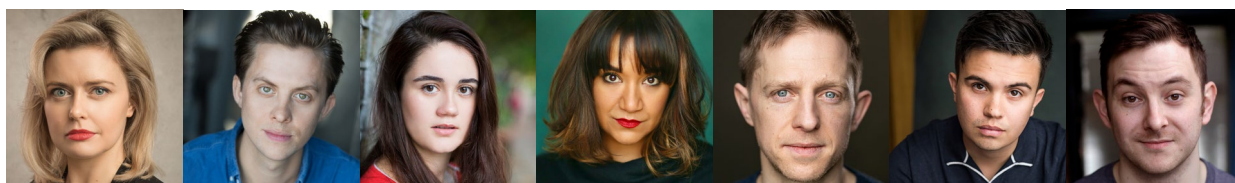


## Circular June 2022

### Welcome...

Christmas in June? Anything is possible at the SJT – read on to find out why we had a table set for Christmas dinner in our Round this month, as well as a first look at rehearsals for our next show, *Brief Encounter*, and more.

### Brief Encounter



The cast of *Brief Encounter*: Anne-Marie Piazza, Joey Hickman, Lara Lewis, Natasha Lewis, Pete Ashmore, Rishi Manuel, Robert Jackson

They're with us at last! The cast of *Brief Encounter* joined us at the SJT on Monday 20 - June to start rehearsing for this joyous new production of Emma Rice's adaptation of Noël Coward's film version of his own short play *Still Life*... phew, quite some evolution.

But the fact that this story has had so many iterations is testament to its power – this is one you won't want to miss.

At its heart is the powerful story of Alec and Laura, torn between following their hearts, and doing the right thing. If you know the film, you'll know what they decide to do in the end – if you don't, we don't want to spoil it for you. They're played by Pete Ashmore – his first time at the SJT – and Anne-Marie Piazza, who some of you will remember from our Christmas shows *Pinocchio* and *A (Scarborough) Christmas Carol*.

Their central story is surrounded by more frivolous and fun relationships – we're looking forward to seeing them play out in the capable hands of Joey Hickman (Scrooge in *A (Scarborough) Christmas Carol*), Robert Jackson (the Cheshire Cat in our 2018 Christmas show, *Alice in Wonderland*), Lara Lewis and Natalie Lewis (no relation to each other, so far as we know!) and Rishi Manuel.

This innovative adaptation by Emma Rice is reminiscent of *The 39 Steps*, one of our most successful shows in recent years – director Paul Robinson has all sorts of clever ideas up his inventive sleeves. We think it's going to be great fun. If you haven't booked yet, make haste to our website: [https://www.sjt.uk.com/event/1302/brief\\_encounter](https://www.sjt.uk.com/event/1302/brief_encounter)

*Brief Encounter* runs from 22 July to 27 August; there are several socially distanced performances throughout the run for those of you who may still feel a little nervous about being in a packed theatre.

And grab an irresistibly fun preview of the show at the links below

The first readthrough: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wEhCmY9qAu4>

Music rehearsals: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M1U16BP14Y8>

Costume fittings:

## Absurd Person Singular



Alan Ayckbourn and the cast and crew of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Reading of *Absurd Person Singular* © Tony Bartholomew

They came from France, and Norway, and the United States, as well as all over the UK, of course, travelling by air, and by train, and by bus – and what a wonderful afternoon it was!

Last Sunday, we celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the play that many consider to be Alan Ayckbourn's greatest: *Absurd Person Singular*.

We welcomed a cast of Alan's favourite actors from over the years: Elizabeth Boag, Bill Champion, Linford Johnson, Alexandra Mathie and Naomi Petersen – plus (at the eleventh hour, replacing Russell Dixon, who couldn't make it due to the recent travel chaos) Christopher Godwin, reprising the role he first played in that original production 50 years ago. At the age of 78, Chris remarked that he was a rather more appropriate age now – when he first played venerable bank manager Ronnie Brewster-Wright, he was only 28!

*Absurd Person Singular* is set in three kitchens over three Christmases, and our wonderful stage management team pulled out the stops to create a festive dining table for the actors, Alan and, on doorbell duty, our company stage manager Fleur Beeley.

We'll be honest, we'd all had a few little misgivings about how Act II would work as a reading – it's a famously visual and very black comic piece – but in the hands of the master, it worked perfectly.



