

British Theatre Guide

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Season's Greetings

Alan Ayckbourn

Bill Kenwright Production

Yvonne Arnaud Theatre, Guildford, and touring
(2011)

This play says Ayckbourn, is about success and failure, jealousy and self deception, greed, envy, lust and gluttony, and as if that wasn't enough, there is love there too, although sometimes not very evident. In this cosy family home the house is ostensibly crammed with excited children, but these we never see. Instead it is the adults who become over-excited (not to mention a little drunk) and there are tears before bedtime, but not before Ayckbourn has given us plenty to laugh at with his cleverly observed characterisations, exaggerated maybe just a little.

He populates his play with characters and situations we recognise. Certainly the Guildford audience picked up on every one with some knowing chuckles at the antics and foibles of this family and friends, thrown together for the festive season and determined to enjoy themselves.

It all has to run like clockwork to be a success and hostess Belinda (Glynis Barber) is doing her best despite the sound of her sister-in-law Phyllis busy ruining dinner in the off-stage kitchen, and nearly finishing herself off in the process. Sue Wallace makes full use of the comic potential of Phyllis getting delightfully muddled and a little drunk, as she later flirts with young and handsome Clive (Mathew Bose), and it is Clive, the writer friend of Belinda's neurotic sister Rachel (Jenny Funnell), who inadvertently creates the most trouble.

Meanwhile heavily pregnant Patti (Barbara Drennan) is trying to persuade her feckless husband Eddie (Ricky Groves) to say goodnight to their multiple children; bigoted ex-security guard Uncle Harvey (Denis Lill) sits in the living room delighting in watching an old violent war film, grumbling bombastically about the state of the nation, and he has bought all the children guns for Christmas. As a contrast Good Old Uncle Bernard (Christopher Timothy), a doctor so incompetent he cannot distinguish between life and death is, to everyone's dismay, determined to perform his annual puppet show. Memories of last year's boringly long drawn out *Ali Baba* have not diminished, and Harvey has a thing or two to say about that.

To add to Belinda's sense of injustice, husband Neville (Mark Healy) is more intent on mending something - anything - and has failed to buy her a present - again! She has her hands full, and a little light relief with the aforementioned Clive almost spills over into tragedy.

It might surprise people to know that not everything this prolific writer has produced has been an instant success. This play, for instance, originally produced in the wide open spaces of The Roundhouse, was considered a failure yet resurrected a few years later was described as his best. The theatre world is fickle and so much depends on performance and attention to detail. Under Robin Herford's well-balanced direction comedy takes precedence but he doesn't ignore the tensions and undercurrents beneath some of the determined jollity.

Attention to detail is present too in Michael Holts well designed set which, with cut-away walls, manages to fit three rooms and a staircase onto the stage, and a very solid front door which easily resists several slamming episodes.

This play will certainly make you laugh, and its a very enjoyable theatrical evening but, in the run up to Christmas, could it also be a warning!

Touring to High Wycombe, Malvern, Peterborough, Wolverhampton, Brighton and Bath

Reviewer: [Sheila Connor](#)