

The Circular

May 2020

Welcome

Welcome to the May issue of the Circular. We're starting with some big news which we hope you will already have heard – but we think it bears repeating: Alan Ayckbourn has written a new show, which, with his wife Heather Stoney, he has recorded and will be available exclusively on our website until Thursday June 25!

You can find out all about *Anno Domino* below, and we've had some lovely press coverage.

Alan and Heather were on Radio 4's *Today* programme on the morning of Wednesday 20 May – you can hear that interview here <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m000j947> (from two hours 38 minutes in), or read more here: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-52720156>

Also – for those Circle members who don't have access to the internet – we're aiming to organise a special Circle Café event to enable you to hear the show. Obviously, we can't say when that will be just yet, but watch this space.

Read on for more about...

***Anno Domino* – a brand new play from lockdown by Alan Ayckbourn**



Alan and Heather in their garden | Photo by Tony Bartholomew

We're delighted to announce the world premiere of a new play by Alan Ayckbourn – *Anno Domino*.

The show will be available as an audio recording exclusively on our website from 25 May to 25 June and is the writer's 84th. It will also mark his return to acting – 56 years after his last appearance on a professional stage.

Alan has also teamed up with his wife, actress Heather Stoney, to record the new show during lockdown.

This summer, he was due to direct the world premiere of a new play written by him, *Truth Will Out*, alongside a new production of his 1976 classic *Just Between Ourselves* and Paul Robinson's production of *The Ladykillers*.

However, after our summer season was suspended due to the coronavirus outbreak, Alan a former radio producer, and Paul hatched a plan to create a new play which Alan and Heather could record and present online.

Anno Domino looks at the break-up of a long-established marriage and the effect that has on family and friends.

In it, Alan and Heather play four characters each, with an age range of 18 to mid-70s. It's the first time they've acted together since Alan's last appearance on a professional stage, in William Gibson's two-hander *Two for the Seesaw* at the Rotherham Civic Theatre in 1964.

After that, Alan pursued a hugely successful writing and directing career, while Heather continued to act, appearing in many Ayckbourn world premieres. Her last full season as an actress was at the SJT in 1985, during which she appeared in the world premiere of Ayckbourn's *Woman in Mind*.

Alan says: "The inspiration for *Anno Domino* came from the idea that all relationships ultimately, however resilient they appear to be, are built on sand! And it only takes one couple to break up abruptly to take us all by surprise, then all of a sudden everyone is questioning their own unshakeable relationship."

Paul says: "We can't wait for our audiences to hear *Anno Domino*. We were all hugely disappointed to have to suspend our summer season. We were so looking forward to seeing the brilliant *Just Between Ourselves* – 'the one with the car on stage' – and the world premiere of Alan's up-to-the-minute satire, *Truth Will Out*.

"*Anno Domino* is one of Alan's 'lighter' plays, a hopeful and rather joyous piece which will provide perfect entertainment in these troubled times. This is a hugely exciting and very contemporary response to the current situation, and shows yet again how Alan has always moved with the times."

Anno Domino marks the first time Alan has both directed and performed in one of his own plays.

You can listen to it, for free, on the SJT website (www.sjt.uk.com/annodomino). It will be available until noon on Thursday 25 June.

Staff profiles

You've been telling us how much you're enjoying finding out more about some of our staff (and we're finding out things we didn't know about about each other, too!).

One person many of you will know is our Archivist, Simon Murgatroyd – if you haven't actually met him at, for instance, a Circle Café, you'll know his writing through his regular contributions to this publication (and we think this month's article, which establishes a link between Stephen Joseph and best-selling American author Stephen King via English writer and philosopher Colin Wilson, is particularly fascinating).

But before you read that, meet the author...

Simon

Amongst the many hats I wear (not literally, unless it's a particularly fine- looking one), I'm the Archivist of The Bob Watson Archive; my main job is Archivist for a chap named Alan Ayckbourn, whom you might be familiar with.

I was raised in Scarborough and – like my colleague Stephanie Dattani – my youth was dominated by the urge to dance: I was a 'ballet boy' at Susan Richard's Ballet School (and thus would have been deadly rivals with Stephanie given Scarborough's dance schools seemingly perpetual Jets vs Sharks hostility to each other). I even went on to do a degree in Dance at the University of Buckingham before injuring a knee during graduation exams (the irony).

