

Attraction and Repulsion : Who has Alan Ayckbourn kept laughing over the years and how does he do it ?

Terence ATKINSON, Université Catholique de l'Ouest Angers.

Particular reference will be made to *How the Other Half Loves* 1969, *Just Between Ourselves* 1976, *Way Upstream* 1981 and *Things We Do for Love* 1997.

Mireille Mathieu will doubtless perform to full houses next month when she returns to the Olympia to celebrate her 40 years in Show business. Thousands of people who will have bought their seats within hours of the tickets going on sale, will sit enthralled as Mimi ploughs through her repertoire, laughing with the artist whenever she makes a well-rehearsed quip and occasionally shedding a tear, along with and programmed by their empathetic idol on stage. The vast majority of the audience, of course, will have been fans of Mireille Mathieu since the beginning. Forty years of fidelity. Of course, in among the old favourites and the Piaf classics, Mireille will sprinkle a few new titles; no rap or hard rock, but songs which could be perceived as somewhat out of character, compared to her legendary style. The audience may be uneasy, thrown off balance, unaccustomed as they are to hearing such trendy tunes; they will, of course, clap appreciatively nonetheless because, after all, it is Mireille and anyway, she will soon have them back on track with an old chestnut. One can love her or hate her, but no-one can deny that the woman is a superb professional. She does what she does, to perfection. She knows what her audience wants and she knows how to deliver the product to them. Beyond the microcosm of France, Mireille Mathieu is also immensely popular. Her Gallic uniqueness moves audiences to laughter and tears in Moscow or Peking. For millions, she IS France. She could be singing the telephone directory for all the audience knows, no matter, this is Mireille Mathieu.

Before you begin to wonder if I am not at the wrong colloquium, let me explain. At roughly the same time Mireille Mathieu was beginning her meteoric rise to international acclaim, Alan Ayckbourn, in 1969, directed in Scarborough and for the first time, a play he had written himself, *How the Other Half Loves*. Previous to this date, though sometimes immensely successful, his work had been

directed by others or written under a pseudonym. In 1968, *Relatively Speaking* (*Pantoufle*) written by Ayckbourn but directed by mentor Stephen Joseph, had triumphed at the sea-side before transferring to the West End. *How the Other Half Loves* premiered in Scarborough, North Yorkshire, England, in a tiny theatre, known as the Library Theatre. This was the first totally Ayckbourn production, following the death of Stephen Joseph. In the same way as *Relatively Speaking* had done, the play transferred to London and then on to Broadway in 1971. The play is still very much alive and even resurfaced in Paris earlier this year at the Théâtre de l'Ouest parisien under the title, *Les uns chez les autres*. For forty years and as many plays, this same movement was reproduced, making Ayckbourn's a household name throughout the world, (though maybe less so in France!) culminating in his Knighthood in 1997. Throughout this time-span, almost every Ayckbourn creation premiered in Scarborough before being caught up by some centrifugal force, resulting in translations into over 20 languages and productions all over the world. Apart from a two-year period of infidelity spent as Company Director of the National Theatre, Ayckbourn has never left his adopted Scarborough. In 1986, the town even granted its prodigal son the Freedom of the Borough just one year after his departure for London and the enemy South, possibly in an attempt to woo back its spleen-begotten, unloved and overworked Director of Productions. It worked! Ayckbourn returned to Scarborough as Artistic Director in 1988, with rekindled affection and one suspects, having promised no more to stray. "I only write plays for Scarborough and people come and buy them."¹ Ayckbourn claims to have told Peter Hall, then Director of the National Theatre.

