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
APRIL 29—MAY 23, 2010

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Words on Plays is made possible in part by the Koret Foundation.

A.C.T. is supported in part by the Grants for the Arts/San Francisco Hotel Tax Fund, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the donors of The Next Generation Campaign.

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CHARACTERS, CAST, AND SYNOPSIS OF

ROUND AND ROUND THE GARDEN

Round and Round the Garden was first produced as part of The Norman Conquests trilogy at the Library Theatre, Scarborough, England, in June 1973 and subsequently at the Greenwich Theatre in May 1974. It was presented in the London’s West End by Michael Codron in August 1974.

CHARACTERS

RUTH
Norman, Ruth’s husband
Reg, Ruth’s brother
Tom
Annie, Reg and Ruth’s younger sister
Sarah, Reg’s wife

René Augesen
Manoel Felciano
Anthony Fusco
Dan Hiatt
Delia MacDougall
Marcia Pizzo

SETTING

The garden outside the Victorian family home of Reg, Ruth, and Annie, situated an hour away from London. A July weekend in the early 1970s.

SYNOPSIS

ACT I, SCENE I. Saturday, 5:30 p.m. Tom, the local veterinarian, waits in the garden to see Annie off. He has been slowly courting Annie, who has been taking care of her bedridden mother. Annie is getting a weekend reprieve because her brother, Reg, is coming from London with his wife, Sarah, to watch over their mother. Tom goes off in search of the cat; frustrated with Tom’s lack of assertiveness, Annie exits.

Norman—the husband of Annie’s sister, Ruth—enters with a suitcase. Norman seduced Annie last Christmas, and they have continued the flirtation through letters. Annie’s get-away is in fact a secret tryst with her brother-in-law. Annie returns to the garden and is surprised to find Norman, who was supposed to meet her later that evening in a nearby town. She tries to send him away, but then runs into the house when she hears her mother ringing for her.

After discovering that the cat is hiding in a tree, Tom returns. Tom asks Norman’s advice as to whether he should offer to go with Annie on her holiday. Norman tries to convince Tom that Annie does not fancy Tom. Tom shrugs this off and asks if Norman is
here for a visit. Norman lies and says he is on his way to the International Association of Assistant Librarians Annual Conference.

Reg arrives and greets the two men, surprised to see Norman. Sarah has already gone inside to see Annie and mother. Tom leaves Reg and Norman to discuss the slow pace of Annie and Tom’s relationship. Sarah comes out and informs them that Annie has decided not to go away for the weekend after all. Norman declares that he’s staying.

ACT I, SCENE 2. Saturday, 9 p.m. Sarah and Reg deposit a very drunk, self-pitying Norman in the garden. Sarah dismisses her husband so she can talk to Norman alone, but before he goes Reg scolds her for interfering with Annie and Norman’s plans to go off together: apparently Sarah had a hand in Annie’s decision to call off the trip. Now alone with Norman, Sarah (the self-appointed “head of this family”) reprimands him for putting Tom and Annie’s relationship in jeopardy. Norman counters by saying that their relationship was already in jeopardy because slow-witted Tom puts up with abuse from Annie; the same is true of Reg. Norman explains: “The trouble with the men in this house . . . is they allow themselves to be trampled on by the giant feet of their cow elephant spouses.” Norman claims that Sarah reminds him of a tyrannical girl he knew in primary school, with whom he had a flirtation. “I’ve never been in love like that again,” he confesses. Then, despite her refusal, he quickly kisses Sarah. She kisses him back but pulls away before Annie enters.

Sarah hastily goes inside. Annie apologizes for canceling their trip and she shyly invites Norman to visit her room later. He agrees. Reg interrupts and Annie leaves. Norman—reacting to his conquests of both Sarah and Annie—muses on what it means to be a man. He suggests to Reg a men-only vacation to get in touch with their primitive masculinity. As he professes his fraternal love for Reg, Annie and Sarah return to see what the commotion is about. Norman collapses, drunk. The others drag him inside.

ACT II, SCENE I. Sunday, 11 a.m. Ruth, Norman’s wife, stands in the garden with Sarah, who phoned her the night before to tell her about Norman’s affair with Annie. Ruth has come to expect Norman’s histrionics and compares him to a loveable but unmanageable dog, but Sarah chastises her for letting him ruin the lives of other people—namely Tom, who left the night before, upset. As Ruth struggles to set up a lawn chair, Sarah goes inside and Tom arrives. Tom asks about Annie, explaining that he insulted her the night before because Norman had convinced him that she would respond positively to rude assertiveness. Ruth recommends that Tom steer clear of Norman’s simplistic theories about women. She attempts to educate him on the effective way to flatter a woman, but is frustrated by his thickness. She tries a more direct approach to elicit emotion: as part of
the exercise she tells him that she loves him and wants to make “mad, torrid, steaming love together.” A confused Tom takes her declaration as sincere.

Ruth escapes indoors. Annie enters and confesses to Tom that she had planned on going off with Norman. Tom thinks he understands: Norman was trying to get back at him because of Ruth’s feelings for him. Annie is insulted. Reg and Norman enter the garden with a tennis ball, and the four play a game, tossing the ball. Soon only Norman and Annie are left playing. As the other two men talk about cars, Norman and Annie fall to the ground for a passionate romp. Ruth returns to find her husband and sister intertwined. In retaliation for this betrayal, Tom begins kissing Ruth. As Reg laughs at the commotion, Sarah enters, aghast at the scene she finds.

ACT II, SCENE 2. Monday, 9 a.m. Sarah and Ruth are ready to leave, but Ruth’s car is malfunctioning. Tom has returned despite the embarrassment of the day before and is helping the men with repairs. Reg enters in pursuit of fuse wire for the engine and asks Sarah to get it for him. With Sarah gone, Ruth tells her brother that she suspects Sarah of something because she’s acting uncharacteristically pleasant. Reg asks Ruth if she thinks that Sarah and Norman have started a romance. Ruth accuses Reg of being unfair. Sarah returns with garden wire, which is useless to Reg, so he goes in with Sarah following.

Norman enters and Ruth asks him if anything is going on between him and Sarah. Norman denies that there is. Tom finds Norman and Ruth to tell them that he has fixed their car. Norman goes to find Reg, leaving an apologetic Tom alone with Ruth. Ruth forgives Tom, but suggests that Annie might appreciate some impulsivity on his part. Reg and Norman return and Reg plans to tow Norman’s car to the top of the hill so it can get a rolling start. The men exit.

