

Directing Ayckbourn (and Contemporary British Comedy) in an American Context: Establishing ‘True Brit’ in the Early Rehearsal Process

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“England and America are two countries divided by a common language.”

Attributed to George Bernard Shaw

“Englishmen never, ever say what they mean – [that’s why] most of my writing is so oblique.”

Alan Ayckbourn in conversation, Institut Francaise, 26 April 2014

American directors face major challenges staging contemporary British plays. The director must consider appropriate accents and vocal placement, variants in posture or movement predicated on class distinctions, while deciphering “loaded” textual referents that bundle implicit meanings for the British but remain opaque to most American audiences. All of this must be prepared in advance to instill confidence and direction from the beginning of the rehearsal process. Experienced directors working with professional casts will have a reliable dramaturgical process in place, although as Alan Ayckbourn pointedly observes, capturing the essential “Englishness” of his plays most often proves elusive for American casts and directors. This problem is exacerbated for the neophyte director, the MFA director in training, or the faculty director working with undergraduate acting students. This article provides strategies for capturing this elusiveness with particular focus on the faculty director. By sharing our outcomes, we hope to provide a template that will be helpful for directors charged with producing a contemporary British play with American actors.

These outcomes stem from an applied research workshop between Paul Castagno, Ph.D, a professor at the University of North Carolina--Wilmington, and Paul Elsam, Ph.D a professional actor and senior lecturer at Teesside University in the UK. Paul Elsam had received research funding to network with a colleague in the US on a project involving applied research. The actors were undergraduate theatre majors at UNCW. Dr. Elsam has ongoing contact with Ayckbourn and is intimately familiar with his directing style: observing many of his rehearsals with professional actors at the Stephen Joseph Theatre [SJT]; and, contracting Ayckbourn to conduct week-long workshops with student actors (then staged for a public audience).

Professor Castagno is a recent Fulbright scholar to the University of York where, for eight months he researched the Ayckbourn collection in the Borthwick archive, and attended eight professional productions of Ayckbourn’s plays across the UK. Primary source research from the archive, plus his personal interview with Ayckbourn, are excerpted for this article. As a perennial director in the UNCW departmental season, he helmed Ayckbourn’s *Private Fears in Public Places [PFPP]*, an ensemble piece most suitable to a diverse young adult cast with a balance of fully realized male and female characters.

Sir Alan Ayckbourn has premiered most of his 81 plays in Scarborough. The majority transfer to the National Theatre or West End, with over 35 plays “crossing the pond” to Broadway, Off-Broadway, and regional theatres, such as Houston’s Alley Theatre. Despite a litany of fine NY reviews and several Tony awards, Ayckbourn laments that English sensibilities and behaviors are often caricatured in American productions, lacking the interplay of ensemble so often achieved at the SJT.

Our central objective was to capture Ayckbourn's elusive "Englishness" while working with relatively inexperienced, albeit eager student actors. The first week of rehearsal transformed into a preliminary workshop to establish a solid grounding in British culture, mannerisms, taxonomies, as well as, techniques relating to speech and movement. We will consider several key factors in approaching an Ayckbourn play, plus various exercises or techniques that proved successful with student or inexperienced actors. Thus, to effect Ayckbourn's 'world of the play' meant reorienting American sensibilities into believable British behaviors. Inculcating confidence in the students as they grappled with foreign codes of language and behavior required an immersive one-week workshop involving text, movement and speech patterns.

To maximize outcomes in speech, we integrated the departmental voice professor, Christopher Marino, who had trained and worked professionally as an actor in the UK. British dialects or accents were introduced organically with an emphasis on contrasting "posh" hauteur with working class tendencies in speech cadence, vowel formation, and pitch. Marino's vocal coaching assured scrutiny and diligence from the cast in maintaining vocal placement and reducing slippage. Attention must be paid as young actors tend to fall out of accent under stress or when breath support is faulty. Importantly, Marino's role carried through the entire rehearsal period.

Some Key Questions

As we probed the text of *PFPP* our methodology focused on asking and addressing a series of six questions:

- 1) How do we best create a believable world for our students to inhabit that is far from their realm of experience? An essential Ayckbourn credo is that "actors must live in his plays, not act in them. The key is to not play to the comedy, or feel it has to be pushed."¹ (Ayckbourn Interview)
- 2) How do we approach accents as markers of socio-economic and cultural conditioning? We are not striving for an entirely unified sound, but one that marks class, is individuated to the character, and can be repeated.
- 3) What lines have specific meanings that need further explanation, and how do we "translate" those meanings; i.e., find American corollaries? Importantly, the UK tendency toward understatement needs to be fleshed out to the "extreme," when what is said is *opposite* to what is meant.
- 4) How do we maintain the company's focus through a painstakingly deliberate and close reading of text? What tactics should address actors "tuning out" if that becomes an issue?
- 5) How do we define status, age and emotional states through movement and posture? How do these characters walk? Take space? What levels of intimacy are there between characters?
- 6) As drinking and drunkenness is a major trope in the play how can this best be realized so that it isn't forced? What examples can be provided?

The workshop began with an exacting communal reading of the play text. Energized by the engaged workshop format, the cast explored cultural and linguistic constructs of each character. Once on their feet, attention to the characters' posture, movement and gestural patterns disclosed some immediate hurdles for our millennial student cast. Some baseline issues, like stooping or slouching postures would need to be addressed; small wonder--students spend hours huddled over a computer or face down texting. In distinguishing American versus British sensibilities, posture not only bulks some heavy subtext, it facilitates production of accents. In America, an erect posture might indicate qualities like confidence or power; in Britain, however, posture is primarily a marker for class distinction and social rank. Push back the shoulders and raise the neckline helps the actor set up for a proper "posh" accent.