Wherever the plays may travel in later months or years, their first test, for a Summer or Winter season, a run of no more than six weeks initially, takes place in Scarborough. This bemusing reality has been reinforced since the opening of the Stephen Joseph Theatre in 1996 and according to recent declarations, due to Ayckbourn's growing mistrust of the taste and judgement of West End theatre-goers and producers. The basic premise is then that Ayckbourn has always had a perfect knowledge of the people who fill the 400 seat Theatre in the Round, the arena auditorium of the Stephen Joseph Theatre. This theatre, like its more humble predecessors in the town, does receive some subsidies from the local council, much to the disgust of detractors, but is, nonetheless, a commercial theatre which needs to attract audiences. Hence Ayckbourn's statement: "I present a theatre for a community, what I think the community wants to see" (Watson, 1981)

The case then seems cut and dried. Ayckbourn, who once teasingly described himself as "the most commercial of commercial writers" seems to have but one preoccupation, putting "bums on seats". The most prolific English-language playwright of all times would thus be content with "giving wet holiday-makers somewhere to dry off", as Stephen Joseph once defined his role? "One definitely feels", as the man himself would express it, that this would belittle his talent and above all belie his ambitions.

The hypotheses of this talk will be that firstly: Ayckbourn's plays provide more to the audience than a pleasurable way of spending two hours and secondly: that his followers do not come from the "fish'n chips in the streets" category, even in Scarborough. Finally we shall risk a statement concerning Ayckbourn today and his status in the public eye.

Ayckbourn's statement above, regarding the playwright's relationship with the community is echoed by the following observation. "When we put the word 'comedy' after the title, many more people go than to a drama" (Watson, 1981) The above quotes, at this point, would appear to demonstrate that the playwright is prepared to make concessions in his work or to orientate it, in order to satisfy the patrons. The latter, who arrive in droves from far and wide, by the coach-load on many evenings, undoubtedly make their pilgrimage to the Stephen Joseph Theatre in search of a good evening's entertainment. Comedy is the name of the game as far as the vast majority are concerned, be it in Scarborough or elsewhere in the world; laughter will be there, just as surely as Mireille Mathieu will have a fringe and a black or red dress. However, we hope to demonstrate how, from an early date and frequently over the years, Ayckbourn has served up to these faithful flocks something other than "pure" Comedy. At times, this other layer is simply present in a very funny play and not necessarily detected by the audience as a whole. Comedy is then the Trojan horse. On other occasions, the play overall, though containing funny lines, characters or situations comes closer to drama. Ayckbourn himself says : "You've got to go out and get the audience, and I think there is an entertainment quotient which plays ought to contain" (Watson, 1981)

The playwright goes further in his play *Comic Potential* by having an over-the-hill TV director Chandler proclaim:

Why do they all want to play Hamlet? Or Hedda? Such a waste! All that potential! Who cares if it's an actoid or a person or a performing parrot? If it makes 'em laugh, treasure it. Tragedy? You can get that in the street being run over.

The plot thickens when Ayckbourn opines: "People in general seem to want to see themselves, or reflections of themselves. They want to see the things that reflect their own particular dilemmas"².

If the playwright applies this theory to his writing, then it is surely a recipe for success as far as his Scarborough audience is concerned. Any number of his plays stage groups of middle-class English people such as those who occupy the seats to watch the plays. Relationships, situations, clothes and language are instantly recognisable for the audience, the more so thanks to the arena structure; indeed, the challenge for actors and audience is to maintain the theatrical distance, to remember that the flesh and blood person just one metre from the front row is playing the part of a fiction character. Of course, even if we accept the statement by Ayckbourn that "...when we put the word 'comedy' after a title, many more people go than to a drama" it would be naïve to imagine that the mere reflection of oneself is sufficient to produce comedy. It is the distorted image, the exaggerated reflection, that of the fairground Hall of Mirrors which produces mirth.

For the purposes of this talk, we shall enlarge briefly on just three types of this exaggeration - the characters, the language and the situation - and try to see how a watershed exists between what the public expects from Ayckbourn and what they actually get. WYSIWYG, in Ayckbourn's case is often a keyboard error!

1. Ayckbourn's laughable characters fall into two basic categories and one other:

a) **The attractive ones:** These are the harmless, bumbling ones, best typified perhaps by Tom, the vet in *The Norman Conquests* or by Frank Foster in *How the Other Half Loves*.