Annie finds Ruth and apologizes for her behavior. Ruth recommends that Annie sort out her relationship with Tom, since they clearly care for one another. The cars now ready, everyone leaves. Annie is left alone in the garden, but Norman secretly returns to once again profess his love for her, leaving only after he has confirmed her affections.

Tom returns and, seeing that he and Annie are alone, makes a faltering marriage proposal. Annie is indecisive. They hear the sound of two vehicles colliding in the distance. The others return with Reg cursing at Norman for crashing into him. Reg leaves to phone home; although no one appears hurt, Tom leaves to fetch his medical kit. Norman is left alone in the garden with the three women.
MEANWHILE
AN OVERVIEW OF THE OTHER NORMAN CONQUEST PLAYS

TABLE MANNERS (IN THE DINING ROOM)
_Saturday, 6 p.m._ Annie confesses to Sarah that she and Norman had a fling and that she’s sneaking off with him for the weekend. Sarah scuttles those plans and tells Reg about the affair. Sarah and Reg have a spat involving a hurled cookie tin. _Sunday, 9 a.m._ Reg, Annie, and Sarah give Norman the silent treatment. Norman claims he was so convinced that Annie would back out of their trip that he never booked a hotel room, but, to Reg alone, he confesses that he wants to make Annie happy because Ruth has no need for him. Ruth tells Norman she is too busy at her corporate job to put up with his shenanigans. Norman tells his wife about his plans with Annie. Ruth cannot help but laugh. _Sunday, 8 p.m._ Norman tries to re-seduce Annie, but she’ll have none of it. Tom tells Norman he is a bad influence on Annie and threatens him. Sarah makes an enormous fuss over dinner. The meal quickly becomes a disaster, filled with arguments and climaxing with Tom punching Norman. Sarah blames the siblings (Reg, Annie, and Ruth) for the debacle and seeks comfort from Norman. _Monday, 8 a.m._ Norman suggests to Sarah that they go away to Bournemouth on a holiday together. Sarah tells him to give her a ring when Reg isn’t home.

LIVING TOGETHER (IN THE SITTING ROOM)
_Saturday, 6:30 p.m._ Tom asks Norman’s advice about Annie: Norman suggests that Annie takes Tom for granted and that Tom should stand up for himself—by insulting Annie to her face. They begin drinking dandelion wine. _Saturday, 8 p.m._ A passed-out Norman is rolled up in the rug. Reg, Annie, Sarah, and Tom try to play Reg’s homemade board game. Norman wakes up and, disoriented, telephones Ruth. While he is on the phone, the siblings’ mother picks up the upstairs line; an enraged Norman sprints off to have it out with her. Annie calls Tom useless, and, taking Norman’s advice, Tom lets her have it, telling her she looks “like something that’s fallen off a Post van.” _Sunday, 9 p.m._ Annie explains to Ruth how Norman took advantage of her vulnerability last Christmas, when they had sex on the sitting-room rug while Ruth was upstairs ill. Norman finds Annie alone and cons a kiss out of her, which Sarah walks in on. Sarah goes ballistic, attracting Ruth, who dismisses the other women. Ruth tries to scold Norman, but succumbs to his pitiful advances. They make love on the rug. _Monday, 8 a.m._ Reg finds Norman and Ruth naked on the rug. Tom returns to apologize to Annie. Norman convinces workaholic Ruth to call into the office sick so they can spend the day together. Sarah wonders what Bournemouth is like this time of year.
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 plays 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.
“MEDICINE FOR THE HUMAN SOUL”
An Interview with Director John Rando

BY KATIE MAY

Director John Rando is one of the United States’s premiere directors of comedy. His impressive and eclectic list of comedic credits includes the iconoclastic Urinetown, The Musical, which earned him a Tony Award and launched its national tour at A.C.T. in 2003, as well as the A.C.T. revival of John Guare’s Rich and Famous last season.

Just before returning to A.C.T. to begin rehearsals of Round and Round the Garden, Rando talked with us about comedy, his affinity for the work of Alan Ayckbourn, and this rare opportunity to direct a resident company of actors.

WHAT FIRST DREW YOU TO THIS PLAY AND TO ALAN AYCKBOURN?
[A.C.T. Artistic Director] Carey Perloff suggested Round and Round the Garden, but I’ve always truly admired Ayckbourn’s work. It’s a great vehicle for actors. When Carey spoke to me about coming back here, we talked a lot about doing something with the core acting company. So we were hungrily trying to find a play that could achieve that. When Ayckbourn came up, and we looked at several of his plays, this one seemed to be the one that made the most sense: it really suits the company members, and I am really attracted to its beautiful construction. When I was a high school student in Houston, I saw a lot of Ayckbourn’s plays at the Alley Theatre, some performed by his own company because there was an exchange program between Ayckbourn’s theater (the Stephen Joseph Theatre in Scarborough, England) and the Alley. I became immediately connected to the work. His sense of humor is extraordinary, but what I really love is his ability to create these wonderful characters that are so delicious for actors to perform. Most of his plays are exceptional showcases for talented comic actors, and, for me, that’s really what is exciting about his work. Round and Round the Garden, in particular, is an extremely well-crafted play. His work is noted for its craft, his ability to tell a story through dialogue and create marvelous situations with outrageous humor. It’s like a Swiss clock in that way: it’s so well tuned and well constructed, and it’s delicious for a director to work on because of that.
WILL YOUR EXPERIENCE WATCHING AYCKBOURN’S COMPANY AS A TEENAGER AFFECT HOW YOU APPROACH THIS PLAY?
No. What I’ve taken from that experience is really more about the spirit and the joy of his writing, and how theatrical it is. That’s what initially excited me. It's very funny stuff. I laughed a lot back then, and I still do. His work tickles me to no end.

WHY DO YOU THINK AYCKBOURN’S BRITISH COMEDY TRANSLATES WELL FOR AMERICAN AUDIENCES?
Good playwriting inevitably triumphs. I think an American audience can identify especially with this particular play, which, although it’s particular in its place and location, is so universal in wonderful ways. Others of his plays I would argue feel more specific, but this one crosses boundaries. That’s another reason why it appealed to Carey and myself; it transcends its time, transcends its local audience, and feels more universal. Plus, you just love these people; you want them to find what they’re looking for, and none of them can. So I think an American audience will have no trouble enjoying it at all. Ayckbourn writes very likeable characters who are extremely flawed. Flawed human nature, well written, tends to make great theater.

