

Three by Three: Alan Ayckbourn, Tim Firth and John Godber in Conversation at the Stephen Joseph Theatre on 4 July 1998

AYCKBOURN: Why direct your own work? Was there no one around to do it?

GODBER: I did it right from the start. I was a teacher who wrote stuff and it was cheaper to employ myself. As I was writing the plays for nothing I may as well direct it for nothing. I actually find directing plays a good way of becoming a better playwright. You also don't have to go through the horrible false politicking of having a word with the writer - which you'll appreciate, you can speak to the writer at any time. What you have to do is write the play as a playwright and then become the director. With this one (PERFECT PITCH) because our kids get up about 2:00 I was up working on the computer - I bought myself a new computer which is a lot quicker as well - so I was able to really get into it and re-write it several times before I let the director see it. I don't know if you feel the same, but I can't read plays on the computer - you've got all this fandangled machinery and all this kind of stuff and I don't know what's happening. Until I print it out and I lay in a room and I read it as a play and think oh, um, yes that's quite good, page -turning and then you strip it to bits and then you go back to the computer. The computer is only there for me as way of very quickly altering the relationship. I direct the first performance of all the plays and then anybody can do them - I don't mind. Once I've got it out of my system ...

AYCKBOURN: When you see them - do you see many productions of your work that you don't do. Are you amazed, shocked, surprised?

GODBER: Well, like you I suspect. There's a lot of them so I try not to see too many. Some of them have what I call the wind tunnel effect, where you're sitting in row "B" like this - HOLDS HEAD IN HANDS AND PULLS BACK SKIN TAUT ON FACE - Christ Almighty TO AYCKBOURN That must happen to you a lot. I think twice I've seen something and I've thought 'Oh, that's good,' once was in America and once was in Flemish and it may as well have been in Flemish. You know what it's like; you do the play and you do it as you want to do it and the rest of it is kind of well, if you want to do it square and you want to do it blue, well I can't say, no it shouldn't be like that. The interpretation is actually ... as long as the structure works. It's about the bottom line, at the end of the day. Somebody can paint it and say well; we're doing it all blue and green but if the story works and it connects then fine. And you have to say, well I wouldn't have done it like that, I wouldn't have had a rugby pitch yellow but I'm sure it works for you. So you've got to offer it out, you've got to give birth to them and then let them go - otherwise it drives you mad I think.

AYCKBOURN: ...the trouble is the television version of a stage play is so boring you get the worst of both worlds.

GODBER: Not always Alan. You should direct your own plays as films.

AYCKBOURN: They asked me to but then they said you've got to take six months out of your life I said I can't take six months, I'm busy here.

GODBER: I think you're talking to the wrong people.

AYCKBOURN: Maybe.

QUESTION FROM AUDIENCE:

I saw Perfect Pitch the other day, which rather staggered me to be quite honest. There was lots of laughs in it but by the time it had finished I thought it was a very serious play with... a very disturbing play in many ways and I very fine play, if I may say so, which I didn't think so earlier, but, what happened was, watching that I was reminded of that statement by Chance in Comic Potential when he gives a second reason what should be in a comedy and it is anger, and I just wondered whether you in fact felt anger when you wrote that remarkable play Perfect Pitch

Godber: Well, I think, you always feel anger otherwise you wouldn't write. Writing is only a way of understanding the world. If I was a decent footballer I'd have expressed myself through football. Plays are interesting because they are in the public domain and often we forget that they are an art form and some people have strongly argued that writing plays is among the most difficult of the written art forms. I know that, quite frankly, when one is invited to work here there is no point in coming and doing a pantomime. It would have been no good for John Godber and it would have been no good for Alan Ayckbourn. One wanted to write a strong play, really, there was no point otherwise - I could have stayed in Hull and done Bouncers again, actually, I am doing it again - so the idea was that it was an opportunity to test myself and I went right back actually to the first play I ever wrote in 1981 which is actually quite severe and quite savage but desperately funny, my writing is turning from the cosy kind of family dramas into something a little bit more abrasive. I think you write the play that you want to see, I think that you always do that. And if other people want to see it as well then that's wonderful. What I was trying to communicate in that play ... let me just take it one step at a time, what I was trying to do was to create the kind of humour that people might say I shouldn't be laughing at this, this is savage but to get the frisson that you do laugh at it. And seeing it last night and the night before when there were three or four hundred people in there, there were people laughing despite themselves. Now that, I think, is a very sophisticated thing to achieve in the theatre. I think it can be uncomfortable because you come out of the play thinking 'Oh hell that's dreadful but I was laughing' but if you do that then at least you are questioning and I think the other thing that I am aiming towards in my own writing is that there has to be a moral, philosophical thesis in the work. Otherwise you may as well sit and watch telly. Most telly doesn't have a moral thesis running through it. What I wanted to do in that play - I don't know how many people have seen it or whatever, but I wanted to create the kind of thing where we assume so much because of the way they look and behave and in that play there are two very working class, lumpen proletariat people on a caravan site. It's a slight cheat because these people would never meet on a proper caravan site, I know because I'm on one. But I wanted to rub an upwards, aspiring middle-class couple against an uninspiring working class couple and it's a play about fear, how we are frightened of the unknown, it a play about our own sexuality. On the face of it, it's a very nice romp over two week-ends at Cayton Bay Caravan Site but underneath it - and I'm flattered you think it is a nice play - underneath it I think there is a state of the nation play. How we feel about the lads walking about with their pit-bull terriers and "Cut-here" tattooed across their chest and "mum" "Brecht," "mum" on one hand and "Brecht" on the other, eagles on their chest - class, which for me is ever fascinating, and if you can make them laugh as well then that's not bad, but thanks for your comments.