With the latter-mentioned play, these were the days of the "happy ending", very close to Ayckbourn's attempts at "well-made plays". Here, Frank, the benign Head of Department, having remarkably and, of course unrealistically, succeeded in splitting up, before reuniting an innocent couple and having forgiven his strayed or straying or soon-to-stray again wife, Fiona, before sitting down to a smooth-over lunch and "squiffy evening together" wants to get to the bottom of things. This character, Frank, played in the West End by Sir Robert Morley, the closest one could get, in my opinion to a British Michel Galabru, wants to know who "the other man" was and, since, on Fiona's admission, it is someone they know, Frank finds that the best solution is to run through the couple's phone-pad:

Frank: : Adams – no, Atkinson – Aubrey S – who's Aubrey S? Oh, him- no-
Associated Dairies-no- (*He continues to mutter*)... "Yates-Yeoman- YMCA"

Frank is in no danger; there is no risk whatsoever of this couple splitting up. His page by page analysis of the phone-pad is then purely innocent, in-character ineptitude. He is protected by an armour of self-produced naïvety and the fact that he is protected allows the audience to laugh "safely".

With characters such as these, one is close to what Véronique Sternberg called "Le Rire euphorique".³ The laughter passes from the stage to the audience. Thanks to these characters' "childish" behaviour, (Frank is unable to find his shirts, loses a vital part of his egg-timer in his coffee cup and so on) the audience is allowed to laugh freely and to lose its inhibitions. (Though I am far from sure that the Scarborough audience see it that way!) In any case, it explains what Michael Holt, theatre designer, academic and frequent collaborator of Ayckbourn means when he says : " The plays are all uproariously funny and therefore attract that holiday audience."⁴ Though we will later try to show the inaccuracy of this statement, it remains true that such are the characters who have attracted countless hundreds of thousands of spectators to Ayckbourn's plays over the years, the "just so" British males.

b) **The repulsive ones:** On the other hand, there are the numerous psycho-rigid characters who remain an immediate source of laughter, in the best Bergsonian tradition. Dennis in *Just Between Ourselves* is a totally incompetent though obsessive DIY fanatic, always "about to" fix something. The opening didascalies tell us, - "*Dennis, in his forties, is busy at his workbench. He is prodding at an electric kettle with a screwdriver muttering to himself*" Then, in his first speech, Dennis gives a running commentary of his attempted repair work:

Dennis: (*frowning at the kettle*) : that goes in there - and that one goes - through there to that one – which should join up with the other one. In which case...

This repair job continues for some time, Dennis almost oblivious to the presence of his wife Vera and to that of a visitor. Dennis has an intense relationship with the kettle, as with all his DIY projects; the kettle, the immediate focal point of his attention, is more important than his relationships with fellow humans. Dennis is the eternal optimist who, in the words of reproach of his live-in mother always wants to "try to laugh everything off". He is in a world of his own, imper-

vious to reality. His fumbling approach to DIY, leading to an exploding kettle and easy laughter, is the surface echo of a deeper social incompetence. Laughing all along the way, Dennis leads his wife down the path to catatonia. The didascalies show Dennis "*helpless with laughter, unperturbed, roaring with laughter, etc.*" and yet it is the same Dennis who warns his guests, Pam and Neil:

Oh by the way, while we're alone, just a quick word... Er – how shall I put it? Vee is a bit – well I think looking after Mother and me and all that – he's tended to get a bit – what shall I say? – tensed up. A bit tensed up. Nothing serious but if she – you know – drops anything or spills her tea or slips on her arse – anything like that – er – best to pretend not to notice. Don't laugh or anything.

Yet, barely three minutes' stage time later, "*Dennis's laughter erupts*" The audience is not here laughing at Dennis, nor are they laughing with him. Their laughter, if there is any, is rather, nervously uncomfortable. In similar fashion, Keith, in *Way Upstream*, provides comedy by his ridiculously authoritarian behaviour. Never having set foot on a boat in his life, he immediately takes command of the canal-boat hired for a week with friends.

