

Once more, near the beach dear friends

He may be Britain's greatest living playwright and his Scarborough theatre may be celebrating its 50th anniversary, but Sir Alan Ayckbourn remains very low key on both matters. TONY GREENWAY reports . . .

He's arguably Britain's greatest living playwright, but, when we meet, Sir Alan Ayckbourn is keen to play all that down. "My great good fortune," he says, "is that I'm very prolific. If I had a repertoire of seven plays, I would be jealously guarding them all, and I'd never want anyone to stage them but me. But there are 69 of the buggers now.

"Some of them I never want to see again, and others are like old friends. They've occasionally been distorted over the years by mad directors, but they're like those bendy toys which always spring back into shape."

Ayckbourn's plays – which include such successes as *Absurd Person Singular*, *A Chorus of Disapproval*, *The Norman Conquests* and *Woman in Mind* – have been performed around the world and translated into 30 languages.

Over five decades, his work has won numerous awards, transferred to the West End and Broadway, and been turned into

films by the likes of French director Alain Renais (rather well) and Michael Winner (rather badly).

Ayckbourn also has co-written a musical (*By Jeeves*) with Andrew Lloyd-Webber, directed at the National and the Old Vic, and his back catalogue is a regular fixture on school curricula.

And he has achieved all of this from the relative isolation of the Stephen Joseph Theatre in Scarborough which, this year is celebrating its 50th Anniversary.

That's quite a golden milestone.

"It is," agrees Alan who reveals that, when the theatre was founded by Stephen Joseph

(the son of actress Hermione Gingold and publisher Michael Joseph), it was expected to last just eight weeks. "It was a very fringe company back then, all living in one house. It was before my time but, apparently, they took over Scarborough Public Library, put a few chairs around the place, created a 'theatre in the round' and opened four or five new plays.

"Now that was a MAD thing to do in fifties' Scarborough, because the entire place was stuffed full of huge variety shows, like *The Black and White Minstrels* and *The Bachelors*."

Mad? That's something of an understatement. It was full-on, frothing-at-the-mouth bonkers.

Yet the thing is, says Ayckbourn with an ironic splutter, the variety shows have gone the way of the dodo . . . but the Stephen Joseph Theatre is still incredibly popular and critically acclaimed.

Now housed in the former Odeon cinema (its third home, costing a not insubstantial £5.2 million), SJT was the UK's very first theatre-in-the-round: An unheard of

phenomenon back in the 1950s.

"What Stephen did," says Ayckbourn, "was quite revolutionary at the time. So we, as a company, were regarded throughout the industry – let alone amongst the public – as a bunch of slightly wacky left-wing weirdos.

"Now, why the shape of a theatre space should be an indication of your political leanings, I don't know: but 'Communists!' was muttered more than once. And then Stephen did the fatal thing of suggesting that we DIDN'T play *God Save the Queen* during the evening. Well. People were resigning from the Board and we had councillors saying we would be drummed out of Scarborough."

But the SJT didn't fizzle out. Instead, it grew stronger. Ayckbourn joined the company, as an actor in 1957; and Joseph – who became his mentor – encouraged him to write. "He said to me: 'If you want to write a play for us, just do it and we'll put it on'. There wasn't any proviso with Stephen. No: 'We'll put it on it if I like what you've written'. But then he said: 'Oh, just one

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thing, Alan . . . whatever you write will form part of our next summer season – and if it bombs, you'll probably close us. OK?"

Um. So no pressure then.

Faced with this kind of stress, the young Ayckbourn was caught between a rock and a hard place, but came up with a comedy called *The Square Cat*, about a family who discover that their mother has developed an obsessive passion for a teenage pop idol. "I knew I had to write a play that brought in an audience and entertained them; but, at the same time, I was aware I was writing for my fellow actors, all of whom had given up more lucrative jobs to work at Stephen's theatre, and who didn't want to be involved in complete and utter rubbish.

