

Not Just Another Pretty Farce

Manke and Company Step Lively to Ayckbourn's Breakneck Beat

BY LINDA SULLIVAN BAITY

"An attic, a lounge, a wife in a quandary and a fiancée in a cupboard, a devious builder, a nervous solicitor, a ponderous personnel officer and a drunken bucket manufacturer, all embroiled in a tale of love, confusion and freedom."

Alan Ayckbourn's description of *Taking Steps* only hints at the madness and mayhem in store when one of the zaniest plays in the legendary writer's vast comedic repertoire takes to the stage. *Taking Steps* is a true farce, which is not a style Ayckbourn has attempted very often. Farces are among the most difficult types of plays to write for any theatre space, but the genre poses a particular problem for arena stages such as Ayckbourn's Stephen Joseph Theatre, where that standard farcical mainstay — the door — is off limits. Ayckbourn's ingenious solution? Replace doors with floors!

Taking Steps is set in a creaky English manor house with the ground floor, second story and attic collapsed upon each other on one level. The stairs, though marked with sloping handrails and rodded stair carpets, are flat and only give the impression of leading up and down between floors. The effect is thrilling to watch in action, but the challenges it presents to the creative ensemble are daunting — to say the least.

Art Manke has taken a left-brained approach to directing his first Ayckbourn play. "The concept is so clever; it's a 3-D puzzle really, a dramatic Rubik's Cube. The longer Scene Designer Ralph Funicello and I worked on the groundplan, the clearer it became to both of us that the key to solving the script's daunting technical problems is logic. And lots of good old-fashioned arithmetic. When people say you'll never need math after high school — don't believe them!"

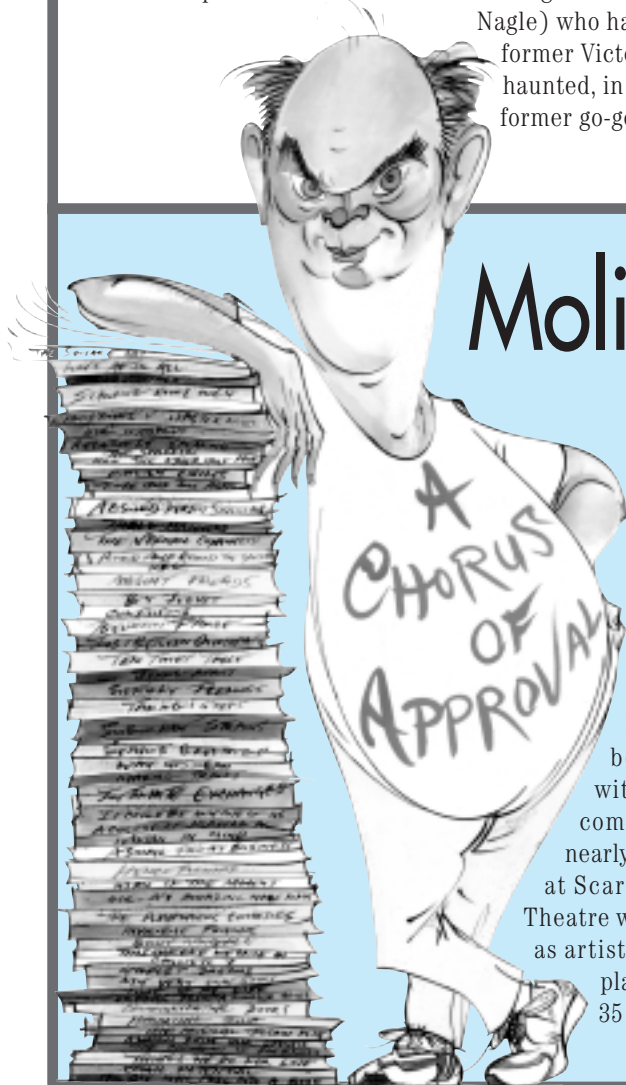
The premise centers on hard-drinking bucket tycoon Roland Crabbe (Rob Nagle) who has been renting The Pines, a former Victorian brothel rumored to be haunted, in order to please his wife, the former go-go dancer Elizabeth (Kirsten

Potter). Elizabeth, however, is set to walk out on Roland after three months of marriage. Elizabeth's brother Mark (Bill Brochtrup) brings back his wayward fiancée Kitty (Emily Eiden), with whom he dreams of opening a fishing shop. Roland's bumbling lawyer Tristram (Kasey Mahaffy) and the house's motorcycle-riding owner Leslie (Louis Lotorto) show up hoping to sell the house to Roland only to find themselves trapped in the merry maelstrom. Add to the mix a cacophonous thunderstorm, the ghost of a prostitute, a few unsigned letters (possibly suicide notes?), and a strategically placed bottle of sleeping pills thrown in for good measure as the characters bounce from bed to bed and from floor to floor all night long.

Taking Steps was a massive hit during its premiere production at the Stephen Joseph Theatre in 1979. The story goes that the audience laughed so hard on opening night that it blew out the theatre's back stage sound system and added seventeen minutes to the running time.

Apparently, everyone was surprised except the playwright. "It's a Farce," Ayckbourn said. "It's meant to make you laugh. If it doesn't, I'm sorry. If it makes you cry, have a word with the director as I refuse to take responsibility for that."

(Clockwise from top) Kirsten Potter, Kasey Mahaffy, Rob Nagle, Louis Lotorto, Emily Eiden and Bill Brochtrup



Molière of the Middle Class

Sir Alan Ayckbourn is not only the most prolific playwright of his generation but also the most widely produced. His astonishing body of work began in 1959 with *The Square Cat* and now comprises 70 full-length plays, nearly all of which have premiered at Scarborough's Stephen Joseph Theatre where Ayckbourn has served as artistic director since 1972. His plays have been translated into 35 languages, are performed on

stages all over the world, and have received scores of international awards.

Ayckbourn chooses as his domain an unspecified Middle England. His genre is usually the "serious comedy" of manners that features artful dissections of the failures of family life. This formula of creating happiness by depicting unhappiness, which has served him exceedingly well over the years, has also meant that his name is rarely mentioned in the same breath as some of his fellow "playwright knights" such as Sir Tom Stoppard and Sir Harold Pinter.

"I'm comfortable with that now," Ayckbourn freely admits. "Years ago I did think: why aren't I being taken very seriously? But as someone once told me, I have an ability to make audiences laugh so I should treasure that. I don't want to lose that. There are plenty of people who can make audiences cry. Unlike those who write about the state of the nation and current affairs, I write about domestic affairs. I see myself more as a Jane Austen who never bothers with the Napoleonic Wars going on around her."

Though temporarily felled by a stroke in 2006, Ayckbourn hopes to write

his 71st play this summer — a fitting homage to master British farceur Ben Travers to whom *Taking Steps* is dedicated. When asked on his 90th birthday if he wasn't getting a bit long in the tooth to still be writing sex romps, Travers quipped, "Ah, but you see, I have an awfully good memory!"

AYCKBOURN AT SCR

A Chorus of Disapproval (1989-90)
Woman in Mind (1991-92)
Intimate Exchanges (1992-93)
Man of the Moment (1993-94)
How the Other Half Loves (1996-97)
The Norman Conquests: Round and Round the Garden (1998-99)
Relatively Speaking (2002-03)
Intimate Exchanges (2003-04)