

Alan Ayckbourn - Technically Speaking

Alan Ayckbourn's 34th play - 'Henceforward...' - has just left Scarborough's Stephen Joseph Theatre in the Round for a tour to Germany, Poland, Turkey and Egypt. John Offord visited the theatre as final preparations were being made for the production's conversion to proscenium format, and talked to Alan Ayckbourn about his involvement with things technical . . .

Working in a theatre form that demands a very intimate relationship between the components of a production, Alan Ayckbourn's involvement with all technical aspects of theatre is well known. I asked him where this interest had its beginnings.

"I started at the point where tape was just creeping into theatre, sound-wise. I was at Oxford Playhouse at the time, and they used those old panatropes, 78 discs, and this rather dicey cueing system. As I had been given an old Grundig tape recorder as a kid, in addition to being the junior ASM, I also became the sound expert!

"I remember that they purchased a tape recorder, and I started to produce taped sound - it was very primitive. Later, I came here with Stephen Joseph, who was a technical nut. He loved the nuts and bolts of theatre completely. He and I together began to explore the use of taped sound, and it culminated a few years later at Stoke-On-Trent with 'Mr. Whatnot' - which was, and in fact still is, a fairly sophisticated sound tape against which actors acted. It was really a sound operator's showpiece!

"Simultaneously, because the theatres I was working in were so small, I was getting involved in lighting. Again, it was learn-as-you-go. Lighting in the round was something that hadn't been approached in detail, and Stephen and I worked out certain theories on angles, and so on. We progressed a long way, because when we started I think we had just eight pattern 23's which had to light



Alan Ayckbourn - "fascinated by the technical side of theatre."



Alan Ayckbourn's first full venture into computerised lighting was with the purpose-built system installed at Scarborough by Statelight in 1980.

a whole show. Our technical facilities were terribly slender, but it was amazing what you could do. We had a crude slider dimmer board where we cross plugged at every cue - so it was all fairly simple.

"The result was that I became fascinated by the technical side of theatre, and this fascination has remained with me, and I'm still involved. When you have lighting designers like David Hersey or Mick Hughes whom I work with a lot, as long as I allow them their artistic freedom I think they like my involvement. I'm certainly very interested!

"I like to know what's happening, and I have very definite ideas - although sometimes I'll say 'find out how to do it and that's the image I want from it' - and the same goes for sound. I'm still involved, particularly in Scarborough, with sound. I have a small studio of my own at the top of the house which has got an eight track, a four track, and two twin tracks."

You are a playwright who believes in the total concept of theatre, drawing together many aspects, and most particularly the actors and the technical. At what stage do the technical elements come up for consideration during the writing of a play?

"They are there all the time. They are there because rarely do I write a play without knowing that I'm going to direct it. So there's a part of me always checking to see that it's possible, or at the very least, feasible. I may not have solved it completely - and in fact it's quite exciting not to have every solution pat by the time you've finished a script. When I write a play like 'Way Upstream' I made certain that it was possible to get water into the auditorium here, which it was, and that it would stay here and also that we could control a boat. The details had to be worked out fast, but nonetheless I was getting a buzz from the thought of that side of it as much as the play itself."

The technical element obviously excites you. To what extent, if any, do you throw it in deliberately?

"I try not to say 'Here's a good effect, let's write a play around it'. My theory of writing is that a play is a meeting of ideas. There are primary ideas like what it's about and the development of the characters and the situation of the plot, but almost as important, and in some ways just as important, is how you tell it. As they say, there's nothing new. What there is are different ways of telling things, and so I bend my mind very much towards how to re-tell that story; how to tell it in a different way.

"For instance, with 'Intimate Exchanges' it may be 16 endings, and with a play like 'Way Upstream' it has to do with using the boat as a symbol of what everyone wanted to say, and so on. Neither one or the other is dominant, and equally I would not start a play

unless I had a damn good framework for doing it in."

I understand that working in a smaller community here in Scarborough, rather than in London, has certain benefits when quizzical interest from the local community can respond to problems with a production?

"It doesn't generally start off like that, but it was exciting with the 'Way Upstream' experience when various elements pulled together. We asked a local boatyard to provide a 'sawn off' boat, for instance, and local interest certainly caught fire with this show. It was not an easy project, and it was trial and error.

"It was a new technology to move bottomless boats with motors through water - albeit only ten inches of it. With a varying number of people on board it required a great deal of work with gears and motors. If the motor was too strong the boat shot water everywhere, and if it was too feeble it started to catch fire. Our poor engineer was rushing backwards and forwards trying different strengths of motor and various gearing. When it worked, which thank heavens it did on the first night, there was a sort of sigh of relief from the entire audience followed by a huge round of applause. A sort of 'thank you, God' followed by applause."