QUESTION FROM AUDIENCE:

How much control do you have over the sets for your plays?

GODBER: With this one here (Perfect Pitch) I came to the space and I don't like realistic plays, I have knee-jerk reaction to them. I took the view that I've just left my room at home I don't want to sit in someone else's room for three hours. I think Piscator said in 1836 why ... it wasn't 1836 it was 1935 or something like that you can fly around the world in eight hours why sit in one room for three - its about concentration and yet when I came here and I've obviously seen a lot of Alan's work in the round both here and at the other place and I suddenly thought I'm going to write a play in the round oh hell I've never done it before and I'm going to write one about caravanning and it was a good idea at the time and then I thought "shit" you've got to have a caravan. But there should be two caravans so we need to put one caravan there and one caravan there, and of course we couldn't get them down the vomms so Pip and I wrestled with it for a long long time and I said OK this is dead easy, I'll sort this out we won't have a caravan so she said that's fine, I'll do it like I do most of my other stuff, very physical, very in-yer-face, visceral physical theatre, Theatre d'Complicite etc etc Bouncers etc so then I went back to Hull and I thought no, I've got to have a caravan. Because there was no way of people pretending on two chairs that they were in a caravan with two people on two chairs there pretending that they were in a caravan. Because there is something about that space which is about the forum which is why I quite like the moralistic thing the treatise idea that you are in a forum and then I thought if we have a caravan I want to make it as real as possible and it is the most realistic thing I have ever done. I don't usually have people eating bananas and cups of tea - I hate it - but this time I've quite liked it.

QUESTION FROM AUDIENCE:

You are all three known as comedy writers. Why did you choose comedy and would you ever consider writing ... I mean you may not like that but you are known ...

GODBER: No you don't choose it. I don't think, you don't choose it - if I write a check people laugh at it. Honestly, I don't know if you feel the same, I think you write - as Bob said - I write plays. As soon as you think you're going to write something funny - bananas oh this is going to be funny - forget it, you write plays about the human condition.

QUESTION FROM AUDIENCE:

Do you think any of you write sequels to your plays? I notice that the central character at the end of Gym and Tonic seeks his salvation through buying a caravan, is that a coincidence?

GODBER: No it's not a sequel but one is certainly ploughing a particular piece of land; if you look at Hemingway, through Chekhov, Shakespeare - you write what's in you. I remember years and years ago, the first time I took a play to the Edinburgh Festival it was about a young guy from a working-class background who was trying to find himself and had problems with his sexuality and took his own life, and somebody afterwards, somebody who actually went on to be very, very famous, said to me, I saw your play and I liked it but I've seen it all before and I said, well what do you want me to write about, Martians? I think, the interesting thing about writing is that you write about who you are and if you don't write about who you are then you are not a writer.

QUESTION FROM AUDIENCE:

What is it that inspires or drives you to write?

GODBER: You also I think learn more from your poorer work than you do from your better work. A good play and your mostly left coming out saying 'phew!' A bad play and you come out saying, 'well, I'll tell you summat, the structure's all to cock for a start!' So good theatre, when you get it is very invigorating, but you don't actually as a practitioner learn a great deal. I use the sport metaphor quite a lot; the more you play the better you get.

QUESTION FROM AUDIENCE:

Do you prefer proscenium theatre or working in the round?

GODBER: I don't think there is that much difference, personally. My feeling is that it is about actors and the audience. What I would say is that I think you have to have a story. I used to be quite into deconstructed narratives but I don't get 'em, you know, they don't make me feel good, I get them intellectually but I don't come out going 'whaa! Two-one at half-time!' So I think you've got to have a story which is fairly fundamental.

AYCKBOURN: Or no interval, because they won't come back afterwards.

GODBER: Or put the story in the first half and don't have a story in the second.

QUESTION FROM AUDIENCE:

I was wondering what your attitude is towards critics. Because I know a critic is only one person but they do happen to have a certain power that can sway an audience. Have you ever had experiences with them?

