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SF PERUSALS

A SMALL FAMILY BUSINESS

A Play

by Alan Ayckbourn

SAMUEL FRENCH

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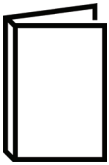

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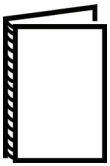

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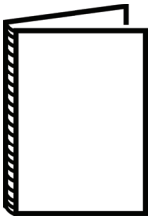

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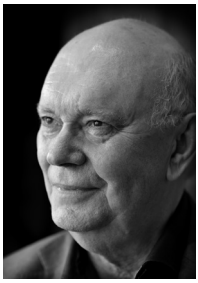

Alan Ayckbourn has worked in theatre as a playwright and director for over fifty years, rarely if ever tempted by television or film, which perhaps explains why he continues to be so prolific. To date he has written more than seventy-nine plays, many one act plays and a large amount of work for the younger audience. His work has been translated into over thirty-five 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 over riding prime directive drummed into me at an early age by my mentor, Stephen Joseph, that above all else a playwright is a story teller.

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

A SMALL FAMILY BUSINESS

A *Small Family Business* was first performed at the National Theatre on 5th June 1987. The cast was as follows:

JACK MCCRACKEN	Michael Gambon
POPPY	Polly Adams
KEN AYRES	Ron Pember
TINA	Diane Bull
ROY RUSTON	Adrian Rawlins
SAMANTHA	Suzan Sylvester
CLIFF	Russell Dixon
ANITA	Elizabeth Bell
DESMOND	John Arthur
HARRIET	Marcia Warren
YVONNE DOGGETT	Barbara Hicks
BENEDICT HOUGH	Simon Cadell
LOTARIO RIVETTI	Michael Simkins
UBERTO RIVETTI	Mischa Melinski
ORLANDO RIVETTI	Liam Sheminicks
VINCENZO RIVETTI	Neil MacSkimish
GIORGIO RIVETTI	Khelim Cassimin

Directed by Alan Ayckbourn
Settings by Alan Tagg

The action takes place in the sitting-room, kitchen, hall, landing, bathroom and bedroom in the houses of various members of the family over one week.

Time – the present

CHARACTERS

JACK MCCRACKEN, a business man
POPPY, his wife
KEN AYRES, his father-in-law
TINA, his elder daughter
ROY RUSTON, **TINA**'s husband
SAMANTHA, his younger daughter
CLIFF, his brother
ANITA, **CLIFF**'s wife
DESMOND, his brother-in-law
HARRIET, **DESMOND**'s wife
YVONNE DOGGETT, **HARRIET**'s sister
BENEDICT HOUGH, a private investigator
LOTARIO RIVETTI
UBERTO RIVETTI
ORLANDO RIVETTI
VINCENZO RIVETTI
GIORGIO RIVETTI
} Italian business men

Note: It is the author's intention that the Rivetti Brothers be played by the same actor.

REVIEWS OF THE ORIGINAL PRODUCTION OF A SMALL FAMILY BUSINESS

"Ayckbourn has never written more skilfully, or to better effect" *London Evening Standard*

"The laughter heaps up, but by the evening's end our theatre's master craftsman and finest recorder of social nuance has delivered a disturbing morality play..." *London Daily News*

"...a cleverly crafted morality play, thinly disguised as farce...the meat of the story is beneath the slick exterior..." *Daily Express*

"An explosively funny first scene...in the second half things move furiously towards the genuinely unnerving climax" *City Limits*

"... sharp, black comedy that takes the sublime, turns it into the ridiculous and then hits you with unbridled comic cruelty" *Today*

ACT I

We appear to be looking at a cross-section of a modern or recently modernised house, perhaps on an executive-type estate. Ours is a rear view. Four rooms, two up and two down. Downstairs, to one side, is the sitting-room. Modern furnishings, fitments with hi-fi etc., a settee, armchairs, low tables. Neutral carpeting. It is a fairly large area, being two rooms knocked into one and then reseparated by a room divider, forming what we shall refer to as the "near sitting-room" and the "far sitting-room". When people move to the far sitting-room they are partially, sometimes totally, obscured from view. The doors from both original rooms have been retained and lead to:

The hallway with stairs up to the first floor. At the far end is the front door leading to an indeterminate front path and street beyond. A further door off the hall leads to the back kitchen, which is in full view. This is modern and well equipped and, like the sitting-room, sufficiently lacking in detail to be practically identical to a hundred other kitchens. There is a fourth door leading off the hall to a front dining-room beyond the kitchen and thus out of our view. A hatchway from the kitchen links these two rooms and, when open, affords us a glimpse through. At the far end of the kitchen, there is a back door leading to an indeterminate yard beyond.