Guests enjoying the buffet provided by Eat Me Cafe after the reading © Tony Bartholomew

We raised a grand total of just over £8,500 for our New Work Fund, which helps us to nurture new talent for the future of theatre.

Our Fundraising and Development Officer, Stephanie Dattani, who masterminded the whole event, says: "We pride ourselves on being a safe space for actors, writers, directors and many more 'newbies' coming into the industry to develop their skill set or getting that help they need to start.

"We want to be able to carry on producing new work on our stages, whether that's an excerpt in one of our Second Stage evenings, a playreading, our family-friendly Christmas show or Alan's world premiere each year. It is so important for that new work to flourish and thrive and be given a chance – we thank you for making that possible. By supporting us on days like Sunday, **you** are making all of this possible, and more – isn't that a great thing to do!? Thank you!"

### **Fleur is leaving us...**

Some happy/sad news from our much-loved Assistant Producer and Literary Co-ordinator, Fleur Hebditch:

"I just wanted to let you all know I will be leaving the SJT after what's been almost ten glorious years here. I do feel slightly panicked at the decision as theatre has been my only career – apart from being a mum of course. So what am I going to do? I'm embarking on a new career as Deputy Registration Officer at York City Council. This means I will be registering births, deaths and marriages/civil partnerships as well as performing wedding, baby naming, vow renewal and citizenship ceremonies. So I think I'll be kept busy!

"It's going to be a bit of a departure from the theatrical world but one I feel I'll enjoy immensely. I've also got a side job, going back to my roots as an actor – so if you see a slightly familiar Witch doing a tour of York please do give her a wave. I am genuinely going to miss everyone I've come to know and love over the years, but I never say goodbye, only adieu for now – big loves, Fleur"



## July at the SJT

Can't wait until 22 July for your next theatre fix? We've some other great shows for you before then...



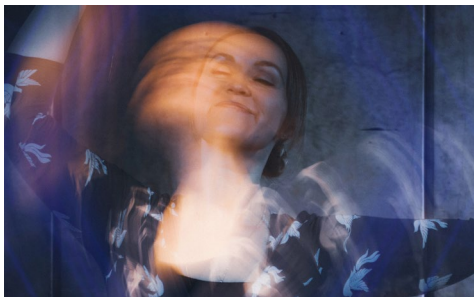
**Scarborough Stories** (7-9 July at 7.30pm): The streets of Scarborough are filled with stories. Memories of those who have gone before us and promises of things yet to come. When the shutters go down at the end of the working day, the Spirit of Scarborough awakes and brings these stories to life. Travel the streets, guided by the people who know them best, and experience a side of Scarborough that will only show itself for three special performances in July. This unique performance, from our

association company Arcade, takes place in unusual indoor and outdoor locations in Scarborough town centre and is written and performed by the people of our town, directed by professional artist Rebecca Denniff.



**Henry Blofeld: My Dear Old Things** (11 and 12 July at 7.45pm): Being confined to the pavilion for the past couple of seasons has given Blowers time to reconnect with his Norfolk roots and reflect on a truly extraordinary life. In *My Dear Old Things*, he recalls his days as a young England hopeful, how an Eton bus knocked him off his stride - and his bike - recoiling from a career in the City to work as a cricket journalist before finding his way into the TMS box. There are hilarious tales of Johnners, Arlott and other larger-than-life characters in the box and

on tour with England. Henry also has plenty of hysterical stories from his post-retirement appearances on *Would I Lie to You?* and *The Real Marigold Hotel*.



**We Should Definitely Have More Dancing** (12 July at 7.30pm, 13 July at 2.30pm and 7.30pm): Clara Darcy is fit, (almost) carefree, (kind of) happily single and joyously dancing through life but her world is about to be turned upside down thanks to the arrival of a tumour slap-bang in the middle of her head. Renowned director Tatty Hennessy and the team behind the multi-award winning *The Greatest Play in the History of the World*,

Ian Kershaw and Raz Shaw, join forces with actress Clara Darcy to tell her remarkable and surprisingly joyful true story.



**Playreading: Big Kids** (18 July at 7pm): The latest in our popular series of playreadings, James McDermott's *Big Kids* is a storytelling show about four Norfolk teenagers who want to stay kids forever. Then one of them loses their single parent, two of them get pregnant and the other starts to transition. The play is an exploration of growing up, queer teenage life in coastal Norfolk and how we all perform adulthood.

