THE NORMAN CONQUESTS

By Alan Ayckbourn

December 2, 2007 – January 20, 2008

The Rep

A guide for students and educators

photo credit: Deborah Staples, Gerard Neugent and Laura Gordon

Inside this guide

This study guide was researched and designed by the Education Department at Milwaukee Repertory Theater, and is intended to prepare you for your visit. It contains information that will deepen your understanding of, and appreciation for, the production. We've also included questions and activities for you to explore before and after our performance of

THE NORMAN CONQUESTS

If you would like to schedule a classroom workshop, or if we can help in any other way, please contact:

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Synopsis

The Norman Conquests is the collective name for a series of three plays, all taking place at the same time in the same house but in different rooms. The events of each play center around six characters: the siblings Reg, Ruth and Annie, Reg's wife Sarah, Annie's suitor Tom, and Ruth's husband Norman, the would-be seducer of all three women. All three plays correspond with one another (a character's exit in one play will match up with their entrance in another, for example), but each one is a stand-alone play with a self-contained plot.

Details of each show, taken from the brochure of the Stephen Joseph Theatre in the Round, Summer 1993:

TABLE MANNERS: The events of one weekend as seen from the dining room. In which Reg finds food rather scarce despite having it thrown at him by Sarah... Sarah is scandalized by Annie... Annie is disappointed by men in general and Tom in particular... Tom knocks down Norman... Norman's romantic proposals are ruined thanks to Ruth... Ruth loses her patience, her temper and her glasses... and in which everyone has trouble deciding where to sit...

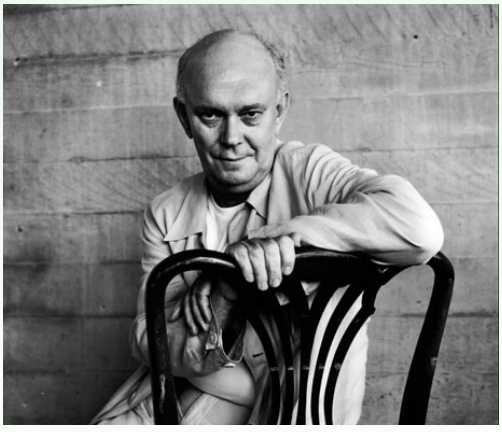
LIVING TOGETHER: The events of one weekend as seen from the Sitting Room. In which Reg is driven mad by Tom... Tom tells Annie a thing or two... Annie nearly comes to blows with Sarah... Sarah sees a different side of Norman... Norman sorts things out with Ruth... Ruth discovers the charms of a fireside rug... and in which nobody enjoys playing board games...

ROUND AND ROUND THE GARDEN: The events of one weekend as seen from the Garden. In which Ruth thoroughly confuses Tom... Tom succeeds in asking Annie... Annie gets a glimpse of Norman's pajamas... Norman tells Sarah stories by moonlight... Sarah disapproves of Reg's outdoor sports... and in which everyone gets to roll in the grass...

About the Author: Alan Ayckbourn

Alan Ayckbourn was born in 1939 in Hampstead, London. The son of a writer and an accomplished violinist, Alan was predisposed to the creative mindset, and by the age of ten had written his first play at prep school. He was devoted to the theater, touring with the Shakespeare company at Haileybury Boarding school, then abandoning his education to work for the famed English actor Sir David Wolfit.

Alan went on to work as a stage manager and actor for the Library Theatre in Scarborough, run by director Stephen Joseph. "He became a sort of mentor to me," Ayckbourn recalls, "He was so dynamic." It was Stephen who encouraged Alan to become a writer, when the young man came to him to complain about the quality of the roles to which he was being assigned. Joseph encouraged all his actors to try their hand at playwriting, believing that, like Shakespeare, the best writers came from within the company. He told Alan that if he wanted a better role he would have to write it himself. Alan responded with *The Square Cat,* which the company produced with great success in 1959, and included an extensive leading role for himself – "I went on early and never came off." Joseph commended him, reportedly saying "Well done, Ayckers... if you write a further twenty you might get to be quite good," and commissioned him to write a play for the following season. Of the seventy plays Ayckbourn has written since, all but four have opened at Joseph's theatre.