IS ROUND AND ROUND THE GARDEN MORE THAN “JUST” A SEX FARCE? IS THERE A DEEPER MEANING?
[Laughter] Well, I think, considering the time period, which was the early 1970s in England, and looking at how people spoke about sexuality then (especially among the married set), it becomes more edgy. We are in a very different world now than we were when Ayckbourn was writing this. I don’t know enough about the British middle class of the ‘70s to really comment, but I would argue, based on what I know of what happens in the play, that most people had this incredible difficulty expressing any kind of sensuality—they’re so taut and tied up. But there was really a loosening up of the ideas of what a marriage is, and Round and Round is poking fun at that loosening. It’s unbridled. I think this play, and the sexual wars in this play, would simply not get written today because this kind of promiscuity is simply not made fun of anymore.

YOU ARE SETTING THIS PRODUCTION IN THE PLAY’S ORIGINAL PERIOD. DID YOU CONSIDER UPDATING IT?
No, not at all. I don’t think that would help us interpret it, and I don’t think it would help the tension or the comedy of it. I think this is a play that is very much of its time in a great way. We should celebrate and marvel at that. However, I do think it does have
a deep resonance that has to do with human flaws, especially in Norman’s character. He is such a likeable man, but also a rascal of a man. I think he has this unbridled sense of desire, of want—always wanting to be loved and wanting to get love. I think that creates a magnetism for him; it makes him bothersome and at the same time incredibly attractive, because he’s full of desire, but it’s that kind of desire that can never be quenched, so you want to help him. It’s a feat of acting to pull that off. Every one of Ayckbourn’s plays has that, and it’s unique to Ayckbourn how rich the characters are and the conflicts that they go through. Plus, it’s always fun to watch a bunch of sexually frustrated human beings clash into each other onstage.

**THE GARDEN ITSELF IS AN INTERESTING PRESENCE IN THE PLAY. CAN YOU SPEAK TO YOUR VISION FOR THE GARDEN AND THE PROCESS OF COLLABORATING WITH SCENIC DESIGNER RALPH FUNICELLO?**

There were two main elements that were really important to us: one was the character of the house outside of which this play takes place—a kind of cozy but decayed old house. But at the same I wanted to create a garden that is fecund—just completely overgrown. I kept using the word “hairy” with Ralph, because I think you can read a lot into the garden—the “garden of earthly delights” and all of that great biblical imagery. And there’s great stuff in this garden as well: there’s a cat stuck up in a tree, and Tom, the guy who can’t get the pussy to come down [laughter] . . . it’s just so great, so sexy and so stupid, too. So you have to give that a physical shape—it’s a messy garden, it’s a little overgrown, and there’s no way to tame it. Ralph had this beautiful idea, which is that there is so much ivy growing on the house that a portion of the set wall would just be ivy. I think it really came out great. Essentially, it feels like a naughty place to have a roll in the hay, and I think that will translate to the audience. [Laughter] We’ll make sure of it.

**HOW DOES THE FACT THAT THIS SHOW IS PART OF A TRILOGY AFFECT YOUR PROCESS AND YOUR APPROACH TO THE PLAY?**

I think it stands as a play on its own, completely and wholly. There’s no reason that you need to know anything else. Ayckbourn is such a craftsman that he’s given you everything you need to know. It’s complete, and as an audience member you don’t need anything else in order to understand it and enjoy it. Even more so with *Round and Round*, because this one has an ending, whereas the others have a sort of “to be continued” feel to them.

On the other hand, for us (the actors and director), we have two additional plays that we are able to study and [use to] gather so much information about who these individuals are—these six characters. It really helps in terms of informing the actor, who is stepping
onstage with a tremendously rich history. We’ll read through the entire trilogy in rehearsal to get a sense of everything.

**WHAT IS IT LIKE WORKING WITH A RESIDENT CORE ACTING COMPANY?**

I find that working with a company of actors is a tremendous tool for the director. There is so much one needs to get out of an actor that has to do with chemistry, and interplay, and improvisation, and creativity, and actors who know each other and have been working together on other shows tend to blossom in those situations. A play like this, which is really an ensemble piece that requires rhythms and sounds and tones from the acting company, and demands listening and interplay . . . I believe that this play will be sharper because a.c.t. has a formidable company—more interesting and ultimately funnier. I find that the funniest actors are often the ones who are deft at drama, as well, and I love the range over which the actors are challenged in this play, the range of things that they have to do. A lot of the chemistry already exists among the actors. As a director that’s really truly what the challenge is—finding the right company of actors and then helping them shine in these parts and fully inhabit them in ways that are completely entertaining and heartbreaking and beautiful and funny at the same time. So I’m really very excited about this opportunity.

**COULD YOU SPEAK TO THE IMPORTANCE OF COMEDY IN THE THEATER?**

I was a little shocked this year when they expanded the Academy Awards category for Best Picture to ten pictures, and not a single one was a comedy. I believe that people who are able to laugh are better able to understand their world. I think that ability is so vital to a culture: understanding humor and celebrating humor at all levels. I do a lot of different kinds of comedies. Ayckbourn’s play is really of a heightened style, and a comedy of manners, but I do a broad range of comedy, including very lowbrow comedy as well as the more highbrow. Comedy in general plays such an important role in entertainment because it allows us to examine things without torturing ourselves. It allows you to laugh so that you can see better and so that you can understand better. To laugh, and to laugh a lot, makes us feel better. It’s a kind of medicine for the human soul.
A SECOND HOME
Interview with Set Designer Ralph Funicello

BY ELLEN CASSIDY

Not only is Ralph Funicello a storied set designer in his own right, he has been a fixture at A.C.T. almost since the theater’s inception. He has designed some 50 productions for A.C.T. alone since his introduction to the company in 1972. Nominated for a Tony Award for his design of Henry IV in 2004, he also designed King Lear and Julius Caesar on Broadway in subsequent years. Primarily a regional theater designer, however, Funicello is committed to creating world-class set designs outside New York City. A professor of scenic design at San Diego State University, he manages to design multiple shows a year despite a demanding teaching schedule. Funicello was excited to speak with us about returning to his second home, A.C.T., and working on Round and Round the Garden with his longtime colleague director John Rando.

