

Alan Ayckbourn at 80

60 Years of Playwriting

80 Ayckbourn Facts For 80 Years

1. Alan Ayckbourn is eighty this year. He was born on 12 April, 1939 in Hampstead, London.
2. As of 2019, he has written 83 full-length plays since his first in 1959.
3. Alan's mother was Irene Maud Worley, better known as the writer Mary James, who was regarded as a highly successful fiction writer for women's magazines.
4. Alan's father was Horace Ayckbourn, a lead violinist for the London Symphony Orchestra.
5. Alan's first professional theatre job, aged 17, was as an acting stage manager with Donald Wolfitt's company at the Edinburgh Festival in 1956.
6. Alan worked as a student Acting Stage Manager at Connaught Theatre, Worthing, during autumn 1956.
7. He joined Leatherhead Theatre Club as an Acting Stage Manager in spring 1957.
8. During winter 1957, he was also an actor at Oxford Playhouse.
9. His most pivotal job of the period was joining the Library Theatre, Scarborough, as an Acting Stage Manager for the summer 1957 season.
10. There he met his single most influential mentor, Stephen Joseph; a British theatre pioneer and founder of the Library Theatre, home to the UK's first professional theatre-in-the-round company.
11. Alan's first acting role with the Library Theatre was Eric Birling in J.B Priestley's *An Inspector Calls*; he would go on to perform in more than 40 productions for the company between 1957 and 1962.
12. In January 1959, he played Stanley in Harold Pinter's professional directorial debut with the second production of his famed play *The Birthday Party* - produced by Stephen Joseph and the Studio Theatre company.
13. Alan married fellow actor Christine Roland during spring 1959 and had two sons, Philip and Stephen.
14. His professional playwriting debut - in which he starred - was *The Square Cat* which opened on 30 July 1959 at the Library Theatre.
15. *The Square Cat* earned Alan £47 and led to an immediate commission for a second play for the winter season.
16. Alan entered National Service in January 1960. He was signed out and back working in the theatre three days later.
17. His professional directing debut was with Patrick Hamilton's *Gaslight* at the Library Theatre, Scarborough, on 29 June 1961.
18. Since 1961, Alan has directed more than 350 productions and has considered himself a director before a writer for the majority of his career.
19. Alan helped found the Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent, in autumn 1962 and was a writer, actor and director for the company between 1962 and 1964.
20. In 1962, Alan directed one of his own plays for the first time with a revival of his fourth work, *Standing Room Only*, at the Victoria Theatre.
21. In 1963, he directed the world premiere of one of his own plays for the first time with *Mr Whatnot* at the Victoria Theatre. He has subsequently directed all but one of the world premieres of his plays.
22. *Mr Whatnot* was the first of his plays to transfer to the West End in 1964, it starred Ronnie Barker in the role of Lord Slingsby-Craddock.

