

## Circular October 2022

### Welcome...

As we head into autumn, and the darker nights (don't forget the clocks go back this weekend!), we'd like to invite you to join us in our cosy theatre for some great entertainment.

### Starry, starry night...



*Emilio Iannucci and Carla Harrison-Hodge in Constellations © Tony Bartholomew*

category at the Evening Standard Awards; and composer Simon Slater (yes, that's *our* Simon Slater!) Olivier-nominated for the score (and we're thrilled that we're able to use that same score in our production).

Around the time this newsletter reaches you, we'll be opening our last show of the year before Christmas kicks in – Nick Payne's *Constellations*.

It's only running for just over two weeks, with 18 performances, so grab your tickets while you can for a show that on its premiere in 2012 saw its author, Nick Payne, become the youngest ever writer to win the Best Play

It's a show that's hard to *explain*, but which delights those who see it – on its most recent London outing last year, the *Guardian* called it: '...*Sliding Doors* to the power of 100... playful and profound, comic and mournful' and *Time Out* praised it as 'zingy and entertaining', whilst a production in Dublin earlier this year drew plaudits from The Times as 'fiendishly clever yet with a real heart'.

Find out more here: <https://sjt.uk.com/events/constellations>

## Raven wings its way to the SJT



We're delighted to welcome Scarborough multi-instrumental band Raven back to the SJT with a special festive fund-raising event this Christmas.

The six-piece group (whose members include a face that will be familiar to many of you: our lovely Executive Assistant Jaye Lewis, who helps out at so many Circle events) is delighted to be performing its ever-popular

Christmas concert in Eat Me @ The SJT on 18 December.

Raven will take you on a magical journey with a mixture of traditional festive songs as well as their own original music. Their enchanting harmonies and haunting melodies will start your festive season with more than a touch of sparkle! – and all proceeds will go towards our community work.

Raven have performed at a wide range of venues and events including the Grassington Fringe Festival, Coastival, Woodend, Filey Festival, the SJT, the Spotlight Theatre Bridlington, Helmsley Arts Centre, Selby Abbey and Castle Howard.

They have created the original soundtracks for Scarborough-based Animated Objects Theatre Company's large-scale community projects including *Leviathan*, *Orpheus The Mariner* and their latest three-year project *The Odyssey*.

Raven will take you on a magical journey with a mixture of traditional festive songs as well as their own original music. Their enchanting harmonies and haunting melodies will start your festive season with more than a touch of sparkle!

The concert will take place in Eat Me @ The SJT on Sunday 18 December from 1.30pm to 3.30pm (doors open at 1pm).

Tickets are £18.00 and include festive sweet treats, mulled wine, red or white wine, or tea or coffee.

To book, visit <https://sjt.uk.com/events/raven> or call our box office on 01723 370541 – there's a limited number of places, so do hurry!

## Autumn daffodils

Our final play reading of the year is *Daffodils* on Monday 7 November – a reading postponed from 19 September, the day of the Queen's funeral.

Sienna. Peach. Marie. Three sisters who haven't spoken in years. After a death in the family, they are thrown back into each other's lives. They laugh, drink, fight and cry as they try to make sense of their world which will never be the same again.

Playwright Rachel Horner is based in Leeds. Her plays are her attempts at understanding life a little better, and her writing is influenced by classical literature and by the strange ties that bind families together. After studying playwriting in York and Manchester, her play *Worldly* was performed as an SJT playreading last year, and she is excited to be back with another, which will be directed by Kash Arshad (and see further down this Circular for some exciting news about Kash!)

For more information on our playreadings – which are partly funded by our New Work Fund, which many of you contribute to – take a look here: <https://sjt.uk.com/new-work-fund>

And to book for *Daffodils*: <https://sjt.uk.com/events/sjt-play-reading-daffodils> or call the box office on 01723 370541.

## Stop press



Antony Eden in *Family Album* © Tony Bartholomew

As those of you who saw it will know, *Family Album* was set during a 70-year period of British history from 1952 to 2022 – a period which coincidentally and quite unexpectedly mirrored the reign of our late Queen.

The Queen's death was announced at 6.30pm on Thursday 8 September, and with people already arriving at the theatre for a 7.30pm performance of *Family Album*, we decided to go ahead that

night, with an announcement and a minute's silence at the beginning.