Keith: On any boat, there can only be one skipper. OK? One guy who gives the orders. All right? It has to be that way otherwise it's bedlam. Like it was just now. Now I don't mind taking the job, I don't mind the responsibility, but I must have your support. OK? Make sense? OK?

Five question marks in three lines and one short speech underscore his attempts to impose himself and his will on the other characters in this scene ten minutes into the play and whereas the audience has already had the opportunity to see that he is incompetent as a skipper. This paradox makes him ridiculous. Once again, the character lacks the elasticity to adapt to new situations.

Keith, even more easily than Dennis, slides smoothly into the mould of comic characters defined, for example, by Sternberg in *La poétique de la comédie*, opining that comic situations are created when there is a discrepancy between a character's behaviour and what is considered as normal. This discrepancy, according to Sternberg, can involve transgression or an excessive stiffness, be it physical or moral. We are, of course with Keith, one step away from Bergson's man in the street or in the case of Dennis, closer still to Bergson's "grand distrait"⁵. Be it said in passing however, that this stereotype has become something of a com-

monplace in Ayckbourn criticism. I would energetically disagree, on this point as on many others, with the theatre critic of *Le Canard Enchaîné*⁶ who recently described or identified William Featherstone, (curiously renamed Chestnutt in the recent French adaptation of *How the Other Half Loves/ Les uns chez les autres*) as being psycho-rigid. This critic cites William as being psycho-rigid in the scene where he is forced to apologise, albeit begrudgingly to his long-suffering wife Mary. True, it is she who, having suffered from years of humiliating hand-slaps, highlights his stiffness and fundamental uneasiness, explaining:

Mary: It's difficult for him. He's never been wrong before, you see.

William, however, has evolved, despite having shown signs of despicable chauvinism, especially when he declares to the apparently superior Fiona Foster:

William : You've no idea, Mrs Foster, the hours I've put into that woman? When I met her, you know, she was nothing

Nonetheless, one has the impression that the days of hand-smacking are over, that Mary from now on will assert herself in a different way, to the satisfaction of her husband. At best, William was the embryonic psycho-rigid, not the finished model.

The above two categories are relatively easy to establish and provide little or no grounds for contention, despite the truth of one critic's remark, " His characters are so brilliantly sketched that we end up liking even the most loathsome of them".

c) **The Difficult Ones:** The analysis is much more vague in the case of a character such as Gilbert in *Things We Do for Love*, renamed *L'amour est enfant de salaud* when it played in Paris and won the Molière for the best Comedy in 2003. True, Gilbert's evident skills but somniferously meticulous attention to detail as a DIY man provoke innocent laughter, as he talks his landlady Barbara through a repair job on a radiator. Here, he is close perhaps to Dennis but no existing relationship is in danger so laughter could be timid in this opening scene. The uneasiness is palpable, however, when, in the final act, we discover the same Gilbert, besotted with love for the unattainable Barbara, Gilbert with a broken leg and wearing one of Barbara's cast-off dresses, having fallen from his makeshift scaffolding, erected in order to paint his ceiling-masterpiece of a nude Barbara:

Gilbert (*as he tries to crawl upstairs*) ... help...help, someone... (*he falls by*

Barbara's door and scrabbles on it like a dog.) : Morning Hamish. 'morning Barbara. I'm very sorry to trouble you but I think I've broken my leg.

The situation is saved from pathos, only by the visual aspect of the scene and the fact that the actor does not play for pathos.