The stairs from the hall lead to the landing above, similarly shaped and with, again, four doors leading off it. The two furthest from us lead to rooms (presumably bedrooms) which we cannot see. Visible to us and situated above the sitting room (but only half its depth) is a

bedroom with a double divan bed, modern sliding cupboards, etc. In style, the room is once again modern and nondescript. Rather as if the owners had in all cases settled for a standard range of good, modern, mass-produced units to satisfy their needs throughout the house. Which, as we discover, is indeed the case. Finally, across the landing from the bedroom, the bathroom. Matching modern fitments, bath with shower curtain, lavatory, basin, etc., all in a matching, unobtrusive pastel shade.

During the course of the play, the various areas will serve as rooms in the different houses of the family. At present though they are all as we naturally presume them to be, i.e. forming a single dwelling, **JACK***'s and* **POPPY***'s house.*

It is an evening in winter. All the downstairs areas and the landing above are lit. **POPPY***, a woman of forty, is standing by the front door, her face pressed against one of the small side windows, looking out into the night. In the sitting-room, ten guests are chattering away in rather subdued tones. They are:* **KEN AYRES***,* **POPPY***'s father, a man in his seventies, at one time the family's driving force but now rather eccentric and unpredictable. Also present is his son,* **DESMOND AYRES***, an overweight, ineffectual, fussy man of forty-two;* **HARRIET***, forty-four,* **DESMOND***'s wife, a thin, nervous woman with an unfortunate dress sense;* **HARRIET***'s older sister* **YVONNE***, fifty, who by contrast is simply, even severely dressed. Calm, impassive and efficient, she stands near* **KEN** *taking care of his needs silently and efficiently. Also* **JACK***'s younger brother* **CLIFF***, forty, who likes to be thought of as an easy going wheeler-dealer, though his need to be loved gives him a certain weakness;* **CLIFF***'s wife* **ANITA***, thirty-six, an attractive woman, expensively overdressed, outgoing and shrewd; accompanying her,*

and taking rather too much interest, **UBERTO**, *an elegant Italian business man of thirty-five.*

Finally, there are the younger family members. **JACK***'s and* **POPPY***'s elder daughter,* **TINA RUSTON**, *is twenty-three and takes after her mother. She is strong, capable and has a maturity that comes with the accepted responsibility of looking after two small children and coping with her impractical husband,* **ROY RUSTON**, *who is twenty-five and a hopeless dreamer. Pleasant enough to meet briefly, he is infuriating to live with. He's already beginning to regret the family he started six years ago with such premature abandon.* **TINA***'s younger sister* **SAMANTHA**, *sixteen, completes the group. Standing a little apart from the others, she seems aware that she alone, still at school and unattached, represents a new and different generation. She is at a stage when life is often a painful, intensely private experience.*

All have drinks and are waiting for someone to arrive. We have a second to take in the scene. Then **POPPY**, *at the hall window, sees someone approaching. She hurries to the sitting-room.*

POPPY Ssssh! Everyone! He's here.

The chatter subdues. One or two "sssh's".

Jack's here. His car's just turned into the road. Can we turn the lights out, please?

People oblige, switching off the table lamps nearest them. **POPPY** *extinguishes the overheads with the door switch.*

KEN What's happening now?

YVONNE Jack's here, Mr Ayres. He's just arrived.

KEN Jack who?

POPPY Everyone! Quiet as you can, please. I'll try and get him to come straight in here.

ANITA *(from the darkness, with a silly giggle)* It's very dark.

OTHERS Sssh!

POPPY *(moving to the kitchen)* Quiet as you can. He'll come in from the garage. *(She goes into the kitchen and pretends to busy herself at the sink)*

ANITA *(from the darkness)* Oooh!

ALL Sssh!