Alan went on to become the Artistic Director of the company, a position he still holds today, in what is now called the Stephen Joseph Theatre. In the meantime he has won more than 25 awards, had his work translated into 35 languages, and has been knighted by Queen Elizabeth II for "services to the theatre". In 1975 he set a new record for having the most plays running simultaneously in London's theatre district; later that year, he set the same record on Broadway. Ayckbourn directs all the original productions of his plays, claiming that watching someone else's interpretation of his work feels like "someone drawing a moustache on your baby."

Ayckbourn suffered a stroke in February of 2006, but did not allow it to stop his career. "Rest assured, I'll be back," he promised fans, and he made good on that promise by opening his 70th play, *If I Were You,* in October of last year.

A Brief Moment with Torrey Hanson

Torrey Hanson has been a member of the Rep's Resident Acting Company for fifteen years. He plays Reg in the upcoming production of The Norman Conquests.

What experience do you have with Alan Ayckbourn's plays?

This is the third Ayckbourn play and the fourth Ayckbourn production I've worked on. I did *How the Other Half Loves* at Intiman Theater in Seattle and *Taking Steps*, once at Oregon Shakespeare Festival and again at Madison Rep. I had great, sometimes glorious experiences with them. Ayckbourn is an exceptionally astute playwright, one whose canon will endure long after each of us is gone. Acting in one of his plays is like being inside an ingeniously constructed machine -- a machine with a uniquely conceived conceit to set and keep it in motion. The conceit is usually of a chronological, structural or dimensional variety. *Taking Steps*, for example, is set in a three-floor Victorian House with all three floors compressed onto a flat stage. An actor miming a walk upstairs may pass another a foot or two away who's imagined to be two stories above. In *How the Other Half Loves*, two dinners over two consecutive nights are performed simultaneously. An actor might address someone on Thursday night, turn to her right and answer someone else on Friday night. *The Norman Conquests*, of course, has a chronological conceit: simultaneous events play out over three performances. In this respect, it's not unlike *House and Garden,* which had great success a few years ago, in which two plays unfold simultaneously with actors dashing back and forth between each.

Ayckbourn is one of the most widely-performed playwrights in the world. What makes his plays so appealing to audiences?

Three things, I think: the whimsy of the devices, the tautness of the writing, and the psychological realness of the characters. That order, incidentally, is not uncommon in critiques of his work, but I've come to respect them in the opposite order over the years: I like the subtlety of their characters most of all, then the crispness of their dialogue and finally their inventiveness of structure. In almost all of Ayckbourn's plays a simple recipe is followed: real people -- very real people-- expressing themselves in effortless, concise, but honest-to-life sentences, react to sometimes outrageous circumstances in a play structure which plays with audience perceptions. It's as easy as that. In *The Norman Conquests*, for example, audiences may enjoy a farcical, witty or Chekhovian scene (a reward unto itself) as they recall a preceding scene from another play which renders it poignant, ironic or psychologically revealing. By simultaneously delighting in character development, chronology games and spot on diction (that is, the selecting and arranging of words) Ayckbourn conjures a unique theatergoing emotion: glee. It is to be hoped (but not insisted upon) that audiences see all three plays--each is a delight in itself, but their cumulative effect reveals Ayckbourn's genius at its best.

Is the language the most difficult part of rehearsing these plays? Does the structure make it more difficult?