We did make one tiny change, though – our eagle-eyed stage management team realised that the newspaper read by actor Antony Eden, who played John in the 1952 segment of the show, had a headline referring to the death of the Queen's father, King George VI.

Reasoning that some older members of the audience might find that a little upsetting, they quickly removed the front cover of the newspaper for that night only – it was restored the following evening.

## Child's play



Photos © Tony Bartholomew

Our Early Years project, funded by the North Yorkshire Coast Opportunity Area, was a huge success last year – we loved doing it, the schools loved it and, most importantly, the four- and five-year-olds involved had a great time.

We're delighted that further funding from the OA has allowed us to extend the project for another year, starting this month, with six local schools across Scarborough, Eastfield and Whitby taking part.

Led by our Early Years Speech & Language Project Leader Alice Kynman, the children are taught language and communication skills through singing and music.

Using music, singing, playing instruments and various drama activities, Alice aims to help develop gross motor skills, fine motor skills, composing stories orally and physically, developing vocabulary, listening to instructions, and much more. The activities, and how we deliver them, vary with each school; from one-to-ones with identified children, small groups of mixed abilities, and whole classroom activities. This flexible approach allows each child the opportunity to learn in environments that suit their specific needs.

Alice says: "Having piloted this project last year and seen improvements in the children's language, communication, confidence and behavior, we know there is a real need for this type of work in the younger generation. Throughout this project the children also work towards completing an Arts Awards and will receive a certificate from Trinity College London."

## Kash prize

We're all thrilled that our much-loved Carne Associate Director, Kash Arshad, is currently waiting to hear whether his show *10 Nights* will win an Asian Media Award 2022 – it's been nominated for Best Stage Production.

As well as being directed by Kash, the show features movement direction by Jennifer Kay, who is also the Movement Director on *Constellations*.

You can catch Kash in conversation with writer Shahid Iqbal Khan here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lfpsy92PSXg&t=2s>



## Raffle

A big thank you to all of you who bought raffle tickets during *Brief Encounter* and *Family Album* – and to our dedicated tickets sellers: Joyce Clibbens, Sue Wilkinson, Liz Curry, Pat Deacon and Eileen Hornsey.

The raffle, which ran on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays throughout the two shows, raised a grand total of £954, a hugely valuable contribution to our funds.

## Dates for your diary

Can you believe there are now only two Circle Café events left for this year? We do hope you can join us for one, or both, of them. They are:

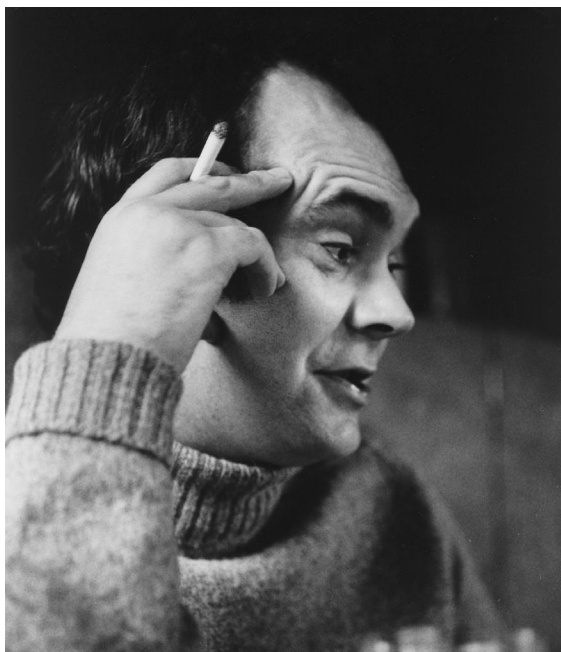
November 10 – members of the *Constellations* company (arrival from 10.30am for an 11am start)

December 15 – Christmas Circle Café (arrival from 12.30pm for a 1pm start)

## Artistically Directed by Simon Murgatroyd

Earlier this year, the Stephen Joseph Theatre celebrated the 50th anniversary of Alan Ayckbourn's play *Absurd Person Singular*. But that's not the only 50th anniversary of note this year.

For on 12 November 1972, Alan Ayckbourn was appointed the Artistic Director of the Library Theatre – which would have an extraordinary bearing on both him and this company in the decades to follow.



