

## **Circular May 2022**

### **Welcome...**

...to the May 2022 issue of the Circular, the newsletter exclusively for members of the Stephen Joseph Theatre's membership scheme.

Read on to find out our latest news, more on our June programme of entertainment, and an insight from Archivist Simon Murgatroyd into what's regarded by many as Alan Ayckbourn's greatest play. Talking of which...

### **Absurd Person Singular**

There are still some tickets left for a very special occasion on Sunday 26 June. Our Director Emeritus, Alan Ayckbourn, will be joined by some of his favourite actors for a rehearsed reading of *Absurd Person Singular* on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its very first performance at the Library Theatre in Scarborough on Monday 26 June 1972.

Directed by Alan himself, the reading will be performed by Elizabeth Boag (first seen on our stage in 2013's *Arrivals and Departures* and returning to us later this summer); Bill Champion (who has no less than seven Ayckbourn world premieres on his CV, plus many revivals including the 2012 production of *Absurd Person Singular*); Russell Dixon (one of the few actors to beat Bill's tally, with 14 Ayckbourn world premieres to his name); Linford Johnson (who delighted audiences in last year's *The Girl Next Door*); Alexandra Mathie (another old hand, appearing in eight AA world premieres) and

Naomi Petersen (a regular with us since 2017 – her last appearance was in the title role in *The Girl Next Door*).

The reading will be followed by a Q&A which will features a few other Ayckbourn favourites, including actor Christopher Godwin, who was in that very first performance of *Absurd Person Singular* five decades ago.

And of course, it's all in a good cause – this is a fundraiser towards our New Writing Fund. This fund nurtures and develops exciting new talent, so is incredibly close to our hearts here at the SJT – and as ever, we couldn't do it without all your brilliant support!

### **Raffle volunteers**

Remember the raffle? The pre-show fundraiser run by our wonderful Friends – who, of course, are now Circle members! – raised thousands of pounds for us. And now two of our lovely Circle members, Sue Wilkinson and Joyce Clibbens are looking to revive it. If you'd be interested in giving up an early evening a week from time to time, please email Sue Wilkinson at [s.wilkinson2@hotmail.com](mailto:s.wilkinson2@hotmail.com)

### **Open door...**



*From left: Paul Robinson, Fleur Hebditch and Kash Arshad*

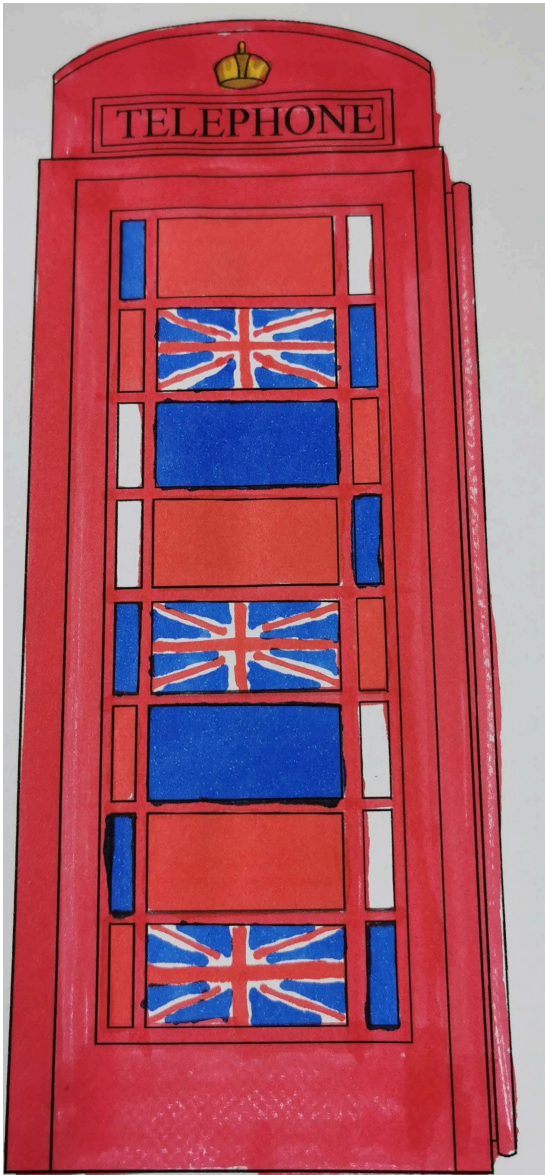
At the beginning of May Artistic Director Paul Robinson, Associate Director Kash Arshad and Assistant Producer and Talent Development Coordinator Fleur Hebditch held two days of general auditions in Scarborough and York.