"I've tried to steer between those two courses ever since – and it's quite difficult. Occasionally I get a little too dark and the audience drifts away slightly; and occasionally I get a little too jolly, and the cast looks strangely disappointed. But sometimes I hit it just right, and I know I've said something quite important and relevant, and yet I've had them laughing, too.

"I never write jokes, but I think I have what is known as," and he puts on a stage voice, "the common touch."

In 1971, five years after Joseph's death and with several hits under his belt, Ayckbourn took over at the SJT as Artistic Director. And after all this time, he still loves first nights, getting a buzz standing in the auditorium, sucking up the energy created by both the audience and the actors. "It can really be electric in there," he says. "It's wonderful."

The 50th anniversary year of the Stephen Joseph Theatre is, says Alan, "business as usual." April features the UK premiere of *Unless*, a new play by Carol Shields, a Canadian novelist who died two years ago, aged 68. "She came to the theatre, saw a show and, we had a chat afterwards. She said she'd really like to write something for us, but then she became ill and it was too much work. So she adapted her latest novel . . . and got halfway through it before she died. Her daughter, Sara, took it up and finished it, and we're pleased it's coming here."

The new season will also feature Ayckbourn's 69th play, *Improbable Fiction*. "A few years ago, I wrote a play about an amateur dramatic society called *A Chorus of Disapproval*; this is sort of the equivalent, about a writers' group. As you get older, writing gets harder. You know you're going to repeat something of yourself because you are still you; but I try to get something new into the work."

The Golden Anniversary celebrations will also include a week of Alan's "unreliable memoirs", scheduled for the summer. "We weren't going to spend too much time on the anniversary," says Ayckbourn, "but I thought I should mark it somehow. So I'll be presenting something called '50 Years New' where, for five

SJT a decade at a time.

"I'll have a few actors on hand to read extracts from some of the plays we've put on, and I'll probably get a guest in for when the audiences tire of me."

Also in the summer, Alan will be taking his 2004 play, *Private Fears in Public Places*, to New York. Are we talking Broadway?

"Nooooo," says Alan, "we're talking off-off Broadway. 'On' Broadway really IS cut-throat; and there's an expectation that you must succeed. I recently looked at the ticket prices for off-off-off Broadway, and thought: 'Blimey! That's expensive!' So *Private Fears* wouldn't survive with an unknown company on the chill winds of Broadway."

London is a much safer bet (before its New York opening, *Private Fears* will play at the SJT and then transfer to the capital); but, even there, Ayckbourn – who's had more West End successes than most – can't just swan in and have a show up and running by next Tuesday.

"My shows never start in London," he says. "They always transfer there. Perhaps it would be better to get a 'star name' to head it . . . but, then, star names are not, necessarily, an improvement to a production."

But surely, the star name in any Alan Ayckbourn play is Alan Ayckbourn. Aren't those two words alone enough to persuade any West End theatre mogul to get out his cheque-book?

"It doesn't work like that," says Alan. "A London theatre impresario will say: 'That's great, Alan . . . Love the play. Er . . . Can we

get Kylie Minogue for the lead? Or Britney Spears? She'd be very good'.

"So I've become increasingly committed to the idea of staying with the company in Scarborough. I'd like to continue because, as has probably become apparent over the last few years, I've become less and less enamoured with conventional commercial theatre. And we've done our thing enough times now to realise that the standard of performance in Scarborough is as good as it is in London."

The SJT, therefore, will continue to innovate, entertain and encourage new writers.

Stephen Joseph would have loved that.

Oh no, says, Ayckbourn cheerfully. He'd probably be horrified. "Stephen was a great anarchist – he once said to me that all theatres should self-destruct within seven years. I don't know if he meant the building or the company – but he didn't think that artists had very much to say as a group after that time. He would have enjoyed our latest building, but he would also have been appalled by the scale of it. He always believed 'small is beautiful'. And he never stayed with things for very long.

"He'd be probably thinking: '50 years!?' What are you all still DOING there? Move on, move on'!"

■ The Stephen Joseph Theatre, Westborough, Scarborough. Box office: (01723) 370541. Log on to www.sjt.com

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