

# British Theatre Guide

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## Drowning on Dry Land

Alan Ayckbourn

A Daniello Tarento Production

Jermyn Street Theatre

(2011)

Premiered at Scarborough in 2004 but only now getting a London production, *Drowning on Dry Land* is amusing but fairly light weight Ayckbourn that cocks a snook at celebrity culture, media manipulation and opportunist litigation without having any particular bite.

Charlie Conrad was a runner who made it as far as international athletics but fell, injured, in his first big race and the media focus on the drama of the loser's injury rather than the winner. Invited on a quiz show he couldn't get a single question right but audiences liked him, or liked watching him fail. Such is the nature of modern celebrity and for the past few years he has been coining it in for being a non-achiever, a failure at everything he touches: even opening a supermarket he manages to knock over a pyramid of cans and that's what delights his fans.

Now he has a grand Georgian house in the country with a Victorian folly in the garden: a tower with a trick staircase that appears to take you upwards but when you think you are about to reach the top deposits you back in the garden, an obvious metaphor for the kind of celebrity that achieves nothing. It is here that Christopher Coghill's likeable but uncharismatic Charlie is meeting the astute but honest agent who launched him (Les Dennis makes him seem genuinely caring) and a currently high-flying, manipulative media journalist who wants to do a recce interview prior to one on television. Siobhan Hewlett gives her a pushy over confidence that masks the insecurity behind her cleverness. This woman knows the world she works in but does she realise she is about to come a cropper.

As Charlie's trophy wife Linzi who misses the attention she had in her former show biz career, Emma Swain nicely hints at the common background behind her poshness and condescension. Linzi (how do you think of a name like that?) is furious that Charlie's doing the interview. She wants him at their little boy's birthday party for which she's booked a clown to entertain the children. That's Marsha (Helen Mortimer) who is a big fan of Linzi's husband. Her alter-ego clown is red-nosed Mr Chortles, who tends to take over her shy personality once she puts on the costume. But is Mr Chortles all that she is performing?

Marsha turns out to be the cat among the pigeons in Charlie's dovecote and the second act sees naïve Charlie trying to defend himself against accusations of sexual assault and Ayckbourn contrives what is in effect a court scene with Mark Farrelly giving a stunning, if nearly OTT performance as a cunningly duplicitous barrister and Russell Bentley as the rather wimpy prosecuting lawyer.

Ayckbourn is pushing things into farce with a celebrity who is famed for failure (though *X-Factor* goofs may get their moment of fame it doesn't provide them with a media career) but director Guy Retallack gets very believable performances from his cast and drives things more gently. You don't

have to think too hard to remember news stories that could have been source material for this play, but this isn't savage satire or biting comment, just a laugh at the ridiculous world the media has created - though Ayckbourn clearly places the blame equally on the audience who lap it up.

My companion commented that it was nice for a change to see a show and have a laugh without having to think too hard. If you want a pleasantly enjoyable night in the theatre that is entirely undemanding (except on the actors), *Drowning on Dry Land* could fit the bill but it is not quite vintage Ayckbourn.

*Run ends 19th March 2011*

**Reviewer:** [Howard Loxton](#)