By then, I'd realised my passion was writing. I wrangled an apprenticeship with the Scarborough Evening News and came into contact with the Stephen Joseph Theatre in the Round press officer, Jeannie Swales, who I consider to have been – and I can think of no higher praise – my Yoda, except with substantially better grammar.

A short time later, a crack appeared in the South Bay cliffs. Followed by Holbeck Hall tumbling into the sea below. Being the height of summer, many senior reporters were on holiday, which resulted in my Editor asking "So Murgatroyd, can you actually write?" as opposed to "Where's my coffee?"

Which is how I ended up on an award-winning news team, gainfully employed and with the knowledge that any SEN reader from the late 19th century could have told you the cliffs were less stable than Jenga bricks during a hurricane.

I worked as Arts and Features Editor for seven years and had free rein to do what my Editor termed 'arty stuff'. I was very proud of my first SJT review – *Tomfoolery*, by Tom Lehrer – which led to my first pull-quote: "So good, you'll laugh up your lunch." Still proud of that one. As lead reviewer I also covered Alan's plays when, generally, the SEN reviews were the first to be published in the country and it was made clear it was a responsibility to do it well. How times change.

Having met fellow employee and future wife, Mo (who had no idea she would marry the shy lad who bought her chocolate muffins 20-odd years later), I reached the apex of my journalism career covering the launch of the SJT in 1996 (I broke the news *By Jeeves* would open the theatre and interviewed Alan, Andrew Lloyd Webber and Alan Bennett. Quite hard to go up from there). My final review was *House & Garden* – again, difficult to top – by which point I realised I just wanted to work at the SJT.

I left the SEN to do an MA, which I hoped would lead to employment at the SJT two years down the line. Two weeks after I left the SEN, I was employed on the box office. I still finished the MA though. Some of you may recall I was the Deputy Box Office Manager for six years – I certainly remember you, particularly those awkward bookings...

Whilst on box office, I worked closely with the Archivist Bob Watson. After his death in 2003, I argued someone needed to look after the Archive – preferably me. Not long afterwards, despairing of awkward bookings and having become ever-so slightly obsessed with Alan and his plays, he also employed me as his Archivist.



Simon in his Box Office days...



... and now | Photos by Mo Murgatroyd

Since then, I have what I subtly term “Best. Job. Ever.” in which I spend most of my working days being paid to be geeky about Alan Ayckbourn. But that’s another story.

Alan supported my SJT Archivist role, so I was able to continue working with what became The Bob Watson Archive. I’ve lost track of all the wonderful things I’ve done with the SJT – administered the Ayckbourn & The Round events, worked on Premiere Patrons and Inner Circle, edited the Circular, helped with Circle Café, curated anniversary exhibitions, held talks for anyone and everyone, shared the stage with Alan, written more articles about this theatre than is probably healthy... it goes on.

This year marks 21 years since I joined the SJT. They’ve been extraordinary times and I consider myself very lucky.

Alternatively. “Best. Job. Ever.”

From Stephen Joseph to Stephen King

by Simon Murgatroyd

If you’re a fan of the author Stephen King, you might have been watching the thriller *The Outsider* on Sky or have read the 2018 novel upon which it’s based.

The title of the book is derived from the most famous work of the English philosopher and writer Colin Wilson, who came to prominence during the mid-1950s. King acknowledges the debt Wilson by opening his novel with a quote from one of Wilson’s other works.

Wilson’s *The Outsider* was a critically acclaimed and best-selling existentialist philosophical text which explored the role of the ‘outsider’ in significant literary and cultural texts.

Which takes us from the Stephen King connection to the Stephen Joseph connection.

Stephen Joseph founded the Library Theatre in Scarborough in 1955 and, during its formative years, was constantly trying to raise the profile of and raise interest in his theatre-in-the-round project and ideas.

Which, rather bizarrely, led to Colin Wilson.

The Outsider had been released in 1956 to extraordinary critical acclaim and the initial print-run of 5,000 sold out in a single day. It’s estimated he earned £20,000 in royalties and became an overnight sensation.

He was considered one of the ‘Angry Young Men’ of British literature and was thrust into literary and theatrical circles meeting many other esteemed writers. Wilson also yearned to write a play and his newfound fame led to him coming into contact with George Devine, one of the founders of the Royal Court Theatre, who expressed interest in working with Wilson.



Colin Wilson (© Tom Ordelman)

However, Wilson's fall from grace was as abrupt as his rise and the following year, his follow-up to *The Outsider* was roundly criticised from all sides. He found himself falling from favour and his debut play was rejected by the Royal Court.