To address movement priorities, a modified "viewpoints" approach was adopted with exercises that focused on body shape, spatial relations, and pace. Contrasts were encouraged: for example, an upper class character would "take" space, while working class would make "small" or strive to be unobtrusive. The workshop accelerated the formation of an underlying "architecture" that proved foundational when traditional rehearsals began.

Applying the cultural model: detecting the underlying textual codes

Awareness of cultural distinctions helped undergraduate actors to understand the world of the play. The next step was to actualize this knowledge. A close reading of the first scene literally "opened" the world of the play, and provided a template going forward. The process moved from an understanding of textual referents in the scene to a movement exercise that unlocked its dynamic.

Private Fears in Public Places**Scene 1**

A large, unfurnished London flat.

Nicola and Stewart.

Nicola: It's rather small, isn't it?

Stewart (*anxiously*): You think so?

Nicola: Well, yes, I do. I mean, your brochure says a three-bedroomed flat, doesn't it?

Stewart: There are. There are three, surely?

Nicola: No, I beg your pardon, there are actually two.

The play opens in a 'large, unfurnished London flat.' The unfurnished state of the flat defines it as available for rent; the size and location — a few lines on, the audience is told that the flat is adjacent to Nicola's workplace on Sloane Street — informs us that would-be renters would need to be wealthy. This apartment is close to several embassies and the posh Harrods store; older audience members may be reminded of the joke term "Sloane Ranger," used in the 1980s as an identifier of young English aristocracy at play in the city, including the soon-to-be, Princess Diana. (Barr)

Nicola's initial, somewhat haughty demeanor toward the letting-agent Stewart is countered by the emerging subtext, which gives the scene a brittle tension. We learn that Nicola's fiancé Dan is unemployed, and that he was supposed to meet her at the flat during her lunch hour; Nicola's house-hunting thus seems curiously futile — her means for postponing the inevitability of this failed relationship. The quibble over bedrooms is actually central to this couple's relationship problems: the second bedroom is for 'guests' (and might also offer somewhere for them to escape each other after a row); and we hear that Dan even wants a third bedroom, so that he can have a 'study' (because, as we later learn, his estranged father has a study). Nicola, still clinging to the wreckage, would (we learn later) like this room for a nursery. However, not only do upper-class English people "never, ever say what they mean," they often routinely hide what they feel (Hegarty): thus, in this scene, to counter Nicola's barely-glimpsed disturbed internal state, Stewart must remain as unflappable as a bespoke tailor on Saville Row charging a client twenty-five-hundred pounds for a handmade suit. Any "leakage" of his own discomfort must be controlled, or at least expressed unseen to Nicola: in a proscenium or thrust staging format, this behavior might be subtly projected once or twice, downstage through a fourth-wall window.

Nicola: Well, yes, I do. I mean, your brochure says a three bedroomed flat, doesn't it?

Britain's 1968 Trades Description Act criminalizes wrongful description of something offered for sale or hire: tellingly, it's a commonly applied law known by name to almost all Brits. Nicola's reply is thus by necessity (from her point of view) direct — even, accusatory: Stewart needs to understand that as a service provider he has misled her and is now wasting her valuable time. Yet, even this relatively direct inquiry carries subtext: at worst, someone like Stewart (whose ear is highly attuned to subtext) is supposed to "hear" something like "Of course it's too small! Are you a fool, or maybe incompetent? After all, your brochure is a lie..."

Stewart: There are. There are three, surely?

Stewart's quizzical response — 'There are. There are three, surely?' — a qualified and tentative statement of the obvious, is actually delivered in two sections. The former is what he meant to say: it is a spontaneous defensive reaction; a statement of fact, since he's almost certainly appraised the flat already before Nicola's visit. Such a direct statement, in light of Nicola's status, and the Trades Description Act, marks Stewart out as brave, albeit, bordering on foolish. Realizing this, he waters down his first statement, adding 'surely?' Here, 'surely?' means something like, "or maybe I'm mistaken?"

Nicola: No, I beg your pardon, there are actually two.

'I beg your pardon' is quintessential English doublespeak used across the social spectrum. No pardon is being begged or even casually sought; Nicola is anything but sorry. The subtext — implicit to the audience through Nicola's restrained vocal tone (like Chekhov, Ayckbourn trusts his actors), and perhaps even in the shadings of emotion (most likely irritation) in her voice — is probably something like: "So are you calling *me* a liar?" Handled lightly — through a thin smile, perhaps — the speaker's high status will seem unassailable. Worse still for Stewart, the brief phrase that follows contains the troubling word, 'actually.'

While this word stereotypically peppers the speech of the English upper classes — suggesting perhaps a Hugh Grant-like attack of modesty (“Well actually yes I did indeed go up to Cambridge but well, actually, I’m afraid I really am in fact quite useless”) — here “actually” means something closer to: “next time, little man, get your facts straight.” In the event Stewart’s status is partially restored only when Nicola lets slip that her fiancé is unemployed (or ‘between jobs’ as she puts it). Not that you’d see much evidence of Stewart’s restoration: he is after all obliged to continue to play a subtly subservient role, in order to maintain the dignity (and so potential future loyalty) of his client. The nearest he gets to biting back at Nicola is towards the end of the scene, when — privately offended, no doubt, by her characterisation of the third bedroom as a ‘box room’ — i.e., a tiny space big enough only for a single bed, he gives up, stating simply:

Stewart: Point taken. I do understand.

Spoken through the mask of a *thinnish* smile, this should be interpreted by Nicola as meaning: “Enough! Please let us move on.”