GODBER: Not on a one-to-one, which is a shame. I'll tell you something about critics, I'm glad you brought that up, like us all, you have very, very interesting good times and then lean years, and then good times and lean years, I used to say, I don't say it now but I'll say it today, I used to say every critic in this country ought to be made to get a ton of coal in, because then they'll know what physical work is like. Unless the people who are reviewing the plays know what's happening on the street then they live in critic-land and they go from seeing... I remember sitting down in the Arts Council, I'd never been to the Arts Council before, true story, and I saw two famous people walking towards me, and their conversation went something like: 'did you see Malfi, no, did you see Lear, no did you see Twelfth Night, no but I saw the new Ayckbourn, did you see Peter's show, no I didn't see Peter's show, Did you see the one at the Cottesloe, wasn't it wonderful? And that's all their conversation was about. Now, I try and live in the real world, the real world of going to Asda, Tesco's, getting up changing nappies TO TIM FIRTH I know you do. Somebody bumping into your car, seagull's messing all over you, and I don't think the majority of critics live in that world, I think they live in the world of journalistic ivory towers. I also think critics decide whether or not they are going to like a show. There's a book called Twentieth Century Modern Theatre by Laurence Kitchen and he says 'battles were won and lost on the stomachs of generals and in exactly the same way, good reviews are gained or lost on the stomachs of the critic; if they arrive at the theatre and it's absolutely throwing it down and they just got water all over his trousers, you've got to be wonderful that evening. I also think, I don't know if you feel the same, that sometimes when you've got a reputation - the knives are out, they don't necessarily want to like it because we don't like success in this country. They did an interesting thing recently, the top three critics, they asked them to put a play on, and we've been putting plays on for a long, long time, and they asked them to put a play on at Battersea Arts Centre, and it was like: HIGH-PITCHED ARTY VOICE 'Oh my God! We've got to put a play on! NORMAL VOICE Good God! They

ought to be able to walk off the paper and into a rehearsal room and know all about it. The other wonderful thing about critics is that you are all critics, every member of the audience is a critic, it's just that some of them have the gall to write it in papers.

GODBER: John Peter in The Sunday Times said of me that, 'John Godber writes like Alan Ayckbourn's younger brother meeting Edward Bond.' I haven't got a bloody clue what that means! And you can hardly put it on a poster: 'Writes like Alan Ayckbourn's younger brother meeting Edward Bond.' That'd really get them in.

AYCKBOURN: Question, anyone?

QUESTION FROM AUDIENCE:

Do you have any good feelings about critics?

GODBER: VERY QUICKLY Any other questions?

Obviously it's great to get good reviews. I'm awful, I dare myself, I read them, I read the worst ones more. Nicholas De Jong, I love that bloke. I read those over and over again, because I know that if I'm ever in a balloon and it's me at seventeen and a half stone and Nicholas there, I know who's going out of the balloon. Seriously, I don't know if you feel they same, when you get a review and you say, actually, they've understood it, or they say the first act is a little bit slow and you say, actually I think they're right.

GODBER: I had a recent experience when I made Up'n'Under into a feature film, which we'd been trying to do for fourteen years, and of course, Brassed Off came out and The Full Monty happened, the Up'n'Under happened and we got awful, awful, except for Barry Norman, reviews for a film that it took me fourteen years to put together mostly because of Brassed Off and The Full Monty. And they're bringing that baggage with them, they're bringing what they saw last night at the Aldwych with them, what they saw at the Almeida with them.

QUESTION FROM AUDIENCE:

What triggers the writing of a play? Is it a very mechanical thing? Do you think; 'Oh, it's nine o'clock on the third of May and I've got three months' or are you suddenly walking the dog and you think CLICKS FINGERS.

GODBER: Well, usually for me it's seeing the poster! MIMES SEEING POSTER 'Argh Bloody Hell!'

QUESTION FROM AUDIENCE:

Can playwriting be taught? And if the playwright is going to be successful, should they be self-taught and should it come entirely from within?

GODBER: I think that you can work through different methodologies, whether or not the images actually hang in the mind, whether or not you've got the story, you've already got the narrative worked through, or whether or not the style comes first, sometimes the form is there and you've got the form and you've got nothing to put in it, sometimes you're aching to write something and you don't know which content, which particular style to put it in. They are all things that I think you can discuss in a workshop, for me, you learn about writing plays by reading plays and watching plays.

QUESTION FROM AUDIENCE:

Do your characters come out of the plots or the plots from the characters?

GODBER: Well, each one (PLAY) is different. This one was quite strange because I didn't cast this play, because I was in Marbella, and we knew we were putting these actors together and I was talking over the phone, saying well how many actors do you want and you always start by saying eight. It's like a knee-jerk reaction - How many? Eight! Even if you can write it for one man and a glove puppet, but then we finally got down to four and we had a lunch here in the theatre when I met the actors before I'd written a word of the play! And I knew Jim and I knew Jackie, because I'd seen her in a play of mine here before, Lucky Sods, and Jenny I didn't know. And I'd got pictures in my head of what I wanted these characters to be but I wanted to meet the actors before I wrote the play. In fact I said to one of them the other day, I bet I've got the one with one leg and one eye and the glove puppet and all this sought of thing but when I met them we seemed to have gelled and the I've got a fairly good memory and I took away what I think I got from them over some salmon fishcakes - which was the bill! And then I went away and with real people in mind, I'm not suggesting that they are the people in the play, but I could personalise the characters, I knew that this particular character was five foot six, that this character was six foot two, that character was blond, that character was twenty five, and once I'd got that it kind of helped me map out the area. That's not to say that, like Mike Leigh for example, who does that but uses improvisation, in fact I do that more and more - I cast the plays before they are written.

Three by Three

---

---