HOW DID YOU FIRST BECOME INVOLVED WITH A.C.T.?
I was hired to go out to A.C.T. initially after I had designed only about five, maybe six, productions that I was paid for, and most of them were really small. That’s unheard of today. I’d been an assistant on one of the largest Broadway musicals up to that point, Jesus Christ Superstar, so I knew how to put a show onstage. I came out to A.C.T. without really knowing what it was. It was a name. I was thrilled when I saw the theater, and the size of the organization, and the company of actors, and the scene shop.

It’s very interesting . . . there was a celebration last summer in L.A. for [former A.C.T. Artistic Director] Ed Hastings and Gino Barcone, who were both affiliated with A.C.T. from the beginning, and there were a lot people I hadn’t seen in 30 years. The one thing we all said to one another was that we didn’t realize at the time how unique it all was. We thought that was just what theater was: that we would always work with 50 actors in this wonderful family of company. Only now do we realize we were able to participate in something that doesn’t exist anymore for the most part. So what I’m saying is that I’ve been at A.C.T. forever. I think [A.C.T. Producing Director] Jim Haire is the only person currently connected to the company who’s been around A.C.T. longer than me. Jim and I remember all of the history. My memory is still pretty good so I can relate to years by what shows I was designing. I remember when something happened based on what I was doing that year at A.C.T.
So whenever I go back to A.C.T. it’s like going home. It’s a very lovely experience. I can’t tell you how amazing it was, the first show I did there after the theater was restored [following the destruction of the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake]. I was so emotional sitting in the building. It was so amazing to me just to be there again, with it looking so beautiful, and a lot of the people I was working with were people from the old days, so it was a very moving experience. That’s how I feel every time I go back there. It’s funny because I always try to go through a door that doesn’t exist anymore. The backstage pass door from the auditorium used to be right past the box office on house left. Now I go out that door and end up in an alley.

**How has your history at A.C.T. influenced you as an artist?**

Right when I got to A.C.T. in 1972, [A.C.T. founder] Bill Ball made this proclamation . . . one never knew why Bill said things. There were seeming aesthetic reasons for everything; often there were other reasons, and often they were financial, but Bill would never claim to be doing something for financial reasons because that would be a limitation, and Bill didn’t believe in limitations. He only talked in positive directions and tried to present things in a positive way. He would never tell you the bad thing about something, but he would tell you the good thing about doing it differently. So there was a proclamation that we would have no walls on the stage for any set (except for one of his productions, which had a lot of walls). That would have been fine if the theater were doing a diet of Brecht and Shakespeare, but we did a lot of interior American and European plays, like Ibsen, O’Neill, and Coward, that were written to take place in rooms. As designers, the challenge became: if I’m not going to have a wall, what do I do? We figured out ways to do it, and one way was to put only the molding on the stage. So you would just have the door frame and the baseboard and the molding and paneling from halfway down the wall, which could enclose a space but didn’t feel heavy because it wasn’t a big solid wall. What I found was that we could achieve very beautiful lighting effects, because backlight and sidelight were completely available all the time to the lighting designer. Whereas in an enclosed box set that’s not available necessarily, and even when it is, it’s light coming over the top of a wall; it’s not light coming through and highlighting different aspects of that wall surface, like the molding, etc.

Now I always try in some way to be the lighting designer’s friend, and design something that allows light into it. In *Round and Round the Garden*, a lot of the vegetation ends in branches; it’s not thick around the edges. Hopefully that will be highlighted by light. As for the big bank of windows in the house itself, the upper windows will be light boxed. Light boxes are not to be illuminated evenly; they sit away from the windows in the back,
and they go beyond the size of the windows, so you can put a light in them that's not directly behind the glass or the translucent surface. It looks like there's light in a room, maybe on a table or something that's off to one side. Downstairs there is space behind the window so the house can have some life to it.

**HAVE YOU WORKED WITH DIRECTOR JOHN RANDO IN THE PAST?**

I’ve known John for years, and we’ve done many shows together. I knew John well before he won a Tony Award, and that’s always an interesting phenomenon. I think in most cases it makes someone a little more sure of themselves and sure of their own ideas, which is a good thing. When I work with a director, the director’s the boss, and I’m working to try to help them realize their vision of the production. A younger director who’s working with me is hopefully not going to look at me as some old war horse, but more like they’re just working with a very experienced older designer. I have to worry about intimidating people. With a younger director or other designer I have to make sure they don’t defer to my judgment because they think I know better than them. I know what I know, but I don’t want to dictate anything to anyone simply because I’ve been around longer. But I’ve known John for a long time, and we’ve done some very successful work together.

**HOW DO YOU DESIGN FOR A FARCE GENERALLY?**

I guess *Round and Round* is farce in a way that’s similar to Feydeau. Obviously, it’s not a French sex farce; it’s something else. There’s not so much of the slamming doors that those farces have. But I think that with farce, as with all plays, one has to provide an atmosphere and an environment that makes the play work, and that can be completely different depending upon the play. Something like John Doyle’s *Caucasian Chalk Circle* does not require a realistic environment for the play to work. It doesn’t up the odds. Whereas you find with a farce people think it’s a cartoon, and they do a cartoon version of scenery. For me there’s nothing to be lost or gained in the action of the play if there’s no reality. You have to up the ante. There has to be something that can be destroyed, even if it’s just by humiliation. If you don’t believe that there’s anything to be humiliated about, it just becomes a Warner Bros. cartoon. In this play certainly (and this is true of French farce, as well) a lot of the comedy comes from the characters. There’s a lot of humor in their personalities and eccentricities to laugh at. But it’s more farcical because of the action of the play. It has everything to do with who discovers whom doing what when: who sees it, who does it, and who mistakes whom. It’s the physical quality of it that heightens the humor. So that’s the challenge in a farce.
WHAT INSPIRED YOU ABOUT *ROUND AND ROUND THE GARDEN*?