On race and ethnicity

Our actor playing Nicola was of mixed-race, which now stands as the fastest growing demographic in the UK. London is increasingly multicultural with less than a forty-five percent white population (2011 UK Census). Importantly, from the standpoint of the upwardly mobile, university educated youth culture in Britain, class supersedes race more so than in America. So casting an actor of color as Nicola, who has graduated from a “posh” prep school in Cheltenham, would fit this upscale demographic well. As a young woman, she would not speak in the “conservative R.P. accent” which is dated and considered snooty, but have adapted a modern form of standard British while at a private boarding school—more akin to the BBC accent.

By featuring class distinctions, plays by important contemporary white British playwrights like Jez Butterworth (*Mojo*), Mark Ravenhill (*Shopping and Fucking*), Simon Stephens (*Punk Rock*), and Alan Bennett (*History Boys*) allow for a more fungible approach to casting race. The fact that the Cockney accent has been usurped by the polyvocal MLE (or multicultural London English) as London’s prevailing working class accent promotes ethnic flexibility in casting choices. This color-blind approach is a staple at the National Theatre for classic works, like Ivan Van Hove’s recent production of *Hedda Gabler*. Ayckbourn steadfastly promotes diverse casts for his plays, and his recent, *My Wonderful Day*, required a black, Anglo-Caribbean actor to play the lead role.

Race is specified in certain plays: Shelagh Delaney’s frequently revived, *Taste of Honey*, features an interracial affair between a black sailor and Jo—the teenaged central character who becomes pregnant and stigmatized—but tellingly, more for her unwed status, than her relation with a black man. Non-traditional casting choices for British plays abound, but the first rule of thumb for directors is aptly stated by *Hamilton* author, Lin-Manuel Miranda: “Authorial intent wins. Period. As a Dramatists Guild Council member, I will tell you this. As an artist and as a human I will tell you this. Authorial intent wins.” (Sherman)

EXERCISE: Attitudes in shared space. In dance, attitude is used to express the body’s comportment in space. Before “blocking” the scene it is helpful for the actors to explore class and role dynamics entirely through movement, gesture, and posture. You can begin by stating, “you are in a posh but unfurnished London studio let; how would you engage this space differently from checking out a campus apartment?”

- 1) Does Nicola feel pressure from Stewart, or from the outside? Demonstrate transitions from confidence to anxiety through breathing changes and changes in pace of movement.
- 2) On entering the space, who has the upper hand? How can this be demonstrated in movement and body position?
- 3) What are the “proxemics,” and how would these differ for an American student viewing a campus apartment? (Proxemics define how close the characters stand in relation to each other or objects in the space.) How does the subtextual tension change between them as they move toward and away from each other?
- 4) How do the actors bring the wintry cold outside, inside? What is oppressive, or uplifting and hopeful about the space? For the client it has to appeal on many levels—can these be shown? For the broker, it’s a matter of moving a commodity. Consider ‘using’ windows, including downstage; what might an actor’s “looking out” reveal about their character? Does the character make a discovery?
- 5) What is the dynamic at the exit? Who leaves first, and what does that signify? Is the exit done quickly, or does it linger? Explore.

This exercise is effective when there is no set to work on but requires actors' mindfulness of the taped floor. Of the 54 scenes in *PFPP* most are between two characters: the aforementioned Nicola/Stewart scene foregrounds class differences; the "romantic" scenes explore the varying dynamics between intimate and personal space that resonates the major action of *PFPP* which is the desire for interpersonal connection.

Turnout vs. locking-in

To effectively stage two character scenes in British comedy, the director must insist that the "listening" actor not continually lock eyes with the speaker, thereby turning away from the audience or upstaging herself. This tendency is widespread in university productions, particularly when an inexperienced director (or acting teacher as first time director) loses sight of the big picture. On the proscenium stage, directors need to find release points for the listening actor to open, turnout, break plane, and expose reactions. This conventional practice often suffers with younger actors since it feels unnatural. In comedy, in particular, observation of the listening actor's reactions is crucial in providing clues to the audience, who then can join in the fun. Takes, slow burns, and discoveries must be seen to be enjoyed, although mugging should be discouraged.

In the workshop, we tried a more natural approach to staging by incorporating the cultural predilection. In comparing American behaviors to the British, an article in the *BBC Anglophenia* noted:

"Americans are much better at looking you in the face and saying what they mean. *Brits are abysmal at eye contact*, telling you how they feel and what they'd like to happen. We overuse phrases like, "I think maybe..." and "Perhaps we could just..." (Anglophenia)

The workshop explored this skittishness about prolonged eye contact. Akin to a sparring match, the actors engaged in the thrust and parry, a hallmark of the "razor's edge" interplay in Ayckbourn's dialogue. We began by having actors turn out on made up spacer lines like "I think maybe..." or, "Perhaps, we could just..." By rehearsal, these transitional spacers could be dropped but the intention and rhythmical back and forth provided the dynamic and polish needed to effectively convey the romantic interplay.

Finding the truth – inside a bottle

"In making characters reveal themselves they must be given a cause, a motive. The classic, slightly corny one is to get them drunk..."