You know, Ayckbourn's language can be easy here and challenging there. His writing always tracks the shortest distance between two points. The catch is that the two points are sometimes microscopically close to one another in staccato timed sequences extending in some cases for several beats. So more than almost any playwright I've encountered, the dashes, ellipses, commas and periods on the page absolutely must be woven into the fabric of memorization. Reg has a line in *Round and Round the Garden*: "He's – er – he's obviously had a – he's had a – he's..." Any deviation from the structure of that line renders it 1) less funny 2) disruptive to the rhythms of the character 3) more difficult for other actors to respond to. Memorization may be like running a musical scale at one point and learning a pleasant, leisurely tune at another. From a structural standpoint, the challenge with Ayckbourn is to integrate chronology into character development. In acting, it's critical to vividly imagine a "moment before" you make an entrance; you've got to know where you've just come from in order to know what you're about to do. Now, you'd think that having a moment before decided by a scene from another play would make life easier. But in fact, slipping into another play before making an entrance can be tricky: on some level, there's a risk of importing a slightly different energy from the play at hand. Until performance rhythms are set and the plays are performed in succession, I think I'll feel a disconnect, like shooting a movie out of sequence. It is only at this writing as we approach tech rehearsals that the fun of fitting the pieces of the puzzle together can be enjoyed.

Staging *The Norman Conquests*

Linda Buchanan is Chair of the design program at The Theatre School of DePaul University. She also works as a freelance designer, and created the set for the Rep's production of The Norman Conquests, *three interlocking plays which take place on three different sets (the garden, living room and dining room of an English country house) all built on the same architectural framework.*

Originally I thought that I was going to be an urban planner, so I have an undergraduate degree in Urban Sociology from the University of Chicago. While I was there I was drafted by a friend into making props for the theatre, and I discovered I enjoyed it. I had always drawn and painted, and I always loved reading stories - fairy tales, Greek mythology, that sort of stuff. The idea that you could actually *make* stuff that would be involved in telling stories, well, that was everything I loved to do, put together. Actually, scene design and urban planning are not so dissimilar: you're looking at how physical space affects people's behavior and vice versa.

The first thing I do with any play is look at the physical requirements of the storytelling. I look at how many entrances we need, how many seats, what size doors we have to use, whether people open windows, and I need to plan to accommodate all the physical business. Beyond that, I look at the architecture of the kind of building it's supposed to be, which in this case is a Victorian **vicarage**. That means we use Victorian architecture, and you'll find more stained glass windows than you might in a normal house because this one was attached to a church at some point. The ornamentation that's used is maybe a little more ecclesiastical, and the place is a little nicer since the vicar that lived in the house would have had a heightened status. That makes for a nice contrast between the architecture, which is staid and Victorian, and the behavior that's currently happening in the house, which is mostly about infidelity.

With these plays, I had the additional challenge of creating a space that could accommodate the physical necessities of three different rooms. Since we have to switch quickly between three spaces, what we have *time* to do becomes a major concern. We have two crew people and one hour to do our change-over, and there are days when we do two of these shows. So that's how much time we have, and that's not a lot - just moving the furniture takes up most of that time. So I tried to minimize the architectural differences between spaces.

Set rendering for *Table Manners*

The layout of the house was another consideration. If you looked at a real ground plan of the building, how would these rooms relate to one another? Where would the outdoor garden be in relation to the dining room and the parlor? How would those two spaces connect to each other? I tried to keep that consistent as we move through the locations. For instance, when we're in the dining room, the garden is on one side; when we're in the living room, the garden is on the other side.

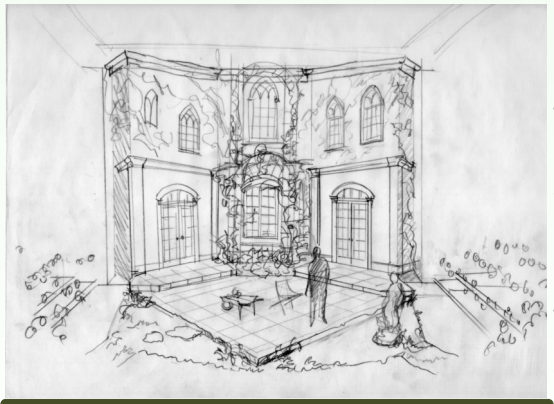
Every location has two sets of doors: one that goes to another part of the house, and one that leads outside. The inside doors have curtains for privacy between the interior rooms. The outside doors don't have curtains - you just see out into the garden. All we do during the scene change, then, is take the curtains off one set of doors and put them on the other. That switches which side the garden is on. Beyond that, it's really about changing the furniture and rugs. We have minimal dressing, things like pictures and so forth hanging on the walls, because the walls are

