

A Technician in the Wings: Ayckbourn's *Comic Potential*

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Alan Ayckbourn has spent his entire professional life in the theater. Before becoming a director and playwright, he worked as “a stage manager, sound technician, lighting technician, scene painter, prop-maker and actor.”¹ He wrote his first play at 20, encouraged by his mentor Stephen Joseph, who, in response to Ayckbourn’s distaste for the role of Nicky in John van Druten’s *Bell, Book and Candle*, suggested that the young actor write himself a promising part. So he did—Jerry Wattis in *The Square Cat*: “It was a piece of wish-fulfillment for the lad who fancied being a rock star—a central role for himself in which he got to dress up in glitzy teddy-boy drapes and play (very badly, apparently!) rock ‘n’ roll guitar.”²

A dream, realized by an actor, in a fiction he had created! Boundaries between life and art had already begun to blur.

That was in 1959. Since then Ayckbourn has written sixty-one³ more plays, including two trilogies, a dramatic diptych, and several musicals. Because his plays are commercially successful, his subject matter the trials and woes of the middle classes, his genre of choice comedy-cum-farce, the playwright was initially perceived “as the inheritor of the lightweight boulevardier mantle recently worn by Terence Rattigan, Peter Ustinov and Enid Bagnold”⁴—and, as such, dismissed as a minor if prodigiously productive playwright. According to Michael Billington, this critical prejudice has persisted, at least until 1990: “Alan Ayckbourn is popular. He is prolific. And he writes comedies. For all these reasons he is still, I believe, seriously underrated.”⁵

As years pass and accolades mount, Ayckbourn’s work has begun to garner the critical and scholarly attention earlier withheld. Billington, Michael Holt, and Sidney Howard White have written book-length studies of his opus, all aptly entitled *Alan Ayckbourn*; so too has Albert Kalson, whose *Laughter in the Dark* traces the plays until 1991; Bernard Dukore has edited a casebook consisting of interviews and essays exploring various aspects of the playwright’s work; Duncan Wu in *Six Contemporary Dramatists* and Susan Carlson in *Women & Comedy*, both allot chapters to Ayckbourn’s plays, as do Christopher Innes in *Modern British Drama: 1890-1990* and Ruby Cohn in *Anglo-American Interplay in Recent Drama*, who

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pair him with Michael Frayn and Neil Simon, respectively. Paul Allen's recent biography, *Alan Ayckbourn: Grinning at the Edge*, has also contributed to the recognition that, along with Harold Pinter and Tom Stoppard, this playwright ranks among Britain's preeminent dramatists of his generation.⁶

As well as writing and directing, Ayckbourn devotes considerable energies to professing his crafts. In 1992, he accepted the Cameron Mackintosh Visiting Professor of Contemporary Theatre Chair at Oxford, where he taught playwriting and directing. He actively participates in Scarborough Theatre's annual National Student Drama Festival,⁷ and, in 2001, he founded the Stephen Joseph Theatre School, a week-long program during which students are immersed in theater studies. Ayckbourn himself conducts several of the seminars. Indeed, this penchant for pedagogy, combined with numerous requests that he write about his work, has resulted in *The Crafty Art of Playmaking*, a delightfully humorous and eminently sensible book in which the playwright-director enumerates, and expounds upon, his "obvious rules" for writing and directing.⁸ It should probably come as little surprise, therefore, that eventually his penchant for teaching would manifest itself in a play, and it has. With *Comic Potential*, he has written a dramatic master class in comic theory and practice, disguised as a futuristic farce.⁹

Since his earliest plays, Ayckbourn has drawn inspiration and subject matter from the theater. If a single thematic thread runs through his opus to date, it is, as Ian Watson noted in 1981, that on "one level at least [his plays are] about the whole nature of theatrical artifice."¹⁰ They are, in fact, plays about *play*, of which his imaginative, metadramatic devices remind us—repeatedly, frequently, *dramatically*.

To borrow from Richard Hornby, "metadrama can be defined as drama about drama; it occurs whenever the subject of the play turns out to be, in some sense, drama itself."¹¹ Metadrama's affects are as disparate and random as the composition of any given audience at any given performance, as pronounced or insignificant as individual attention, interest, knowledge. Despite affective discrepancies metadrama unfailingly disrupts theatrical illusion by blurring, if only ephemerally, conventional distinctions between art and life. If we cannot relax pleasurably into an artistically coherent illusion, escape into a fiction or a dream, as Puck would have it, we are forced to reassess our epistemological and ontological bearings in order to sift between fancy and reality. In short, metadrama reminds us of what Samuel Beckett knew all along: all this is "just play,"¹² which depending on the work can range from reassuring to terrifying.

To some degree, all plays call attention to themselves as fiction, if only by virtue of live performance which renders dramatic illusion tentative and fragile. Bert O. States smartly summarizes this phenomenon: "Thus one witnesses a play as an event in the real world as well as an illusion of an unreal world, and its

realism is not simply the descriptive realism of either cinema or fiction but the weakly disguised reality of the actor and the raised platform on which he stands."¹³

That being said, different playwrights puncture, and punctuate, this "weakly disguised reality" more readily, more frequently than others: Ayckbourn is one of these playwrights, and he has been disrupting illusion all along, forcing audiences to distinguish among various fictions, or realities, depending upon one's teleological perspective.

Drawing from a seemingly bottomless grab-bag of metadramatic devices, this playwright flourishes his plays' fictions in ways difficult to ignore: titles announce themselves as theater (*Bedroom Farce*, *Mr. A's Amazing Maze Play*, *Standing Room Only*, *RolePlay*); extravagant props whose very authenticity, paradoxically, makes them appear grotesquely incongruous on the stage (an authentic cabin cruiser floating on real water in *Way Upstream*, an actual swimming pool in *Man of the Moment*); thematic, visual, musical echoes of earlier plays and films resonate of their fictional forebears and, consequently, of their own fictive selves (*The Revenger's Tragedy* and *Strangers on a Train* in *The Revengers' Comedies*; other "Hitchcockian" notes in *Communicating Doors* and *FlatSpin*¹⁴); "stagescapes"¹⁵ imaginatively call attention to themselves and their artifice (the "split-screen" staging of *How the Other Half Loves*; the three-story set of *Things We Do for Love*; two plays—*House* and *Garden*—running simultaneously on two stages in a single theater, with actors exiting one to enter the other; a *logical*, as it were, extension of *The Norman Conquests*, a trilogy of plays each taking place in another part of the family manse during the course of a single weekend); plays-within-plays and characters-playing-roles-within-plays serve self-reflexively (*The Beggar's Opera* in *A Chorus of Disapproval*; a mind-numbing puppet-show in *Season's Greetings*; a school girl's posing as a high-class hooker in *GamePlan*)—this brief and perforce incomplete, catalogue suggesting, I hope, the ingenuity and variety of ways Ayckbourn calls attention to the theatricality of his plays.