2. The Language: Ayckbourn attracts his audience by talking like they talk. Again, pleading the merits of living in Scarborough, he says: "So I do hear English spoken, which is really the name of the game." (Watson, 1981). Ayckbourn therefore purports to use English as it is spoken and heard in the street and as it used by members of the audience coming to the theatre. A diachronic analysis of texts over the years illustrates how Ayckbourn moves with the times, introducing, for example, the latest slang words and never hesitating to introduce "naughty" words to keep abreast of the times. Whereas in *How the Other Half Loves*, premiered in Scarborough in 1969, there is a mere smattering of "bloody" and the very occasional "bastard", the "bad" language goes no further than an ever-so English "swine". In the 1997 creation of *Things We Do for Love*, "bloody" had become common-place and "fucking" had become the "shocker": Hamish, talking of doors, of all things, explodes,

You can only unscrew them when they're open, woman! You can't unscrew them when they're shut, can you? Otherwise, what would be the bloody point? People would go around unscrewing doors everywhere. So there'd be no bloody use in having a fucking door in the first place, you stupid bitch!

Jacie, the actoid plays the same role in *Comic Potential* in 1998 when she exclaims in a quite uncontrolled fury: "you - stupid fuck-dyke". The comedy stems from the unexpectedness of the outbursts, as well as from the titillating effect. A repetition of such language, the vernacular of the working-class, would surely disturb the characteristically lower middle-class Scarborough audience, but a smattering of naughty words enhances their feeling of tasting the forbidden fruit. Never would the vast majority of the Stephen Joseph audience use such language. We are very close to the sea-side thrill of the "What the Butler Saw" machines, where, by inserting a penny, punters could revel and grovel in low-class thrills, camouflaged behind an arcade machine. The same could be said for the repeated use of sexual innuendo, particularly in the second of the two extracts below and in its original context of the late seventies. The audience laughs, whereas the real subject of

conversation is pornography or sadomasochism. Gilbert, in *Things We Do for Love*, guilty of having painted a lewd fresco of his landlady Barbara on the ceiling of his basement flat, tries to make amends:

Gilbert: I could put a dress on, don't you think?

Hamish: Yes, I think that would be brilliant. You may have to rearrange the limbs a bit but-

Or again, in *Way Upstream*, the canal pirate Vince and soon-to-be wayward wife June begin their relationship as follows :

Vince: There's nothing wrong with you, Ginger-

June: Mm?

Vince: -that a little naval discipline wouldn't put right.

June: Lovely.

In *2001* and *Roleplay* the puns are even more explicit:

Justin: She just popped out to look for a fork .

Paige: A what?

Justin: A fork

Paige: Oh I thought you said something else.

Beyond this, Ayckbourn is a genius of repartee, as can be seen, for example, in the quick-fire exchanges between Hamish and Barbara in *Things We Do For Love*. Incidentally, the roles of Fiona and Barbara would be played by the same sort of actress, best exemplified by Penelope Keith, who would also have been perfect in the role of June in *Way Upstream*.

Finally, as far as language is concerned, Ayckbourn occasionally resorts to an absurdist technique, where the words themselves lose their meaning and their importance is to be found in their on-going drone and the effects of this on other characters. Gilbert, in the already quoted opening scene of *Things We Do For Love*, gives a splendid running commentary on the repairs he is doing on Barbara's central heating system, echoing Dennis in *Just Between Ourselves* as he gives his pathetically unconvincing sales spiel to Neil, the prospective buyer of a second-hand car. It is as if such characters, who are to be found throughout Ayckbourn's work, attempt to fill in the vacuity of their existence by talking constantly. Losers, who talk to exist.

3. The Situations: Whatever generic axis one chooses to put Ayckbourn on, one opinion shared by all, is that he is unquestionably THE man of the performing arts. He refrains from commenting on fellow-playwrights, but never hesitates to put forward his own view that, for example, "The theatre's salvation lies in a move away from the over-emphasis on the verbal, back towards the visual." (Watson, 1981) Ayckbourn's plays are not written to be read.