Wilson was from Leicester and he knew the writer David Campton – who was the Library Theatre's first resident playwright, a key figure in the company's first decade and a close friend of Stephen Joseph. Through Campton, Wilson became aware of Stephen Joseph and his theatre company in Scarborough.

Stung by his Royal Court rejection, Wilson wrote to Stephen Joseph during September 1957 offering his play, *The Death of God*, to the Library Theatre company whilst suggesting his fame and connections would lead to guaranteed publicity and financial success.

He also suggested it would be one in the eye for the Royal Court Theatre if a rival theatre staged the play and enjoyed success with it. Such was his belief in his own talents that his correspondence painted a picture of his and Stephen's partnership leading to theatre-in-the-round becoming a force to rival the Royal Court.

It's fair to say, Wilson had no end of belief in his own genius.

Stephen didn't stage *The Death of God*, but he commissioned Wilson to write a new play, *Viennese Interlude*, which was staged at the Library Theatre during December 1959 in a double bill with Strindberg's *Miss Julie*.

Programme Notes

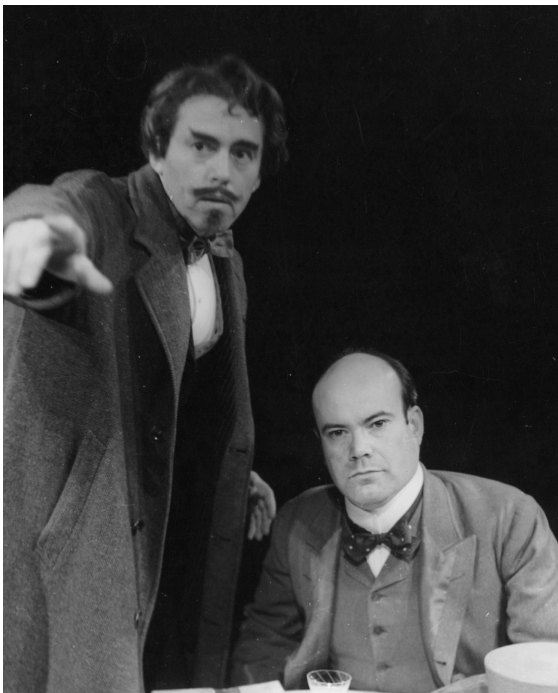
We have now been presenting theatre in the round for over five years. During this time, we have tried to produce as many new plays as possible, and to make a wide and daring choice from well known drama. Tonight's programme offers one new play and one acknowledged masterpiece. About the latter it is not necessary to say more than that we have found it immensely rewarding to work on.

However, some celebration is appropriate in the case of Colin Wilson's first play, *Viennese Interlude*. Mr. Wilson has, in fact, written other plays though these have not been staged. In *Viennese Interlude* he deals with an aspect of Strindberg's personality. The play was written as a result of our finding out about his interest in Strindberg – an interest shared by us. We asked him to write this play. We are very proud, therefore, to have the opportunity of presenting it with Strindberg's own *Miss Julie*. Colin Wilson, whose books *The Outsider*, *Religion and the Rebel* and *The Age of Defeat*, have caused much controversy, has always been keen on writing for the stage. We hope the experience of having this play produced will encourage him to write more for the theatre.

Four of the full length plays we are presenting this season have been specially written for theatre in the round by members of the company. These are David Campton's *Lunatic View* and *Gift of Fire*, and Roland Allen's *The Square Cat* and *Love After All*. A close working relationship between playwright and stage is important, particularly while dramatists find so little help from our Universities, only one of which (Bristol) has a drama department.

Stephen Joseph

Stephen Joseph's programme note for the Library Theatre's production of Colin Wilson's *Viennese Interlude*.



A publicity image for *Viennese Interlude* with William Elmhirst as August Strindberg and David Campton as Dr Otto Steinmetz.

Directed by Stephen Joseph, the three-hander chronicled an imagined encounter between Strindberg and a student of philosophy. Originally the role of a waiter was to be played by Alan Ayckbourn, but he was called up for short-lived National Service and was unable to perform in the role; he did, however, perform it the following year in a one-off performance in London.

The play, which received rather poor reviews, did attract publicity even though Wilson's star had fallen considerably by this stage; and he didn't come up to Scarborough to see it as he was, according to several newspaper reports, waiting for it to be staged in London.