Combining to create dizzying configurations of multiple fictions, these metadramatic devices, like layer upon layer of transparent tissues, obscure distinctions among themselves, making empirical evidence increasingly insubstantial (and unreliable), thus calling into question perceptions of reality. R. D. V. Glasgow's observation on this phenomenon is useful: "Rather than describing this as fictional *confusion* of levels of reality, it is perhaps less misleading to term it as a *fusion*. Reality and play become indistinguishable."¹⁶ That "all the world's a stage," as insightful as Jaques's remark may be, is finally old hat, but to be reminded that this is the case, to be forced to acknowledge that our world differs imperceptibly from what is happening on stage can be intellectually and emotionally disrupting, especially if the action calls into question certain unexamined or sacrosanct perceptions. In a variety of ways, Ayckbourn's plays do just that.

Yet, no matter how outrageous, comic, or troubling this playwright's metadramatic devices may be, rarely, if ever, are they gratuitous. Rather each contributes in some manner or form to the play's overall meaning. To quote Stuart Baker: "Technical proficiency is perhaps Ayckbourn's most distinctive characteristic; he never lets us forget for very long that a playwright is at work. His devices are delightful in themselves, but they usually also enrich the action and comment on the characters."¹⁷ In other words, they do not jolt just to jolt—or just to get a laugh. When Ayckbourn calls attention to *play-as-play*, attention should be paid. And in no work to date has he employed metadramatic devices so conspicuously, numerous, variously as in *Comic Potential* where they combine to shatter theatrical illusion so forcefully that distinctions between on- and off-stage action all but vanish. The playwright might set his farce in "The foreseeable future when everything has changed except human nature,"¹⁸ but, this play insists, the future is ominously present.

As he has with most of his plays, Ayckbourn wrote (and directed) *Comic Potential* for theater-in-the-round, whose very architecture thwarts theatrical illusion.¹⁹ While the proscenium stage neatly defines the audience's field of perception thereby delineating the perimeters of *Art* and sustaining what States dubs "a double pretense: the play pretends that we don't exist (the fourth-wall convention) and we pretend that the play does (the willing suspension of disbelief),"²⁰ in-the-round has no such boundaries. If the stage incorporates not-quite-all the world, the entire auditorium does, and its inhabitants—off stage and on—all become players.

In the Stephen Joseph Theatre's arena theater, where *Comic Potential* debuted in 1998, the audience surrounds the stage, sitting no farther than six rows from the actors and the action. Albeit technically off-stage, audience members assume two roles on: protean backdrop which differs with every performance and within the course of a single one (exchanging seats at intermission, fidgeting with coats and candies) and unscripted chorus whose laughter, gasps and, alas, the occasional postprandial snore, comment extemporaneously on the action.²¹ Without the proscenium's imaginary cordon, the actors' rehearsed behavior and the audience's impromptu reaction tend to merge into a single theatrical experience, forcing illusion to battle for perceptual prominence. The audience, rather than relaxing into a fiction framed and defined by the proscenium arch, must actively distill the business of the stage from that on its periphery—a task made increasingly difficult in a play which reminds us repeatedly that *it is a play*, a dramatic comedy, not just about an android's personal and professional coming-of-age, but about *dramatic comedy*.

Reminiscent of Tom Stoppard's opening scene in his own metadramatically titled *The Real Thing*, *Comic Potential* begins with a comic *coup de théâtre* forcing the audience to question our initial perception of the action, which, in Ayckbourn's play, appears to be a highly charged hospital scene: a young man is faced with the

prospect of having his mangled foot amputated. The doctor announces that the X-rays “speak for themselves,” which *they* might, but *he* muffs his next line: “I’m going to remove the temporary plaster cast and amputate just above the ankle . . . (*The Nurse laughs.*)”²² At this moment, the audience’s attention is directed away from center stage to its periphery where, shrouded by darkness, sit the show’s director, Chandler (Chance) Tate, the programmer, Prim Spring, and the technician, Trudi Floote, who respond with various degrees of frustration to the actors’ gaffes. This is a TV studio, we quickly learn, and the actors are not really third-rate thespians, but defective *actoids*—androids programmed as actors. The *doctor* suffers from “random AU subrogation . . . It’s replacing its As with Us,”²³ while the *nurse*, more alarmingly, exhibits a sense of humor—inexplicable since unprogrammed. Further muddying perception, if delightfully so at this point, is our knowledge that the *actoids* are not really *mechanicals* at all, but human actors-playing-androids-programmed-to-be actors; or if observed from a slightly different perspective, they are actors speaking words they have learned by heart and behaving on stage as they have been directed. In a word, they have been *programmed* by the writer-director, making them not all *that* dissimilar from their cybernetic characters. Immediately, the audience starts sifting one reality from another in an attempt to distinguish real life from fiction.²⁴

At this moment, the only *real thing* appears to be impending chaos, which Prim is given the thankless job of reporting. Besides two disfunctioning actoids, filming is “Thirty-seven . . . now thirty-nine minutes behind” schedule,²⁵ the show’s viewing audience has plummeted from sixteen to fourteen million, and the Regional Director, Carla Pepperbloom (Chance’s nemesis, a.k.a. “The Black Death”²⁶), is due momentarily. Furthermore, she brings with her a young man, Adam Trainsmith, nephew to the studio’s owner, an aspiring comic writer and presumably Carla’s latest squeeze, the most recent of the “The Pepperbloom babes. She gets older, they get younger”²⁷—a line which resonates later in the play.

Complications accrue: Adam succumbs to “actoid empathy,”²⁸ developing a crush on the laughing nurse, JC-F31-triple 3, whom he names “Jacie Triplethree” and for whom he decides to write a television special. His Uncle Lester, an ancient Murdochian-figure confined to a wheelchair, arrives to hear his nephew’s pitch and watch a snippet of the show.²⁹ He likes what he sees, but agrees with Carla: Jacie cannot get the lead. The Regional Director, given to *showbiz* jargon, wants a more famous actoid, “We need that name, darlings. If we’re to sell it on, we need a household in this role.”³⁰ Her boss does not want Jacie to play the part because *it* is unreliable. Indeed the actoid, unprogrammed, but quite reasonably and with killer-comic timing, has just shoved a custard pie in Carla’s face. Concludes Lester, “She’s unstable, next time she could kill someone.”³¹ Carla threatens to shut down

the studio, and Chance goes off to get drunk leaving the young writer and his protégée with the first act's big-curtain:

JACIE: Adam, I don't want to be melted down. I don't want to forget this.

ADAM: Nobody's going to melt you down, I promise.

JACIE: Promise?

ADAM: I promise.

JACIE: Oh, Adam . . .

ADAM: Jacie . . .

JACIE: Adam . . .

The music continues as the lights fade to:

*Blackout.*³²

Heightened emotions, along with increasingly impoverished language, recall popular 19th-century melodrama, complete with melody, here emanating from the actoid herself. No need for *live* musical accompaniment.