The current production of 'Henceforward...', your latest play, intrigues me. It has a very simple set, compared with many of your plays, but at the same time it involves the latest technology, and is set in the future.

"The set came about because I was trying to write about a creative artist, which is always a dangerous thing to do because creative artists are notoriously difficult to portray on stage. A composer seemed to be a good idea. I had worked quite a lot with Paul Todd, who is the resident MD here, and over the years we've used a lot of the latest music technology. Before I started to write we investigated the state of the art in music computers, and in this case we went to look at a Synclavier, of which there are only about two or three in the country. It is a fascinating



Getting to know computers. Alan Ayckbourn (seated) takes the original cast of 'Henceforward...' to look over the systems at Scarborough Building Society.

American machine, and a very clever programmer showed us around it. We saw about a fiftieth of what it could do in about three or four hours. It convinced me that it was the sort of machine that would suit my purposes, particularly as I was intending to push the play a little bit into the future.

"The nub of the play asks to what extent is an artist justified in pillaging his personal life in order to express himself throughout. In the end, doesn't he destroy his personal life, and how much does art matter over human relationships?"

"In the play the composer records everything that happens around him and he creates his music from the verbal and the sounds people make - which was very nice for him and quite infuriating for everybody else! In the end he alienates everyone around him.

"This was the starting point. It was then a



Jerome has difficulty with troublesome robot NAN

matter of actually recording this, and getting the Synclavier to do it for me. I think we have about five minutes music in all the show, but it took at least eight weeks to produce. One had to use a little dramatic licence and advance the state of the art a few years!"

You've also involved Jerome, the composer in the play, with the 'technical' side of the show.

"Barry McCarthy has actually learned the music quite closely, and a lot of people believe he played it - although I don't think people with a sufficient knowledge of the technology would think he did! It's also a play about people, and what we do to people - as indeed most of my plays are, and to that extent I've put mechanical people in 'Henceforward...' as well. There's a mechanical woman the composer lives with, and she's very unreliable. (I like the view that technology is rather unreliable - and I loved the spaceships in 'Alien' that looked like clapped out machines!) NAN 300F is a sort of British Telecom version of a robot: she's a little erratic, and has developed several nasty faults, and like all good things, they've stopped making spares for her.

The Technician's View

Michael Thomas has been chief technician at the Stephen Joseph Theatre in the Round, Scarborough for two-and-a-half years. His background ranges from working in several of Britain's major producing theatres through to major concert touring and presentation work.

He considers Alan Ayckbourn the best director he's ever worked for. "Aside from his plays, I've enormous respect for him as a director," he told me. "He is stunning. Although he's the only one who knows exactly what he wants on stage, he will take notice of other people's comments, and often incorporate their suggestions.

"He gives us very good stage directions on the script. Then we get another good insight on the read-through when everyone is involved. At that stage you've got a good idea of where he's at.

"You could say most people working here are over qualified, but Alan Ayckbourn stretches the entire building every time he puts on a new play. He is also an excellent director of other people's work, a factor of which a lot of people are unaware. He has a very intimate rapport with all the people he works with.

"On the purely technical side, he knows as much, if not more, than I do. He's very technically minded, and he's certainly one of the best sound operators I've known."



Chief technician Michael Thomas pictured on the set for 'Henceforward...' with assistant technician Jackie Staines.

"So I think there's a nice parallel there. In a sense I tried - being aware that at the words 'science fiction' some people tend to climb on a chair and scream, rather like plays about soccer - to make science fiction user-friendly, and to that extent I think it has worked. It doesn't seem to have upset too many people!"

'Henceforward...' is going off on tour prior to its West End opening in the autumn. Where will the production play?

"It's going first to the Lyceum Theatre in Crewe before touring to West Germany, Poland, Turkey and Egypt and then it has a small break before a number one tour of the UK in places like Bath, Norwich and Wolverhampton. It winds up in Scarborough in the summer, and then I will re-rehearse it in September prior to its opening in the West End in November."

It will obviously be staged in a proscenium format, and it does seem to be a much easier play to produce on a proscenium stage compared to some of your previous Scarborough-originated plays.

"What we are doing at the moment is rehearsing during the daytime for the pros. Actually it isn't that difficult to do, and in some ways it's easier. Some of my plays lose a lot coming out of the round, but this one much less so. The set we are designing for the tour and for the summer is basically the set we will use in the West End."

Moving to more general matters I am interested in your views on how the technical side of theatre is developing, and how you see its role.