ANITA Who did that? Who was it did that?

CLIFF Be quiet.

ANITA No, that really hurt, that did. Who did that??

ALL Sssh!

TINA Quiet! He's here.

A silence. The back door opens. **JACK**, *a forceful, energetic man of forty-five, enters, wearing a coat.*

JACK I'm back.

POPPY *(kissing him)* How did it go, then?

JACK All right. You know. Fond farewells. Usual thing. We shall miss you for ever thank God he's gone at last...

POPPY *(affectionately)* They never said that.

JACK They were thinking it. Cheering me through the gates, they were. Goodbye, you old bugger, goodbye. *(Sensing a slight nervousness in her)* I'm not that late, am I?

POPPY Only a little.

JACK *(looking at her properly for the first time)* You're all dressed up, aren't you?

POPPY No, I've had this for ages.

JACK *(a horrid thought)* We're not meant to be going out?

POPPY No, no.

JACK Thank God for that. I don't want to see anyone else. Not today. *(He goes into the hall)*

ANITA *(softly)* Oh dear, what a shame.

TINA Sssh!

POPPY Make us both a drink, will you?

JACK *hangs his coat up in the hall.*

JACK *(calling back to her as he does so)* I drove back past the factory this evening...

POPPY What's that?

JACK On my way home just now I drove back past my new office. Do you know, I suddenly felt very excited. *(He has returned to the kitchen doorway)*

POPPY I'm glad.

JACK We're going to the stars with this one, darling, we really are. This is going to be the one.

POPPY It will be if you have anything to do with it...

JACK *(holding her)* No, no. Not me. Us. You and me.

POPPY *(not really believing this)* Yes.

They kiss.

JACK Come on, what are you dressed up for, then?

POPPY No reason. I just felt like it.

JACK Trying to take my mind off my work, were you? Eh?

POPPY *(coyly aware of her audience next door)* Don't be silly.

JACK Sammy upstairs?

POPPY No, she's out tonight.

JACK Just us, is it?

POPPY Yes. There's nobody here.

JACK I see.

POPPY Go on. Make us a drink.

JACK *(taking her hand and starting to lead her)* First of all, follow me.

POPPY Where are we going?

JACK *(heading for the stairs)* Not far, I promise. Not far.

POPPY *(alarmed)* Jack, no, we can't. Not now.

JACK I fancy it right now. I don't mind saying...

ANITA *(sotto)* Oh, my God...

POPPY No, we can't. Really. Jack.

POPPY *pulls away from* **JACK** *and remains at the foot of the stairs.* **JACK** *continues to retreat upstairs.*

JACK Come on.

POPPY No.

JACK *(more firmly)* Come on.

POPPY No. I'm going in here. *(She indicates the sitting-room)* I want a drink.

JACK Poppy...

POPPY *(opening the door)* I'll be in here.

JACK Poppy, if I have to come down and fetch you...

POPPY Bye-bye.

POPPY *goes in to the sitting-room and closes the door. She crowds in with the rest of her guests.*

JACK Poppy!

POPPY *(calling girlishly)* Woo-hoo! *(To the others)* I'm ever so sorry. This is so embarrassing.

TINA *(hissing)* Mum. What are you playing at?

POPPY It's the only way I can get him in here. *(Calling)* Woo-hoo!

JACK I'm going to have to come in there and get you, Poppy...

CLIFF This'll be entertaining.

ANITA It's all right, Poppy, we'll shut our eyes.

POPPY Sssshh!

JACK Poppy! If I have to come and fetch you, Poppy...you know what that means, don't you? *(Starting to take off his jacket)* It means rough trade. Rough. Rough. Poppy. *(He throws his jacket over the banisters and starts to descend, treading heavily)* Right. Here come the Vikings. You hear him coming, Poppy? *(He takes off his tie and starts to unbutton his shirt)* It's Erik the Hairy, coming for you.

ANITA *giggles.*

ROY Eric the Who?

POPPY Oh God, I want to die. I really want to die.

JACK *(in a strange Norwegian accent)* Nordsky! Nordsky! Where she hidey-hole the little Angley-Sexey girl? Here he come, Hairy Erik with his big meatey axey... *(He opens the sitting-room door, slowly reaching round for the light switch as he does so. Calling softly)* Angley-Sexey Girl! Come for a little pillage. Look who's here. Look who's here... *(Switching on the light)* Look who's— Oh, for crying out loud!