Without a doubt, the visual aspect is the strongest tool of attraction deployed by Ayckbourn over the years and that which has, at the same time, the least chance of playing against him. Indeed, there is little risk of him adopting a minimalist setting! Scarborough productions, supported as they are nowadays by a purpose-built auditorium, complete with a hydraulic lift the size of the playing-area, contain effects which, truly have to be seen to be believed. Once again, this must be put into perspective. Today, The Stephen Joseph Theatre, Ayckbourn's theatre, is what it is, detractors may say, thanks to massive sponsorship and Lottery money. In the nine-teen-seventies however, in the old Theatre in the Round when ends were met thanks to the interval raffle, Ayckbourn was already putting a real full-sized car on the stage in *Just Between Ourselves* and, going from the garage to the canal in 1981 with *Way Upstream*, pulled off the remarkable feat of sailing a full-size Norfolk Broads type house-boat in the playing area of a three hundred-seat theatre-in-the-round, before playing at "double or quits" with the 1998 swimming-pool of *Man of the Moment*.

Sophisticated props and settings are not Ayckbourn's only visual weapon of fatal attraction. The stage-play of *How the Other Half Loves*, for example, demands exquisite precision from the actors and technicians. Two sitting-rooms are set out on the same stage, mingled thanks to the props. A mere cushion of a different colour will indicate that it is the Fosters' settee and not that of the Phillips. The stage directions express this better: "The lights come up on the main set to reveal two living-rooms. Not a composite setting but two rooms contained and overlapping in the same area....The characters, in their different rooms will often pass extremely close but without ever actually touching."⁸ This being said, Ayckbourn's stage-craft, though ambitious, has brought different consequences. Firstly, success, with audiences flocking in ever-growing numbers to see what Ayckbourn was "going to do this time!"; also though, the risk of being caught up in the spiral of the need to go one step further each time. Alternatively, the audience could be tempted to pay more attention to the stage-tricks than to the play itself. Guardian critic, Michael

Billington, in an attempt possibly to put future audiences back on track, had surely been observing his neighbours in the stalls, when he wrote in his review of *How the Other Half Loves*: "The dazzling technique is not there as an end in itself but to service an idea."⁹ Despite this, Ayckbourn has continued constantly to innovate over the years, an indisputable source of attraction.

It is with the other acceptance of the word "situation", the situations portrayed on stage, that the analysis will be more subtle. Ayckbourn has stated the obvious by saying "The play is changed by the nature of the audience"¹⁰ he goes on to explain how different members of the audience go looking for different levels of interpretation or appreciate different aspects of the play. This knowledge is however, a two-edged knife. If, for example, *Way Upstream* was praised for its technical prowess and adored by thousands for the slap-stick scenes of walking the plank and the mock fight, appreciated, without a doubt, by many genteel Scarborough folk who were served with their first helping of full-frontal nudity in the final scene, the play was, on the other hand, slammed by many critics: "an instance of a comic dramatist getting out of his depth"¹¹. Such criticism, seeking to lock up Ayckbourn as the comic playwright and having met the man behind the title, must have rankled. Behind the self-proclaimed "commercial" writer was the belief that Shakespeare was "just a dramatist who wrote plays" and not "known as a well-known comic dramatist or a well-known serious dramatist" (Glap, 1999) This is a plea for tolerance, much more than a wish to be compared to Shakespeare. A favourite anecdote from Ayckbourn concerns a letter allegedly received from a disappointed patron. The play in question was *Time of My Life*¹², but it could have been any other of at least ten plays. "Somebody wrote and said, 'It wasn't very funny.' And I wrote back and said, 'Whoever said it was? I feel like a butcher and someone has come in and complained about his fish.'"

Today Ayckbourn can afford to provoke. He can write what he pleases and HIS theatre will still be full, as long as he is around. He is big enough to be concerned only with HIS community, leaving the Michael Billingtons and Benedict Nightingales, along with the other "hairy buggers from the left" to chew over whether it is comedy, black farce or whatever! This being said, the man has pride and would not put up with half-full houses in Scarborough.