"It's changed out of all recognition. One's seen the rise of the lighting man; he was always there when I started, but barely on the poster. They've crept slowly up in prominence, as indeed has the technology. Obviously with the change of lighting boards it has become much higher technology than when I started, and there are some wonderful lighting technicians around. I think that given the opportunity their creative input can be enormous - invaluable. I suppose how much they are allowed to do depends on how much the director allows them in. Personally, I would not conceive of a production without having at least a space for a brief for a lighting designer. Sometimes we have to say 'terribly sorry, it's just the one room, and it's daylight, and it's a straight up and down'. On the other hand, at the moment I'm working on 'Tis a Pity She's a Whore' at the National Theatre, and I was rather pleased to set lighting designer Mick Hughes so many headaches because I knew he would enjoy solving them!

"With sound, of course, the whole world has changed. Certainly to have recorded sound effects on compact disc is going to be wonderful, rather than having to buy a new copy of the 33 every time you want to dub a change. And of course it's even rather old hat to use disc now. Most self-respecting technicians pick up their equipment and wander off to record effects themselves on tape.

"It has been particularly true for me, working in the round where scenic possibilities are limited, but where light and sound are doubly important. I use a lot of what I call the permanent background tape, which has to be very carefully balanced, wrapping the audience into a sort of ambient feeling - particularly with things like the 'garden plays' I have written."

There's a little story about the blackbird that flies around during one of your plays.

"Yes, it was in 'Intimate Exchanges'. It flew all



The latest from Alan Ayckbourn: the set for 'Henceforward...' at the Stephen Joseph Theatre in the Round, Scarborough.

around the auditorium - we panned it all over the place! It used to fly gently around. It just added something. Few people noticed, but I'm sure the odd ornithologist went 'ah' as it moved again!

"I think one of the most successful tapes was produced by Rob Barnard in London for 'A View From The Bridge', when we took great delight in blending sounds to undercut the outside scenes. What was lovely was that people actually noticed it in the right way, and said 'gosh, those footsteps dropping in were just right'. It adds a depth to a show, and we are very lucky in working with people who respond. I look for people like that to work with, and I also think they'll find you. They say, 'this guy's interesting. He doesn't just say give me a dog'. What I say is 'give me a dog growling, or a dog running away'. That makes it much more interesting."

You are currently directing at the National Theatre, and also popping back to Scarborough on occasion. How do you cope with directing in two totally different venues, at different ends of the spectrum?

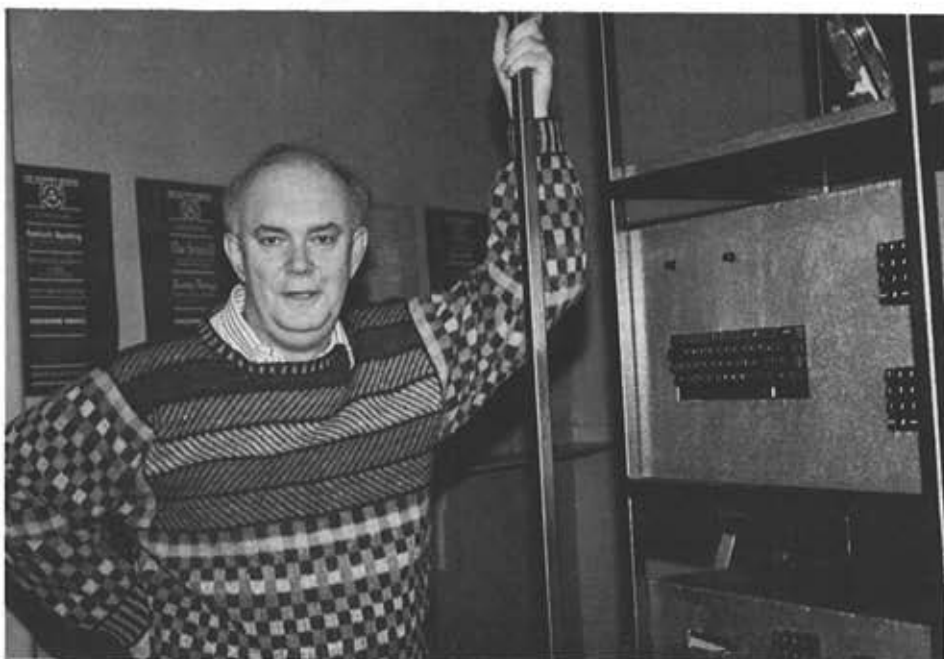
"Obviously at the National you have got a lot more people at your disposal, whilst at Scarborough I tend to take a lot of the sound on myself and let Mick Thomas get on with the lighting. He can obviously do both, but it's asking rather a lot. At the National people

are paid to do it, and I think they would be a little hurt if they weren't allowed to! I'm quite happy. I don't mind if I do it or not - as long as I get what I want in the end. It is a luxury at the National. You can ask slightly more down there, and you can also say, with the length of rehearsal time available, 'run me up some stuff and we will have a look at it'. If we hate it we can wipe it and start again. Up here, with only four weeks available, we've got to make sure it's more or less right straight away. We can't do too many dummy runs!"