VICARAGE: The building inhabited by the leader of a Christian church.

represented by hanging layers of **scrim** that have a floral wallpaper pattern painted on them. It's stylized enough that we can use it as wallpaper when we're inside the house, and ivy or greenery when we're outside.

We started with a much more realistic building with full walls. For both budgetary and stylistic reasons, we ended up moving towards the idea of patterned scrims, which I think ultimately will be more versatile in terms of how we see the space than the solid walls would have been. I have a bunch of hanging windows that act as a stylized representation of the second story. The mother of the family is upstairs - you never see her, but she's kind of a binding force in the play. These couples don't have a lot in common, and really don't like each other, but the three siblings are kind of stuck to this house because their mother is still here. The upper windows give us a sense of her presence upstairs.

In the center of the set we have a large wall unit with a central pivot. It has a window seat built into it, which is used for the living room set. We revolve that around, and we have the bay window coming out toward us, with a big climbing rosebush next to it, and suddenly we're outside. For the dining room set, we have another wall piece with a built-in sideboard that fills in our window seat opening. That central unit is the primary indicator of location: it's a bay window in the garden, a window seat in the living room, and a sideboard in the dining room. We also have a chandelier for the dining room that flies in and out. The rest of the set is a little more stylized, and the scene changes depending on the furniture and the lighting. That's really the extent of the change, and I think it'll work well.



Set rendering for *Round and Round the Garden*

The floor of the set is a slate tiling, which can work as either an interior or exterior floor. There are areas of grass downstage, which during the indoor scenes look like the lawn outside the house. When we switch to the garden, it looks like a slight terrace with a lawn adjacent to it.

Color is an issue. In the script, the house is described as a "brown museum," which I take to mean it's worn, it's dirty, it's a little unpleasant. Brown is a warm color, so it's kind of homey, but can also be unpleasant in its connotations of dirt. What's good about brown is that Caucasian faces stand out against it. What's bad about it is that in this play, we have to be both inside and outside, and we have both daytime and nighttime scenes. Under warm light, brown is okay - under cool light, it looks horrible. If you take brown and you put blue light on it, it will look very grey. That's not really ideal. We have to make sure that there are some tones in there that will still be picked up under blue light.

Set rendering for *Living Together*

The tricky thing is picking a brown that will work. You can't use light brown, because then you won't see the actor's faces, so it has to be dark... but then how do you make it look good under the lights? You have to pull other color layers in to make it work. I've chosen materials with patterns that are *predominantly* brown, but with other colors mixed in: some blues, some greens, some warm oranges and reds. The scrims are oversprayed with rust color and a cobalt blue, and on top of that the khaki-colored wallpaper has been stenciled. That way, no matter what color light we use, the set will not look dead - it will have some color that it can reflect.

I've also been working a lot with the costume designer, Alex Tecoma. A lot of men wear brown, so how do you handle that? We compared his fabrics and my paint samples, so that if, for example, he has someone wearing khaki, it's a lighter khaki or a greener khaki than what I use. We needed to at least make sure that the colors of the costumes weren't an exact match to the color of the sofa. When most people buy furnishings they aren't worried about whether someone standing fifty feet away, outside of their house, can see them standing out from their couch or their rug. But this is what we in the theater have to deal with.

SCRIM: A thin screen made of very light cotton or flax-based material.

The History of *The Norman Conquests*

by Simon Murgatroyd, writer for Alan Ayckbourn's official website alanayckbourn.net.