The play, it can be safely said, did not set the world afire nor establish Wilson's credentials as a playwright. Further correspondence shows Stephen becoming quite frustrated with Wilson and his inability or lack of discipline to write a full-length play or accept that he might benefit from learning more about playwriting and theatre-in-the-round.

Stephen stayed in contact with Wilson, though, and continued to encourage him to write, which led in 1963 to the theatre announcing the world premiere of a full-length thriller by Wilson, *Necessary Doubt*.

However, Wilson never finished writing the play (it later became a television screenplay before being adapted into a novel) and Stephen pulled it from the season and replaced it with a triple bill of plays by James Saunders.

This marked the end of Colin Wilson's short-lived relationship with the Library Theatre. It achieved nothing of what either Wilson nor Stephen Joseph hoped and certainly the connection with Wilson had no appreciable benefit for the Library Theatre.

Wilson himself became a prolific writer of non-fiction and fiction, although he never re-attained the popularity or notoriety of his first book *The Outsider* and his play-writing career never amounted to anything more than *Viennese Interlude* at the Library Theatre.

Wilson died in 2013 and is still remembered for *The Outsider*, the book which – somewhat tenuously! – connects Stephen King to Stephen Joseph.

The Library Theatre Vernon Road Scarborough 4279 Summer season of plays 1963

1st showing 2nd showing

11-17 July 15-21 August

COMEBACK

A husband returning to his family after an absence of fifteen years is the starting point of the comedy in this new play by David Campton.

8-14 August 5-7 September

AFFAIRS OF STATE

American politics — with a touch of "Pygmalion" — form the background of this charming comedy by Louis Verneuil.

25-31 July 22-28 August

NECESSARY DOUBT

A thriller, which is more than a "whodunit", by Colin Wilson, author of "The Outsider".

A detail from the summer 1963 Library Theatre brochure featuring the unproduced Colin Wilson play Necessary Doubt.

With thanks to Paul Elsam who extensively explores Colin Wilson's relationship with Stephen Joseph in extensive detail in his book Stephen Joseph: Theatre Pioneer and Provocateur.

A treasury of Ayckbourn

Missing your Ayckbourn fix this summer? Do you know about the official AA website, where Archivist Simon works tirelessly to create what has to be one of the most comprehensive resources on any artist ever?

He's recently added a new page full of things to listen to, watch or read – take a look here:

<http://www.alanayckbourn.net/page-2/NewsInDepth.html>

Scarborough arts organisations offer practical help to local creatives



Photo by Tony Bartholomew

We are proud to be part of a group of local arts organisations which is offering practical help to creatives and artists across the Borough of Scarborough during the current coronavirus crisis.

COAST is the Local Cultural Education Partnership for the Borough of Scarborough, which includes the towns of Whitby, Scarborough and Filey. It is administered by Create Arts Development and includes local stakeholders from cultural organisations, and freelance artists and practitioners.

Other member organisations include Create Arts Development, Crescent Arts, Invisible Dust, the North Yorkshire Library and Information Service, the Old Parcels Office Art Space, The Pannett Art Gallery and Whitby Museum and Scarborough Museums Trust, alongside some talented and experienced individuals with specialist skills.

The group has produced a resource and information pack, which includes contact details of members to allow creative and artists to access their skills and advice on everything from accessing emergency funding to technical issues. There are also links to online support and creative projects to inspire and excite, and wellbeing resources.

Emma Hallam, Director of Create, says: “In these difficult times, we feel it’s important to share our skills wherever possible. COAST’s membership comprises a wide range of organisations and individuals with years of experience between them – and if we can’t help with a specific situation, we’ll try and find someone who can!”

You can download COAST’s creatives and COVID-19 resource and skills information pack here: <https://bit.ly/COASTC19>

Membership renewal

Thank you to all of our members who have continued to renew their memberships. Please be assured that your membership renewal has gone through on our system, but there will be a delay in getting your physical packs out to you. Once we are able to open up again we will be posting all packs out to members who have renewed during this period as soon as possible. Thank you for your patience at this time.

The next few weeks...

We’re doing our best to keep in regular contact with all of our customers, especially Circle members and those who may not have access to the internet.

If all goes according to plan, you should receive, over the next few weeks, regular emails or mail-outs from us, keeping you up to date with all our news.

If you do have access to the internet, but don’t receive our emails, do drop us a line so we can make sure we have your email address listed.

And if you know anyone who you think would like to hear from us, now’s the ideal time for them to sign up to our mailing list here: <https://www.sjt.uk.com/maillinglist-signup>