

Circular June 2021

Welcome...

...to the June issue of the Circular, the newsletter exclusively for members of the Stephen Joseph Theatre's membership scheme.

If you're wondering where the postponement of the proposed lifting of lockdown on 21 June has left us, then don't worry: it hasn't had too much impact on us. When we were planning for this year, we'd anticipated that things may not go as planned, so decided not to lift the seating capacity limits in the near future – we're currently selling all our 2021 shows with social distancing in place, with a view to adding seats in only as and when we're able to do so.

We're very aware, though, that we're in a very fortunate position, and our thoughts are with our many colleagues across the country who are finding the current situation very challenging.

The Girl Next Door



Production photos from The Girl Next Door © Tony Bartholomew

By the time you receive this issue of the *Circular*, there'll only be a handful of opportunities left to catch Alan Ayckbourn's 85th play, *The Girl Next Door* – it ends on Saturday 3 July.

It's one of those rare plays that seems to have completely united the national critics – they all loved it. Dominic Maxwell, writing in *The Times*, gave it four stars, describing it as 'inventive and empathetic, timely and fun'.

The Mail's Patrick Marmion also awarded four stars, saying: "[Ayckbourn's] powers are undimmed... It's a brilliantly constructed play, turning inconsequential details into later revelations."

There were another four stars from Mark Fisher in *The Guardian*, who called it 'clever and playful', while Clare Brennan, writing in the *The Guardian's* sister paper *The Observer*, said: "Ayckbourn's direction is, as always, sheer genius. Set (Kevin Jenkins), lighting (Jason Taylor) and sound (Ayckbourn, with Paul Stear) are as witty as they are effective. The ensemble is terrific, individually and collectively."

All of which is a rather long-winded way of saying: If you haven't already booked for *The Girl Next Door*, we recommend you do so now, while you still can!! You'll probably have read that, for Covid reasons, we have two casts (known as the Red Team and the Blue Team) – and we've spoken to some audience members who've been so intrigued, they've come to see both! You can find out which team are performing on your chosen date here: https://www.sjt.uk.com/cast_information

To book: https://www.sjt.uk.com/event/1131/the_girl_next_door

SJT at Home: The Girl Next Door



If you haven't been able to get to us so far this year, for whatever reason, you might like to know that a film of *The Girl Next Door* is available online from 6pm on Monday 28 June until midnight on Sunday 4 July.

Tickets are £12 for one and £15 for two or more (the latter being an 'honesty' price!). There will also be available a version with bonus features including interviews with writer and director Alan

Ayckbourn, designer Kevin Jenkins and wardrobe supervisor Julia Perry-Mook.

Coming soon to our website: www.sjt.uk.com

Home, I'm Darling



Rehearsal pictures from *Home, I'm Darling* © Ellie Kurttz

Rehearsals are well under way for our next production, *Home, I'm Darling*, a co-production with the Octagon Theatre, Bolton and Theatre by the Lake in Keswick.

This sparkling comedy is by Laura Wade, who you might know better as the writer of the play *Posh* and the film version of it, *The Riot Club*.

Laura recently spoke with Fergus Morgan of *The Stage* newspaper, and we liked what she had to say about the show:

"A new production of my play *Home, I'm Darling*, is opening at the Stephen Joseph Theatre in Scarborough in July. I love it when people produce my plays again. It is so interesting to see what they are able to find in my script. If a script is a recipe, it is fun to see how different the cake looks from the original. I'm a kind of Fairy Godmother to the production – I will be here if they need me."

We do so love the idea of having a Fairy Godmother – we can't wait to check out Laura's wings and wand when she comes to see the show!

https://www.sjt.uk.com/event/1132/home_im_darling

Filming our shows



Our Broadcast Co-ordinator and Director of Photography for SJT at Home: *The Girl Next Door*, Dan Abell, running tests before filming. © Hannah van Helvoort

Some of you will remember that last year we were one of the theatres fortunate enough to benefit from the government's Culture Recovery Fund. Part of the £247,705 we received was to go towards filming our shows – both for posterity and also to possibly release to the public at some point.

We started that process with a film of *The Snow Queen* at Christmas, but at that point, had to call in an outside company to do the filming as we didn't have the necessary kit.

Well, now we do – some of you may even have been present in mid-June when we filmed *The Girl Next Door*, on our website soon.