The second act begins as a romantic caper: Adam and Jacie elope, first to a posh hotel, where he buys her stylish clothes, takes her to dinner and uses the Gideon Bible to teach her to read. Soon pursued by the tabloids, "Trainsmith heir in illicit android romance. The story of the decade,"³³ they flee to another *hotel*, one which rents rooms by the hour. Here Jacie, like Eve before her, encounters original sin. After a worldly and cynical prostitute posits that Adam, like all men, will discard her as soon as he has "taken what he wants from you,"³⁴ the dejected actoid picks up her purloined Gideon, happening upon Genesis 3:16: "Unto the woman he said: I will greatly multiply thy sorrow . . . : in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children: and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee." Her understated, understandable response: "Oh."³⁵

As she prepares to escape the brothel and her romantic fantasies of a life with Adam, he enters proclaiming his love. By now the actoid understands their predicament, which she frames metadramatically, in terms of an unsuccessful audition for the role of *woman*:

I am not Jacie, Adam. I am JCF 31 triple 3. . . . I'm a machine. . . . On the one hand, it's a fact that every day we stay together, you'll change and I'll stay the same. . . . Yes I can *play* your Jacie. . . . But I can never *be* your Jacie. Do you see the difference? I've been miscast, you see. . . . Audition failed.³⁶

When Adam tries to dissuade her, she loses her temper, relying on the vulgar vocabulary she has picked up from Chance:

This is not a programme. This is me talking, Adam. . . . and the only person in the world that I trust is standing there talking to me like a child. And I refuse to be treated like that, do you hear me? . . . well, you can just go to hell and screw yourself and see if I care, you—stupid fuck dyke!³⁷

Lester is quite right: for an actoid, she appears alarmingly unstable. For a frustrated human demanding to be taken seriously, she sounds alarmingly normal.

Enter Turkey, the brothel's proprietor, who orders Jacie off his turf. She refuses to leave. He pulls a knife, accidentally stabbing Adam, who jumps into the fray, unnecessarily given that a knife poses little threat to an actoid. Assuming a former role, "Terry. A closet lesbian,"³⁸ Jacie hurls Turkey out: "And if I see you in here again, you'll be talking out of some alternative orifice, all right?"³⁹ Dialogue from "*Phantom Squad* . . . a pilot for a series they never made"⁴⁰ seems exceedingly fitting for this *real-life* crisis.

Back at the studio, Lester fires Carla, who, driven by jealousy, leaked word of Adam and Jacie's elopement to the press, or as her boss sees it, ". . . chose to get personal, Mrs Pepperbloom, and not only that, not just with a person but personal with an actoid. I am dismissing you not just for disloyalty, Carla, but for sheer, downright stupidity."⁴¹ He offers the job of Regional Director to Jacie, who declines for reasons that, if rational to an android—"I'm unstable. I no longer control my own feelings,"⁴²—seem lunatic to a human: who among us can? Leaving his offer open, Lester departs. Determined to be reprogrammed, "melted down,"⁴³ Jacie is taken by truck to the factory. Adam returns bandaged and heartbroken, but otherwise unscathed, and Chance, characteristically, goes off to drown his sorrows in Scotch.

At the play's penultimate moment, Jacie returns ("I couldn't go through with it. . . . I think I must be in love," accepts Lester's job offer, agrees to produce Adam's "two-hour special," if cutting it to "seventy-five minutes, darling," and assumes her new "role" as Regional Director: "All right, people, let's go to work. (*incisively*) Action! (*As she speaks into the phone, the music surges and the other actoids obediently restart their scene. Curtain.*)."⁴⁴ Order restored, *life* goes on, but with a disturbing redistribution of power: an android, *who* will outlast and probably outperform the human beings, is in charge. This is no *deus ex machina*; here *machina est deus*—a rather frightening conclusion to a frightfully funny farce.

Comic Potential's most obvious metadramatic device is its subject matter—the creation of drama, or what passes for such in this future. Yet this play garners no immediate significance-by-association, as do Ronald Harwood's *The Dresser* or Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, by being set backstage of Shakespearean tragedies—*King Lear* and *Hamlet*, respectively. Nor does it benefit from comic reinforcement by mirroring a production of some lighter dramatic fare

as in the social satire of *The Beggar's Opera* in Ayckbourn's *A Chorus of Disapproval* or the farcical *Nothing On* in Michael Frayn's madcap *Noises Off*. Unspectacularly, *Comic Potential's* theatrical backdrop is a "branch-line TV" studio—"not even local" with equipment "fifty years old . . . requiring a diploma in archaeology to work it."⁴⁵ The title might promise comedy, but it does so guardedly—*potential* is not always realized.

Its characters too lack promise. The studio's owner, himself an antique, has become by his own admission "increasingly reliant on artificial intelligence"⁴⁶ in order to survive, which his doctors assure him he will until he's a hundred and twenty, presumably requiring ever more elaborate mechanical prostheses. In a stunningly acute visual pun, Lester already has a *spokesman* (tantalizingly called Marmion Çedilla) to whom he is wired and through whom he, quite literally, speaks. Marmion explains:

Although [Mr. Trainsmith] can hear perfectly, all his speech will be re-routed through the medium of myself. I would therefore ask you from now onwards to treat everything I say as coming from Mr Trainsmith himself. If I should need to interpolate personally at any time I will always identify myself to avoid confusion.⁴⁷

Lester's second in command, Carla, has little imagination and less artistic sensibility, while the studio's artistic staff consists of an over-the-hill film director given to afternoon tipping, two overworked, stressed-out lesbians and a stable of actors made of "a lot of wires and circuits and micro-servos and—bits."⁴⁸ That Lester and Chance, the heads of both the business and artistic sides of this enterprise, are American serves as a cynical indicator of the degree to which creativity has been prostituted in the service of capitalistic greed. For a serious artist, this milieu constitutes theatrical hell.

Additional self-reflexive devices contribute to this dismal vision of the future. The initial play-within-the-play is a tacky soap-opera-within-the-play—alliteratively entitled *Hospital Hearts*. At one point, when several humans are speaking, technicians turn down the actoids' volume and use headsets to film, creating a *dumb-dumb-show-within-the-soap-opera-within-the-play*. Adam's brief pitch to Lester, a third variation of this metadramatic sleight-of-stage, echoes Hamlet's *Mousetrap*, it too written to impress an uncle. Like his predecessor's play, Adam's fragment of a play-within-a-play succeeds: Lester agrees to finance his nephew's venture. So all is not totally lost. Perhaps, initiated by a latter-day Adam, potential exists for a comic renaissance, especially as the disconsolate Chance is still willing to teach the young man and their cybernetic protégée about comedy—and love.