23. Alan Ayckbourn would go on to write for Ronnie Barker under the pseudonym of Peter Caulfield for the first two series of *Hark At Barker* on ITV between 1969 and 1970.
24. Including *Mr Whatnot*, 39 of Alan's plays have been produced in the West End or at the National Theatre - not including revivals.
25. For every year between 1970 and 2000, there was at least one and as many as five Ayckbourn plays running in the West End.
26. In 1974, he broke the record for having the most plays running simultaneously in the West End with *Absurd Person Singular*, *Table Manners*, *Living Together*, *Round And Round The Garden* and *Absent Friends*.
27. In 1987 he became the only playwright known to have productions running simultaneously in the National Theatre, the West End and the London fringe with *A Small Family Business* (NT), *Woman In Mind* (Vaudeville Theatre) and *The Westwoods* (Oxford Arms, Camden).
28. In 1965, Alan joined the BBC as a Radio Drama Producer based in Leeds working with the renowned northern producer Alfred Bradley.
29. During his first year with the BBC, Alan directed more than 50 productions and it is estimated this rose in excess of 200 during his five years with the company.
30. Whilst working at the BBC, Stephen Joseph invited Alan to write a 'well-made' play for the 1965 season at the Library Theatre. Alan wrote *Meet My Father*.
31. Which is better known as *Relatively Speaking*, which in 1967 became Alan's first bona fide West End hit at the Duke Of York's Theatre.
32. *Relatively Speaking* was the first Ayckbourn play to get television exposure when a 50 minute extract from the West End production was shown on the BBC in 1967.
33. In the UK, there have been 20 television adaptations of Alan Ayckbourn's plays. He has also been adapted for television numerous times in other countries.
34. On 5 October 1967, Stephen Joseph died. Stephen is without doubt the single most influential and significant figure in Alan's life and whom he regarded as a father figure.
35. In 1968, *Relatively Speaking* became the first Ayckbourn play to be published.
36. Since 1968, 70 of Alan's 83 full length plays have been published, the majority of which have never been out of print.
37. Faber & Faber has published six collected volumes of his plays, more than any other author the company publishes.
38. In 1969, the single most performed Ayckbourn play of all time was published for the first time. The play was *Ernie's Incredible Illucinations*.
39. In 1970, Alan Ayckbourn wrote *How The Other Half Loves*, his first play to feature a multiple location set and the first in which two locations are overlaid over each other allowing for simultaneous action in different locations and even different times.
40. *How The Other Half Loves* became the first Ayckbourn play to transfer to Broadway where it starred Phil 'Sgt Bilko' Silvers as Frank Foster.
41. Alan has had nine of his plays staged on Broadway - not including revivals
42. In 1972, Alan was appointed the Artistic Director of the Library Theatre, Scarborough, a role he held until he retired in 2009.
43. The same year saw Alan Ayckbourn write one of his most popular and lauded plays, *Absurd Person Singular*. This play had the longest runs of his work in both the West End and on Broadway.
44. He received his first award with *Absurd Person Singular* which won the Evening Standard Award for Best Comedy.
45. Since 1972, he has received 38 major awards for either his plays or his work as a playwright and director.

46. He is the only playwright to have received both the Olivier and Tony Awards for services to theatre.
47. In 1973, Alan Ayckbourn wrote one of his most famous works *The Norman Conquests*; three plays written in less than a week!
48. The television adaptation of *The Norman Conquests* in 1977 marked the first time six hours of British prime-time television has been dedicated to a living playwright and 10 million people watched each part of the trilogy. In America, it was estimated at 30m people!
49. Alan's only actual screenplay was written in 1974. *Service Not Included* was an original work written for the BBC TV Series *Masquerade*. Despite many offers, Alan has steadfastly refused to write any more screenplays.
50. In 1975, the National Theatre commissioned its first play from Alan Ayckbourn with *Bedroom Farce*. It was the first of Alan's plays intended specifically for end-stage performance.
51. Since 1975, Alan has had ten plays produced by the National Theatre - not including revivals.
52. *Bedroom Farce* marked Alan's debut as a director in London; he was intended to co-direct it with Peter Hall, but Hall had 'arranged' to be directing *Volpone* at the same time leaving Alan to fly solo.
53. Alan has directed 28 of the West End or National Theatre productions of his work.
54. 1975 also saw the first radio adaptation of an Ayckbourn play when the BBC recorded *Relatively Speaking* starring Michael Aldridge and Rosemary Leach.
55. Since 1975, the BBC has produced 27 adaptations of Alan's work for the radio.
56. In 1976, Alan led the Scarborough company from the Library Theatre to the Stephen Joseph Theatre In The Round; converted from the former Westwood County Modern School.
57. In 1980 *Sisterly Feelings* saw the first use of chance in an Ayckbourn play with the choice of two second scenes determined by the flip of a coin. On the first night, the coin landed on its edge and rolled off stage.... There have since been four other 'plays of chance.'
58. During 1978 Alan wrote the first of his 11 musical revues, *Men On Women On Men*.
59. Although - for a time - Alan was regarded as a farceur, he considers he has written only one true farce, *Taking Steps*. This was premiered in 1980 and is dedicated to the master farceur Ben Travers.
60. Although Alan's obsession with water-features in his plays began with *Time & Time Again* in 1971, it reached its peak in 1981 with *Way Upstream*, in which the entire stage in Scarborough was flooded to create a 'canal' for a riverboat to cruise upon. The play also features a rain-storm...
61. Alan has written five adaptations of work by other authors beginning with *A Trip To Scarborough*, adapted from R B Sheridan, in 1982. Most recently he adapted Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* as *Dear Uncle*, which can be seen this summer at the Theatre By The Lake, Keswick.
62. In 1986, Alan took a two-year sabbatical from Scarborough to become a company director at the National Theatre. He directed four plays including the world premiere of *A Small Family Business* - one of only four of his plays not to have premiered in Scarborough.
63. His production of *A View from the Bridge* by Arthur Miller for the National Theatre was critically applauded and transferred into the West End. Miller himself would go on to say it was the finest production of the play he had ever seen.
64. The star of *A View From The Bridge* and *A Small Family Business* was Michael Gambon, who is the most prolific actor in Ayckbourn plays in the West End or National Theatre. He has appeared in nine Ayckbourn productions in London.