A roar from everyone.

POPPY Look who's here.

JACK *is mortified.* **POPPY**, *almost equally embarrassed, hugs him amidst much merriment. The following six speeches overlap.*

JACK I don't believe it. I really don't believe it. How long have they been there?

POPPY I'm sorry, Jack, I didn't mean it to happen like that, I promise.

JACK That was without a doubt the most embarrassing moment of my life...

CLIFF *(simultaneously with this last)* I wish they'd carried on. It was just getting interesting, wasn't it?

ANITA Fascinating. What was all this Viking business, that's what I'd like to know?

UBERTO Viking? Per favore, che cos'è un Viking?

ANITA *starts to try and explain.*

JACK *(singling out* **KEN** *and shaking him by the hand)* Hallo, Ken old lad, how are you? What a rotten trick to play on someone.

KEN *(effusively)* Hallo, then. Hallo then, old lad. Good to see you here. *(To* **YVONNE***)* Who is he?

YVONNE This is Jack. You know Jack, Ken.

KEN Of course it's Jack. I know Jack. He's my son-in-law. *(Trying to stop the chatter)* Ladies and...ladies and...

POPPY Sssh! Everybody!

DESMOND Quiet, everyone...quiet a minute...

Silence.

KEN *(to* **YVONNE***)* Who's this, then?

DESMOND I'm Desmond, Dad. Everyone, I think—my father would like to say a few words.

KEN I won't talk for long because I know that you know we all know who we're all talking about. We all know that. Our Jack here—

He grasps **DESMOND** *by the arm, who gently removes the hand and places it on* **JACK***'s arm instead.*

—my son-in-law... *(Worried by* **DESMOND***'s gesture)* What's that?

DESMOND Nothing, Dad.

KEN Well, don't do it. *(Resuming)* Jack, my son-in-law, loving husband to my Poppy there, who's coming home to run the business and all I can say is, welcome home, Jack, and not before time...

Applause.

That's all I wanted to say.

Applause.

JACK *(starting his reply)* Well, Ken, I'm sorry—

KEN When I started this firm, I started it with twenty-five pounds, a hand cart and a good woman. Well, over the years the money's devalued, the cart's disintegrated and Grace?—well, Gracie bless her, has departed. Only her name lives on in the firm, Ayres and Graces. Ayres, that's me. Gracie, that's her. And I know if she was here—which she probably is, since she's never been known to miss a party—she would undoubtedly reiterate to me that if there was anyone who can move this firm forward into the twenty-first century, it has to be Poppy's Jack who's the man to do it. He's done wonders for that duff load of frozen-food merchants he's just been with. What the hell's he going to do for a good firm?

Laughter and applause.

JACK *(after checking that* **KEN** *has finished)* Thank you, Ken. I'll do my best. I'm bracing myself for the culture shock of jumping from fish fingers to furniture—and I hope you'll have observed that all the fixtures and fittings in this house have come from the right place. Well, a man's got enough problems without in-law trouble as well...

Laugher.

Well. I think we're all aware that the business hasn't been as healthy as it might have been, just lately. Demand is sluggish, we know that. Consequently, productivity's also down and generally, I think it's fair to say—so far as I can gather, everyone's lost a bit of heart. Now it's very hard in this country for a business man to say something even half-way idealistic, without people falling over backwards laughing. To them it sounds like a contradiction in terms, anyway. But. Putting it as simply as I can. If I do nothing else, and during the coming months I can assure you I plan to do plenty, but if I succeed in doing nothing else I am determined to introduce one simple concept. And that concept is basic trust. *(He pauses for effect)*

KEN Basic what did he say?

YVONNE Trust.

KEN Oh, basic trust. Yes.