Daniel Abell, our new Broadcast Co-ordinator, explains: "When the pandemic happened, we looked back through the archives of the shows we've done in the past and realised we didn't have anything of a quality that we were happy to release.

"I was asked to investigate what we could do in the future to ensure we had a better archive and something of a quality that we could release to the public if this happened again or if we wanted to stream.

"I have broadcast experience, so I was happy to look into what kind of camera and sound gear we'd need to capture the shows effectively, and also at how we capture theatre in the round, because it's obviously a very unique perspective and environment.

“One of the key things for me is that I don’t want to produce a ‘film’ – it’s going to be a capture of a live theatre performance. We want you to see the audience, to feel like you’re sitting there. We’re trying to give you the best seat in the house!

“Of course, when you’re sat in the theatre, you can choose exactly where to look: “I’m not going to look over there, I’m going to look over here.” Obviously we’re a bit more limited with film – if you just took a big wide shot as your eyes see it, on video that would soon become very boring because you can’t just zoom in as your eyes naturally do when they focus on an object.

“So we have to do that for you with the cameras; we have to draw your attention. A big part of my new role is capturing the director’s vision for the piece when it’s performed in front of a live audience and translating it into something that’s enjoyable when you’re sitting at home.

“The filming of work also enables different audiences to access our produced work in a new and exciting way, especially for those who may not be able to attend in person.

“Filmed theatre can never replace the real live thing, of course. It does, however, open a doorway to a global audience. It gives those who can’t come to the building for whatever reason a way to enjoy and experience the amazing work we produce.”

A big thank you...



Select the two images above to visit their websites.

Our Fundraising and Development Officer Stephanie Dattani writes: All of us here at the SJT would like to say a big thank you to Clock’s Home and Garden and Pinkney Grunwells for continuing to support us through corporate partnership for this year.

“We’re delighted to keep our partnerships going and really appreciate their loyalty and generosity in these times. Thank you!”

Tayla



To celebrate the recent centenary of the birth of our founder, Stephen Joseph, we asked one of our brilliant *The Girl Next Door* company, Tayla Kovacevic-Ebong, to read some words written by Stephen for *Theatre World* magazine in 1959. They seem to sum up perfectly everything that we think makes live theatre so special.

We thought you might like to see the beautiful and rather touching result: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0zklwwdu8EU>

Nightjars



And Then Come The Nightjars © Scarborough Theatre Trust

Some of you will still remember a deeply moving show that visited us back in 2016, *And Then Come The Nightjars*. Written by Bea Roberts, this two-hander set during the devastating foot-and-mouth crisis of 2001 was a co-production between Theatre503 and the Bristol Old Vic, and was one of the last shows directed at Theatre503 by our now Artistic Director, Paul Robinson, before he left them to join us.

We were delighted to discover that Paul is about to direct a new film of the show. He explains: “One of the two actors in the show, Nigel Hastings – who SJT audiences will remember from Alan Ayckbourn’s 2014 play, *Roundelay* – is also a script consultant and editor at a brilliant independent film and TV production company called Finite Films & TV.

“The producer there, Amy Gardner, was looking for a ‘nimble’ project, and asked Nigel what the best script was he’d read recently – and he recommended *Nightjars*.”

The upshot of that conversation is that Paul will be heading down to Meldon Farm on Dartmoor in September to direct the film version of *And Then Come The Nightjars*, starring Nigel and David Fielder, both of whom were in the original show.

It should be ready for release by the end of the year, after which – look out for it at a film festival near you!

NB: And Then Come The Nightjars writer Bea Roberts is currently working on a commission from the SJT based on the adventures of Captain Jack Lammiman, who in 1991 decided to place a commemorative plaque to his hero, Whitby whaling captain William Scoresby, in the Arctic. His boat was declared unseaworthy, but Captain Jack defied the authorities and went anyway, accompanied by a somewhat motley crew. Look out for that in our programme.

Dates for your Diary

As things slowly return to normal, we’re starting to reinstate our popular programme of Circle Cafés, where you can meet cast, crew and SJT staff for an insight into what happens behind the scenes. We’ll be confirming our guests later, but for now, pop the following dates in your diary...

Thursday 22 July

Thursday 12 August

Thursday 9 September

Thursday 21 October

Thursday 18 November

Thursday 16 December

For those of you who haven't been to one of these events before, they're very relaxed. We ask you to arrive between 10.30am and 10.50am for an 11am. Tea and coffee is provided, and we usually wind up at around 11.45am. We look forward to welcoming you!