– Alan Ayckbourn in *The Crafty Art of Playmaking* (65)

A tourist visiting the cultural milieu that is England's upper-middle classes, might feel confused by the signs typically given out by such people. This broad social group appears to value polite interactions which demonstrate good manners: such a phenomenon assumes the visitor will adopt the group's way of communicating, since this is a world in which 'rudeness' can quickly lead to exile for the outsider.² Being rude involves, by no coincidence, stereotypical lower-class behavior: using mainly colloquial speech; swearing; stating too openly and enthusiastically what you think or feel; highlighting uncomfortable or embarrassing truths; speaking for 'too long' about yourself and your world (Ambrose Bierce said it well: "A bore is someone who talks when you want him to listen"). (Bierce) In fact the 'tourist' analogy can serve as a helpful one, since it is generally only possible to gain temporary residency within such a culture – usually, in fact, for as long as the visitor is seen as 'useful.' This often means being somehow entertaining — typically, knowledgeable or witty — although even 'bad' behavior can entertain as long as the visit is temporary, and hosts' reputations remain respected.

Part of the pleasure of Ayckbourn's *PFPP* derives from his willingness to lift the lid on the ethnography of this world. This process was deepened in his dark-edged *Arrivals and Departures*, in which a serious sexual assault by a young upper-middle-class male army officer is shown to have been covered up, as a result of legal threats by the rapist's wealthy and well-connected parents. In *PFPP* Nicola and Dan alone are from the upper echelons of English society. Theatre critic, Quentin Letts, of the (posh) *Daily Mail*, noted that Nicola "never quite snaps. Woman of her class must not." (Letts)

Things tend to be different for males brought up within this culture, for whom alcohol offers an acceptable emotional and behavioral outlet — including in public. Many readers will have heard of the Bullingdon Club, Oxford University's socially exclusive drinking society (former 'Bullers' include pre-Brexit prime minister David Cameron and Boris Johnson), whose members will eat at a restaurant, drink heavily, then, wreck the venue. Afterward, they pay in cash for the damage, relying on 'charm' and social connections to avoid prosecution.

Indeed, Laura Wade's breakthrough play, *Posh*, produced to great acclaim at the Royal Court (2010) and later, West End (2012), created a fictional "riot club" based on the Bullingdon Club. (Billington)

Unlike America, a key feature in joining clubs in Britain has to do with drinking rituals, like the famous pub crawl or speed drinking competitions. The practice of "rounds" are a customary in Britain, and once some chap buys the first round, not taking one's turn to pay is considered rude, as is opting out before the round is completed (no matter what the state of inebriation!). There's also the sport of rugby union, with its public exhibition of restraint and psychologically violent private initiation ceremonies. Here, a commandeered version of the civil rights-linked song 'Swing Low Sweet Chariot' has become a drinking game, with mimed actions and forfeits.

There's a sense that these activities provide upper and upper-middle-class English men of privilege with an escape from what can be a heavily rule-bound culture, in which familiarity with subtextual meanings is crucial. Such violence can also enter the orthodox world of the British army officer: in *PFPP* Dan claims that he lost his employment as an army officer through 'no fault of my own' when something unacceptable happened. As the 'only officer there' Dan complains bitterly to bar manager Ambrose that he 'didn't know a thing about it.'

Possibly, Dan was drunk at the time of the incident. Sadly, Dan is drowning his self-pity in liquor, a rising alcoholic, whom Ayckbourn depicts drinking throughout the play. This is in fact partly a plotting device, since society English people are (like most people) more likely to share their 'real' thoughts and feelings when inebriated. So it is with Dan and Nicola, when (in Scene 26) they each find the strength to admit that their relationship has failed:

Nicola: Are you very drunk?

Dan: No. I'm not very drunk. I'm pretty drunk but I'm not very drunk.

Nicola: Yes, so am I. I've had most of a bottle – dear God, what's happening to us? Listen, Dan. I decided something tonight. I came to a decision.

Dan: So did I.

Nicola: Well, you listen to me first. I want us to separate. I want you to go and live somewhere else for a while. And I need to be on my own for a little.

Dan: On your own?

Nicola: Just for a little while. I want you to leave. Tonight. We need to be apart, Dan. Just for a time.

Dan: (considering this) That's exactly the decision I'd come to.

(Scene 26)

Just half a page later, Dan flails about with desire that is quickly quashed:

Dan: ...your body is like the body of – of another fucking goddess. My God, looking at you standing there, my darling –

Nicola: (screaming) Dan, will you just shut up and go away!

(Silence.)

Dan: (soberly) Righty-ho. If that's what you want.

Nicola: I'm sorry. I can't cope – with you. At the moment. I've packed you a case. It's in the hall there.

Dan: Righty-ho. (Slight pause.) Cheers. I'll be off then. (26)

In the *silence* adeptly provided by Ayckbourn, Dan suddenly sobers up; then, blithely accepting his fate—his 'righty-ho' posits a cultural difference.

In American dramaturgy (consider Stanley's drunken reaction to Stella's rejection), a drunken interaction between lovers generally culminates in passionate sex or unearths dark secrets (*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*); or, covers psychological and physical wounds (Brick, in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*). In O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, Tyrone's "sacrosanct" liquor cabinet is targeted by his son, Jamie, as he and brother Edmund furtively pilfer the old man's booze—then water it down in an attempt to cover their tracks. Fueled by drinking, the final act is a descent into a dark subtextual revelations, like Jamie's need to see his brother fail. *Iceman Cometh* details the downward spiral of alcoholics in a depressing skid row atmosphere. In *Raisin in the Sun*, Walter's idea of the American Dream is buying a liquor store with his mother's inheritance. Indeed, this scheme to make money selling booze is punished, as Walter is conned out of his stake by his "trusted" partner. *Buried Child* has the drunken sot of father, Dodge, hiding his bottle under the the couch cushions to keep it from his sons.