Names of Ayckbourn's characters are frequently telling. While speaking specifically of *Comic Potential* and by implication of all his plays, the playwright says of *Trainsmith*:

I wanted to have a name that was slightly American but a name that suggested a man who prided himself on coming up from working stock. It suggests this generation of gritty Americans who will always tell you . . . "I started with a hammer and now I've got a \$20 million a day business!"⁴⁹

Of *Trudi Floote*:

It's slightly Dutch. . . . what will happen [in the world] increasingly is an intermingling. Like in America—the names are extraordinary. They're all contractions or alterations of European names. . . . And so I think I just followed the suggestion that the European Community has just [in the "foreseeable future"] interbred a little more since today.⁵⁰

To the observation, "Adam needless to say goes back to the original man," the playwright responds: "Yes. I very rarely use the same name twice. Because, of course, I have an Adam in *Time of My Life*. But I needed the name again."⁵¹

Occasionally names in Ayckbourn's work signify multivalently, as with Chandler (Chance) Tate, whose names hint of artistic promise *and* public approbation. His Christian name links him with old-fashion lighting; a chandler made and sold candles,⁵² forerunners of the paraffin lamps used to illuminate early cinematographs. His surname summons images of not one but four major art galleries, homes to renowned national and international collections: Tate Britain and Modern in London, Tate Modern in St. Ives and Liverpool. Heady company indeed.

But this once gifted wielder of light and art has been sacrificed to corporate greed, as Adam tells Jacie:

When my uncle's company took over they tried to get rid of him. He was still making quality movies at the time but they didn't want him. He wouldn't toe the line. He argued, he went over budget. That was his worst crime. He overspent. He upset the accountants. So they moved him sideways. And this is where he's been left.⁵³

In an industry that devalues art in pursuit of lucre, Chance is out of step, an anachronism.

Despite frustration and booze, he has yet to succumb totally to despair. In order to improve the show even at the risk of losing more viewers, he *offs* the soap's most popular character, directs Adam's project, and teaches Jacie how to execute a double take that doesn't resemble "Zero Mostel on speed."⁵⁴ No sooner does Chance-the-cynic announce to Adam that comedy is dead, Chance-the-master-craftsman launches into his first lesson: "But comedy—you want to know about comedy? . . . Comedy is two things."⁵⁵ The teacher begins.

Chandler's sobriquet also resonates. When Adam arrives at the studio, Prim and Trudi give the aspiring apprentice some advice: "PRIM: Incidentally, don't call him Chandler. He hates it. He prefers Chance. / ADAM: Oh, right. As in lucky chance? / TRUDI: As in positively his last."⁵⁶ *Chance*, Ayckbourn reminds us from the start, can be double-edged.

Despite its disconcerting premise, *Comic Potential* is an extremely funny farce, itself the most metadramatic of genres. Exaggerated makeup, outlandish costuming, acrobatic, or stilted, kinetics focus attention on actors at work, on the theatrics of theater. As Baker writes, farce " . . . presents not a view of the world as such, but a view of the world as theatre. The playwright as puppeteer or the performer as acrobat is always in sight."⁵⁷ Ayckbourn's presence in this play is conspicuous enough to confer upon it the subtitle, *Portrait of an Artist as a Young, and Old, Man*, Adam and Chance constituting separate periods in a playwright's career: the gifted, well connected youth anticipating a promising future; the politically incorrect cynic bedeviled by prelapsarian memories. Reminding us repeatedly that this is but an artful sham, the actoids, "performers as acrobats," call attention to the physical demands of their craft, their robotic postures, gestures, movements, quite literally reinforcing Henri Bergson's theory that laughter results from " . . . something mechanical encrusted upon the living."⁵⁸ And none more so than the play's central cybernetic character, Jacie, who during the course of the play evolves from an actoid-with-a-sense-of-humor to an apparently fully functioning human being, if remaining an android.⁵⁹

Jacie has an impressive archetypal and literary lineage, creating what Hornby refers to as "metadramatic estrangement" in which "the imaginary world of the main play is disrupted by a reminder of its relation, as a literary construct, to another literary work or works."⁶⁰ This being Ayckbourn, *works* plural. As Shaw plundered Greek mythology for *Pygmalion*, and Lerner and Loewe Shaw for *My Fair Lady*, so Ayckbourn pillages them all for *Comic Potential*. Like Galatea before her, Jacie is named and brought to *life* by an artist who falls in love with her; like Shaw's and Lerner and Loewe's quick-witted Elizas, she is tutored by two men. At play's end, "my fair lady" brings Professor Higgins his slippers. Shaw's Eliza storms off leaving her mentor to buy his own gloves. Early on in his play, Ayckbourn introduces the possibility that Jacie might become the musical's version of Shaw's flower girl: when the actoid afflicted by "AU abrogation" finally gets the lines

right, Chance echoes Lerner's oft-quoted, "By Jove, he's got it!"⁶¹ However, Jacie's quick wit leads not to domestic harmony and female subservience, but Shavian independence—and power.

Lectures on the nature of the craft itself must figure among the least subtle self-reflexive devices in a playwright's metadramatic stockpile. They can also have powerful impact, an affect not lost on many accomplished dramatists who seize the opportunity for a bit of theatrical proselytizing. Hamlet's instructions to the Players have at least three audiences: most germane to the task at hand, the actors enlisted to "catch the conscience of the king."⁶² Less immediate targets include actors in general and the rest of us, whose attention is temporarily diverted from Hamlet's dilemma to his theory that good acting involves holding "as 'twere, the mirror up to nature."⁶³ A lesson in technical execution intrudes upon theatrical illusion. In *Comic Potential*, Adam and Jacie are not the only students enrolled in this master class on comedy. We all are—Chance's playing Marmion to Ayckbourn's Lester.

Although Adam initially instructs Jacie on comic fundamentals, explaining silent movies, double takes, and custard pies, Chance's knowledge of comedy is vaster, ranging from the practical to the metaphysical. The young man admires great comedy; the old man understands it. In his first lesson, Chance proves an effective teacher—through explanation and example: "First [comedy is] surprise. You're like a magician. They're expecting this—but you give them that."⁶⁴ Moments later, responding to Adam's follow-up query, "You said that comedy was two things. The unexpected and . . . What was the other?" Chance practices a surprising comic turn of his own: "CHANDLER: (*shaking his fist*) Anger. (*He goes out.*)"⁶⁵

During rehearsal, Chance gives Jacie some advice which *dramatically* resonates of Ayckbourn's own theories on comedy:

You notice I'm always wanting you to do a little bit less, you're always wanting to do a bit more, yes? . . . You have to learn control, yes? . . . You show these people today what you can do, they will be knocked out. But don't try to show off, don't pander to them in any way. Always keep the comic truth. Because once they stop believing, they go home.⁶⁶

In his "Preface" to *Sisterly Feelings/Taking Steps*, Chance's creator emphasizes the necessity of a playwright's maintaining credibility:

Good farce explores the extreme reaches of the credible and the likely. It proceeds by its own immaculate internal logic and at best leaves its audience only at the end wondering how on earth they came to be where they are now. In other words, it takes the basic illusion of theatre whereby,

as in all plays, the dramatist first creates a world and then convinces his audiences of its credibility—farce takes this illusion and stretches it to the limits and outside them.⁶⁷

In this comic cosmos, farce must adhere to the “comic truth”—one not necessarily defined by laughter.