"I believe since I first discovered Alan Ayckbourn's work in the early seventies that I had also come across one of the twentieth century's greatest theatre technicians. His ability to bend time, space and emotion on stage to throw new light on all our lives is actually a measure of his craft. The excitement for me in selling our theatre is perhaps best expressed now by contemplating a package of shows for 1988/89 which out of a total of nine productions will include no less than eight world premieres."

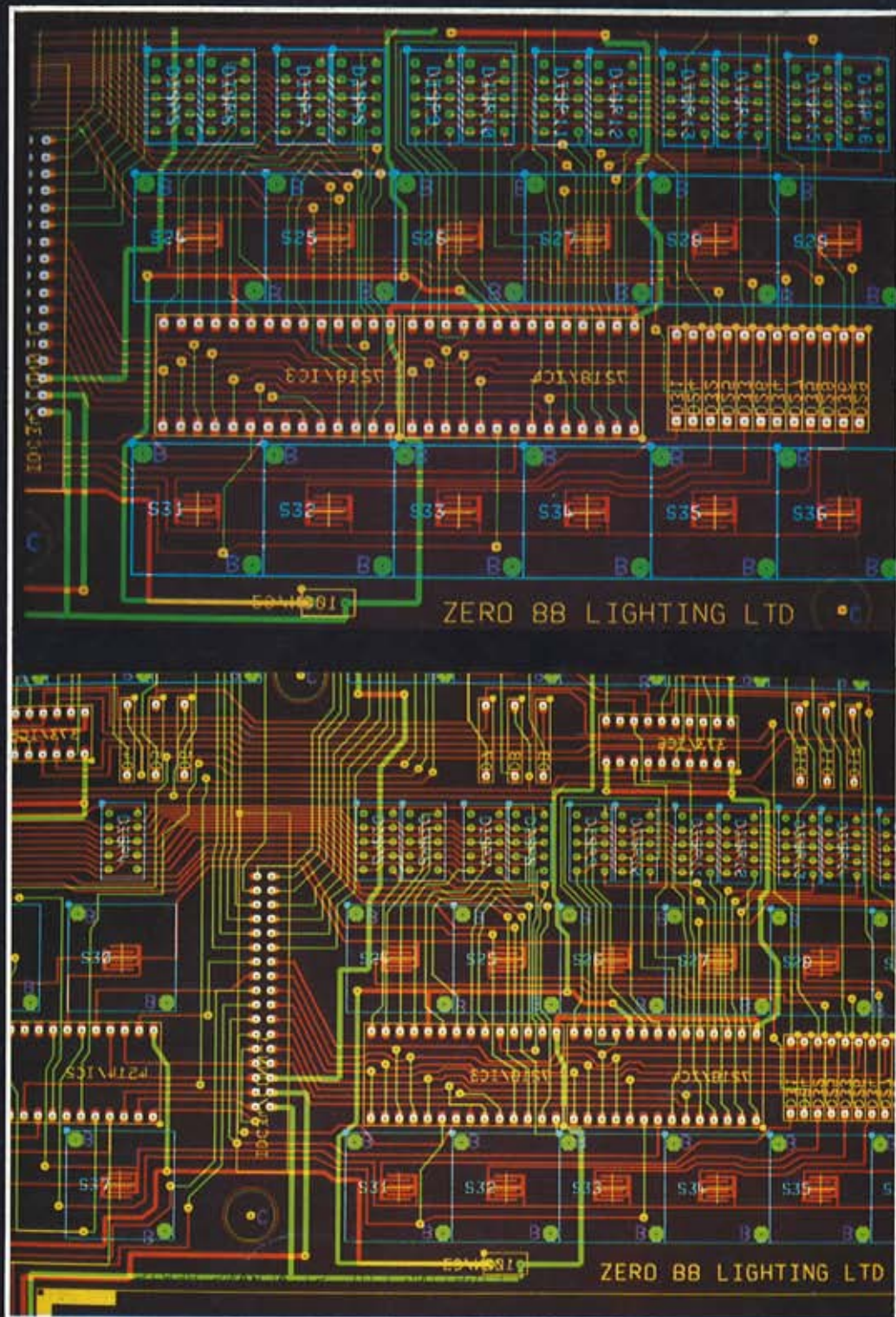
"It's the finest of world theatre - and very exciting."

Russ Allen
Marketing Director
Stephen Joseph Theatre in the Round



Alan Ayckbourn pictured with part of the set for the touring production of his latest play 'Henceforward...'

LIGHTING+SOUND *International*



'Insider' Design - an up-front view of Zero 88's new Sirius lighting desk.
(see feature 'Behind the Scenes at the Manufacturers' in this issue)

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