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SF PERUSALS

SEASON'S GREETINGS

A Play

by Alan Ayckbourn

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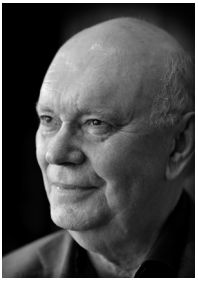
ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Alan Ayckbourn has worked in theatre as a playwright and director for over fifty years, rarely if ever tempted by television or film, which perhaps explains why he continues to be so prolific. To date he has written more than 79 plays, many one act plays and a large amount of work for the younger audience. His work has been translated into over 35 languages, is performed on stage and television throughout the world and has won countless awards.

Major successes include: *Relatively Speaking, How the Other Half Loves, Absurd Person Singular, Bedroom Farce, A Chorus of Disapproval,* and *The Norman Conquests.* In recent years, there have been revivals of *Season's Greetings* and *A Small Family Business* at the National theatre, in the West End *Absent Friends, A Chorus of Disapproval, Relatively Speaking* and *How the Other Half Loves.* In 2015, Chichester mounted a very successful revival of *Way Upstream.*

Artistic Director of the Stephen Joseph theatre from 1972 – 2009 where almost all his plays have been first staged, he continues to direct his latest new work there. In recent years, he has been inducted into American Theatre's Hall of Fame, received the 2010 Critics' Circle Award for Services to the Arts and became the first British playwright to receive both Olivier and Tony Special Lifetime Achievement Awards. He was knighted in 1997 for services to the theatre.

Image credit: Andrew Higgins.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

After a lifetime of playwriting (I first started as an unpublished writer at the age of ten!) my career has moved steadily forward from the status of untried tyro through to establishment figure to ageing experimentalist!

The work has reflected this. From the early tried and tested plays, (*Relatively Speaking, How the Other Half Loves, The Norman Conquests*, etc.) which thankfully people still seem happy to produce and come to see, through the middle period, larger scale so called "social" pieces (*Man of the Moment, A Chorus of Disapproval*) to the more recent smaller scale departures such as *Private Fears in Public Places, Snake in the Grass* and *Haunting Julia*, I have continued to experiment with shape and form, whilst I hope continuing to deepen my characters.

Throughout this, though, I have always needed to remind myself of the overriding prime directive drummed into me at an early age by my mentor, Stephen Joseph, that above all else a playwright is a storyteller.

To keep an audience in their seats you need to involve them in a constantly unfolding series of unexpected twists and turns. These can, of course, be the narrative of the story itself as in *Relatively Speaking* or, as with *Woman in Mind* say, through the psychological development of the characters.

One of the nicest things people can ever say to me, coming out of a new play for the first time of seeing it, is "Well, I never saw THAT coming!"

Alan Ayckbourn

SEASON'S GREETINGS

First presented at the Stephen Joseph Theatre in the Round, Scarborough, on 25th September 1980, with the following cast of characters:

NEVILLE	Michael Simkins
BELINDA, his wife	Tessa Peake-Jones
PHYLLIS, his sister	Susan Uebel
HARVEY, his uncle	Robin Herford
BERNARD, Phyllis's husband	Ronald Herdman
RACHEL, Belinda's sister	Marcia Warren
EDDIE	Jeffrey Robert
PATTIE, Eddie's wife	Lavinia Bertram
CLIVE	Robin Bowerman

Subsequently presented at the Apollo Theatre, London, by Michael Codron in the Greenwich Theatre production on 29th March 1982, with the following cast of characters:

NEVILLE	Bryan Marshall
BELINDA	Barbara Ferris
PHYLLIS	Bridget Turner
HARVEY	Peter Vaughan
BERNARD	Bernard Hepton
RACHEL	Marcia Warren
EDDIE	Brian Hall
PATTIE	Diane Bull
CLIVE	Christopher Strauli

The play directed by Alan Ayckbourn
Setting by Edward Lipscomb

The action takes place in the home of Neville and Belinda Bunker.

ACT I	Scene One	Christmas Eve, 7.30 p.m.
	Scene Two	Christmas Day, noon
	Scene Three	Christmas Day, midnight
ACT II	Scene One	Boxing Day, 3.30 p.m.
	Scene Two	December 27th, 5.15 a.m.