The Norman Conquests are arguably the most famous of all of Alan Ayckbourn's plays. This trilogy of plays, premiered in 1973, truly established Alan's reputation with the play-going public, won him great acclaim from the critics and would go on to win a number of prestigious theatre awards.

Yet for something that is regarded as a milestone in 20th century British theatre, its origins are surprisingly pedestrian. Alan has suggested there were two reasons for writing the trilogy: the first was little more than meeting the challenge it would present him and his acting company to write, direct and perform such a unique piece. The second inspiration was, apparently, a misjudged comment to the Scarborough Evening News. An interviewer had asked Alan, in the wake of *Absurd Person Singular*, what was next for the playwright. He casually noted he was thinking of writing a trilogy, which was promptly printed as fact in the newspaper. This led to a panicked phone -call from the Library Theatre to Alan, who was in London at the time, asking whether the theatre should deny it. Instead, Alan saw this as excellent motivation to began working on the plays.

The initial challenge of writing a trilogy was the viability of presenting such a work in the tourist town of Scarborough. The Library Theatre relied on the summer season tourist trade, and Alan knew he could not alienate these people with a trilogy of plays. He realized immediately that for the season to be able to work, the plays had to be able to stand independently of each other and be seen in any order - both points that were emphasized in the summer brochure. Unlike the London productions, the trilogy nature of the work was not overtly emphasized, nor the fact that ultimate satisfaction required seeing all three productions.

The plays were written simultaneously over a week in the spring of 1973, although each play has its own very distinct character: Alan believes *Table Manners* is the funniest; *Round And Round The Garden* the more casual and conventional; *Living Together* a slower piece. Norman appears so late in *Table Manners* (the first of the plays to be rehearsed) simply because the actor playing Norman, Christopher Godwin, was unavailable for the first week of rehearsals and the script was changed accordingly.

The plays opened in the summer of 1973 at the Library Theatre and were an enormous success, selling out for every performance. One member of the audience laughed so hard she spat her false teeth out, and her husband came to recover them the next day.

Interestingly, at this point, the trilogy was not known as *The Norman Conquests*. The brochure for the 1973 summer season refers to the plays individually but without an overarcing title. The programs mention that each play is: "A weekend view of the Norman Conquest". However, the actual title of the plays, *The Norman Conquests*, did not appear until the plays transferred to London as a means of emphasizing to the audience they should see all three. The London production would also see two of the original play titles altered: *Fancy Meeting You* became *Table Manners*, and M*ake Yourself At Home* became *Living Together,* leaving only *Round And Round The Garden* unaltered.

The process of bringing the plays to London was extraordinarily complex, with no producer having the faith to produce the entire trilogy. Only one play was wanted and there was some argument as to which this should be. While the arguments continued, Alan – who had not seriously believed they would be commercially viable in the city anyway - put the scripts away and concentrated on his next play.

The solution to the issue came when Eric Thompson, director of the highly successful London production of Ayckbourn's *Absurd Person Singular*, suggested the trilogy be mounted at a smaller venue which offered less financial risk. He persuaded Greenwich Theatre to stage it, and it was his faith and his choice of an exceptionally strong cast of relative unknowns (including Michael Gambon, Felicity Kendal and Penelope Keith) working alongside the more established Tom Courtenay that enabled the trilogy to survive. Not that Eric was totally convinced he had a hit on his hands. Alan Ayckbourn recalls a conversation during the premiere of the plays: "Eric said, 'Do you realize we could be the first people in history with three flops in a row? Because if they don't like one, they sure aren't going to like the others!'" Fortunately for all concerned, the opposite occurred.

The Norman Conquests played at Greenwich Theatre in May and June, 1974, and were an incredible and immediate success. The producer, Michael Codron, took the trilogy in to the West End with virtually the same cast – Bridget Turner taking over from the unavailable Penelope Wilton. The production would win the Evening Standard and the Plays And Players Awards for Best New Play. The plays opened in America in 1975, directed by Eric Thompson, but without quite the same measure of success as his previous production of *Absurd Person Singular*. The trilogy was adapted for television in 1977 by Thames Television, with Tom Conti playing Norman, and the BBC adapted it for radio in 1990.

