

British Theatre Guide

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Roundelay

Alan Ayckbourn

Stephen Joseph Theatre Company, Scarborough, in association with Guildford's Yvonne Arnaud Theatre

Yvonne Arnaud Theatre Guildford

26–31 January 2015

In this, his 78th play, Ayckbourn is still surprising and challenging his audiences, and not averse to challenging himself at the same time.

He has provided five short plays to be performed over one evening, but in no particular order. Just before curtain-up, audience members randomly choose the sequence and there are 120 different permutations. Is this a crafty way to encourage more than just the one viewing?

Now, having seen them, I can only wonder how each play would seem if they had been in a different order. If, for example, we had seen Sarah Stanley as the self-publishing novelist with a horrifying secret, would we then have understood (or accepted) her as the efficient secretary to a politician? Although we might have then understood her later hysterical reaction in that role.

Would Gale's (Elizabeth Boag) close, and painful, encounter with a vicious hit man in *The Agent* have had any bearing on the break up of her past relationship with the well-meaning vicar Russ (Richard Stacey).

Each play is complete in itself, yet they overlap and intertwine with most of the same characters appearing each time in a different situation, and Ayckbourn has managed to give us farce, a thriller, a murder, a tantrum by a wannabe reality star combined with a touching, but futile, reunion, and a sad old man trying to relive his youth.

The first, on the night I attended, was *The Politician*, and a predictably stereotyped politician it is, but recognisable enough to raise some chuckles around the audience as he talked over the top of his accuser and gave false promises. The arrival of a young girl in school uniform and the presence of a BBC film crew makes sure he gets his comeuppance.

Krystle Hylton does a brilliant job as the ambitious schoolgirl and is even more dynamic in *The Star* as the more than confident wannabe diva, but would it have made sense if the order of those two plays had been reversed?

The last play on my night, and the most touching, was *The Judge*, where Russell Dixon as an old man with lapses of memory is trying to recreate his former life when his wife was alive, aided by call girl Lindy (Brooke Kinsella) dressed as his wife. She weaves her dreams in with his as she tries, and succeeds, in keeping him happy, and is delighted that their reluctant 'waiter' for the occasion is hit man Lance (Leigh Symonds).

Nigel Hastings blusters and prevaricates as Leo the politician and creates a very different character as Ashley, the inoffensive, well-meaning neighbour living next to his mother, but having watched

programmes such as *The Sweeney* gives him an insight into how to defeat thugs.

All tricky plays to direct as well as to write, but Ayckbourn is very experienced in both roles and has brought excellent performances out of each and every one of the cast.

I had thought that the concept of overlapping random plays could be very confusing and complicated, but in fact it isn't at all and seeing the same characters in different situations is totally intriguing.

Reviewer: [Sheila Connor](#)