After Adam pitches his concept to Lester and Carla, the latter goes on the attack, “It’s supposed to be a comedy?” to which Adam, faltering, responds: “It’s funny, yes, but it’s also—I don’t know. . . .” Coming to the aid of his protégée, Chance explodes: “It’s a comedy. That doesn’t mean everyone has to be falling in bowls of custard, for God’s sake. It’s an allegory. It’s a satire. . . .”⁶⁸ The young writer senses that comedy embraces more than guffaws and pratfalls; the seasoned practitioner knows that its province stretches well into those realms conventionally perceived to belong solely to *serious* drama. While reminding his on-stage audience that such is the case, Chance introduces the notion to his audience off stage that the play we are watching might also be veering towards allegory and satire, which given two of its concerns—society’s increased dependence upon technology and corporate commandeering of the arts—it very well might, and does.

Later in the play, Chance argues for the preeminence of comedy among dramatic genres, with Jacie the focus of his frustration. After the actoid refuses Lester’s offer and decides to be melted down, the director tries to persuade her to take the job even though he cynically perceives in management’s motive not altruism, but greed: “Trainsmith’s only offered you the job so’s he’ll look enlightened. The rest of us know he’s doing it to try and break the union but it’ll be done in the name of progress so who’ll notice?”⁶⁹

In his attempt to convince Jacie, Chance appeals to Adam’s love, which she first denies, then concedes, but adopts as further reason to be melted down:

JACIE: . . . All right. Maybe he does love me. All the more reason I should melt down. Do you think I could bear it if anything like that ever happened to him again? Just because he loves me? It’s terrifying.

CHANDLER: But don’t you think that the only reason you’re terrified at the thought that something might happen to him again because he loves you, is because you care too much about him to want to see anything happen to him? Or to put it slightly more simply, because you love him?⁷⁰

Despite Chance’s circuitous explanation, Jacie insists on being deprogrammed. In a final display of comic desperation, as the technician with “*a handful of straps and restraints*”⁷¹ takes her off to the factory, she attempts her own unexpected turn—leaving Chance alone and exasperated:

Who's been teaching her *that*? Completely mistimed. If you're going to use a comedy trip, if you insist on using it, you've got to make sure you're not already drawing attention to your feet, otherwise the audience is expecting it. (*yelling after her*) I've told you time after time comedy is *surprise*, otherwise . . . it's . . . Oh, to hell with her. Why do they all want to play Hamlet? Or Hedda? (*He opens a drawer and produces the bottle of Scotch and swigs from it.*) Such a waste! All that potential! Who cares if it's an actoid or a person or a performing parrot? If it makes you laugh, treasure it. Tragedy? You can get that in the street being run over.⁷²

In this speech foregrounded by being the play's only soliloquy, Chance voices and calls to question the prevailing and popular notion that tragedy is the preeminent dramatic genre, comedy its trifling, less significant sibling. Given that premise, it follows that the challenges and skills of a tragedian—playwright or actor—must be superior to a comedian's. By extension, farceurs dwell among the unspeakable. Chance disagrees. Jacie's fate, like Hamlet's and Hedda's, is indeed tragic, but hers achieves tragic status paradoxically: she has *comic potential*, precious because so fleeting, so rare.

At this, *Comic Potential's* penultimate moment, scripts, real and fictional, merge, further obscuring illusory distinctions among them. Enter Adam, another artist with potential, to whom Chance passes the creative torch while calling attention to the illusion-within-the-illusion which weaves this play's fabric: "Ah! The author returns. Perfect timing." After offering the young man a drink, "Be warned, I will never ask you again," Chance makes his final exit, leaving Adam alone and wretched: "*Despairingly, he jabs at the console. He succeeds in animating the actoids. The Farmer and his Wife appear and restart part of their earlier sequence [from Adam's script], only this time without Jacie. . . . He stabs vainly at the console to stop it, then gives up.*"⁷³ As the actoids farcically mime caring for an absent Jacie, she, if "*rather dusty and unkempt*,"⁷⁴ makes a well-timed entrance and picks up her dialogue in this play-within-a-play, speaking Adam's lines which we heard rehearsed in act one, and which here apply to both the frame play and its insert: "I—fell—off—the lorry."⁷⁵ Jacie has, in a manner of speaking, done just that: she jumped from the truck taking her to the factory. *Real life* mirrors fiction and fictions converge—leaving the audience to sort out the jumble.

Without the benefit of human or mechanical actors, allusions to TV-series-within-the-play require the audience to envision fictional scripts. Carla cites *Madly Moving Parts* as an example of a highly successful show, one Chance considers "a load of crap"⁷⁶—a disagreement the audience has few resources to resolve, other than a title and our opinion of the speakers. Besides acting in *Hospital Hearts* and *Phantom Squad*, Jacie's vita includes *The Market Girls* in which she played "Tracy,

a fun-loving teenager . . . who came to a tragic end when she drowned herself off Wapping Pier clasping the baby that nobody wanted her to have.” She then

. . . went on to join the very successful *Teen Time* where [she] played Marcie, the bookish frump, who was later transformed by her love for Derek into a glamorous bride. Unfortunately their marriage ended prematurely when their car overturned in Sicily. . . . Next to the police series *Fair Cops* where [she] played Helen Dudgeon, the rookie with a sexual hang-up and a grudge—for which [she] received very favourable reviews despite the show’s brief run . . .⁷⁷

These allusions may be to fictional shows, but they call to mind any number of melodramatic serials the audience can recognize, which we ourselves may even have watched on occasion, therefore figuring among those viewers Chance describes as “. . . subnormal . . . people who can’t figure out how to turn on the set.”⁷⁸ Assuming the role of a politically correct chorus, Prim and Trudi call Chance’s remarks “very offensive.”⁷⁹ The fictional audience he is insulting, however, cannot hear him; the audience which can, and does, is sitting in the theater.

Along with TV-shows-within-the-play, role-playing-within-the-play, lectures on comic technique, and flat-out farce, all of which contribute to the audience’s sense of metadramatic estrangement, Ayckbourn uses literary and *showbiz* allusions to a degree unprecedented in his work to date. Not only does the playwright intentionally name Adam for the “original man,” he has Turkey stab him “[j]ust to the side of his rib cage.”⁸⁰ Immediately thereafter, Jacie takes charge of the pimp and her future. Metaphorically re-enacting Eve’s caesarian birth, the actoid assumes the role of original woman—a somewhat troubling development from a humanistic perspective.

Other scriptural allusions, rare in Ayckbourn’s canon, help color a picture of this new world. On the one hand, Adam’s using the Bible to teach Jacie to read and choosing Genesis as his text smacks of comic realism in this futuristic setting—not only have the Gideons seemingly always been with us, so apparently shall they always be. And if using the Bible as a textbook, why not start at the beginning? On the other hand, this playwright, like Chance, leans more towards surprise than logical expectations. So if he chooses Genesis as Jacie’s primer, and does so without a hint of irony, attention must be paid. *Comic Potential*, it would seem, presents a futuristic Genesis in which Eve, an android, grows increasingly independent of computerized control and the Judeo-Christian God grows ever more impotent.