Alan Ayckbourn in 1972, the year he became Artistic Director of the Library Theatre © Haydonning Ltd

Alan came to Scarborough and joined the Library Theatre in 1955 as an acting stage manager. He made his writing and directing debuts here in 1959 and 1961 respectively, before leaving to become a founding member of the Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent, in 1962. In 1965, he joined the BBC as a Radio Drama Producer for five years.

Stephen Joseph – founder of the Library Theatre and Alan's most significant mentor – died in 1967, leaving the company without direction or a leader. For several years, a director of productions would be appointed annually to run the 13-week summer seasons.

Alan held this role in 1969, 1970 and 1972 – still working at the BBC during the first two of those years – but all this was soon to change.

The 1972 summer season was remarkably successful, but the Scarborough Theatre Trust board knew changes were necessary as the company was essentially stuck in a rut.

Restricted to summer seasons since 1962, there was little continuity from one year to the next with no plans to expand.

One of the few constants was Alan, who had continued to premiere and direct his own plays since Stephen's death and whose royalties from the West End productions of his plays were proving to be an invaluable prop for the company.

The board knew Alan wanted to move back full-time into theatre and had already cast his line out to see if anyone was biting. In 1970, he unsuccessfully applied to be the Artistic Director of the recently opened Leeds Playhouse.

This was an issue as, quite patently, the board could not afford to lose Alan. His plays were as close to a guaranteed success as was possible each summer, he generated enormous publicity for the theatre and town and the West End royalties were substantive. Hesitate and they might lose Alan to another theatre.

So in November 1972, it was unanimously agreed to appoint Alan as Artistic Director: a role he would hold for 37 years, making him one of the longest serving artistic directors in modern UK theatre history.

Now there's an interesting question of what would have happened if Alan had not been asked to take on the role or had been asked too late. It's hard to imagine any scenario where the Library Theatre would have survived.

Within three years, the company was being given its marching orders from Scarborough Library – without Alan fighting ferociously to ensure its survival, would it have found a new home?



*Alan Ayckbourn and company on the final night at the Library Theatre in September 1976 © Scarborough Theatre Trust*

If Alan had been offered a job elsewhere – Leeds Playhouse, say – would he still have premiered plays in Scarborough and would the West End royalties have continued to come in? Presumably not. Presumably the financial benefits would have gone to his new base.

The more you question it, the more difficult it is to imagine any scenario where the Library

Theatre survives, let alone thrives, without Alan at the helm. As was noted at the time, there was hardly a surfeit of comparable talent rushing to take on the role.

Fortunately, Alan grasped the opportunity with immediate benefits. First, he turned down his annual wage and reinvested it back into the company; Alan did not draw a wage at any point whilst Artistic Director.

The ever-increasing royalties from the West End also continued to pour in – at a rate negotiated by the playwright's agent which saw Scarborough receive more than was traditional for the original producing house.

And Alan quietly subsidised the theatre with new equipment as well as covering other costs. It's never been explicitly stated nor has Alan ever drawn attention to it, but his financial investment in the theatre during almost four decades is hugely significant.

The theatre also benefited by association. During the '70s and '80s, Alan was at a peak of popularity with television documentaries, newspaper and magazine features – generally all with a backdrop of Scarborough and the theatre. It was invaluable free publicity for both the theatre and the town.

And alongside all this was an extraordinary work ethic. Alan's biographer, Paul Allen, once noted Alan's life is dominated by theatre and there's not much to write about outside of his theatre life. His work with the company was all-encompassing.

In 1974, Alan transformed the Library Theatre into a year-round company which also toured. He oversaw the move of the company to a new, larger home in 1976 which resulted in a massive expansion of the theatre's programme bringing lunchtime and late night shows alongside the main house plays – most of which he directed.



Alan Ayckbourn. outside the Stephen Joseph Theatre in the Round in 1978 © Haydonning Ltd

And he didn't stop there. Between 1976 and 1986, Alan directed between five and ten productions a year in Scarborough. He wrote between three and five works a year and worked as an uncredited sound designer on many of the productions. He ran the theatre as there was no executive director – just a theatre manager – and this is in addition to taking his plays into London.

It's a very different world to today, where it's almost unimaginable an artistic director would be so heavily involved in every aspect of running a theatre all year round.