His son Vince's drunken return later in the play continues this legacy, and ironically, signals his claim to patrimony over his older brothers, Bradley and Tilden. Liquor has heavier connotations on American stages and its presence is at the heart of the American Canon, defining many of its iconic characters as victims of the American Dream. In these American classics alcohol is an ongoing, steady companion, as much a cause for the character's condition as it is a symptom of their demise. The British never had the societal hangover from the prohibition that labeled alcohol as an evil scourge in America. In the main, drinking is seen as a recreational and pub life is embedded into the culture as quotidian social activity. As such, Dan, in a culturally British comic fashion is on a short-term binge of self-pity. At one point in our production of the play to effect his passing out in the bar, Dan cracks a beer bottle (prop) over his head, a frightening albeit comic moment that illustrates current, risky British male drinking behavior as a kind of sport.

Dan's summary rejection by his paramour simply sobers him up, and he's on his way. His vulnerabilities only can be exposed to a degree—a common prerequisite for British drunks. Recall the dissolute, yet eloquent, professor Butley from Simon Grays' eponymous play, who masks his cracking psyche in alcohol fueled rants. Alan Bates star turn in this play (available on video) demonstrates a range of nuanced movements and tics in playing the believable, binging drunk academic. Tormented by his office mate's perfidy and the breakup of his marriage to a despised rival, Bates pauses at each crossroads in a speech, a respite for relishing, savoring, or slashing; then, on a dime, he either switches emotional gears (anger, sarcasm, self-pity), topics (poetry, Shakespeare, fairy tales, colleagues), or reverses course through a sozzled haze, trying to remember what he was doing. These quick turns are simultaneously comic and painful but deeper character revelations or vulnerabilities are held at bay. Butley and Dan embody what British historian, David Starkey, describes as the "real British values of drunkenness and self-loathing." (Ward) In these cases, the idea that Britain and America are, as Shaw joked, "two countries divided by a common language," calls for serious attention from the director and actor in executing the inebriated equivalent of the stiff upper lip.

Directors risk stereotyping drunkenness onstage; and here attention to cultural norms means exploring connections to booze bonding rituals embedded in British male behaviors, whether Oxbridge, pub life, or, in the military. Here, the actor is asked by the director to respond to why Dan is drinking solo in an upscale hotel bar, and what effect that would have on his behavior. How is the character's drunken state, exhibited by his stumbling into the scene, tied to his psyche as the failed, discharged officer within a longstanding military family? And how does drinking exaggerate his emotional key that varies (happy, angry, sloppy, or maudlin) across the scenes? The preliminary workshops were very helpful in establishing balance points, stumbling falls, and movements to effect varying degrees of inebriation. As in the reference to Butley, we worked at how a drunken state places the character at crossroad moments, struggling to overcome confusion, figuring through the foggy state. To not overdo it, the director focuses the actor on the difficulty a drunk faces in common tasks, like putting a key in the lock, and once onstage, to follow the putative advice to the "drunken" actor, whereby Elsam emphasized the obstacle, in other words: "Play Sober."

The Failed Man

"So the Americans I'd say are much more positive, they're much more in love with success. In Britain they're a fairly envious bunch and they love it if you fail." John Cleese (NPR)

In the great plays of the American Canon, the failed man is pitied (Willy Loman), humiliated (George in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*), alienated (Yank), or scorned (Dodge). The consequences of failure to achieve the American Dream are harsh, even brutal: often death, suicide, or exile. Case in point: contemporary fare, like Young Jean Lee's, *Straight White Men* ends with the 'exile' of brother Matt, for his failure to assert the "white male's right" to privilege and success. Conversely, the British sensibility accepts the failed man without admonishment or shame, and rarely as a tragic figure or societal victim. In fact, as Cleese posits above, the reaction may be a pleasurable schadenfreude—joy at another's misfortune.

"Nothing brightens a Brit's day like discovering someone we didn't particularly like lost their job."
(Margolin in *Anglophobia*)

Mitigated by the British sense of self-deprecation another's misfortune or unhappiness offers only momentary relief in real life. But, as critic Ben Brantley noted, Ayckbourn's plays [like Chekhov's] reveal one of the "wonderful paradoxes of theater: deeply unhappy people can generate profound happiness in audiences allowed to eavesdrop on their lives." (Brantley 2009)

If the potential for rag to riches is hardwired into the American psyche and status is determined by wealth, fame or both; in Britain, class structures remain stratified or out of reach even when success or wealth is apparent. In the recent blockbuster West End musical about the Kinks, *Sunny Afternoon*, the authors carefully distinguished the difference between their upper-class British managers who are in it for the adventure versus the hard-nosed American managers who are all business. While the Kinks achieved great success, their Muswell Hill (North London) working class background precluded any entry into the aristocracy. When the British managers are fired they don't view it as failure, simply a return to their aristocratic lifestyle after a satisfying lark of booze, drugs, and sex.

The failed man is a staple across Ayckbourn's plays from *Absurd Person Singular* onward, underscored with a pessimism about the human condition that might seem to rival Jimmy Porter's in Osborne's seminal, *Look Back in Anger*. Ayckbourn is adept at showing how a guileless but good-hearted man like Barry in *Arrivals and Departures* can be dispassionately flung down the socio-economic ladder of status and class. In the play's arc, Barry, once head of the family business is ultimately relegated to a parking ticket agent--done in by trusting his embezzling secretary and cheating wife who were tearing down the company under his feckless watch. Crucially, Barry keeps going – ever-sociable, ever-curious, even after we witness the ruthless rejection by his daughter, the only constant source of love in his life. A more widely known example is the lowly assistant librarian, Norman, the central character in Ayckbourn's Olivier/Tony Award-winning trilogy, *Norman Conquests*, who is the epitome of the underachieving, British male. The definition of a loser, this philandering reprobate's knack to insult, charm and seduce makes him one of comedy's most memorable characters.