Here Ayckbourn corkscrews Biblical mythology. In this play, God is a dualist: Lester, the decrepit ancient, pulls the financial strings, while Chance, the over-the-hill tippler, is in charge of whatever artistic merit remains. Ayckbourn foregrounds the image of director-as-god in the opening scene: “*Barely discernable in the*

gloom,⁸¹ Chance watches his own creation—the filming of *Hospital Hearts*—in primordial (or stygian) darkness. Reminiscing about the film industry’s glorious past, he evokes the *showbiz* image of director-as-deity:

I had this vast crew—in those days . . . Cameramen, carpenters, gaffers, electricians, best boys . . . You name it. They were all there. Assistant directors. Hundreds of assistant directors. And I’d come on the set and it’d be like God had arrived, you know . . . And there’d be this silence. As they all waited for me—me!—to speak. And I’d say very quietly—I never raised my voice on the set—people listened, they wanted to listen, they wanted—even the actors—they wanted to learn—and I’d say, ‘All right, people, let’s go to work—’ . . . And they’d mark the scene and I’d say—‘Action!’⁸²

However, in a turn more existential than Biblical, *Comic Potential*’s gods desert their set and their creations: Lester flies off to Rangoon, although at first he thinks he is bound for Rome—the latter perhaps a more apt destination for a Christian deity—and, at the play’s penultimate moment, Chance exits to drown his disappointments in Scotch. After an initial jump-start from their creators, it is apparently up to Adam and Jacie to go it alone.

Other less sacrosanct allusions recall comic legends from stage and film—James Finlayson, Buster Keaton, Zero Mostel, George Burns, Gracie Allen. In a fit of frustration, Chance remarks sarcastically to Prim: “Well, thank you, Stanley. Call me if Ollie falls off the roof, will you?”⁸³ Jacie, too, reminds the director of this comic duo. In his attempt to convince the actoid to accept Lester’s offer of Regional Director, Chance resorts to guilt: “You realize what you’ve done? The classic Oliver Hardy. You’ve just slammed a door in your own face. And not just your own. In every single android face. . . . Don’t you think you owe it to them to accept?”⁸⁴

A less sardonic Adam also reveres past comics: Chance is his “greatest living idol. After Hal Roach and Preston Sturges,⁸⁵ filmmakers renowned for their slapstick and screwball comedies respectively. Allusions beget allusions: Roach fostered the careers of Laurel and Hardy, who in turn worked with Finlayson; Sturges wrote and directed many wildly successful films, the title of perhaps his most famous—*Lady Eve*—echoing significantly in *Comic Potential*. The greater the audience’s awareness of modern comedy, the fewer the degrees of separation among aspects thereof—increasing the already rococo complexity of this theatrical experience.

Allusions to comic history and tradition are not limited to the 20th-century. As he has since his first popular success, *Relatively Speaking*, Ayckbourn borrows liberally from New Comedy. *Comic Potential*’s plot is Menanderian, its characters

drawn from that, and future, stockpiles. *Boy* (usually an outsider), Adam, *meets Girl*, Jacie. Their union (personal and professional) is opposed by several blocking figures: Carla, the sexually rapacious older woman, who covets Adam; Lester, the patriarchal representative of society, who opposes Jacie's being cast in Adam's play; and society itself, whose laws forbid romance between an android and a human. So, *Boy loses Girl*. In an unsurprisingly conventional *surprise* twist-of-plot, Jacie accepts Lester's job offer (itself an unexpected development) and returns to the studio and Adam. *Boy gets Girl*. Order is restored, the status-for-the-most-part-remains-quo—or so it at first appears.

Yet like all great comic writers, Ayckbourn reworks comic convention to his own ends. Cut from the same cloth as Menander's *Dyskolos* and Molière's *Alceste*, the testy Chance is a classic misanthropic blocking figure at odds with society. Tradition would have him oppose the young people's romance, although by play's end he is either reconciled to their union or banished from society. Being an Ayckbourn creation, Chance embraces *and* disrupts convention. Although initially opposed to Jacie's acting unplugged, on her own initiative, he later encourages the actoid to admit she loves Adam and accept Lester's job offer. In this respect, he, like *Dyskolos*, gives the young couple his blessing and bows to conformity by tacitly acknowledging the inevitable progress of society. Like *Alceste*, who histrionically rejects the salons of Paris and retreats to a solitary existence in the country, Chance stomps off to alcoholic isolation.

Another stock-figure Ayckbourn reconfigures intriguingly is the ingenue. Having never been outside a factory or a studio until she elopes with Adam, Jacie is indeed an innocent. Her innocence, however, is imaginatively tarnished by the roles she has played—an unwed teenage mother “who drowned herself off Wapping Pier,”⁸⁶ a “closet lesbian . . . blown up by terrorists,”⁸⁷ a nurse who is “a secret alcoholic,”⁸⁸ the aforementioned “rookie [cop] with a sexual hang-up and a grudge”⁸⁹—and whose indelicate dialogue she can, and does, recite when necessary. That being said, Jacie has extremely limited experience *playing* a human, although she learns quickly enough—in fact disconcertingly so if she, and her fellow androids, augur the future which this play's ending suggests they very well might.

Ayckbourn may draw from past conventions, but his plays' conclusions regularly undermine traditional comic resolution when, ideally, an audience senses that “all's well that ends well.” Common sense argues that such endings must be ephemeral, but for that moment when stage lights dim, before house lights rise, the promise of a harmonious future *feels* real. Superficially, *Comic Potential's* conclusion conforms to such expectations: Jacie is saved from melt-down, the couple is reunited and Adam's script will be produced. But all is not quite right. Chance may support Adam and Jacie's union, but he does so in spite of the law that, in a twist of futuristic miscegenation, prohibits human and android coupling.⁹⁰ He may support Jacie's ascension to Regional Director, but by so doing he puts his

own professional fate, and that of his present and future colleagues, in the hands of an android. Even Adam's future appears dicey. As Prim says earlier of Carla, Adam too will grow older, while his Eve will remain nineteen-years-old forever.⁹¹

Unlike traditional romantic comedies which end with marriage and the expectation of future generations, *Comic Potential's* conclusion promises no such eventuality, which Ayckbourn foregrounds in a side-splitting scene at a posh restaurant. Having had too much to drink, Jacie asks Adam to empty her "trap," which he does by climbing under the table only to discover that the actoid is "only constructed for simulated sex."⁹² They will have no biological children. The other young couple in the play, Prim and Trudi, are lesbians.⁹³ Indeed the only heir on the horizon is an actoid, Jacie, whose final words echo Carla and Chance. Mimicking her predecessor, Jacie assumes artistic control, cuts Adam's script—from two hours to "probably seventy-five minutes, darling"⁹⁴—and borrows verbatim from Chance's prelapsarian memories, "All right people, let's go to work."⁹⁵ This representative of the next generation has learned her lessons from seriously problematic progenitors. As have we all?