During this period, the Stephen Joseph Theatre in the Round gained an international reputation, not just as Alan Ayckbourn's home theatre but for its new writing programme, which went into overdrive under Alan as he continued Stephen Joseph's legacy of championing new writing. He directed new work and encouraged new writers and directors. He put the theatre firmly on the cultural map.

So much so, that when the Holbeck Hall hotel went down the cliffs in 1993, our current press officer Jeannie – in the same role at the theatre then – and I, a novice journalist at the *Scarborough Evening News*, recall the most frequently asked question from journalists and news organisations around the world was, what does Alan Ayckbourn think about it?

The playwright and this theatre had become completely synonymous with the town. And it wasn't a one-way street, let's be honest. Alan himself is quick to acknowledge that when he was appointed Artistic Director, he was given the keys to the toy box.

He wrote – pretty much – what he wanted and set the company challenges which it's hard to believe any other venue would even have considered, let alone produced.



Alan Ayckbourn on the Hadfirth Bounty for the world premiere of *Way Upstream* at the Stephen Joseph Theatre in the Round in 1981 © Haydonning Ltd

other writers and directors could imagine or hope for. Along the way he created extraordinary theatre with unforgettable works for a very literate Scarborough audience. And that was another extraordinary achievement. Alan has no time for people who patronise regional theatre or think parochially. He believes this audience was as – if not more – sophisticated than London audiences. And he programmed with that belief.

Throughout his tenure, there's a great diversity of work, not just new pieces by new writers, but also classics, lesser known works, even a penchant for American writers.

Alan creates and nurtures an extremely theatre-literate audience, which is prepared to take risks, be it experiencing new writing or little known shows.

He doesn't presume there's a generic Scarborough play or a stereotypical Scarborough theatregoer. He challenges his audiences. Not least with his own work, which runs the gamut from what we would consider typically Ayckbournian to musicals, thrillers to epics, the very darkest of works to the lightest.

Flood the theatre for a play set on a boat? *Sure, why not?* Give an entire year over to one play with 16 different endings? *No problem.* A 60th anniversary show running to five hours over two performances with dinner in between? *Sounds like a good idea.* A summer season of ten premieres by ten authors with ten actors? *Slightly mad, but what the hell.* Two plays running simultaneously with one cast in two auditoria? *Is that even a challenge?*

The freedom the SJT gave him, allowed Alan to push himself in directions few



Alan Ayckbourn and the Stephen Joseph Theatre in 1996 © TBC

All this combines into an extraordinary achievement, which we can quantify to a point:

- Alan was Artistic Director for 37 years – that's more than all the other SJT Artistic Directors from 1955 to the present day put together.
- During this period, he directed more than 180 different productions for Scarborough – not including tours; more than all the other Artistic Directors combined.
- He commissioned and produced more new writing at the SJT than all the other Artistic Directors combined.
- He wrote 59 produced plays, numerous musical reviews, half a dozen plays for pre-schoolers, and other works.
- He oversaw the company's move into two new homes and ensured its survival.



It's an extraordinary record.



*Alan Ayckbourn (right) with his successor Chris Monks on 31 March 2009, the day Alan stepped down as Artistic Director*  
© Tony Bartholomew

And in 2009, he retired and walked away from it without looking back.

That's also noteworthy. Alan made a clean break only to return to write and direct for the company, choosing not to interfere, and to become involved only when asked.

It's extraordinarily gracious and unusual. There are relatively few people with such long-term ties to an organisation where there hasn't been acrimony or argument at the end of the tenure – chosen or otherwise.

It is in no way hyperbolic to say that 50 years ago, when Alan was made Artistic Director, it was a decision that had huge repercussions for both him and the company.

Without Alan, the company probably wouldn't have survived and certainly wouldn't have become internationally renowned as a theatre of excellence and new writing.

And without this theatre, it's improbable that Alan would have had such an extraordinary career as a writer and director.

Perhaps, ultimately, Alan's legacy specifically to Scarborough will be recognised for his work as Artistic Director and how he made a small, regional theatre into something so significant on so many levels.

*Simon Murgatroyd is Alan Ayckbourn's Archivist and runs his official website [www.alanayckbourn.net](http://www.alanayckbourn.net)*