Stephen Joseph Remembered



Stephen Joseph, theatre pioneer and founder of the SJT
© Scarborough Theatre Trust

This month marks the centennial of the birth of the founder of the Stephen Joseph Theatre.

Stephen Joseph was born on 13 June 1921 in London and would go on to have a profound impact on theatre in the UK, not least in founding the UK's first professional theatre-in-the-round company in the UK, before dying at the tragically young age of 46 in 1967.

Equally importantly, he nurtured Alan Ayckbourn, encouraging him to both write and direct. It is a debt Alan has always recognised and he regards Stephen as the most influential figure in his life.

During 2017, the SJT marked the 50th anniversary of his death with a weekend of events which included a discussion between Dr Paul Elsam – biographer of Stephen Joseph – and

Alan Ayckbourn. For those fortunate enough to attend, it was an extremely moving afternoon during which Alan made obvious that Stephen was a hugely significant father figure.

It is, in my opinion, the final word on Stephen and for our final article celebrating his life, it's a fitting conclusion by the man who, arguably, knew him best and who still holds his memory close.

Stephen Joseph Remembered: an edited transcription

Dr Paul Elsam: What is your earliest memory of Stephen Joseph?

Alan Ayckbourn: I worked with him for several weeks without knowing who the hell he was! I was just an ASM [at Leatherhead Rep] and when we had all finished the current season, [the stage manager] said the immortal words, 'Anyone fancy a job in Scarborough?' And I chimed up and said, 'Where the hell's Scarborough?' And he said, 'Well just go up that way until York and turn right.' And I said, 'Oh, that sounds good, OK, I'm off.'

So without further ado, I was on a train to Scarborough. I changed at York and then it became really pretty with this beautiful scenery and I arrived in Scarborough. I met the director there, Clive Goodwin, who was directing a season of plays and there was no sign of this man, Stephen Joseph. So I proceeded to stage manage the opening production of *The Glass Menagerie* and then appeared in the second production of *An Inspector Calls*.



Stephen Joseph and Alan Ayckbourn in 1957 when Alan first joined the Library Theatre © Scarborough Theatre Trust

In between these roles, I was operating the lights as well and I would stand in this cramped little space in the narrow corridor between the dressing room and the stage, operating a lethal machine – a Strand Eight Way Slider Dimmer – which you got belting shocks off. I was operating the lights sight unseen, so I couldn't see the stage; I had no view of the stage and the curtains were drawn on both entrances to avoid light leaks. I was operating the lights and I got to the end of the first scene and I did a down-fade with eight fingers and I then brought them up again at the beginning of the second scene with the same eight fingers and I was suddenly aware of an enormous man standing at the side of me.

And he said, quite loudly, 'There's a better way to do that.' And I said, 'Excuse me, sir, this is a restricted area. Professionals at work.' And he said, 'No, no, there's a better way to do that.' I said, 'Yeah, I'm sure there is, thanks very much.' And he said, 'If you get a bit of wood', and he found a bit of wood on this untidy floor, 'you can lay it across the dimmers. If you use it there it's a much easier way to do a blackout.' He brought it down and I said, 'You've just blacked out the stage...' and he said, 'Oh Jesus' and then he ran through the door.

At which point the actors came out very angry ('That was in the middle of my big speech') and I said – I was like Stan Laurel – 'There was this great big man...', and one of the actors said, 'Oh, that's got to be Stephen.'

I said, 'Stephen who?' They said, 'Stephen Joseph, the guy who runs the company.'

I said, 'Oh *that's* Stephen, he's crazy!' And that was our first meeting.

Stephen has been described as someone who collected people and maintained wonderful relationships with them: was that your experience?

I think he collected me, in a way, because he took one look at me as this stage manager and failing electrician wanting to be an actor. So he gave me a go at acting and very shrewdly could see I wasn't cut out to be the next Albert Finney, so he gently tilted the course of my progress towards the poisoned chalice for an actor of directing and then – simultaneously – towards writing. So he collected me and redirected me. In that sense, he was a producer of people's lives as much as anything.

He made a memorable response to your first play, *The Square Cat*: what was that?

He said, 'If you write another seven plays, you'll be quite a good writer.' I said, 'Thank you so much.'



Alan Ayckbourn, Faynia Jeffreys and Stephen Joseph during rehearsals in 1960
© Scarborough Theatre Trust

Stephen was your mentor for both writing and directing in those early days. What can he claim credit for?