Ayckbourn has said that this play is "in some sense, a history of women through the 20th century from a fairly submissive, minor walk-on part in a hospital series to a someone who, in another ten years, is going to be running the network!"⁹⁶—and so it might well be read. More universally, *Comic Potential* tracks the evolution of a human being, from the mimicry of childhood to the relative self-authorship of adulthood, from being funny to possessing a sense of humor, from being loved to loving. At first, Jacie is forced to rely on her past roles to navigate in the *real* world. In order to explain her lack of luggage to a hotel clerk, the actoid summarizes a melodramatic tale of rococo complexity concerning abduction and murder in Spain.⁹⁷ Later she uses, and misuses, expressions learned from Chance. Yet in short order she assumes her own authority, decides her own future, expresses her own emotions, writes her own sentences. She will be deprogrammed; she does love Adam. Indeed, she has become her own author, composing her own exit line: "Whoops! Leave 'em laughing folks."⁹⁸

In a telling exchange between Prim and Adam, Ayckbourn raises the vexing issue of what it means to be human. Warning the young writer not to succumb to "actoid empathy," the programmer explains:

. . . the words it uses—its so-called conversation—that's merely an amalgam of all the conversations of all the characters it's played in all the shows it's ever been in. Its personality is nothing more than that. Every time you speak to it, you trigger some response. It pulls it out of its memory bank and blurts it back at you. That's all it's doing.

ADAM: Maybe that's all any of us do.⁹⁹

Here Ayckbourn hits a discordant note, one which echoes yet another twentieth-century metadrama, Beckett's *Endgame*. Defending himself against Hamm's semantic/metaphysical query, "Yesterday! What does that mean? Yesterday!" Clov shoots back: "That means that bloody awful day, long ago, before this bloody awful day. I use the words you taught me. If they don't mean anything any more, teach me others. Or be silent."¹⁰⁰

What Clov angrily asserts, Adam reasonably proposes: all that any of us do is repeat what we have learned—a potentially discomforting notion for those who cling to a belief in personal autonomy, as does Prim, who in her role as a member of the politically correct chorus, strikes back, "If I thought you really felt that, I'd think a lot less of you. I really would."¹⁰¹ The less sentimental Hamm simply changes the subject.

Although I have suggested that *Comic Potential* garners little thematic reinforcement by overt reference to other dramatic works—tragic or comic—its visual and verbal allusions to *Endgame*, a play itself awash in Biblical and Shakespearean references, cannot go unheeded by anyone familiar with Beckett's tragicomedy—another farce of sorts.¹⁰² Similarities abound, including the germinal metaphor of *play*—drama and gaming. Beckett's own translation of *Fin de Partie* refers to the last possible phase of a game of chess; Ayckbourn imagines at least two of his characters to be chess pieces: "Carla Pepperbloom . . . is dressed in black and Jacie—whom I always call 'the white queen'—is in a white nurse's uniform with a white hat. And they tend to play on different corners of the board."¹⁰³ Battle metaphors incorporate more than the conflicts between Hamm and Clov, Carla and Jacie, but among all *players* on and off the *board(s)*.

Both plays are set beyond our temporal ken: Ayckbourn's in the future, Beckett's in some nebulous time zone where too apparently "everything has changed except human nature."¹⁰⁴ The two *kings*, Lester and Hamm, physically resemble one another, which stage directions punctuate. First Beckett's: "*In a dressing-gown, a stiff toque on his head, a large blood-stained handkerchief over his face, a whistle hanging from his neck, a rug over his knees, thick socks on his feet, Hamm seems to be asleep.*"¹⁰⁵ Now Ayckbourn's: "*Lester Trainsmith is wheeled in. He is well wrapped up and remains motionless throughout. Apart from the flickering of his eyelids there is little evidence that he is alive at all.*"¹⁰⁶

Whereas Hamm speaks volumes and Lester, initially, remains silent, both rely heavily on their servants: Marmion, whom Chance describes as a "talking pink blancmange,"¹⁰⁷ speaks for his employer and pushes the old man's wheelchair; Clov, "*Very red face,*" runs errands and pushes Hamm's "*armchair on castors.*"¹⁰⁸

Chance too evokes images of Hamm, whom he echoes when drawing attention to himself as an actor approaching the end of his career. HAMM: "I'm warming up for my last soliloquy."¹⁰⁹ CHANCE: "My life's just run out of script."¹¹⁰ Ayckbourn's actoids also bear kinetic resemblance to Clov, whose "[s]tiff,

*staggering walk*¹¹ and routine chores give him the air of a mechanical being. As *Endgame*'s stories-within-stories-within-stories reinforce the fictive nature of its characters' endeavors (and Beckett's play), so do the plays-within-plays-within-plays which infuse *Comic Potential*. Finally both make significant intellectual demands upon the audience, ones expected from the Beckett canon, but rarely remarked upon in Ayckbourn's. Not only do both plays rattle our epistemological and ontological bearings, they posit disturbing issues of eschatology: Hamm and Clov are apparently the last men alive. Are Ayckbourn's humans the last of their species, which within these metadramatic milieus is to ask: of ours?

Despite these correspondences, *Comic Potential* and *Endgame* are, of course, quintessentially dissimilar creations. Yet as *Hamlet*'s behind-the-scenes existence in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* emphasizes the tragedy inherent in the fates of even these menial courtiers, and an amateur production of Gay's eighteenth-century spoof on Italian opera and contemporary politics foregrounds Ayckbourn's own biting, if subtler, satire in *A Chorus of Disapproval*, so *Endgame*'s allusive presence casts a shadow over *Comic Potential*, which, as the lights dim on Jacie and her obedient actoids, contributes to the sense that the future adumbrated in this final image could be every bit as grim as the one facing Hamm and Clov.

Ayckbourn has said repeatedly that comedy is "tragedy interrupted."¹² Given that premise, the playwright's ultimate choices include: interrupting the tragedy to end on a purely comic note, pressing on into the realms of tragedy, or—as in *Comic Potential*—concluding on a comic-high while presaging the inevitable. We might not, as Chance bemoans, all *want* to play Hamlet or Hedda, but we will. In time we too will suffer our own individual tragedies—if only by getting ignobly "run over" in the street—an inevitability the accretion of metadramatic devices helps realize by shattering repeatedly the illusionary distinctions between on- and off-stage action. Jacie may remain nineteen forever, but Adam and the rest of us will not. Tragedy can only be interrupted, for as *Comic Potential* dramatizes, there is always a technician "*with a handful of straps and restraints*" lurking in the wings. So while we still can, and offered the choice, Chance (and Ayckbourn?) would have us embrace the comic: "Who cares if it's an actoid or a person or a performing parrot? If it makes you laugh, treasure it."

Notes

1. *A Chorus of Approval* (Scarborough: Stephen Joseph Theatre, 1999) 11.

2. 16.

3. When I began writing this essay in late summer 2001, Ayckbourn had just completed his 60th play, *RolePlay*, the third of his trilogy, *Damsels in Distress* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002). As of January 2002, he had completed his 61st, *Snake in the Grass*, which was staged that summer. Since

then, he has completed his 62nd, *The Jollies*, which opened in December 2002, at the Stephen Joseph Theatre. One has to work quickly to keep abreast of this playwright's "stats."

