
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 limelight, 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 psycho-analysis 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.
With critical objectivity off the table, Allen might have given the reader a cozy portrait of his friend Alan Ayckbourn. Ayckbourn, however, remains at a remove, a polite and guarded figure. Despite the acknowledgement that interviews with Ayckbourn form the primary source material for the book, there are not many direct quotations from Ayckbourn, leaving the reader with no sense of his voice. One is assured that Ayckbourn is wont to set the table on a roar with his gifted storytelling, but Allen provides meager evidence of this. My impression of Ayckbourn from the incidents in the book is that he ranges from diffident to disagreeable. There are a surprising number of figures in the book with whom Ayckbourn has a “spectacular row” or to whom he no longer speaks: “Withdrawals are final, and [composer Paul] Todd is not the only formerly close associate to feel bewildered and discarded” (236). I wanted to hear a little more from these formerly close associates.

Owing to Ayckbourn’s talent (or curse) for inventing the most instantly forgettable titles in the English language (Bedroom Farce, Taking Steps, Relatively Speaking, Just Between Ourselves, Home and Garden, etc.) I was surprised to be reminded just how many of his plays I had seen or read, and surprised again to realize just how many I had not. Paul Allen has written a worthwhile, if flawed, introduction to Ayckbourn production history. It is a good book for a winter vacation and gives you a reading list of plays for your summer one.

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In his 1889 Autobiography, Joseph Jefferson III, the acknowledged master of the American comic stage and then an international star in the eponymous lead role in Dion Boucicault’s Rip Van Winkle, asserts, “We [actors] learn our profession by the mortifications we are compelled to go through in order to get a living” (449). This maxim provides the keynote for Arthur Bloom’s impressive biography of Jefferson, which renders a faithful, unvarnished picture of the poverty and dogged toil which characterized the actor’s existence for two decades and eventually set him on the path of greatness.

Whereas Jefferson’s book is, as Bloom notes, “a collection of amusing personal and theatrical anecdotes brimming over with nostalgia” (xvii), this recent biography is a thorough, factual, evenhanded examination of all aspects of Jefferson’s life and career. It includes events that bathe its subject in glory and others that reveal him in a less flattering light, such as his initial reluctance to play the part of Rip and his unwillingness to seek newer dramatic material as Rip became stale.

Joseph Jefferson is a clear, definitive work of prodigious research that provides critical as well as laudatory assessments of each of Jefferson’s roles as they evolved. For instance, struggling to find the proper interpretation of Bob Acres in The Rivals, Jefferson employed and discarded various mannerisms, then cut scenes and roles to make the part “play,” eventually discovering that the key to the role’s success lay in the correct conveyance of cowardice in the duel scene (213–215). For Rip he tinkered for decades with minute aspects of facial expression, stance, the handling of props, and the proper inflection of certain telling phrases, thereby making points with the keenest impact. Evaluations of Jefferson’s performances in various roles, among them Asa Trenchard in Tom Taylor’s Our American Cousin and Caleb Plummer in Boucicault’s Dot, utilize contemporary reviews as well as first-hand accounts by other performers to provide an understanding of both Jefferson’s technique and his powerful bond with his audiences.

Bloom does not stint on crediting Jefferson with astute financial management and anticipating directorial imperatives of rehearsal methods and production verisimilitude that emerged by the century’s end. While Jefferson himself sets forth his thoughts on these matters (Autobiography, 434–5), Bloom documents the salutary effects of their implementation (177–87). He also provides documentation of company members, touring itineraries, and repertoire, making the work a valuable aid to the theatre historian. Observing, for instance, that “Between 1879 and 1904 Jefferson employed at least two hundred different actors as company members . . . [some of whom] were leading figures of the nineteenth-century American theatre” (179), the author proceeds to chronicle the roles, the relationships, and the future successes or failures of many. An eighty-four page appendix sets forth in painstaking detail “The Tours of Joseph Jefferson, Fall 1866–Spring 1904” and the primary sources that document them.

Particularly helpful is Bloom’s treatment of the theatrical figures who influenced Jefferson, such as his grandfather and father (of identical name and