I think the key was he was a teacher really. He could talk beautifully about playwriting in a way I've never heard anyone talk about the structure and about the creation of it: the practical craft. He talked about acting – that was his gift as a director – because he knew more about acting than anyone I have known. Therefore, he knew more about directing.

Although he was a practitioner

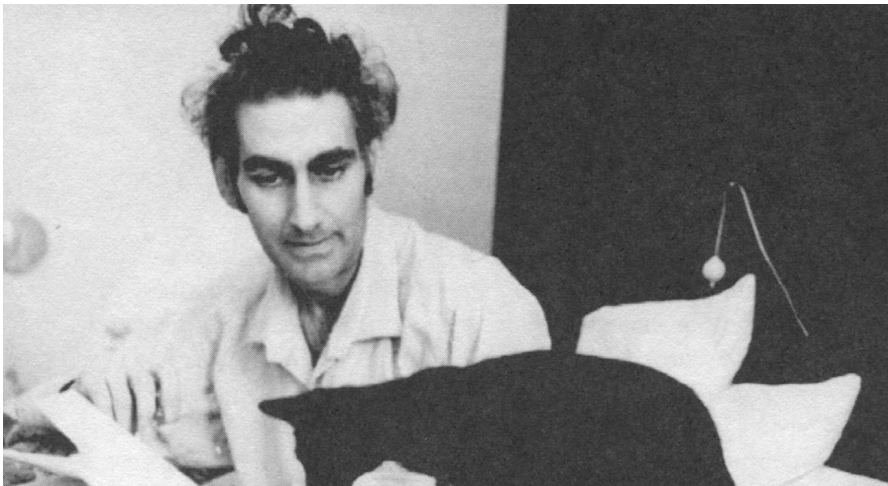
in none of these areas, if you had the courage, the patience and the sense to listen to him, he had the key to all those things. He was just extraordinary. I'm still carrying some of the things he said to me and I'm passing them on as if they were mine!

Would it be any exaggeration to say that Stephen transformed stagecraft?

I think so, I think his emphasis on truth – artistic truth and consistency – was not something around at the time. I think Stephen was a man of his time. He had the excitement to create theatre-in-the-round, yet he also had the shrewdness to know that there was already an audience there that was not prepared to sit at the Leeds Grand Theatre and be shouted at by

some speck in the distance being amplified which you'd need opera glasses to see, when you'd got actors in the Library Theatre who were literally inches from you, acting in a manner which you could see in *Coronation Street*, to be quite honest.

I remember the lights coming on once at a production when we were in the Library Theatre and a woman saying, 'Oh it's in colour! 'Yes, madam, 3D and smell-a-rama and everything! But, obviously, she was already into a televisual experience and we were matching this challenge, because all around us at that time rep was crumbling and dying. Why go to the theatre when you can switch on a box in the corner? Because we're live and in colour and for god's sake, it's special. Every night is special. Forget the box. Forget the movies.



Probably the last surviving image of Stephen Joseph prior to his death in 1967 with his cat
© TBC

What greater influence might Stephen have had on British theatre if he had lived much longer?

It's very hard to know. I think one of the sadnesses for me is that he left theatre when he did and went into academia and was lost to the profession forever because he probably had a death wish – he would never open a

theatre and run it successfully.

I think Stephen probably was that extraordinary figure of a first stage rocket that started pushing the rest of us into space and then always knew he was going to drop away.

I live in his house, he's with me everyday. I miss him more than anyone, if that's possible. I sat with him in his bedroom during his dying days and he said one of the most frightening things to me and I was making stupid noises about 'as soon as you're better we can start again, Stephen and we can get going again'. He said, 'Ayckers I'm dying, old mate, let's face it, I'm dying.'

And I just shut up because I couldn't think of anything to say. And he said the most awful thing, he said 'All the books I've read, they tell you this and they tell you that and I have to tell you, I'm terrified.'

My heart just went out to him and I left him, I have to say. He was sitting there with this kitten he'd adopted, just flopping around on the duvet and that was the last of Stephen which I saw. He died. It was probably the saddest time of my life.

That was the death of a rocket, falling into the sea. I guess for many of us, we remember the energy which lifted us and just thank him very much.

Simon Murgatroyd is Alan Ayckbourn's Archivist and the Administrator of his official website www.alanayckbourn.net.