4. Michael Holt, *Alan Ayckbourn* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1999) 2.
5. Michael Billington, *Alan Ayckbourn*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1990) 1.
6. Sidney Howard White, *Alan Ayckbourn* (Boston: Twayne, 1984); Albert E. Kalson, *Laughter in the Dark: The Plays of Alan Ayckbourn* (Associated University Presses, 1993); Bernard F. Dukore, ed., *Alan Ayckbourn: A Casebook* (New York: Garland, 1991); Duncan Wu, *Six Contemporary Dramatists: Bennett, Potter, Gray, Brenton, Hare, Ayckbourn* (New York: St. Martin's, 1995); Susan Carlson, *Women & Comedy: Rewriting the British Theatrical Tradition* (Ann Arbor: UP Michigan, 1991); Christopher Innes, *Modern British Drama: 1890-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992); Ruby Cohn, *Anglo-American Interplay in Recent Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995); Paul Allen, *Alan Ayckbourn: Grinning at the Edge* (London: Methuen, 2001).
7. Allen 260.
8. Alan Ayckbourn, *The Crafty Art of Playmaking* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002).
9. I am grateful to, and borrow from, Simon Murgatroyd, who describes *Comic Potential* as "an impromptu masterclass in writing comedy." "Virtual Realities: Fantasy in the Work of Alan Ayckbourn," diss., U of Hull, 2001, 40.
10. Ian Watson, *Conversations with Ayckbourn* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988) 69.
11. Richard Hornby, *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception* (Associated University Presses, 1986) 31.
12. Samuel Beckett, *Collected Shorter Plays* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1984) 153.
13. Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1985) 154.
14. Ayckbourn himself referred to the "Hitchcockian" echoes in these plays during a lecture on playwriting on 13 August 2001, at the Stephen Joseph Theatre.
15. I am grateful to Ian Watson for this extremely helpful term in connection with Ayckbourn's theater. Watson 69
16. R.D.V. Glasgow, *Madness, Masks, and Laughter: An Essay on Comedy* (Madison: Farleigh Dickinson UP, 1995) 145.
17. Stuart E. Baker, "Ayckbourn and the Tradition of Farce," *Alan Ayckbourn: A Casebook*, ed. Bernard F. Dukore (New York: Garland, 1991) 31.
18. Alan Ayckbourn, *Comic Potential* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999) n. pag.
19. For further discussion of this phenomenon, see Stephen Joseph, *Theatre in the Round* (New York: Taplinger, 1968) 142-50.
20. States 206.
21. Of course, some of this *filtering* occurs in any theater, of any configuration: audience members cough, rustle candy wrappers, laugh or just attract attention to themselves by being in close proximity to us. The difference between-in-the- round and proscenium auditoria is one of degree, including the degree of difficulty required to maintain the pretense of which States writes.
22. Ayckbourn, *Comic Potential* 2.
23. 2.

24. The first time I saw *Comic Potential*, Ayckbourn was watching his play from the Stephen Joseph Theatre's light-and-sound-box. The author/director was overseeing his fictional creation (Chance) directing actors-playing-actoids, thereby forcing dramatic illusion to contend mightily with reality for this audience member's attention.
25. Ayckbourn, *Comic Potential* 3-5.
26. 5.
27. 15.
28. 60.
29. Ayckbourn's biographer refers to this character as "a cross between Rupert Murdoch and Howard Hughes." Allen 300.
30. Ayckbourn, *Comic Potential* 56.
31. 58.
32. 65.
33. 93.
34. 97.
35. 97.
36. 99.
37. 100.
38. 103.
39. 102.
40. 103.
41. 108.
42. 111.
43. 111.
44. 118-19.
45. 16-17.
46. 110.
47. 48.
48. 60.
49. Glapp, Albert-Reiner and Nicolas P. Quintmere, eds., *A Guided Tour Through Ayckbourn Country* (Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 1999) 181.
50. 181.
51. 182.
52. As James Joyce reminds us, ironically, in "A Little Cloud," whose wimpish protagonist is also called Chandler.
53. Ayckbourn, *Comic Potential* 35.
54. 25.
55. 32.
56. 17.
57. Baker 28.

58. Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: Macmillan, 1917) 49.

59. The role of Jacie, originally played brilliantly by Janie Dee, requires an actor to affect the mannerisms of movement and speech which are initially fairly mechanical (androidlike), but grow increasingly more lifelike during the course of the play. I am not alone in my admiration for Dee's performance as Jacie. Among her tributes for this role: in England she was named Best Actress—Olivier Award, Best Actress—London Evening Standard Award, Best Actress—Critic's Circle; in New York, Best Actress—OB Awards, Best Actress—Theatre World Awards, Best Actress—Drama League Citation.

60. Hornby 88.

61. Ayckbourn, *Comic Potential* 6.

62. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (New York: Washington Square-Pocket, 1992) 119.

63. 137.

64. Ayckbourn, *Comic Potential* 32.

65. 35.

66. 45.

67. Ayckbourn, *Sisterly Feelings/Taking Steps: Two Plays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1981) vii.

68. Ayckbourn, *Comic Potential* 51.

69. 113.

70. 113.

71. 114.

72. 115.

73. 116-17.

74. 117.

75. 118.

76. 55.

77. 40-41.

78. 5-6.

79. 6.

80. 104.

81. 1.

82. 26-27.

83. 71.

84. 112-13.

85. 10.

86. 40.

87. 103.

88. 62.

89. 40-41.

90. Ayckbourn himself suggests this futuristic miscegenation: "I mean they are the first of their kind, if you like a mixed marriage. There is implied in the play a terrible prejudice, that was certainly there against black people, against androids." Qtd. in Glapp and Quintmere 178.

91. Ayckbourn, *Comic Potential* 99.

92. 92.

93. Murgatroyd makes an excellent point: "Paradoxically for a play about creativity, the relationships in *Comic Potential* signal another grim future for mankind, for they are unable to fulfil the ultimate act of creation." (43).

94. Ayckbourn, *Comic Potential* 118.

95. 27, 119.

96. Qtd. in Glapp and Quintmere 176.

97. Ayckbourn, *Comic Potential* 69.

98. 115.

99. 60.

100. Samuel Beckett, *Endgame: A Play in One Act* (New York: Grove, 1958) 43-44.

101. Ayckbourn, *Comic Potential* 60.

102. Beckett's repeated line, "Why this farce, day after day?" reinforces this point. *Endgame* 14, 32.

103. Glapp 181.

104. On the subject of setting a fiction in the future, Ayckbourn states, "In one sense it's a classic science fiction ruse, to put a projection of one thing against present reality in order to show it up." Qtd. in Glapp and Quintmere 176.

105. Beckett, *Endgame* 1.

106. Ayckbourn, *Comic Potential* 47.

107. 48.

108. Beckett, *Endgame* 1.

109. 78.

110. Ayckbourn, *Comic Potential* 116.

111. Beckett, *Endgame* 1.

112. Ayckbourn repeated this during a lecture on playwriting, at the Stephen Joseph Theatre, 13 August 2001.