In *PFPP*, it was important for the male actors to understand how failures (whether personal or professional) had shaped their characters' lives, and the weight that should carry in their portrayal. Further information helped actors differentiate the socio-economic status of a: letting agent (Stewart); hotel bartender/carekeeper (Ambrose); and dishonorably discharged officer (Dan). A very helpful source for understanding class stratification is the British Social Attitudes survey. The 2016 survey demonstrates that despite societal changes 62% of British citizens identify as working class (not middle class), the same number as thirty years ago. A large majority of these character see upward mobility as out of reach. Consistent with these findings, *PFPP* discloses male characters as less ambitious about their careers and pessimistic about the future.

In contrast, there was agreement that the male characters were optimistic about making personal connections that could bring them happiness. Ironically, this provided the path to a series of romantic reversals and failures: first, Nicola's desire to establish a home with Dan drowns in his drunkenness; on the rebound, Dan's online attempts to woo Stewart's sister Imogen unravel when Nicola shows up at the bar unexpectedly: Imogen arrives, misinterprets the encounter, leaves, but poor Dan has failed to get her contact information; Stewart's furtive attempt to kiss his office mate Charlotte (fueled by a sexually explicit porno tape of herself that she has given him—his discovery of her dominatrix ways providing a series of hysterical scenes) is greeted with scorn and derision; finally, the bartender Ambrose laments his desolation after the death of his male lover. Dashed hopes are the basis of the failed man, but provide opportunity for the "Ayckbourn effect," the key point in the play that juxtaposes the harshest reality with humor.

If *PFPP* is ultimately a play about missed connections, then its fragmented structure of short scenes underscore the futility of pursuits that end badly. The play concludes with a striking tableau vivant: *each character isolated in his or her own space*, having failed to make the personal connections that would have transformed them. This pessimistic ending, which is brutally realistic and revelatory about contemporary relationships, is problematic to the Hollywood sensibility that demands a hopeful resolution to its comedies, especially where romance is concerned. Ayckbourn posits, "Brits accept moral discomfort in comedy, American prefer endings to be reassuring and warm." Yet, for millennials brought up in broken families and wary of permanence or commitment in relationships, the sense of discomfort proved a valuable conduit to understanding the world of the play.

On Sounding British

The close reading unlocks the cultural and behavioral codes leading to more organic accent or dialect choices. Getting the accents "right" is important, especially if characters represent various classes and regions. Traveling across Britain, one inevitably confronts a variety of regionalized and individuated accents; as an American, one can be astonished how the British routinely decipher a person's birthplace, social rank, and occupation solely based upon accent.

Labeled as such, the “accent” becomes a class marker in communication strategy and tactics. (Coupland 77-80) If this principle is not understood in production, accents will be superficial window dressing: obscuring rather than clarifying meanings in the play. In the workshop, we discussed how southern accents are often viewed as a liability in the job market. Several cast members from rural North Carolina responded to how the degree of southern drawl stereotyped them as less educated or “rednecks,” but then, quite painfully, how, after taking voice classes, their subsequent accent reduction was negatively received by their families during home visits. We discussed how in London adopting the Estuary accent (a conflation of working class and standard English; e.g., actor David Tennant) allowed more access to the job market for millennials with working class backgrounds who had attended universities. Personalizing these experiences helped actors to understand the significance of how the sound of their characters’ “a” vowel could be a determining factor in establishing his or her identity within the world of the play.

Achieving authenticity in accents will always be a concern, provoking questions like, “do we have actors who have IPA training?” or, “have they taken enough voice work, so they can learn from a CD?” to: “do we need to bring in a voice specialist?” In the late 1960s and early 1970s, American productions of Edward Bond’s *Saved* resorted to the East London Cockney accents popularized at the time by Anthony Newley’s *Roar of the Greasepaint* success, and blockbusters like *Oliver* and *My Fair Lady* — versus the more accurate, but less intelligible South London accent which audiences would have difficulty understanding. Now, as Cockney has been superseded as a “living accent,” with “multicultural London English” or MLE becoming the norm,³ (McGowan) audiences would be more disposed to hearing other working-class accents — whether from Essex, Yorkshire or Manchester. For an American audience, however, accuracy is less important than believability and consistency, and most local critics favor the latter as “getting it right.”⁴ (Staton)

Some articulation standards were applied in the workshop: an effective working-class accent favors forward placement and edge (e.g., dropping the “h” before the vowel); another key: adopt a consistent glottal stop (found in Yorkshire and Cockney) with appropriate consonant substitutions or modifications, and a harsher, nasalized “aaa” vs. the open “ah” sound. The “constructed” BBC accent, in which all consonants are phonated, will suffice for “posh” or standard British. For a more neutral middle class, estuary might be used. The conservative R.P. (older British films) would only be relegated for aged characters, and is considered too uptight or stodgy for use by anyone under 35—it is simply too brittle, unfriendly, and nose-up-in-the-air. Paralinguistic techniques may be used to reinforce status. A more privileged character may be vocally louder, or (intentionally) quieter, and will speak authoritatively with the assumption that they will not be interrupted. (Gregory 37-38) The ‘posh’ *sound* is phonated from the mouth and lips primarily with careful attention to shape the placement needed to effect clear enunciation, particularly at the end of sentences. This must be practiced, for back-throated American student actors will suffer from vocal fry if placement is not rigorously addressed. We also noted tendencies to drop pitch (and energy) on the last word in dialogue. Conversely, we needed to remedy the widespread habit of American college-aged women to “uptalk” at the end of a phrase or sentence, altering statements into questions, while ‘giving off’ an unintentional lack of confidence. Pitch variance and intonation sustained by breath support facilitated proper cadence; furthering the ability of the actors to render viable accents.