Kash says: "This was an opportunity to meet actors who haven't previously worked with the theatre and also for those actors to begin their relationship with us. We had over 120 applications, and over the two days we saw a total of 48 actors. It was an incredibly successful couple of days, the talent on the SJT's doorstep is awesome.

"We all really appreciate, after the last few years, how joyful it was to be doing in-person auditions, and the actors were thrilled that the SJT was

meeting the local talent. We hope to use some of those actors very soon in our play readings and Second Stage new writing nights."

## Jubilee installation



You may have noticed that there's a certain important event coming up at the beginning of June – the Platinum Jubilee of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

We're celebrating it with the help of another very British icon – the two red telephone boxes outside our theatre. They're being reimagined for the occasion by Scarborough-based creative production and theme art company The Curious Theme Factory, whose director David Nicholson tells us: "I wanted to incorporate iconic visuals associated with the Queen - a postage stamp-style background with red, white and blue



radials, and a Coronation era portrait, painted subtly in darker tones of the colours, to symbolise that the Queen IS the red, white and blue, and likewise the colours are in her."

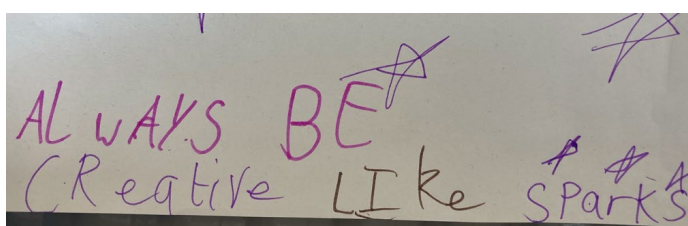
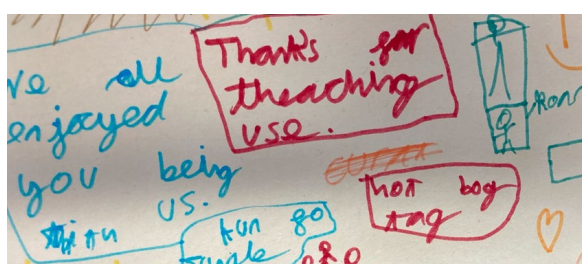
The stamp will hang above the phone box which will be temporarily redecorated in red, white and blue – the perfect Instagram opportunity (or, if you don't do Instagram, a backdrop for a photo to remember the event by).

We'd like to thank Circle member Liz Curry and Proudfoot supermarkets for helping to make this possible with their generous sponsorship.

## Creative Sparks

We wanted to share with you some lovely messages from our very own group of little Creative Sparks!

Supported by a personal grant, this project ran in four local schools – Overdale Community Primary School, Braeburn Primary and Nursery Academy, Gladstone Road Primary School and Northstead Community Primary School – and helped young people to build emotional resilience, particularly important after the last couple of years. More than 250 children were involved in the project, which was supported by the NHS's Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. Here's some of their lovely thoughts:



## Corporate partners

We're delighted to be able to introduce you to another new Corporate Partner. Castle Employment Group join our current partners Clock's Home and Garden Centre and Bibelot Bee Giftorium, Eaglei, Lloyd Dowson Chartered Accountants and Pinkney Grunwells Lawyers LLP.