For more on all of these: <https://www.sjt.uk.com/whatson>

## Dates for your diary

We do hope you can join us for our popular Circle Café events – we'll be announcing more as the year goes on, but let's start by getting the dates below into your diaries...

Circle Cafés (all 10.30am arrival for an 11am start unless otherwise stated):

July 14 – Ernie Acquah from our OutReach department

August 11 – members of the *Brief Encounter* company

September 15 – members of the *Family Album* company

October 6 – tbc

November 10 – members of the *Constellations* company

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

### Brief Encounters: Noël Coward at the SJT

by Simon Murgatroyd

This summer will see the rather exciting revival at the SJT of Emma Rice's acclaimed adaptation of the classic film, *Brief Encounter*.

This – as I'm sure everyone reading is aware – was written by Noël Coward and is regarded as one of the greatest British films ever made. It is frequently cited as one of the most famous of Coward's works, but less well-known is that it originated as the short play, *Still Life*, which was first produced in 1936.

The film, released in 1945, directed by David Lean and starring Celia Johnson and Trevor Howard, greatly expanded Coward's play and, in 2007, Emma Rice cleverly brought the film back to its stage roots with her acclaimed adaptation with Kneehigh Theatre. Our Artistic Director, Paul Robinson, will be undertaking the not insubstantial task of transferring the play into the round – we believe for the first time.

But this obviously isn't the first Coward work to be presented by the company. Indeed, he's one of the few playwrights who has consistently been revived by the SJT from the 1960s through to the present day. Here then is a brief guide to all things Coward at the SJT as well as Alan Ayckbourn's own link with the playwright.

### Fallen Angels (1963)/Private Lives (1964)



A scene from *Fallen Angels* (1963), the first Coward play to be performed by the company.

It was eight years after the Library Theatre opened before it staged its first Coward play: *Fallen Angels* in 1963. Sadly, we don't know an awful lot about either this or a production of *Private Lives* the following year, as so little has survived in archive.

However, we do know – bizarrely – what the cast ate on stage as Stephen Joseph wrote about the

production in his book, *Theatre in the Round*, and how the company solved the problem of eating a full meal on stage.

“A full dinner is eaten, but the actresses simply cannot cope with real food in such quantities. Special dishes have to be made that look substantial but are not. Our catering manager devised mushrooms in aspic (we christened them ‘fallen angels’) to do for oysters; steaks had to be bread in gravy – a familiar standby; and extra light-weight eclairs were made for sweet.”

To be honest, this doesn’t really sound as though it was an issue with appetites; more so the budget of providing oysters and steak each evening!

### Hay Fever (1968)



Tom Baker in *Hay Fever* (1968), sadly without the floppy hat and long scarf which would make him famous.

The 1968 season was the first to take place following the death of Stephen Joseph in 1967. It’s an interesting one in that it’s the only season where a completely new set of actors came in, none of whom ever worked in Scarborough again.

It’s another season which features very little in the archive, but there is one photograph which makes it all worthwhile. For the 1968 season featured Tom Baker in the company, then at the very early stages of a long and illustrious stage and screen career; most notably – certainly from this Archivist’s perspective! – as the fourth Doctor in the BBC series *Doctor Who*.

before going onto major success, be that Tom Baker back in 1967 or – having just made her West End debut in *Prima Facie* – Jodie Comer of *Killing Eve* fame, whose professional stage debut was at the SJT in 2010.

The photo of Tom in *Hay Fever* is a great reminder of just how many actors have begun their careers in Scarborough

### Fallen Angels (1977)



A scene from *Fallen Angels* (1978), the first and only time Alan Ayckbourn has directed a Coward play.

One of the first plays to be performed at the Stephen Joseph Theatre in the Round, following the company’s move to Westwood in 1976, was a revival of Coward’s *Fallen Angels*, this time directed by Alan Ayckbourn.

For long-term fans of the company, many of the actors will be very familiar with Alison Skilbeck, Malcom Hebden, Diane Bull and Robin Herford amongst the cast.

Notably, this marked the first – and as of writing, final – time that Alan Ayckbourn has directed a Coward play, despite the fact that he has always acknowledged Coward as one of his many influences.

*Plays and Players* magazine also reported that on the first night, dozens of people were turned away at the box office with people queuing up the road for an hour before the doors opened, such was the demand to see the play.

**Blithe Spirit (1986)**

# Seeking an alternative to alternative comedy

Scarborough Evening News  
06/08/86

ACTRESS, print-maker and lithographer, radio journalist — Helen Atkinson Wood's career has as many facets as a diamond, and she has a sparkling personality to match.