EXERCISE: Scott Nice, VASTA master voice teacher and dialect coach for the network television series’ *Sleepy Hollow* and *Hawaii Five-O*, makes the salient point that the standard British accent requires more activation of the mouth’s musculature than typical American speech—noticeably more forward placement is required. *To effect placement of the voice Nice has the students tightening and spreading the muscles of the upper lip, practiced, as though sipping tea.* The predilection to speak from the neck up and be heard is a marker of hauteur and class, embedding a sense of emotional detachment found in typical Britannia slogans such as the now much-parodied, war slogan, “Keep Calm and Carry On.” Students can repeat the slogans with an emphasis on the proper technique and accent, then transfer this to actual dialogue. Ironically, we found the stiff upper lip is more than a metaphor for the British spirit, it is a muscle that once activated will effect the sound desired! (Nice) This was exaggerated in the workshop but as actors became more proficient during rehearsals the accent became more relaxed and contemporary sounding.

Does solving the accent challenge mean the director can proceed as if it were an American script? The savvy director knows better. As the following points out, Nicola’s posh accent bundles with it paralinguistic codes that go much deeper than the placement of the open “ah” vowel.

Nicola: It’s rather small, isn’t it?

The accent will be recognizably upper class. But the wording matters too: Nicola arrives with the confidence (gained via elite private education and the security of family wealth) to speak (relatively) plainly to someone who is essentially, to her, a ‘mere’ servant. The appended phrase ‘isn’t it?’ —ostensibly a gesture of consultation — is really a linguistic turn used to force agreement: in this case Nicola expects Stewart to agree with her dismissal of the size of an apartment that the playwright has already described as ‘large.’

Stewart (*anxiously*): You think so?

Broker Stewart’s anxiety is sudden: the showing of the apartment is, he now concludes, over before it began; there will be no commission fee here. ‘You think so?’ is therefore as close to disagreement as Stewart dares to sound bearing in mind Nicola’s high status. Stewart is good at building relationships with clients like this, and he cleverly switches to nurturing their professional relationship beyond this disappointment. Apprised of the cultural codes at play, the young actor playing Stewart, who might otherwise sulk, lose energy, and telegraph frustration, now re-engages the character’s professionalism on the spot, adding dimension to the moment, and nuance to the action. Later on, we glimpse his success when Nicola visits his office and specifically asks for him by his first name.

Staging Ayckbourn: the British context

Studying Alan Ayckbourn leads to an admiration of his craft; staging his plays unveils his profound understanding of human behavior. This perception into the human condition rivals Chekhov’s in its nuance and subtlety of emotional pith. In the June 2014 Brits Off-Broadway production of *Arrivals and Departures*, Ben Brantley’s review praised Ayckbourn enthusiastically for his depth and poignancy of characterization, touting him as one of the VIP’s of British theatre:

“...for Mr. Ayckbourn, as for Chekhov, farce and tragedy are no more mutually exclusive in theater than they are in life. And running throughout “Arrivals & Departures” is a gentler undercurrent of sadness about people’s failure to connect.” (Brantley 2014)

Dr. Castagno witnessed the world premiere of this production (with the same cast) in at the Yvonne Arnaud Theatre in Guilford, Surrey, UK in January 2014, as it began its UK tour. What is striking about the play, and Ayckbourn’s work in the main, is his ability to take an innocuous character, like Barry, in *Arrivals and Departures*, or Ambrose, in *PFPP*, who you would never notice as particularly interesting or compelling, and suddenly explode open their lives to reveal incredible depth, sorrow and unfulfilled longings.⁵

It is this very depth of characterization that we wanted to explore in *PFPP*, an often dark and sad piece about alienation and the “failure to connect.” Co-author, Paul Elsam who attended the world premiere production of *PFPP* in Scarborough, noted: “When Ayckbourn directed the original production of *PFPP* within the intimate in-the-round SJT space in Scarborough, it bore no trace of the comic stereotyping or farcical plotting which is often projected onto his work.” While not as bleak as the late French director’s Alain Resnais film adaptation of the script: *Couers*⁶ (Ayckbourn Interview) *PFPP* was no Neil Simon-esque comedy built on one-liners.⁷ For audiences, the filmic ‘bitty-ness’ of the piece — fifty-four scenes, some of them lasting only for a few seconds, several without any dialogue — made the task of following the narrative flatteringly effortful. For Ayckbourn, the key factor is maintaining audience engagement with fully committed actors embodying his characters.

If they believe that you believe you’re in danger they’ll care. If they believe that you believe that if you don’t get things right you’ll die, they’ll stay looking. If they believe that your character genuinely has no idea what’s going to happen next, they’ll stay glued... and care. (Archive)

Ayckbourn plays require work from the audience. He stresses that it “should not look that easy for characters. Actors make it look easy not characters.” This probing of circumstance, believability, and internal life is entirely consistent with current American acting training. The director offers this lifeline that grounds the actor in truth while concomitantly applying the cultural model.

AYCKBOURN: ADVICE TO A YOUNG DIRECTOR

Fundamental to effective comedy: It’s about truth.

- 1) Do not waste too much time laugh hunting. This approach will diminish character, distract from narrative and destroy the overall sense. If you feel a new laugh coming on, mistrust it. But he concludes: Go for one BIG LAUGH not the many little ones.