Now in its sixth decade, Castle Employment Group's purpose is to transform the lives of people while helping organisations to grow and investing in the region's economy. They do all this by providing exceptional service through their specialist consultants who work within hospitality, accountancy and finance, engineering and manufacturing, business support, HR, procurement, IT and education as well as providing the region with temporary industrial staffing solutions. They're determined to make a real difference in a region that they're incredibly proud to be part of.

Managing Director Kerry Hope says: "The work that the SJT offers is thought-provoking and generates discussion around many issues in society. They are helping inspire young people in the community to build confidence and dream big. At Castle, we know what great relationships can grow into; whether that's in business, communities or personal life – we know they can help define the possibilities for people in the region and by us supporting the SJT again, this enables them to continue to inspire the next generation."



Annual contributions from our valued Corporate Partners are used towards community work across the Borough of Scarborough. As well as the warm glow that gives them, they also receive a range of annual benefits including a number of complimentary tickets which they can use for staff or clients.

Our Fundraising and Development Officer, Stephanie Dattani, says: "Our Corporate Partner both help the SJT and give back to the local community. They support valuable and essential cultural engagement in areas of need, whilst aligning their brand with a highly engaged cultural audience and receiving an exclusive package of benefits."

## June at the SJT

With the red tops feverishly predicting the hottest summer on record, why not escape the heat by joining us for a show in our air-conditioned auditoria? We've tried to programme something for everyone this coming month, starting with...

***Full English*** (Tuesday 7 June, 7.45pm)



Best Production in last year's Asian Media Awards, *Full English* explores personal histories from the Canterbury Estate in Bradford, where writer Natalie Davies grew up with her mum and her Nan, Cath - a reggae-loving dance enthusiast. Back in the late 50s, migrant workers started to arrive from Pakistan and Bangladesh, and soon met and started to fall in love with local lasses, including Cath. Using first-hand stories, *Full English* is a poignant, funny and life-affirming homage to the strength of these women.

**King Pleasure and the Biscuit Boys** (Saturday 11 June, 7.30pm)



The unforgettable kings of swing return to the SJT with their brilliant blend of jump, jive and swing band – they're an institution! They've opened shows for B.B. King, Cab Calloway and His Orchestra, Ray Charles, and toured with the real Blues Brothers Band – yes, the one from the movie. Rough, tough and always rocking, King Pleasure & The Biscuit Boys have appeared at festivals, in concert and at clubs throughout the UK and Europe – and they still play the Birmingham Jazz & Blues Festival, where they have headlined for an unprecedented 14 years.

**Potatohead** (Tuesday 14 June, 7.45pm)



An unadulterated celebration of silliness, *Potatohead* is a hilariously bizarre solo show and adaptation of Doctor Faustus and the Seven Deadly Sins. An original piece of new writing by puppeteer and performer Freddie Hayes, saturated with potato puns from start to finish, *Potatohead* tells the story of a humble spud who dreams of becoming a cabaret superstar.



**JB Barrington: Showing Poetential** (Friday 17 June, 7.45pm)



JB Barrington is a Salford-born, award-winning performance poet renowned for his searing and satirical poetry, snarling delivery of strong sentiments and sharp rhymes. His funny, endearing and nostalgic poetry has made him one of the most powerful performers on the UK scene. *Showing Poetential* delivers a rollercoaster of emotions with a brilliant and imaginative display of poetic writing covering social issues, economics, class and loss.

**Choir Night 2022** (Saturday 18 June, 7.30pm)

An evening of uplifting songs with the SJT Community Choirs: Global Voices, who'll bring a fantastic collection of music from around the world, the Funky Choir with their catchy funk, pop and rock tunes, plus our newest group, the Eastfield Family Choir who not only sing but play ukulele too.