I think this is my fourth Alan Ayckbourn show. The first one I did was *Absurd Person Singular* at A.C.T. in the 1970s. What’s interesting about Ayckbourn is that there’s a pop sensibility about him, and most of his plays are written including some kind of crazy gimmick. If you do all three *Norman Conquest* plays, the conceit is that they all happen simultaneously. We’re not doing all three, so we don’t have to worry about that, but the other challenge with Ayckbourn is that his plays are written for his theater [in Scarborough], which is in the round. So all of the scenic things that are usually described in a script aren’t there [in this script], but if you do the play on a proscenium stage like A.C.T.’s, you have to put them in. The recent Broadway production [of *The Norman Conquests*] was done in the round, and it had only a grass floor and furniture and a few props, but it didn’t have a complete house or anything like that. My challenge, and I will see if I’m successful, is to try to put onstage what the characters talk about, the house that was once a vicarage that is overgrown, the brambles, and entrances to various places, without overwhelming this sort of domestic comedy.

HOW DO YOU DESIGN A LARGE HOUSE FOR THE STAGE WITHOUT OVERSHADOWING THE GARDEN?

We tried to make the house the garden. I just started researching, without even having much of an opinion, just looking at English country houses, English vicarages, and I came across some houses that were completely overgrown with windows just sort of set into ivy, and we thought, “That’s very funny, let’s do that.” We could have perhaps even gone further and had no visible brick and no wall, but I didn’t want to do something that might ultimately be surrealistic. I think that’s a burden that the play doesn’t need. When I first met with John back in September, I brought with me a book called *Garden Ornament*, by Gertrude Jekyll, who was the queen of Edwardian gardens. The first thing we decided looking at it was that most of the houses in the book were too huge; they were really manor houses, and this play is somewhat more domestic. So I then went back and started researching English vicarages, and found a book called *The English Vicarage Garden*, which is exactly *Round and Round the Garden*. So that was good to see the scale.

I think the next important thing was working with John and the other designers to hammer out what we thought would be an appropriate ground plan to provide the best mix of entrances and exits. Then John was interested in having the presence of the room where their mother is upstairs, so there can be a light on or some sense of someone in that room; a room to refer to. So that meant we were talking about a two-story building. John’s other request was that perhaps we can see Reg rooting around in the kitchen. So that’s the
window next to the door, and we have some sense of a kitchen in there. That was basically my design process.

I was lucky in that about two summers ago I spent a month on a work vacation in England. My wife and I rented a little house in the Cotswolds and just traveled and moseyed around. And very recently I was back in England to meet with a director on another project. Keeping this play in mind, I did a little of the same, keeping my eye out on the sides of the road, and looking past houses into the backs of their gardens. That director was here afterwards meeting with me at my house, and I happen to live north of San Diego in a development where the houses have very little of their own property, but are surrounded by community property. The director said, “Well, that’s very interesting, no one in England would put up with that. Each person has to have their garden.” It dawned on me that what he was talking about, and what the play is talking about, is the backyard. *Round and Round the Garden* is not set in a garden per se, but in English terms the garden is the backyard, and every house would have one. The garden in American language would be a different thing.
GIVEN THAT THE PLAY IS SET IN THE 1970S, HOW PERIOD DID YOU WANT THE SET TO LOOK?
For me the period doesn't really apply except in the props. Certainly, ivy hasn’t changed over the years. And the house is basically Victorian, or was probably set up in Victorian times. I would think that the kitchen we see through the windows is not even particularly period. There’s probably not a 1960s refrigerator; there’s probably a 1920s or ’30s refrigerator in there. The domestic architecture in England didn’t change during the economic hardship and the war, so everything is pretty old. There’s the bit about unfolding the chairs, but I even have a chair that I bought recently that fits that bill, and it’s a chair that you could have found in the ’20s. It’s a sling-back cloth chair that you put outside, and you never know which way to set it up. I have those very problems with the chair whenever I use it.

HOW DO YOU FORESEE YOUR INVOLVEMENT IN ROUND AND ROUND THE GARDEN’S REHEARSALS?
I will probably be there on the day of the first rehearsal, and I will come up once or twice during the time they’re building the set to check some things and see how the props are coming along. With this production, the big issue is really going to be what the foliage looks like. It’s a challenge because it’s being constructed, and I expect that rather than just being foot-and-a-half-deep fake ivy it will be some understructure, covered with chicken wire, covered with camouflage cloth, covered with ivy. How it works and how good it looks will be something I probably have to come and have a look at. The other challenge is that it has to be done in a way that is somewhat detachable from the set for transport [from the scene shop to the theater], and then easily reattachable in the building, going up 20 feet high. So there are some tricky parts to it. And I obviously will be here for all of the rehearsals once we’re in the theater. I usually leave the weekend after the first preview. I see two previews and leave because the reality is that by that time even if we want to make changes the shop has moved on. That’s the other thing about working at A.C.T.: unlike some organizations, when the scenery is set up in the theater for tech rehearsal it’s really finished. It’s ready to go.
BUZZING FROM FLOWER TO FLOWER
An Interview with Costume Designer Lydia Tanji

BY ELLEN CASSIDY

Director John Rando issued costume designer Lydia Tanji a challenge. He wanted to keep *Round and Round the Garden* rooted in the 1970s—the period in which the play was written—without distracting contemporary audiences with stereotypes. How does a designer root her work in a visually striking era without getting carried away? She returns to the garden. By picking the vivid colors of flowers as inspiration for her designs, Tanji allowed the garden to grow round and round the characters. We sat down to talk with this Bay Area–based film and theater designer about *Round and Round the Garden*, her costume sketches, and her design process.

**HOW DO YOU APPROACH DESIGNING A SHOW?**
First, there’s a design meeting with the director and the other designers. You find out what the director’s vision is, and when he or she wants to set the time period. Then I look at painters, photographers, and films that were done during or about that time period. You kind of build up a visual bank and then pull from that. Then, after the sketches are done, I’m in meetings with [A.C.T. Costume Shop Manager] David Draper and the assistants in the shop. They’re fabulous. They can make anything out of anything. I’m totally reliant on them.

Our director, John Rando, wanted the play (which is set in 1973) not to be too clichéd or too much about the time period. He wanted it to be more about the characters, their interactions, and letting the actors and the words really shine. So he didn’t want the clothes to take away too much attention. It was a fine balance between giving the essence of the ’70s and making sure it didn’t predominate.