Time—the present

ACT I

Scene One

The home of **NEVILLE** *and* **BELINDA BUNKER.** *Christmas Eve, 7.30 p.m.*

It is a six-bedroomed, three storey-plus-attic, modern house. Well kept, without being too trendy or ultra tasteful, it also has that clear appearance of a house containing young children. Our view is of the ground floor and is dominated by the front hall though this is not of any particular size or magnificence, larger than some, rectangular with a main staircase leading off upstairs. Besides the front door, there are two other doors: one opening on to a dining-room, the other to the sitting-room. The hall is furnished with an upright chair beside a telephone table which also has on it a table lamp. On the other side of the hall is a small carved wooden bench, and just inside the front door a coat- and umbrella-stand. Near the foot of the stairs, currently dominating everything, is a large Christmas tree, eight or nine feet high standing in a substantial tub. The tree is festooned with decorative bulbs but has not yet been fully dressed. Arranged around the base are a large number of presents, brightly gift wrapped and labelled. Also leading off the hall is a kitchen passageway. This runs alongside the dining-room, and possibly contains a hatchway through to it. The dining-room itself is apparently large though our view of it is restricted. We see probably a third, including some of a sideboard and a third of what must be a very long dining-table. We see only one end of this, including the chair at the top and a

maximum of two further chairs on each side. Similarly, we see only a portion of the sitting-room. This includes a window with window-seat, a single armchair with side-table. This chair faces away towards an unseen fire and an unseen television set. We can gather again from, amongst other things, the floor covering that this room too is fairly big.

The house glows warm and cosy: a wonderful place for children or adults to spend Christmas. At the start, **HARVEY BUNKER**, *a man in his sixties, with cropped hair and a slightly military appearance, is seated in the sitting-room armchair watching the off-stage television. He is immensely enjoying an old adventure film and laughs uproariously at something he is watching. In a moment,* **DR BERNARD LONGSTAFF**, *a rather faded man in his forties comes pattering downstairs. He carries about half a dozen gift-wrapped presents. He reaches the bottom of the stairs, looks round and sees no-one. Then, hearing* **HARVEY** *laughing, he goes to the sitting-room doorway and stands looking at the television screen.*

HARVEY This is a marvellous film, you know. Marvellous.

BERNARD I think I've seen it before, haven't I?

HARVEY *(slightly irritably)* What's that?

BERNARD I said, I have a feeling that this film's been on TV before. Hasn't it?

HARVEY Probably. I think it was on last Christmas.

BERNARD Ah.

HARVEY Matter of fact, I think it's on every Christmas. It's very old.

BERNARD Oh yes.

HARVEY He's dead now. That one there.

BERNARD Yes.

HARVEY And him. He's definitely dead. He died not long ago.

BERNARD And her.

HARVEY Oh, yes, she's dead. She's been dead for years.

BERNARD Yes, I can remember her dying.

HARVEY I don't know about this chap.

BERNARD No.

They both stare at the screen.

HARVEY I could be wrong, I think I read somewhere he's in a home. Alcoholic.

BERNARD Oh dear.

They watch again. **HARVEY** *laughs.*

HARVEY Damn fine film though. Even if they are all dead.

At this moment, **BELINDA**, *an attractive woman in her early thirties, comes downstairs. She is carrying some large boxes containing Christmas decorations for the tree. As she comes down, she calls back to the children behind her that she hears but we do not.*

BELINDA Not unless you go to sleep, you won't. You do as Pattie tells you and go to sleep...

A child apparently says something.

Go to sleep. *(She puts the boxes by the tree)*

BERNARD, *on hearing her, comes out of the sitting-room.*

BERNARD Er...

BELINDA Bernard?

BERNARD *(indicating his pile of parcels)* All right if I put these...?

BELINDA With the others? Of course. We're going to do the usual thing. Give the kids their stockings tomorrow morning with some little things and save the big presents for Boxing Day.

BELINDA *goes off along the kitchen passageway.*

BERNARD Right, yes. That's—er—that's best. Yes. *(He arranges his parcels around the foot of the tree with the others)*

HARVEY *(still watching the television)* Bang! Look at that. Blown them to smithereens. Ought to have the kids down to watch this. Just up their street. Next time you do one of your shows for them, Bernard, take my tip. Put a bit of blood in it. They'll love it.