An attractive 31-year-old blonde with the bluest eyes I have ever seen, the most-surprising thing about her is her size. After seeing her as the overpowering Madam Arcati in "Blithe Spirit" at the Stephen Joseph Theatre in the Round, I had expected to be confronted by a towering Amazon. In fact, she is tiny, not even sure if she is "5 ft, these days", and with a fine bone-structure.

Her name may not be familiar to theatre-goers, but her face will certainly ring bells with fans of the new wave of "Alternative" comedy which sprang up a few years ago.

While studying fine art at Oxford University, she appeared in many productions of the university's dramatic society, including two revues with Rowan Atkinson. A showcase role as Isabella in "Measure for Measure" during her last term led to acting work as she left, and she eventually took over from Sally James as one of the presenters of the late-night madcap TV comedy show "OTT", which she now regards as "controversial, and a springboard for many of that type of programme which have since emerged".

## Theatre experience

Since then her list of credits has included virtually all of the major "Alternative" shows — "Alas Smith and Jones", "The Young Ones", "Who Dares Wins", "The Lenny Henry Show", "The Comic Strip", and the Radio 4 series "Radio Active".

So what is she doing in Scarborough, working with Alan Ayckbourn, doyen of the middle-class, kitchen-sink dramatists?

The answer is that, seeking more experience of "straight" theatre, she applied to come here, and, to her obvious delight, was accepted.

"I have mostly done TV and radio work within a group of people who all know each other, and who all work together fairly regularly. I would describe myself as an actress, not a comedienne,

Evening News reporter JEANNIE SWALES meets actress, artist, and broadcaster Helen Atkinson Wood.

so I was looking for an opportunity to move outside that group of people — people like Lenny Henry, Rik Mayall, and Alexei Sayle — and learn more about, and get more experience of, theatre.

"Who better, in contemporary terms, than Alan Ayckbourn, who is living, writing, and directing his own work?"

## 'Not fashionable'

Ayckbourn's style, she agrees, is somewhat different to what she is used to.

"He is not fashionable at the moment. Comedy is like pop music, it's a very fashion-conscious and very self-conscious thing. But I have a feeling he's going to be fashionable again soon."

"He is a past-master at making comedy out of an area which hasn't really been explored for its comic potential. He writes accurately for a class which probably doesn't like to see itself being ridiculed, although that same class will pay pounds to see someone like Alexei Sayle ridicule them and their Habitat furniture, because it's fashionable."

She has very definite ideas on comedy, feeling that words like "satirical" and "alternative" are meaningless.

"I have been described as an alternative comic, but I don't really know what it means. It doesn't really mean anything, but people like labels."

And, citing Victoria Woods as a favourite comic, she adds that it is a very exciting time for women in the world of comedy. People have



•Helen Atkinson Wood as Madam Arcati, and (inset) as herself.

always had reservations, she says, about laughing at women, either because it might hurt the woman's feelings, or because people don't like to see women ridiculed. "It's the sacred-cow idea," she says.

But Victoria Wood and her ilk are breaking down those barriers, and Helen Atkinson Wood intends to be in there alongside them — if her other careers allow her the time.

## Successful artist

Although she sees herself primarily as an actress, she is also a successful artist. Working usually during the day, and on the odd weekend off that her packed schedule allows, she screen-prints, etches, and makes lithographs. She would have liked to have mounted an exhibition of her work at the theatre here, but eager buyers virtually cleared out her last show, and she has spent too much time "riding donkeys and poking about in rock pools" to replenish her stocks.

She also enjoyed her brief venture into the

world of radio journalism as presenter of "Week-end", a Sunday-morning magazine programme produced by the "Woman's Hour" team, and would like to do more on that side of her career. But for the moment she is kept busy with her roles as Madam Arcati, as Anna, in "Time and Time Again", and in the new late-night review "Pay Day Night", which opens next Friday, and is currently in rehearsal.

"It's a piece of late-night lunacy", she says. Devised and directed by Stephen Mallatratt, who wrote "Touch Wood and Whistle", the one play in the main auditorium this season that Helen is not in, it aims at being topical. It features songs by Paul Todd, contributions from the cast, and parts will be revised from week to week.

•"Pay Day Night" will open at the Stephen Joseph Theatre in the Round at 10.30 pm on Friday.