After we met, I began my research. One book was *Garden People*, by Ursula Buchan, which contains photographs of British gardeners in the ’70s. Then I looked at the photographers Tony Ray-Jones, David Hurn, Chris Killip, Ida Kar, and Ian Berry. I looked at painters like David Hockney. The films that helped me the most were *O Lucky Man!* by Lindsay Anderson and starring Malcolm McDowell, which was made in 1973; *Bleak Moments*, by Mike Leigh; *Of Time and the City*, a documentary by Terence Davies, which contains footage from 1973; and *The Red Riding Trilogy*, which was just released, but the first episode is set in 1974. Two TV programs I looked at were the soap opera *Coronation Street* and the sitcom *Are You Being Served?*
While I’m researching it’s about whatever catches my eye. If the characters in a film, tv show, or photograph are wearing costumes that seem right for our characters in the play, then I’ll certainly steal them. I try to change small details, but nothing drastic.

**HOW WILL YOU BE INVOLVED IN THE COSTUMING PROCESS NOW THAT THE SKETCHES ARE DONE?**

We shop for fabric for the items we build. We shop for shoes online and in stores, looking for modern shoes that look like they could pass for ’70s. A lot of the vintage shoes are not that comfortable to wear. It’s always nicer if we can find new shoes for the actors that look the period. And then we have fittings once the rehearsals start. Actors tend to have very specific feelings [about their costumes], and if the director agrees [with the actors] there could be changes. It’s a fluid process up until opening.

**WHAT ABOUT THE TEXT OF THIS PLAY INSPIRED YOU?**

With a comedy, you can have a little more fun as a costume designer. The colors also don’t have to be too dark, because it takes place in July. But I really got lost in the characters. The characters are so . . . there’s that layer of humor and then they become more complex with their inner actions and their interrelationships. They all have a sort of longing. They’re all a

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**ABOVE** (Top to bottom) Pre-rehearsal costume sketches for Annie, Ruth, and Sarah by costume designer Lydia Tanji

**NEXT PAGE** Pre-rehearsal costume design for Norman by costume designer Lydia Tanji
little bittersweet. And Norman, well . . . he's very needy, but he tries to give the ladies what he thinks they want. He's all about the love that he has to give. I see Norman as a honeybee going from flower to flower in the garden, spreading his love and making people happy.

**HOW DO THE COLORS OF THE COSTUMES REFLECT THAT IDEA?**

Luckily, I didn’t put Norman in yellow and black. [Laughter] John wanted him a little more plain, colorwise, except for a little color in his vest and hat. Those were the only two pieces where we could have a little fun with the color on Norman. His main accent color is maroon. The mackintosh is in the script, and that's usually beige or tan or khaki: a light brown. Then for the women—Ruth, Sarah, and Annie—I have them in colors of flowers in a garden. Ruth is in blues and purples. Sarah is pink and violet. Annie is yellow to orange. Tom is the more pensive country vet, so he has more warm earthy colors, but as an accent I have him in a teal sweater vest. Then Reg is in khaki and blue.

**HOW DO THE COSTUMES REFLECT WHO THESE CHARACTERS ARE?**

Ruth is supposed to be the beauty of the family, yet she's also a career woman in the finance business. So I think she's very pretty, but she covers it with a tough businesslike facade. So she has the ’70s collar and the power vest and pants: in the early ’70s pants weren’t as prevalent for women over 30 as they are now. She’s a little more modern and more urban.

The script says Annie is in baggy jeans, but in the ’70s (I remember because I grew up then) the waist part is pretty fitted, and past the knee [the legs are] flared out. The flare’s not as pronounced as in the ’60s. Things had loosened up by 1973. I chose golden yellow—not too light or bright—because it would bleed out in the lights and because it’s more pastoral and less zingy. She hasn't been able to have the adventures she would like. She’s stuck at home taking care of this crazy mom, and her brightest spot is Tom, who's always running after her cat, so when Norman offers her a fun weekend we have to believe that’s something she might be tempted by because of her situation.

Sarah is prim and proper. She's a housewife, kind of feminine but not too frilly. She definitely wears the pants. All the women seem to be strong. Even Annie is strong, despite not having as many opportunities as she'd like.
THE MOLIÈRE OF THE MIDDLE CLASSES
Alan Ayckbourn on Round and Round the Garden

BY KATIE MAY

The author of some 74 plays, Alan Ayckbourn is one of the most produced playwrights of all time (second only to Shakespeare) and the most produced playwright in his own lifetime. He also holds the record for having the most plays running simultaneously in London’s West End (The Norman Conquests, Absurd Person Singular, and Absent Friends) and on Broadway (The Norman Conquests and Absurd Person Singular), all in the year 1975. His plays have won countless awards, including a Laurence Olivier Special Award in 2009 for lifetime contribution to the theater. He was even knighted in 1997.

Despite his popularity, Ayckbourn’s work has typically been met with a certain amount of academic snobbery. While hailed as the “Molière of the middle classes” for his precise and almost cruelly comic depiction of a particularly ordinary slice of English life, Ayckbourn has often been attacked for the narrowness of his view by critics who instead favor his more political contemporaries (and fellow knights) Sirs David Hare, Tom Stoppard, and Harold Pinter. Director Peter Hall, who championed Ayckbourn’s plays at London’s National Theatre, once told him: “If you didn’t write so much they’d realize you were quite good.”

Ayckbourn makes no apologies, however, either for his commercial success (he is a multimillionaire and lives in a sprawling mansion in Scarborough) or for his insistent inclusion of comedy in even his most serious dramas. “I have an ability to make audiences laugh, so I should treasure that. I don’t want to lose that,” said Ayckbourn in a 2007 interview with London’s Telegraph. “There are plenty of people who can make audiences cry. Unlike David Hare, who writes about the state of the nation and current affairs, I write about domestic affairs. I see myself more as a Jane Austen who never bothers with the Napoleonic wars going on around her.”

Instead Ayckbourn deals with the smaller, more personal wars that take place in his characters’ living rooms, kitchens, and gardens. He is an expert illustrator of the quotidian
experience—the quiet desperation and small, sad struggles of everyday people—which is, perhaps, why his plays continue to resonate across decades and generations of new audiences. (*The Norman Conquests* was revived in 2008 to huge success both in London and on Broadway, earning a sheaf of Tony and Drama Desk awards, including for best revival of a play). Despite his unrelenting commitment to making his audiences laugh, Ayckbourn is in fact a master of contrasts—his deeply flawed characters are typically so desperately unhappy that it is a wonder his audiences don’t cry more often. Perhaps it is a testament to the precision of his craft and his seemingly flawless timing that Ayckbourn is able to bring the lightness of laughter to some of the darkest situations; among his best running jokes are the continually thwarted attempts at kitchen suicide found in *Absurd Person Singular* and the painfully awkward group of acquaintances in *Absent Friends*, who just can’t seem to say the right thing while comforting the bereaved Colin after his fiancée has died in a drowning accident. (When asked if she would like milk in her tea, Marge innocently replies: “Yes, but don’t drown it.”)

