

Interview with Robin Herford

Ahead of the start of rehearsals for the Coliseum's production of *Taking Steps*, director Robin Herford answers some questions about his work with Alan Ayckbourn and performing in the round.

You played the role of Mark in the original production of *Taking Steps*. What was it like working on the play and being directed by Alan Ayckbourn?

Taking Steps was written in the late Summer of 1979, and I had been working with Alan Ayckbourn since the Spring of 1976. It was the fourth original Ayckbourn I had been cast in, following *Ten Times Table*, *Joking Apart* and *Sisterly Feelings*, as well as being directed by him in many plays by other writers, so I felt very comfortable working with him. The theatre in Scarborough at that time was comprised of a small semi-permanent group of actors, a rolling nucleus of which stayed together for season after season. Actors would be added to the group, stay a while and then move

on. What this gave Alan was a collection of people who knew each other well, and whom he could trust with new work. It was a process of removing variables. He knew the potential as well as the limitations of his actors, his designers, his stage management, so everything could move forward smoothly. Ensemble companies are much less common nowadays, sadly in my opinion as it is a system that allows a small group to punch above their weight and produce work of a higher standard than might otherwise be expected.

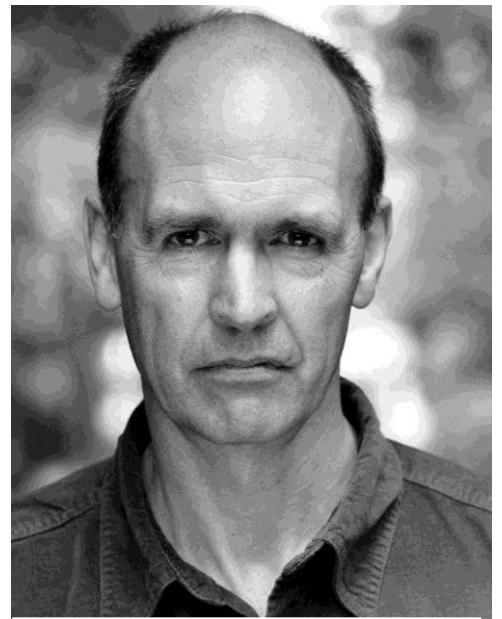
Working with Alan on one of his new plays was an extraordinary process, but basically the actor's job was to listen incredibly carefully to everything Alan had to say and attempt to carry out his instructions to the letter. If this suggests a slavish approach, that would be misleading, as, for Alan, the process of directing the play, actually realising it on stage, is the logical extension of his writing process. It is often not until he sees a scene taking shape in the hands of an actor that Alan fully realises what he has written.

It helps too for the actor not to be too paranoid about the character he is being asked to play. In earlier plays, I had played a succession of bores, misfits and no-hopers that Alan had specifically written for me to enact. When it came to Mark, in *Taking Steps*, I was playing a man so boring that it soon becomes a running gag that people always fall asleep whenever he starts talking to them! Alan had to work hard to convince me I was not the model for the character. Thirty years on, I'm still not sure I believe him!

How does *Taking Steps* compare with other plays written by Alan Ayckbourn?

Alan dedicated *Taking Steps* to Ben Travers, the great writer of British farces whose plays ran at the Aldwych Theatre in the Twenties and Thirties, and in many ways it is the only true farce that Alan has written. That is not to say that many of his plays don't have farcical elements within them, but in *Taking Steps*, the escalation of events through successive misunderstandings and misapprehensions is on a much higher level. Where it is so brilliant as a play is that the confusion within the CONTENT of the play is mirrored by the apparent confusion of the SETTING, for here we have the three floors of a house all represented on one plane. Sounds complicated, but through Alan's genius, it all comes wondrously clear to everyone!

Ayckbourn's plays are famously written to be performed in the round; what challenges does this present to the director and the cast?



Robin Herford

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Acting in-the-round is actually the most natural form of acting. The actors can face each other as they would in a room, and the audience hover above them, watching. When you think about it, acting in a conventional theatre is very unnatural, as all the action has to be directed one-way – through the Fourth Wall. Initially, it's a bit frightening for an actor, to find oneself surrounded by audience members with nowhere to turn to avoid them, but the feeling soon passes! It makes actors communicate very directly with each other, and I think makes for very truthful acting.

The actors need to speak very clearly to be sure that every section of the audience can hear what they're saying, even when their faces are not visible.

Do you have a favourite Ayckbourn play?

Not really, I have many favourites, last Autumn it was *Season's Greetings*, which I was then directing for a national tour, but now as I start working in earnest on *Taking Steps* again, I suspect it will become my "flavour of the month!"

How would you describe Alan Ayckbourn's contribution to Twentieth Century drama?

Alan has made, and continues to make a unique contribution. He writes plays which are accessible, truthful, funny, sad, profound, and always about very recognisable, real people. He manages to engage with us on so many levels, yet he is never patronising. He has his finger on the pulse of British society, and deals with issues that often prove alarmingly prophetic. (his most recent offering – *Neighbourhood Watch*, seemed uncannily to anticipate the riots of last summer.) He is very political, but we never feel we are being preached at.

How does he do it? Total mystery.

Which modern playwrights do you admire and why?

Arthur Miller, Harold Pinter, David Hare, Christopher Hampton, Michael Frayn, Stephen Jefferies, Jez Butterworth...to name but a very few. Why? Because each one, in his own distinctive voice, tells the truth.

Which do you prefer acting or directing?

Very hard. I really believe they are complementary activities, and doing one helps you do the other better. Directing is ultimately very satisfying, because the job involves bringing together all aspects of the production and harnessing the various talents into a coherent whole, but nothing can really compare with the thrill of going out on stage and being someone else for a couple of hours – beyond the immediate controlling grasp of your director!!

What are you looking forward to about working at the Grange Arts Centre?

I'm looking forward to re-acquainting myself with the space after 30 odd years, and putting on a play that is so well suited to being done in-the-round in a space that was conceived for that very purpose. Most of the company I have assembled have worked extensively in-the-round, in Scarborough, Stoke, Richmond, Bolton or Bowness, so I am confident that the first Coliseum show out of the building will get the Spring Season off to a cracking start.

Taking Steps opens at The Grange Arts Centre from 16 February – 10 March. To book your tickets or for more information call 0161 624 2829 or visit www.coliseum.org.uk