In my introduction, I chose deliberately a verbal form which may have surprised grammar lovers in the assembly. Talking about the progression of Ayckbourn's plays after Scarborough, I said "the movement WAS reproduced" and

not "has been". The reason for this choice is the personal conviction that in the late nineties and in the new century, the shuttle between Scarborough and the rest of the world, passing through the West End definitely slowed down. Ayckbourn's new century productions, significantly more sombre, more subtle pieces, were less attractive to many and people were put off by subject matter, less suited to comedy and to their expectations. To quote but a few examples of Ayckbourn's annual crop, *Snake in the Grass* (2002, A thriller), *Sugar Daddies* (2003, with disturbing undertones of deviant sexual practices) or *Private Fears* have so far, failed to take off in London. Granted, the latter play did achieve something of an exploit by transferring directly to Broadway, with the Scarborough cast directed by Ayckbourn, though it must be said that this took place in the context of a festival, "*Britts off Broadway*". Granted also that *L'amour est enfant de salaud* received a Molière in 2003, albeit five years after its premier in Scarborough. All the same, things had cooled off. Perhaps the writer's greatest disappointment of this period would be his 2001 Summer trilogy, *Damsels in Distress*. The three plays, with the Scarborough cast, that is with no TV soap stars brought in to bolster up the poster did transfer to the West End. However, the runs of two of the three were cut short after being given the cold-shoulder by the public. Only *Roleplay* survived. The boisterous afterthought, drafted by Ayckbourn at the end of a Scarborough season, added possible insult to injury by being nominated for the Best New Comedy award. This reversal of fortune even pushed Ayckbourn to proclaim that henceforth, he would have nothing to do with the West End!

The 2005 Summer production at the Stephen Joseph Theatre would seem to show that Ayckbourn has realised how far he can go and that he is abiding once more by his contract with the community of Scarborough. It is Mireille back to *Femme amoureuse* after a new song about a drug-addicted unfaithful wife! The title of the play is *Improbable Fiction* and it has been reviewed as a joyous romp, starting off slowly in the first act before exploding in the second. More hostile reviewers have remarked that it is a return to a seam already exploited, in that there are undeniable thematic similarities with a former, international box-office blockbuster, *Chorus of Disapproval* 1984. The Scarborough community lapped it up.

Only the future will enable us to verify our hypothesis concerning *Improbable Fiction*, should it transfer to the West End and...? The question of Alan Ayckbourn's success abroad remains open, as does HIS universality, indeed

the principle of universality in general.

Notes :

- 1- an Watson *Conversations with Ayckbourn* – Faber & Faber 1981.
- 2- Albert-Reiner Glaap, Nicholas Quaintmere, *A Guided Tour Through Ayckbourn Country*, 1999.
- 3- Véronique Sternberg, *La Poétique de la comédie*, Sedes 1999.
- 4- Michael Holt, *Alan Ayckbourn*, Northcote House 1999.
- 5- Henri Bergson, *Le Rire*, PUF 1940.
- 6- *Le Canard Enchaîné*, janvier 2005, Bernard Thomas.
- 7- John Peter, «The Serious Art of British Farce», *Sunday Times*, sept. 1986.
- 8- Alan Ayckbourn, *How the Other Half Loves*-Samuel French 1972.
- 9- Michael Billington, *Alan Ayckbourn*, Macmillan, 1983.
- 10- Albert-Reiner Glaap, Nicholas Quaintmere, *A Guided Tour Through Ayckbourn Country*, 1999.
- 11- Benedict Nightingale, *New Statesman*, 1982.
- 12- Alan Ayckbourn, *Time of My Life*, 1992
- 13- Albert-Reiner Glaap, Nicholas Quaintmere, *A Guided Tour Through Ayckbourn Country*, 1999 <http://www.mireillemathieu.com/> (Just a joke).

Nota : some elements evoked in the present article were previously discussed in " Clowns and Fools in Alan Ayckbourn's work : "Objects of Laughter or Tools of Destruction." .

Terence Atkinson.