In his 2002 book, *The Crafty Art of Playmaking*, Ayckbourn writes: “Comedy is an essential part of any play. Without light how can we possibly create shadow? It’s like a painter...
rejecting yellow. I think if I’ve contributed anything to the sum of modern playwriting it has been to encourage comedy and drama to exist together as they used to in the days of old.” This philosophy is perhaps no better illustrated than in Ayckbourn’s smash hit, and possibly seminal work (it’s hard to pick from 70+ full-length plays), *The Norman Conquests*, in which an inexplicably and often confoundingly charming Norman relentlessly pursues both of his sisters-in-law, right beneath his wife’s nose, in a trilogy of plays that both celebrate and poignantly satirize the sexual freedom of the early 1970s and the dark truths and disappointments that often lie beneath the surface of any marriage.

Following his appointment as permanent artistic director of the Library (now the Stephen Joseph) Theatre in Scarborough, England, in 1972, *The Norman Conquests* were Ayckbourn’s 1973 commission to himself. The project came about as the result of an off-the-cuff remark to a journalist who had asked him at the end of the previous summer’s season, “What are you working on next?” Ayckbourn, who admits he had no idea what he was going to be working on next, airily replied: “Possibly a trilogy, who knows?” When the same journalist called the following March to ask how the trilogy was coming along, Ayckbourn realized he had better get to work. Two weeks later, *Table Manners*, *Living Together*, and *Round and Round the Garden*—later collectively titled *The Norman Conquests*—were born.

Because Scarborough is a vacation destination with tourists arriving and departing daily, Ayckbourn was careful to bear in mind that few people would be able to attend the theater three nights in a row to see all three plays. As a result he wrote three thematically related plays—each telling the same story of a weekend of hilariously attempted infidelity, but each depicting events taking place in three different parts of the house—plays that not only stand alone, but were also written “crosswise.” In other words, rather than progressing linearly to write one play after the other, Ayckbourn wrote scene one of *Round and Round the Garden* (considered the most conventionally structured play of the three, with an identifiable beginning, middle, and end), followed by scene one of the other two plays, then scene two of all three plays, and so on to the story’s conclusion. “I found myself grappling with triplet sisters all with very different personalities,” writes Ayckbourn of the trilogy. “Each play, although dealing with the same characters and events, began to develop a distinct atmosphere of its own. . . . Although very closely related thematically and in every other way, they were meant to be enjoyed as individual plays.”

Collected below are some of Ayckbourn’s thoughts—expressed in interviews throughout his long and prolific career and compiled by his archivist, Simon Murgatroyd—about comedy, drama, and the creation and enduring appeal of *Round and Round the Garden* and its sister plays.
WHY DID YOU WRITE THE NORMAN CONQUESTS AS THREE SEPARATE PLAYS?
I wanted to explore offstage life. That is, the life of characters immediately before they come on and just after they leave the stage. I was also interested in experimenting with theatrical form. Whether in viewing the same weekend three times and making each play a complete evening in itself, I could also uncover fresh insights and altered perceptions of the characters each time someone sat down to re-see it. And whether seeing them in different orders would change their perception. As far as I know this had never been tried and although it owes a lot to the form, it’s not strictly multiviewpoint theater. I love pushing theater to see how far it will shove.

HOW DIFFICULT WAS IT TO WRITE THE NORMAN CONQUESTS CROSSWISE?
I think it all seemed fairly easy at the time. The problem was that one can never, as the writer, read the plays individually with an innocent eye. I needed several fresh pairs of eyes to read them before I was assured that they worked “downwards” as well as crosswise. It was the natural way to write those plays. I needed to cross-plot the parallel stories and it was the simplest way of keeping track. I finished two of them in one night. I doubt that I’ll ever do that again.

WHAT MADE YOU CHOOSE THE DINING ROOM, SITTING ROOM, AND GARDEN AS LOCATIONS FOR YOUR TRILOGY?
They were sort of logical locations. I’d just done kitchens (three of them) in Absurd Person Singular, so I couldn’t use them again. Living rooms and dining rooms seemed ideal locations for people to assemble or pass through, giving me a great freedom to move my characters about. A lot of The Norman Conquests is about getting people on and off. The garden naturally followed and gave the piece a nice contrast. Drama always has such a different feel when it’s out of doors.

BENEATH THE HUMOR OF THE NORMAN CONQUESTS, THERE IS A DARKER SIDE WHERE HUMAN WEAKNESSES ARE EXPOSED. WAS IT YOUR INTENTION TO WRITE THE PLAY IN THIS WAY?
I always set out, when I write a play, with some fairly serious intentions. The stronger the serious base upon which I build a play, the more I can allow my humorous side to run away a bit. I love this tension that the comic and the serious create when they run successfully side by side. It’s a matter of balance: too dark becomes unbearable; too light and you are in danger of laughing at the characters, which is really, for a writer, a terrible act of betrayal.
WHEN YOU WROTE THIS TRILOGY, WERE YOU AIMING FOR COMEDY THAT CAME FROM A REALISTIC VIEW OF SOCIETY, OR A PARODY OF PEOPLE THAT WE RECOGNIZE, BUT EXAGGERATED VERSIONS OF THEM?
I was looking to write a comedy that sprang from genuine observation of the recognizable. Not being a natural “gag” writer, I always rely on character and situation to create laughter. For that to operate properly, we need first to believe in the people we’re watching.

AYCKBOURN ON COMEDY
I’ve found that the darker the drama the more you need to search for the comedy. If you don’t let the audience off the hook occasionally to laugh when you want them to, you’ll find them roaring with laughter during moments you didn’t intend. One of the endearing features of the human race is that we can’t generally keep serious for long. Be thankful for it. If we could we’d probably have become extinct long ago.