Discussion Questions and Activities

- How would you approach directing *The Norman Conquests*? Knowing what you do about the unique nature of these plays, what difficulties do they create for an organization attempting to stage them? How will this affect your costumes, set design, and rehearsal process? What are the advantages and disadvantages of staging three related plays like this, as opposed to three entirely unrelated shows?

- Consider this quote: *"While others are called* avant garde *for writing complex plays that take structural risks, Ayckbourn tackles them with such facility that he is considered mainstream."* - **Curtain Up**
  The Norman Conquests are unusual in that they depict one story told through three self-contained plays. Do some research on Ayckbourn's other plays, particularly *House & Garden, Man of the Moment, Communicating Doors,* and *Bedroom Farce.* What is unique about the structure of these shows? Why is Ayckbourn so fond of writing scripts which are difficult to stage?

- Some critics have expressed disappointment in the way the plays end. Do you think the endings are appropriate to the action and theme of the plays? Which was your favorite? Would you change any of them?

- Ayckbourn describes a comedy as "a tragedy that has been interrupted." What do you think he means by this? How does *The Norman Conquests* illustrate this viewpoint?

- Ayckbourn has described the characters in this play as "Six people who are unhappy for various reasons, who don't like each other much but can't seem to get away." What does each of these characters want, and how successful are they at getting it? Why are they unhappy?

- Why do each of the female characters end up giving in to Norman's advances by the end of the play?

- *The Norman Conquests* were originally intended to be performed in the round, meaning that the audience is seated in a circle completely surrounding the stage. This is a relatively uncommon stage configuration: more often theatres use a **proscenium** (where the audience faces the stage from only one angle) or a **thrust** (where the stage thrusts out into the audience, who watch the action from three sides). What are the advantages and challenges of performing in the round as opposed to on a thrust or proscenium stage?

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The Audience

You can sit there and have a universal experience, of fear, of anger, of tears, of love, and I discovered that it's the audience, really, that is doing the acting.- **Marlon Brando**

Theater is a collaborative art form. The success of a production relies upon every member of the ensemble performing their role expertly, from the cast and crew to the administrative staff to the audience themselves. Come prepared to make your contribution as a member of the audience. You have an active role to play, and the performers are relying on you to be respectful and attentive. Months of preparation, weeks of rehearsal and hours upon hours of effort have gone towards providing the best possible performance for you. Your participation is what makes this process worthwhile.

Visiting The Rep ...

Milwaukee Repertory Theater is housed in the Milwaukee Center at the corner of Wells and Water Streets, downtown. Our building was formerly the home of the Electric Railway & Light Company. This name is still carved on the wall outside.

You'll enter on the Wells Street side into a large, open space. Our box office will be visible on your left as you come through the front doors. The large space is the main hub for the businesses that share this building: a bank, an office tower, the Pabst Theater and the Intercontinental Hotel. If you walk into the center of this area, you'll see a staircase on your left. You will take this staircase to the Quadracci Powerhouse Theater lobby.

Inside the lobby are restrooms, water fountains and a coat check. If you decide to bring a snack, please know that food and drink are NOT permitted in the theater. However, you can leave things (at your own risk) in the coat check room, and enjoy them outside the theater during the intermission. Most plays have one intermission that is about 20 minutes long. You might also want to look for signs in the lobby which give the full "running time" of the play.

If you arrive forty-five minutes before the show, you can participate in a FREE pre-show talk called Rep In Depth. An actor from the show usually leads this discussion. This person will tell you a little about the play, the playwright, and the period in which the show is set. Often, they will also share stories about the design and rehearsal process. You can ask questions too!

For information on our education programs and our productions, visit our website at www.milwaukeerep.com