**SJT Play Reading: Hen** (Monday 20 June, 7pm)



The first of our 2022 season of play readings, Lily Bevan's *Hen* sees a group of women arriving at a cottage on the slopes of a Welsh mountain expecting a weekend of rude balloons, drinking games and good stories. But a storm engulfs the mountain and the hens are cut off with only prosecco and their own secret struggles. The silent power of the mythical Welsh mountain is the strongest force at work, though, and the local Welsh story teller transforms the weekend into a very different kind of party.

## 50 Absurd Years

by Simon Murgatroyd

Alan Ayckbourn's classic play *Absurd Person Singular* will celebrate its 50th anniversary on 26 June.

Over the past five decades it has come to not only be recognised as one of Alan's greatest plays, but also one of the most significant British plays of the 20th century.

The SJT will be marking the anniversary on Sunday 26 June with a special fund-raising event which will see Alan leading a rehearsed reading of the play.

To celebrate the birthday, here are some of my favourite stories associated with the play over the past five decades.

### A Singular Production



An image from Act II of the world premiere of *Absurd Person Singular* at the Library Theatre in 1972.

The first performance of *Absurd Person Singular* took place on 26 June 1972 at the Library Theatre, Scarborough, and if you attended that night, you saw a version of the play never seen again.

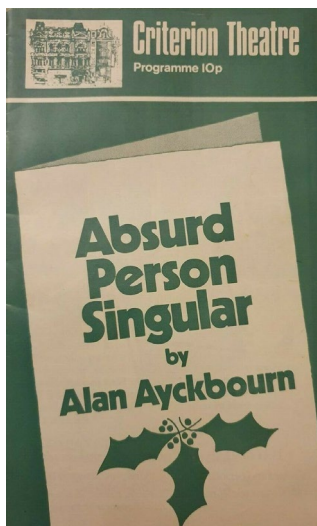
For the play originally ran for more than three hours. As the first performance progressed, Alan realised it was running far too long. That night, he apparently went at the script with his marker pen and cut approximately half an hour of material to bring it to the length we know today.

Sadly, no rehearsal manuscript is believed to have survived. All we have is the edited version and no idea what was cut from that first performance.

So, if you were one of the lucky few to be there that first night, you saw a piece of theatre and history that has never been – nor will ever be – repeated.



## Singular Sensation



A rarely seen alternative programme cover for the West End production of *Absurd Person Singular*, covering the Christmas period.

It's been long accepted that Alan first directed in the West End in 1977 when he co-directed the National Theatre's production of *Bedroom Farce* with Peter Hall.

However, he recently admitted he'd actually made his West End directorial debut several years earlier, uncredited and off the books.

*Absurd Person Singular* was initially directed in the West End by Eric Thompson in 1973, but the success of the play saw it transfer to Broadway the following year and Eric was unavailable to re-direct the West End production's several recasts.

The producer, Michael Codron, asked Alan to re-direct it. Alan agreed – despite never officially being credited for the role.

Even more astonishingly, Alan recalls his recompense arrived in the form of a man who appeared at the theatre each week with a brown envelope stuffed with cash. It sounds like something Sidney Hopcroft would do!

## Absurd Proposals

There was considerable demand to transfer *Absurd Person Singular* to Broadway, but Alan later wondered whether the producers had actually seen it beforehand.

During rehearsals, the producers made it known that they weren't happy with the play and demanded Acts II and III be swapped as Act II was a far funnier climax to the evening. It was also suggested the play end with all the kitchen shelves collapsing to demonstrate Geoffrey's lack of architectural skills.