BERNARD *(unconvinced)* Oh—hardly...

HARVEY For God's sake, get them used to real life, man. You're a doctor, you ought to appreciate that. Give them some guts.

BERNARD *(muttering)* I'm sorry, we don't agree, Harvey, we really don't. I'm sorry.

HARVEY *(back at the television screen)* Boom! There goes another one.

BERNARD We never have. It's a vicious spiral. You introduce children to violence in adults and the next thing you know, they're—

HARVEY Well, I'll tell you this...

BERNARD —imitating them...

HARVEY I'll tell you what I've given them all for Christmas and I'm not ashamed to say so. I've given them all a gun. All except Gary who's got a crossbow because he had a gun last year. But Lydia, Katie, Flora and Zoe, they're not getting any of your wee-weeing dollies and nurses' uniforms from me. They've all got guns, so there.

BERNARD Well, I'm sorry, I think that is irresponsible and if I were a parent, I would...

HARVEY But you're not, Bernard, you're not and that's your trouble. You've got no kids and you don't know a bloody thing about them.

BERNARD I'm not arguing, Harvey, I am not arguing. We have this discussion every Christmas and I am not going to be drawn into it again. We beg to differ.

BELINDA *returns from the kitchen with a small stepladder.*

BELINDA Now, what's going on?

BERNARD Nothing. Nothing.

BELINDA *(setting down the steps by the tree)* I don't want any of that, please. The holiday has only just started and I can do without that.

BERNARD *(sulkily)* I should speak to Harvey, not me.

HARVEY *(calling out through the sitting-room door)* Aha, wait till you see what I've got you for Christmas.

BERNARD Me?

HARVEY Yes, you.

BERNARD What?

HARVEY Aha. Something to wake your ideas up. You'll see.

BERNARD If it's another of your awful jokes, I'd prefer not to have it.

BELINDA Bernard, Phyllis wants you in the kitchen.

BERNARD *(immediately concerned)* Is she all right?

BELINDA She seems to be. There's a lot of steam and groaning but I think she's coping.

BERNARD *(hurrying off)* I'd better see what she wants.

BERNARD *goes off to the kitchen.*

BELINDA, *about to decorate the tree, goes to the sitting-room doorway.*

BELINDA All right, Harvey?

HARVEY *(totally absorbed)* Bel, look at this. Watch this bit.

BELINDA Oh yes. Haven't I seen this?

HARVEY Ah. There he goes. That's—er—what? That's a sixty-foot fall, that. Sensational.

BELINDA Haven't you got a drink yet?

HARVEY No.

BELINDA Well, where the hell's Neville? He was fetching us all a drink an hour ago. What were you having?

HARVEY A small ginger wine, please.

BELINDA Ginger wine. Still in training?

HARVEY Like to keep fit, you know, Bel. I'll have a drop of wine at dinner.

BELINDA If we get it. Phyllis is out there in the throes.

HARVEY Oh good God. Drunk in charge of an oven...

BELINDA Ssh! *(She goes to the dining-room doorway. Calling into the room)* Nev? Neville... *(She goes to the foot of the stairs. Puzzled)* They haven't gone out, have they? *(She moves to the front door)* Nev, where are you? Nev?

PATTIE, *a woman of about thirty, appears at the top of the stairs. She is noticeably seven months pregnant.*

PATTIE Ssh.

BELINDA Pattie, I'm sorry. Are they asleep?

PATTIE All except Gary. Is Eddie down there?

BELINDA Well, he's probably wherever Neville is but I've lost Neville. If they've gone to the pub...

PATTIE Could you ask Eddie to come up? Gary won't go to sleep until he sees Eddie.

BELINDA OK. Would you like a drink?

PATTIE Oh yes. Oh yes, a drink. Lovely. Why not?

PATTIE *goes off upstairs.*

BELINDA Well, what would you... *(She shrugs and gives up)*

BERNARD *comes back from the kitchen with nine place mats. He has some flour on him.*

Bernard, is Nev in the kitchen?

BERNARD No, just Phyllis.

