusually unkind world, who survived on his wit and agility like the tricky servants of the *Commedia dell'Arte*. His outwitting maneuvers were usually physical and, though he got knocked down, he picked himself up,

dusted himself off and started all over again.”<sup>1</sup> The physical resilience also was shown in the work of the Marx Brothers. Their energy was potentially aggressive and destructive as they attacked society’s sacred cows. They expressed anger at what people could not understand, control or do and their insecurities at the difficulty of functioning in a complicated world.

Why has farce persisted for more than 2,000 years? First, farce takes a particular perspective upon certain unchanging qualities in human beings and their relationship with each other and the world around them. The characters are usually pursuing either basic needs or those that society makes desirable: love, sex, food, money, power and glory. They characterize the very human traits of greed, lechery, avarice, arrogance or pomposity. Secondly, farce attacks all pretensions, all masks and tends to attack in the simplest way, a physical way with a kick in the pants or a knock on the head. In the world that farce inhabits, people get their just desserts. Finally, farce goes for the belly and the backside; it makes us laugh at the fact that we look funny when we’re at a disadvantage, when we’re caught with our pants down.

Comedy is the clash of character.  
Eliminate character from comedy  
and you get farce.

—William Butler Yeats, *Dramatis Personae*

Harrop, John and Epstein, Sabin R. *Acting with Style*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1982.

*The Encyclopedia of World Drama*. Vol. 2. NY: McGraw Hill Book Co., 1972.

1. Harrop and Epstein, p. 144.

# Boxing Day

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*Poetry's unnat'ral; no man ever talked poetry  
'cept a beadle on Boxin' Day.  
—Charles Dickens  
Pickwick Papers (1836-37)*

**B**oxing Day is a public holiday observed in many Commonwealth countries on the 26th of December. In many European countries it also is a holiday, but called St. Joseph's Day or the Second Day of Christmas. Depending on its origin, it may have traditionally been strictly defined as the first weekday after Christmas. However, in recent years Boxing Day has been almost universally accepted as December 26, although its associated public holiday may fall on a different day.

There is a great debate over the true origins of Boxing Day, but some of the common stories include:

- Centuries ago, merchants would present their servants food and fruits as a form of Yuletide tip. Naturally, the gifts of food were packed in boxes, hence the term "Boxing Day."

- In feudal times, Christmas was a reason for a gathering of extended families. All the serfs would gather their families in the manor of their lord, which made it simpler for the lord of the estate to hand out annual stipends to the serfs. After all the Christmas parties on December 26, the lord of the estate would give practical goods such as cloth, grains and tools to each family of serfs who lived on his land. Under this explanation, there was nothing voluntary about this transaction; the lord of the manor was obliged to supply these goods. Since the boxes were given out on December 26, that day became known as Boxing Day.

- In Britain, many years ago, it was common practice for the servants to carry boxes to their employers when they arrived for work on the day after Christmas. Their employers would then put coins in the boxes as special end-of-year gifts. This can be compared with the modern day concept of Christmas bonuses. The servants carried boxes for the coins, hence the name Boxing Day.

- In churches, it was traditional to open the church's donation box on Christmas day, and the money in it was distributed to the poor on the next day. In this case, the "box" in Boxing Day came from that one gigantic lockbox in which the donations were kept.

- In Britain, because many servants had to work for their employers on Christmas Day, they would open their presents the next day, which therefore became known as Boxing Day.

- In the United States Boxing Day and the days immediately following are when many retail stores sell off their Christmas merchandise and retired model products by holding clearance sales. This could be called "Boxing Week."

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/second\\_day\\_of\\_christmas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/second_day_of_christmas).