*An interview from the Scarborough Evening News by Jeannie Swales with Helen Atkinson Wood for the 1986 revival of Blithe Spirit.*

It would be hard to believe there is any theatre in the country which hasn't staged *Blithe Spirit* at some point and, 31 years after opening, Robin Herford directed the SJT's first production of the play.

More familiar names were in the loop with Russell Dixon, Serena Evans and the late Lesley Meade. It also featured the surprising Scarborough debut of the 'alternative' comedian Helen Atkinson Wood as Madam Arcati; Helen was more famous for her television work in series such as *The Young Ones*, *Alas Smith and Jones* and *The Comic Strip*.

She would also appear in Alan's revival of *Time and Time Again* that season and had — according to Evening News reporter Jeannie Swales (now that's a familiar name...) — 'the bluest eyes I have ever seen'.

## Private Lives (2000)

We skip a decade before the next Coward production, which helped kick off the new millennium. In 2000, a revival of *Private Lives* saw Sam Walters, then Artistic Director of the Orange Tree Theatre, direct a production in the Round.

It was a strange season as the original plan had been to celebrate the new millennium by producing a classic play from each decade of the 20th century by notable writers. The following year would then consist of predominantly new work.

It didn't quite work out that way as only seven plays were produced in 2000 with work from the 1900s, '20s, '30s and '70s with only Alan Ayckbourn, George Bernard Shaw, J.M. Barrie and Noël Coward included. Not really a revealing portrait of the breadth of writers and writing from the previous century!

To be fair, the following year was slightly more on plan with nine of the ten plays being new work.

### **Blithe Spirit (2011)**



Kieran Buckeridge & Clare Corbett in the 2011 revival of *Blithe Spirit*.

The most recent Coward revival was more than a decade ago, seeing Artistic Director Chris Monks decide to shake up the Christmas programme by counter-programming the traditional Christmas play – *The Nutcracker Prince* in this case – with a play for adults.

It was a successful – if short-lived – idea which saw Kieran Buckeridge playing Charles Condomine and Clare Corbett as

Ruth, both actors who would feature regularly in Monks' seasons at the SJT.

That Christmas also saw the SJT debut of Leigh Symonds playing Dr George Bradman in *Blithe Spirit*. Leigh would go on to become a regular at the SJT in Alan Ayckbourn's productions between 2016 and 2019, including an almost definitive performance as Sven in a revival of *Joking Apart*.

### **A Telegram of Note**

You can't have an article about Noël Coward though that doesn't include Alan Ayckbourn's own infamous encounter with the playwright.

In 1967, Alan's first major West End hit, *Relatively Speaking*, opened in the West End, propelling him to overnight fame and success.

Alan was quite unprepared for the fame and attention and certainly not a telegram purporting to be from Noël Coward himself. It read "Dear Alan Ayckbourn, all my congratulations on a beautifully constricted and very funny comedy. I enjoyed every minute of it = Noël Coward."

Naturally, Alan assumed it was a hoax and threw it away. However, soon afterwards, the actor Richard Briers excitedly asked Alan if he had known that Coward had been in the audience the previous night and had apparently loved the play.



Charges to pay  
s. d.  
RECEIVED

POST OFFICE  
TELEGRAM

No. 222  
OFFICE STAMP

Prefix. Time handed in. Office of Origin and Service Instructions. Words.

At \_\_\_\_\_ m  
From \_\_\_\_\_  
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LONDON O COLLECT 12/6 30  
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ALAN AYCKBOURN GO BBC WOOD HOUSE LANE LEEDS2 =

DEAR ALAN AYCKBOURN ALL MY CONGRATULATIONS ON A  
BEAUTIFULLY CONSTRUCTED AND VERY VERY FUNNY  
COMEDY I ENJOYED EVERY MOMENT OF IT =

2++ TSO NOEL COWARD ++

51-5695 J.P.Ltd. 11/66

For free repetition of doubtful words telephone "TELEGRAMS ENQUIRY" or call, with this form at office of delivery. Other enquiries should be accompanied by this form, and, if possible, the envelope. B or C

*Noël Coward's telegram to Alan Ayckbourn praising **Relatively Speaking** (sadly without the creases as they've been digitally erased!)]*

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

Sheepishly, Alan retrieved the rather crumpled telegram and realised it was, in fact, authentic. Just 28 years old and being praised by the master himself. The telegram still survives today, proudly held in the Ayckbourn Archive at the Borthwick Institute for Archives at the University of York, complete with its many creases.