BELINDA Well, where are Nev and Eddie?

BERNARD I don't know. They may be out in the...

BELINDA You all right, you look pale?

BERNARD No, I think it's flour.

BELINDA Flour?

BERNARD Cornflour. Phyllis dropped a tin of cornflour. It flew up in a cloud. It's all right, it's under control.

BELINDA *(unsure)* Oh yes?

BERNARD It was just a little dizzy spell. She's over it. She's coping. Don't worry...

BERNARD *goes into the dining-room and begins laying out the place mats.* **BELINDA** *follows him and starts rummaging in the sideboard cupboard for drinks.*

BELINDA *(as she does so)* Look, if she'd rather I carried on for her.

BERNARD No. No. She's all right, really. It's good she's doing this. It really is.

BELINDA Not if she's fainting all over my kitchen...

NEVILLE, *an easy-going man in his late thirties, enters along the kitchen passageway. He is followed by* **EDDIE**. **EDDIE** *is less successful, less at ease than* **NEVILLE** *whom he obviously admires, or at least requires.* **NEVILLE** *carries a small, home-made remote radio control box, similar to the type used to control TV sets, but this with only two buttons.*

NEVILLE *(as they enter)* Personally, I find every single claim they make can be taken with a huge pinch of salt and that includes their frequency response details which are pie-in-the-sky to start with, because I have personally tested every single speaker of theirs we have ever had in stock and they've got to be joking.

EDDIE Really, really?

NEVILLE It's all never-never-land and hallo-Hong Kong, I can tell you.

BELINDA *(coming out of the dining-room to meet them)* Nev, where have you been?

NEVILLE My darling.

BELINDA *(holding up an empty ginger wine bottle)* Have we any more of this?

NEVILLE We are awash.

BELINDA Where is it?

NEVILLE Out the back.

BELINDA Would you fetch it, please?

NEVILLE *(taking the empty bottle from her)* My pleasure.

BELINDA And could you also do all those lovely drinks you promised everyone half an hour ago?

NEVILLE Of course, of course.

BELINDA Otherwise I'll never get this tree done.

BERNARD *comes out of the dining-room and goes through the hall and back into the kitchen.*

(moving the steps into position) It's a ginger wine for Uncle Harvey, and a something or other, she didn't say, for Pattie.

NEVILLE Right. *(He goes into the dining-room, and takes out an ice bucket)*

EDDIE Pattie never knows. Don't bother asking her.

BELINDA And she also wants you up there, Eddie.

EDDIE Right. *(He does not move, but watches* **BELINDA***)*

NEVILLE Eddie, could you do these while I get some more of this, please?

EDDIE Fine.

NEVILLE *(going to the kitchen)* I'll have a Scotch.

EDDIE Fine.

BELINDA *(after* **NEVILLE***)* And some ice.

NEVILLE *goes off with the ginger wine bottle and the ice bucket.*

BELINDA *starts to decorate the tree. During the following* **EDDIE***, unable to find any ginger wine, pours a ginger ale. Then he finds a bottle of Scotch and pours out two of these.*

HARVEY *(calling out)* Hey, you're missing a first-rate shark fight in here.

BELINDA *(busy with her decoration)* Oh dear.

HARVEY Killer sharks.

PATTIE *appears at the top of the stairs.*

PATTIE Belinda, is Eddie down there?

BELINDA *(from her ladder)* Eddie?

EDDIE *(from the dining-room)* Hallo.

BELINDA Pattie wants you.

EDDIE *(continuing pouring his drinks)* What does she want?

BELINDA What do you want, he says.

PATTIE Can he come up?

BELINDA Can you come up, she says.

EDDIE In a minute.

BELINDA In a minute.

PATTIE Well, Gary won't go to sleep till he's seen him. He doesn't believe he's here. Tell him I don't want to sit up in this bedroom all night. I want to come down and have a drink.

PATTIE *goes off upstairs.*

BELINDA Yes, well what are you going to have to... *(She sees that* **PATTIE** *has gone)* Oh.

EDDIE What's that?

BELINDA Nothing. Just trying to find out what she wanted.

EDDIE *(drily)* If she tells you, let me know, won't you?