65. In 1987, Alan was awarded a CBE. Ten years later, he was knighted for 'service to theatre.'
66. Alan's first 'family' play was unveiled in 1988 with *Mr A's Amazing Maze Plays* - designed to be enjoyed by a family audience (not just children). He would go on to write 11 family plays and considers them a vital part of his play canon.
67. In 1992, Alan was appointed the Cameron Macintosh Professor of Contemporary Theatre at Oxford University for the year.
68. After a surprise meeting between Alan and Alain Resnais at the Stephen Joseph Theatre In The Round, Resnais adapted Alan's epic *Intimate Exchanges* into the award-winning film duology *Smoking / No Smoking*.
69. Five Ayckbourn plays have been adapted into films with three directed by Alain Resnais: *Smoking / No Smoking*, *Private Fears In Public Places* and *Life of Riley*.
70. In 1996 came the event that Alan Ayckbourn says he is most proud of: the move of the Scarborough company to the Stephen Joseph Theatre; a £5.2m conversion of Scarborough's former Odeon cinema.
71. In 1997, Alan married his long-term partner Heather Stoney.
72. With a new theatre with two auditoria, Alan wrote *House & Garden* in 1999; two inter-related plays sharing a single cast running simultaneously in two theatres with the cast moving between the two. It transferred to the National Theatre the following year where it was a huge success.
73. In 2001, the critically acclaimed *Damsels In Distress* trilogy transferred to London with the original Scarborough company. It marked a breaking point with the West End for Alan though and no new Ayckbourn play has been seen there since 2001
74. Alan's first book, *The Crafty Art Of Playmaking*, was published in 2002 and has never been out of print since. It contains his thoughts and tips for both playwriting and directing.
75. In 2005, Alan transferred his Scarborough production of *Private Fears In Public Places* to the *Brits Off Broadway* festival at the 59E59 Theaters, New York. The extraordinary reviews and sell-out run marked a high point in his New York experiences and practically every two years since he has returned with the SJT company to acclaim and record-breaking figures at the 59E59.
76. On 21 February 2006, Alan Ayckbourn suffered a stroke. Within six months he was directing the world premiere of his play *If I Were You* and within 18 months was writing again.
77. He retired as Artistic Director of the Stephen Joseph Theatre after 37 years in the role in 2009: one of the longest tenures of any Artistic Director in the UK.
78. Sixty-one years after his theatrical career began at the Edinburgh Festival, he returned when the festival and the Old Vic presented a stage adaptation of his prose work *The Divide* in 2017, which subsequently transferred to The Old Vic.
79. In 2018, he was appointed the first Director Emeritus of the Stephen Joseph Theatre, marking his commitment and contribution to the theatre which has dominated his life and where he continues to premiere and direct his latest work.
80. In 2019, he will mark his 60th anniversary as a playwright with the world premiere of his 83rd play at the Stephen Joseph Theatre, Scarborough.

And a fatuous fact...

It is frequently said that Alan Ayckbourn is the most performed living playwright in the UK - even the world. There is actually no way to plausibly prove this statement (and it is most likely untrue). But he remains undoubtedly very, very popular.