"ABSURD PERSON SINGULAR"		
EVENING PERFORMANCE NOVEMBER 6, 1974		
MUSIC BOX THEATRE		
LAUGH COUNT:		
ACT 1		
	CHUCKLES	149
	BELLY-LAUGHS	56
	TOTAL	205
ACT 2		
	CHUCKLES	130
	BELLY-LAUGHS	41
	ROLL-EM IN THE AISLES	4
	TOTAL	175
ACT 3		
	CHUCKLES	95
	BELLY-LAUGHS	28
	ROLL-EM IN THE AISLES	1
	TOTAL	124
ENTIRE PLAY TOTAL		504

The report presented to Alan Ayckbourn counting the number and types of laughs in the Broadway production of *Absurd Person Singular*.

Alan was astonished, particularly when he was offered \$250,000 to alter the play. He refused and was then told he had no choice but to comply. Fortunately, he had the formidable literary agent Margaret Ramsay on his side who pulled no punches and took the producers to task, threatening to pull the entire production if they changed a single word of the text.

The producers folded but, during the first week, sent a couple of people to count every laugh, classifying them as 'Chuckles, Belly Laughs, & Roll 'Em In The Aisles'. Smugly, they presented the results to Alan to prove their point that Act II was funnier than Act III.

Alan's response was to thank them for re-affirming the play was working just as he had intended with the comic highpoint midway through and the play ending on a dying fall.

### **Absurd Person...**

*Absurd Person Singular* has the longest run of any Ayckbourn play on Broadway at 18 months and would then go on an extensive tour with Patrick Macnee, of *The Avengers* fame, playing Ronald.

It had multiple casts during its Broadway run and tour and during one performance, audiences got a little more than they anticipated.

Alan recalls one of the actors – who shall remain unnamed – had a known fondness for illicit substances, which got the better of them prior to a matinee.

Ushers and audience apparently watched gobsmacked as, just before curtain up, the actor appeared on stage and proclaimed: ‘Do you really want to see this crap? Or would you rather see this?’ and promptly began a striptease. Cue the comedy sight of two arms appearing from behind the curtain and the stage manager hauling the actor off.

Not what you’d expect from a civilised afternoon visit to the theatre!

### **Not Singular But In Triplicate**



*My favourite Absurd Person Singular poster, created for the Stephen Joseph Theatre in the Round's 1989 revival of the play.*

*Absurd Person Singular* is one of the few plays Alan has directed in all three Scarborough homes of this company. Although his 1989 revival at Westwood had something rarely experienced in Scarborough...

Unfortunately, the actress originally cast as Marion – Moira Redmond – severely injured her back early in the play’s run and Heather Stoney was drafted in to read the part for her that night.

In desperate need of an understudy, they contacted Lavinia Bertram to ask if she could take over. Lavinia having just that day returned to London from... Scarborough, where she’d been to see the production!

She immediately rushed back to Scarborough and took over the role of Marion.

### **And Just Plain Absurd....**

Perhaps my all-time favourite *Absurd Person Singular* story is that of the unfortunate experience of the Plumpton Players in Sussex back in 2006.

The amateur company arrived on their opening night to find the theatre’s front door had been superglued shut. Once inside, they discovered all the cupboards and drawers were also glued tight.

But there was still worse to come. When the stage managers tried to work the stage revolve, which held all three sets, it wouldn’t budge.

Further examination found more than 100 nails had been driven through the revolve mechanism. The vandal had even covered the nail heads with sawdust to make them harder to find.

True troopers to the end, the show did go on – albeit on the same set for each scene and slightly delayed. Stage management even managed to remove all the nails before the play ended so the audience could at least glimpse the sets they had missed.

Meanwhile, the person and their mysterious motive were never uncovered. Perhaps they had a grudge against the Plumpton Players, perhaps they just really didn't like the play or maybe they just really, really wanted to be an absurd person singular!

*The Absurd Person Singular Reading is taking place on Sunday 26 June with a talk about the history of the play at 12pm and the reading with Alan Ayckbourn running from 3pm followed by a Q&A with the company. Ticket are priced at £5 for the talk and £15 or £35 for the reading. A VIP ticket which includes both events and a hot buffet at Eat Me after the reading is also available for £80.*

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