BELINDA *continues to decorate the tree. It is a task she enjoys.*

HARVEY You've just missed a damn fine shark fight, you lot.

BELINDA *(abstractedly)* Oh, what a pity. That's a wonderful bit, too.

EDDIE *comes to the dining-room doorway.*

EDDIE Nev's just been showing me his workshop out the back there.

BELINDA Oh yes?

EDDIE He's got himself nicely set up now then, eh?

BELINDA Yes.

EDDIE Marvellous. All those power tools. I envy him those power tools.

BELINDA Yes, it's good to see where the money goes. It's all invested in a shed round the back of the house.

EDDIE Ah, don't be like that. Man's got to have a hobby, hasn't he?

BELINDA Why?

EDDIE Well... *(He is momentarily floored)* He just does. He's got to get away, hasn't he?

BELINDA Away from what?

EDDIE Well. Everything.

BELINDA Me?

EDDIE I didn't say that.

BELINDA Obviously me. What else? Me and the kids.

EDDIE Well, I'm saying nothing. You take that up with Nev.

BELINDA I would. Except I never see him. He's always in his bloody shed.

EDDIE *retreats back into the dining-room and finishes pouring the drinks.*

EDDIE *(muttering to himself as he does so)* Man's got to have a hobby.

BERNARD *comes through with some side plates from the kitchen.*

BERNARD Er...

BELINDA *(without turning round)* Bernard?

BERNARD Phyllis wants to know how many of us there's going to be.

BELINDA I've told her. Nine.

BERNARD I mean to say this man is definite, is he? This Clive Thing man is definitely coming?

BELINDA According to Rachel, he is. She's gone to the station to meet him.

BERNARD She just didn't seem all that certain.

BELINDA Well, he's coming as far as I know. Phyllis all right, is she? Dropped anything else?

BERNARD No, she's—well, as a matter of fact, she's having a little nose bleed. It's not serious. She's lying down. She'll be fine.

BELINDA *(mildly alarmed)* Are you sure?

BERNARD Yes. When she felt dizzy, she straightened up too quickly, you see and she banged her head on the cupboard. It's only a nose bleed.

BELINDA Lord... *(She continues decorating)*

BERNARD *goes into the dining-room and starts to lay out his place mats.*

HARVEY *(laughing to himself)* Hah! He made short work of him.

EDDIE *(to* **BERNARD***)* Do you want a drink, Bernard?

BERNARD No, I'd better get all this done first, thank you, Eddie.

EDDIE You—er... Are you going to be doing your Christmas play again this year, Bernard?

BERNARD My puppet show? Oh yes. On Boxing Day as usual. I think I'm doing it whether I like it or not. It's become rather traditional, hasn't it? Uncle Bernard and his puppets. *(He laughs)*

EDDIE *(laughing too)* Yes. It just occurred to me, Bernard, you know, just a thought—maybe you might be thinking of jazzing it up a bit this year. I mean, I know it's a puppet show and you can't obviously do that much, I mean with all those strings and so on, but just make the story a bit more

zippy, if you know what I mean? I think the kids would appreciate that. I know our three would. You should see the things they watch on TV these days. You don't mind me saying this?

BERNARD *(icily)* Has Harvey put you up to this?

EDDIE No, no.

BERNARD I will continue to do my puppet plays as I wish to do them and as I know children enjoy them. I think you know that I will always accept help with the manipulation but I will not have people interfering with the content of my plays. I refuse to pander. I will not include gratuitous violence or sex. Not for anyone. I will not do that. I'm sorry.

EDDIE Who's talking about sex? I didn't mention sex.

BERNARD I know exactly what you're talking about, don't worry.

EDDIE I don't know why you bring sex into it.

BERNARD I thought as a parent you might have been a little more responsible.

EDDIE All right. All right. *(He walks into the hall with the ginger ale)* I did not speak. I never spoke.

BERNARD *(leaving the dining-room and returning to the kitchen)* I'm disappointed, that's all I can say, I'm disappointed.

BERNARD *goes to the kitchen.*

BELINDA What's going on?

EDDIE All I did was mention his puppet show.

BELINDA He's very touchy. Especially after last year.