- 2) Avoid dramatic fragmentation. Always play the scene not anything in isolation.
- 3) Never shy from truth, especially at the expense of laughter. Truth causes the play to blossom...and will increase the comedy.
- 4) Rules of farce: The more preposterous the situation the more seriously the people experiencing that situation must take it. If you believe it...the audience will believe it.
- 5) Tell it as fast as you feel you can get away with it. Except when it compromises the above. Stay ahead of them (the audience). Nothing worse than a play where the audience sits patiently waiting for the actors to catch them up.
- 6) Finally. Try and tell us as much about your feeling as you can. In some plays it's nice to hide feelings to be opaque. You have to tell us without seeming to be telling us. "How do you do that?---you're good enough to know... you don't need me to tell you."

Conclusion

What, then, would be an optimum approach for an American director in rehearsing and directing a play by Ayckbourn (or a similar contemporary British playwright) - especially when working with actors unfamiliar with British sensibilities and accents?

We would advise that you:⁸

- Consider the strategic value of intensive workshops — including planning meetings — vs. jumping right into getting the play on its feet. (Naturally the scheduling of such workshops should be flexible to meet time constraints. A weekend intensive may fit the bill).
- Consider some level of collaboration with a native UK theatre person. Contacts can be made through LMDA listserv; US/UK Fulbright will offer a list of funded UK theatre academics in the US—who are required to conduct lectures/workshops outside their host institutions. Contact conservatories in the UK; consider using skype if personal visits are impossible. Much information is available on social media. A small budget is usually possible, and UK theatre faculty are rewarded significantly for international consultations.
- As director, introduce the cast to your collaborator, establish the working parameters with the goal of a solid grounding in the world of the play.
- Avoid getting hung up on specific accents vs. creating a consistent articulation that defines class distinctions: posh, working class, multicultural British, etc.
- Access online sources (e.g. YouTube) for authentic speaking voices - since this may well be more effective than working with CDs or IPA (especially with inexperienced, college-aged actors).
- Consider employing some or all of the exercises offered herein — particularly those indicating space relations (proxemics) and appropriate attitudes.

What else? In short – just remember that you're staging a play, not trying to recreate a specific foreign culture with CCTV-level accuracy. Be guided by the playwright towards a production which observes cultural and class difference, yet remains, above all, the thing Ayckbourn always intended: a thoughtful and entertaining, and seamlessly-connected, experience for a live audience. Alan Ayckbourn can remember audience members, satisfied after an evening of rich and provocative naturalism (built, of course, through painstaking work in the rehearsal room), asking in all innocence: so what do the actors do during the day? (To coin an English phrase – there's a back-handed compliment if ever there was one...)

APPENDIX: SOME APPLIED EXERCISES

Playing Card Status game

Many directors and teachers will already be familiar with the use of a pack of playing cards to explore characters' relative status. An extension of this exercise requires a 'mini-sized' pack of cards: here, an actor is allocated (by the director) a card 'face-down', which is then attached (face out) to his or her forehead (pressing hard usually does the job!).

The card allocated denotes the character's status as felt – and subtly projected - by other characters. In practice, the only person who does not immediately know the **given** status of the character is the actor playing that character. Actors should select appropriate UK accents and paralinguistics, postures, movement patterns and gestures that provide clues as to class and status.

At the end of a short scene or improvisation, the action is paused and each actor is invited to guess their card. Each person may remove a card and check it.

Follow-up:

Following the exercise, discuss how status can be imposed on us by the physical and vocal behavior of others - and how a character's status should differ from the status already given (by the group) to the actor.

Tips:

- 1) Sometimes a card falls to the floor. Prepare your actors by demanding that the person whose card falls must not look down – another actor must pick the card up and place it again on the first actor's forehead. If this happens during a group improvisation, the actor should raise a hand to show they need help.
- 2) There's fun to be had – and often some valuable learning - in secretly allocating the 'wrong' status card to a character.

Exposing the subtext: Brits never say what they mean.

1. Actual dialogue. The setting is *A large, unfurnished London flat.*

Nicola: It's rather small, isn't it?

Stewart (*anxiously*): You think so?

Nicola: Well, yes, I do. I mean, your brochure says a three-bedroomed flat, doesn't it?

Stewart: There are. There are three, surely?

Nicola: No, I beg your pardon, there are actually two.

2. Imagined, subtextual dialogue.

Nicola: No, it's far too small.

Stewart: Damn it! Is there any point carrying on?

Nicola: Of course not! There are only two bedrooms. You lied in your brochure.

Stewart: Not true! - there are three bedrooms – let me show you...

Nicola: So are you calling *me* a liar? Next time, little man, get your facts straight...

¹ Ayckbourn recalled giving praise to an inexperienced actress who had the audience in hysterics night after night. Subsequent to his praise, she began to add more and more in an effort to be even funnier, but when the laughter had gone out of her character she asked Alan what went wrong. He said, “before you were living in the play, now you are acting in it. The audience can always sense the difference.”

² A similarly complex type of game-playing can be witnessed among elderly social groups ‘taking tea’ in the genteel cafés of downtown Savannah, Georgia.

³ Cockney has migrated south to Kent. The proliferation of MLE within one generation is noticed in families where parents speak Cockney, children MLE. MLE features placement back in the mouth, whereas Cockney exhibits very active “fronting” substituting: “F” for the “TH” sound.

⁴ Staton notes “the student acting is good all-around, particularly in creating believable British accents.”

⁵ A southwestern suburb of London, Guilford was as close to London’s West End as this play would get. It toured across the UK,

⁶ Ayckbourn applauded Resnais’ darker, desolate version of *PFPP* set in a wintry, snowy Paris with actors notably older than Ayckbourn had intended.

⁷ Ayckbourn, while an admirer of Neil Simon, states many times that the reason for his mixed results on Broadway were the lack of one-liners; and, conversely, Simon’s lack of huge success on the West End was favoring one-liners and setups over character depth.

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