

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

Carey Perloff, Artistic Director

PRESENTS

WORDS ^{on} PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

Round and Round the Garden

BY ALAN AYCKBOURN

DIRECTED BY JOHN RANDO

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

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ROUND AND ROUND THE GARDEN MEET AND GREET / DESIGN PRESENTATION

Excerpts from Remarks Made to A.C.T. Cast and Staff, March 29, 2010

During the first week of rehearsal of each production, A.C.T. staff members and the show's cast and creative team gather in a studio to meet, mingle, and get to know each other. After personal introductions are made, the director and designers present to the assembled group their vision for the design of the production, which is typically the culmination of months of research, discussion, and textual analysis. This introduction is a kind of "snapshot" of the creative team's understanding of the world of the play at the moment they step into the room with the actors, an understanding that will evolve and grow and perhaps change in significant ways as the cast brings life and breath and physical action to the playwright's words over the following four weeks of rehearsal.

Below are excerpts from remarks made at the first rehearsal of *Round and Round the Garden* at A.C.T., which offer a glimpse into the initial impulses behind the look and feel of the upcoming production.

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR CAREY PERLOFF

We're thrilled to welcome back John Rando, with whom we had such a great time, just about a year ago, on *Rich and Famous*. About that time we were looking for plays for this season, and when we read *Round and Round the Garden* it seemed so perfect for this community—this group of artists, this company, and this town. And some of our favorite designers are back with us.

Alan Ayckbourn is a member of the great British triumvirate—he sits with Pinter and Stoppard—but he's often not viewed that way because he's funny. Somehow we always think the funny one is the mindless one. His is a great story. He ran the theater in Scarborough for years, and he looks upon his contribution to playwriting as what he can do to keep the seaside tourists in Scarborough entertained during the summer. The reason he wrote this trilogy is that the weather report for the summer of 1973 was very bad, which it always is in England, and he was very worried that he would only have one play, and what would the tourists do? So he took three yellow pads and wrote three plays, and they are brilliantly woven together—all of the plays take place in one weekend in a different location in the same house. He wrote them all in a month, so that the tourists would have something to do in the summer, and then, as it turned out, they had really nice weather. [Laughter]

DIRECTOR JOHN RANDO

I'm really happy to be back at A.C.T. I like that this is becoming an annual visit in my tours around the country doing plays, because this particular theater has so many things about it that are wonderful, starting at the top with Carey, and going down from there. And very high on that list is the acting company. I'm thrilled because when I was here before with *Urinetown* and *Rich and Famous*, I didn't actually have this many members of the company in those productions, so it's really nice to have a few more in the group.

I don't want to say too much today, because I want this to be about the designs. But I do have one small thing to say about this play: we're not doing the whole trilogy, and the great thing about *Round and Round the Garden* is that, even though *The Norman Conquests* are three plays, each one stands alone, and you do not need to know the other plays to enjoy this one, which is really important. This play stands alone beautifully. And the other thing I want to say is that I just want you to know that this play is about unfulfilled sexual desire. I just want to say that out loud. [*Laughter*] I just want to put that out on the table, so if any of you are feeling that way you can come and laugh at yourself! The trilogy takes place at a house, and this play is in the garden. And in talking about this play with the designers, especially [scenic designer] Ralph [Funicello], I was really interested in showing a place that was once grand and beautiful, which has become very fecund, and very hairy, and overgrown, and unkempt. Very much like the libidos of all six of these characters. So with that, Ralph went to work! [*Laughter*]

SCENIC DESIGNER RALPH FUNICELLO

When John and I started meeting last summer, I brought a book with me that was written by the [late-19th-century] English gardener Gertrude Jekyll, who was so famous that someone actually made a painting of her gardening boots. The book is great because a lot of the houses and gardens in it are run down. Messy. So that's where we started. We chose to make this a Victorian house, a vicarage-type building. Victorian architecture in England is very different from American Victorian architecture. Here Victorian architecture is wonderful; in England it's kind of nasty. It's all brick and it's kind of overdone, so that's what we went after. And then I started researching and I started seeing all these buildings that were completely overgrown with vegetation, and I thought, "This is perfect." I found one that looked like a *Monopoly* house; it was all ivy with just four windows and a door. So we decided that was close to what we wanted to do. Also, somewhere along the line I realized that a "garden," in England, is the backyard. It's not necessarily a rose garden; that's just their name for the backyard. So I didn't have to worry too much about flowers. And we did really want the house to be run down. It was really a lot of fun to design.

JOHN RANDO

One other thing to add is that Ayckbourn's theater [in Scarborough] is a theater-in-the-round. So what you have to deal with there is simply a floor: there are no walls, so you get maybe a suggestion of a house. Be we're in a proscenium theater, here in this fantastic building, so one of the things we talked about from the beginning was that we should play that to our advantage, and we should try to create a place, a real set, that does what a round would not allow. Which is a chance for you to get completely lost in the world that you are looking at. So you're smelling and you're hearing what's coming at you. We wanted to create an environment that does that. Ideally, you want to be in the play with us when you see this scenery.

The play was written in 1973, and we were just having a discussion that the play seems like it could happen in any time; it doesn't feel like it needs to be set in its period. That said, I love this time, and I think it does need to be in its period. I'm really interested in the world of that time, and interested in it as a point of view for our audience. Looking back now at the material we created both in the American theater and in the European theater [in the '70s], and seeing how we thought about the world then, and reflecting on that, I think is a great tool of entertainment. It's fun to pick up a magazine from the '70s and flip through the advertisements; it's great to see what they were wearing and all that. That said, when [costume designer] Lydia Tanji and I talked about this, we didn't want to overwhelm the audience. We're not having the actors wear platform shoes and shag haircuts. It's not that kind of a reflection on the time. These were very middle-class people who lived of the time, as opposed to standing out in their fashion.

COSTUME DESIGNER LYDIA TANJI

My inspiration for Norman was a bee, who is kind of patrolling the garden for flowers. So I thought of stripes for him, and my colors for the women were flowers. Goldenrod yellow for Annie, and blue for Ruth, and pink for Sarah. With Norman, we didn't put him in yellow and black, but his hat has a little honey comb pattern in it, and he does have the striped t-shirt in the second act (after he's rummaged through the closet), and John had this great idea that he's taken Reg's old soccer shorts. So we'll be fitting him in some soccer shorts that are really short-short shorts. And later in the play he shows up in the dead father's ill-fitting suit. Annie is in her baggy sweater and gardening boots, and then she makes an effort to dress nice and put on makeup. And Ruth I thought of as nonconformist, so I put her in pants, but we've changed that to a skirt.