EDDIE Maybe. Maybe. But someone's got to tell him. I mean, if he does another show like last year the kids will mutiny. Gary threatened not to come at all.

BELINDA He always has so much scenery. It takes hours just changing the scenery and then it always falls down. Poor Bernard.

EDDIE We'll have to do something.

EDDIE *goes towards the sitting-room.*

Simultaneously, **NEVILLE** *returns along the kitchen passageway with a new bottle of ginger wine and a full ice bucket.*

EDDIE *stops in the sitting-room doorway.*

NEVILLE What are we having for supper?

BELINDA Roast lamb, I think. Why?

NEVILLE I just wondered. Phyllis is lying stretched out on the kitchen table with three yards of kitchen towel stuck up her nose, I just wondered. *(He goes into the dining-room)*

EDDIE *(laughing and going into the sitting-room)* Here we are Harvey, one glass of lovely ginger.

HARVEY Thank you. Watch this. *(He indicates the television set)*

EDDIE *stands and watches.*

BELINDA So long as she's coping.

NEVILLE *(placing the ginger wine bottle and the ice on the sideboard)* Phyllis?

BELINDA Yes.

NEVILLE *(coming out of the dining-room)* Well. She's obviously been drinking but she's no worse than usual.

BELINDA Where'd she get it from? I haven't given her a drink.

NEVILLE I haven't. *(As an afterthought)* Ah. Hang on. I opened her some red wine to put in the gravy.

BELINDA Look, we really must stop this business of her cooking the Christmas Eve meal, you know. It's beyond a joke. I mean, all right, I know she's your sister but all the same...

NEVILLE *(shrugging)* Well, it's Christmas. *(He goes back into the dining-room and puts ice in his and* **EDDIE***'s glasses)*

EDDIE *(staring at the screen)* I haven't seen this for ages. It's good this.

HARVEY Marvellous film. Marvellous. Look at him there... That's it. Down he goes. We could do with this chap round Clapham Common. He'd sort the little bastards out. Cheers.

EDDIE Cheers.

HARVEY *(trying his drink and choking)* What's this?

EDDIE Ginger thing...

HARVEY Ginger ale.

EDDIE Right. Ginger ale. Ah, now you wanted ginger wine, didn't you?

HARVEY Course I wanted ginger wine.

EDDIE Right.

HARVEY I don't want ginger ale.

EDDIE No, ginger wine. That's what you want.

HARVEY Ginger wine.

EDDIE Right.

BERNARD *returns with the cruet.*

EDDIE, *seeing him, lingers in the sitting-room doorway. He drinks the rest of the ginger ale and watches the television.* **BERNARD** *goes into the dining-room.*

BERNARD I mean, I'm not perfect for heaven's sake, I know that.

NEVILLE *(turning somewhat startled)* What?

BERNARD But I do try. Every day, I try. And nowhere do I try more than with that woman out there in that kitchen. With my dear wife. With Phyllis. I've given everything I have for that woman's health and I'd give more. I really would, believe me, Neville.

NEVILLE *(gently)* Bernard, what are you talking about?

BERNARD I'm just—trying to explain...

NEVILLE You don't have to explain to us, Bernard, we know. We all know. We've seen what you've...

BERNARD *(going out)* I have to explain to someone. Sometimes. I need to.

BERNARD *goes off into the kitchen.*

BELINDA, *on her ladder, turns.*

NEVILLE He's getting worse.

BELINDA Is he going to be in that state all over Christmas?

EDDIE *(going into the dining-room)* That's my fault, that is.

NEVILLE What did you do?

EDDIE *puts the empty ginger ale glass on the sideboard. He finds his Scotch, now with ice, and sips it.*

EDDIE I mentioned his puppet show to him.

NEVILLE Oh no, he's not doing another one, is he?

BELINDA Of course.

NEVILLE Well I, for one, shall be out.

BELINDA Nev.

NEVILLE No, I'm sorry. I'm not sitting through another one of those, I'm sorry. Ali-Baba last year was my lot. Forty thieves and they all came on with ten minute intervals between them.

BELINDA Neville.

NEVILLE No way. *(He toasts* **EDDIE***)* Cheers.

EDDIE *(responding)* Cheers.

NEVILLE Happy Christmas.

EDDIE Yes.

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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