WHAT INSPIRED THE CENTRAL CHARACTER, NORMAN, AND WAS IT TO DO WITH THE TIME, THE POST-1960S?
Norman was of his time, certainly. It amused me to conceive a character who felt it his God-given duty to please every woman he met. He sees himself as a New Man. In fact he is just an Old Man in New Man’s clothing. Well, sort of. The joke is that he goes to inordinate lengths to seduce women who, for various reasons, don’t really need that much persuading.

IS NORMAN’S CHARACTER BASED ON ANYONE SPECIFICALLY?
Not really. I once said Norman was how I’d love to be; Tom was how I appeared; and Reg was what I feared I’d become. They’re all parts of me, male and female characters. I think Norman is not uncommon. I once asked a friend of mine what the secret was of his success with women. “Simple,” he said, “I ask them.”

HOW DID AUDIENCES RESPOND TO THE NORMAN CONQUESTS WHEN YOU FIRST WROTE IT IN 1973, AND DO YOU THINK THAT PEOPLE WILL RESPOND IN A SIMILAR WAY NOW?
Heaven knows how they’ll take it now. I hope they’ll enjoy them. They were written for fun and the plays, looking back on them, all have a great innocence about them. The characters get quite het up occasionally but they’re totally devoid of malice or dark intentions. It’s a celebration of love and that’s still around, thank God.
A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ALAN AYCKBOURN

BY KATIE MAY

Alan Ayckbourn was born in Hampstead, London, on April 12, 1939, to Horace Ayckbourn, a professional musician who worked in theater, and Irene “Lolly” Worley, a writer who often published under the name “Mary James.” Five months after Alan’s birth, World War I broke out in Europe. While many parents evacuated their children to the country, Lolly kept her son with her in London, where he was the only child on a bohemian apartment block occupied primarily by performers and musicians. Over time the relationship of Ayckbourn’s parents dissolved, and he moved with his mother to the coastal city of Sussex. Lolly supported them by writing for magazines and, as she typed away at the kitchen table, Ayckbourn watched and mimicked, pounding away at his model typewriter on the floor. Horace swooped in and out of his son’s life during this period, but he was unreliable. Lacking a father figure, Ayckbourn became a bit of a problem child. Lolly decided that he was in need of some masculine influence and sent him away to boarding school.

After grammar school, Ayckbourn did well enough on his exams to win a scholarship to the prestigious Haileybury and Imperial Service College. At Haileybury he became involved in the school’s Shakespeare program and soon began to spend his summer holidays touring Europe and America acting in school productions. Edgar Mathews, one of Ayckbourn’s theater teachers, recognized Ayckbourn’s talent and introduced him to his close friend, Sir Donald Wolfit—one of the great English actors of the time. In 1956, when the 17-year-old Ayckbourn decided to leave school, Wolfit gave him his first job in the theater: touring with his company as an “acting stage manager,” which allowed Ayckbourn to play bit roles in conjunction with his managerial duties. From there, Ayckbourn took a summer job working at Scarborough’s Library Theater, England’s first theater-in-the-round. It was a tiny space on the first floor of a public library, with a playing area measuring just 14 by 18 feet, headed by Stephen Joseph, who quickly became Ayckbourn’s most influential mentor.

Ayckbourn wrote his first play in 1958, when, after complaining to Joseph about the roles he was getting, Joseph told him that if he wanted a better part to write a play with one in it. With the help of his new wife, actress Christine Roland, Ayckbourn did just that. The following year Joseph directed The Square Cat, written by “Roland Alan,” the pseudonym Roland and Ayckbourn created by combining their names. Ayckbourn continued to work for the Library Theatre until 1962, when he became involved in the formation of the
Victoria Theatre in Stoke-on-Trent, an industrial town in northern England, with Stephen Joseph and Peter Cheeseman.

It was Joseph's personal mission to introduce theater-in-the-round to Britain, and the Victoria was the country's first permanent professional theater of that type. (At the time, the Library Theatre only operated during the summer tourist season.) It was at the Victoria that Ayckbourn premiered his first play written under his own name, *Mr. Whatnot*, in 1963. *Mr. Whatnot* did well enough in Stoke to interest a London producer, but when the play went up in the West End the production was a critical and commercial disaster.

Now with two young sons to support, Ayckbourn managed to get himself hired at BBC Radio, where he worked as a producer for radio plays—work that he credits with honing the editing and directorial skills that would continue to serve him throughout his career. During this time, he continued to write, and after a bit of advice from Joseph to “follow the rules before he went about breaking them,” Ayckbourn set out to draft his first well-made play. The result was *Relatively Speaking*, a huge success in Scarborough in 1965. It opened in the West End two years later and quickly made Ayckbourn a rich man. His next play, *The Sparrow* (1969), however, never made it beyond a three-week run in Scarborough, but was quickly followed by *How the Other Half Loves* (1969), which secured Ayckbourn’s popularity as a playwright.

He began a second career as a director in 1961 with *Gaslight*, and soon after began directing his own plays. His directing credits include more than 260 professional productions, including all of the premieres of his own plays since 1977.

Following Joseph's death in 1967, Ayckbourn assumed leadership of the Library Theatre, officially becoming the permanent artistic director there in 1972. He continued Joseph's previous practice of commissioning at least one Ayckbourn play a year.

The height of Ayckbourn's commercial success included *The Norman Conquests* trilogy (1973), *Absurd Person Singular* (1975), *Bedroom Farce* (1975), and *Just Between Ourselves* (1976)—all of which focused largely on marriage in the British middle classes.

In February 2006, Ayckbourn suffered a small stroke but was back to work by October to premiere his 70th play, *If I Were You*. In 2008, after more than 30 years at the helm of the Library Theatre, Ayckbourn finally stepped down. He continues to write and direct his own plays in Scarborough, most recently a revival of *How the Other Half Loves* in 2009.

“He was born to play Hamlet,” said Harold Pinter paying tribute to Ayckbourn on his 60th birthday in 1999. “About three thousand plays later, I must conclude that he made the right decision [in taking up playwriting instead]. What he has given to the theater is immeasurable.”
QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What does Norman want from other people? Why is it significant that he is an assistant librarian?

2. What about Norman do the women find attractive? Are they all attracted to the same characteristics?

3. What role does the mother play in Round and Round the Garden?

4. How is family defined by the characters in this play?

5. What is the significance of this play being set in the backyard garden?

6. Do you believe the accident at the end of the play is, in fact, an accident?

7. What about sexual interactions and gender roles has changed since the 1970s and what has remained constant?

FOR FURTHER READING . . .