JACK I'm talking about establishing the understanding that so far as every individual member of that firm is concerned, working there is no longer going to be purely a question of take, take, take...whether it's raw materials from the shop floor, an extra fifty quid on our car allowances or paper clips from the office. We're there because we actually believe in what we're producing. Let's try and put across the idea that many of us believe in it so strongly that we are even anxious to put something back in. Effort. Hard work. Faith. Where do you think we'd be if we could do that? I'll tell you, we'd be top of the bloody league, that's where we'd be. We're a small family business. Even today, we're still essentially the same as we always were. There's no them and us about it. When it comes down to it, it's all us. That's all there is. Us. Ken and Des and Roy, there. All the lads we have working for us; all the girls in the office. They're practically family themselves, aren't they? It shouldn't be that difficult to achieve. All I'm saying is—let's start with the paper clips, shall we? Let's start with trust, that's all... *(After a slight pause)* Sorry.

A rather startled silence, then applause from everyone.

KEN Great speech, Jack, great speech...

JACK Thank you.

KEN I knew I'd got the right man.

DESMOND *(confidentially, to* **JACK***)* Just what was needed. Very inspiring.

JACK Thanks.

ROY Fantastic. I couldn't understand a word of it, but fantastic.

POPPY Roy, can you make sure everyone's got a drink?

ROY Wilco.

During the next, **ROY** *and* **DESMOND** *move into the far half of the sitting-room to replenish their drinks.* **HARRIET** *follows.* **POPPY** *stays talking to* **KEN** *and* **YVONNE. SAMANTHA** *sits herself in a corner with her half-finished glass of Coke and continues reading a hardback book.*

ANITA *(over this last)* You're a lovely talker, Jack. Beautiful. I could listen to you for hours.

JACK I meant it, Anita.

ANITA Jack, I want you to meet Uberto Rivetti. Uberto is a business associate of Cliff's. Visiting from Italy.

JACK How do you do, Mr Rivetti.

ANITA This is my brother-in-law— *(To* **JACK***)* —he doesn't speak hardly any English. *Mio cognate.* Jack.

UBERTO Piacere. Grazie per avermi invitato. Che bella casa!

JACK Thank you. *(To* **ANITA***)* What's he saying?

UBERTO E che bella famiglia. Sua moglie e le bambine sono simpaticissime.

ANITA *Grazie.* Uberto said he liked your speech.

JACK Oh, thank you very much. *(To* **ANITA***)* How long have you been speaking Italian?

ANITA I'm learning. Off a tape. I listen in the mornings when I'm jogging. Trouble is, I speak it better when I'm on the move. Look, Jack, I'm sorry we can't stay, but Uberto has a dinner engagement and I promised I'd look after him...

JACK Oh, shame...

ANITA We wanted to pop in. Just to say congratulations.

JACK Is Cliff going as well, then...?

ANITA No. No. Not Cliff.

JACK *(slightly embarrassed)* No. Sorry.

ANITA *(kissing him)* See you soon.

UBERTO Bye-bye.

JACK Yes. *Ciao!*

UBERTO Ciao! Si!

ANITA *and* **UBERTO** *move off towards the front door.* **POPPY** *accompanies them.*

KEN *(more confidentially)* Come and talk to me tomorrow, all right? At home.

JACK Sure.

KEN *(moving away)* I'll be there all day. All right?

JACK I will... 'Night, then.

YVONNE Good-night, Jack. I have to get him home...

KEN *and* **YVONNE** *move off to the front door, where* **POPPY** *is saying goodbye to* **ANITA** *and* **UBERTO**. **CLIFF** *emerges from the front sitting-room.*

POPPY Oh, are you off as well, Yvonne? Won't you stay for something to eat?

YVONNE No, Ken would like to get home. He never stays up too late...

CLIFF Get you a drink after all that, Jack?

JACK Ta. I'm just going to freshen up. Scotch. With plenty of water.

CLIFF Coming up. *(He returns to the drinks)*

TINA *(kissing* **JACK***)* Fantastic, Dad. Wonderful...

JACK Sorry, I didn't mean to go on quite so much.

TINA No, seriously. I think what you said was absolutely terrific. About time somebody said it.

JACK Oh, thank you. Praise indeed from one's own daughter.

TINA *checks round both rooms and gathers up empties and any bowls of snacks that need replenishing.* **SAMANTHA** *is now reading while listening to her personal stereo.*

Noticing her.

Hallo, Sammy.

SAMANTHA Hallo, Dad.

JACK Didn't see you there. All right, then?

SAMANTHA Yes, I'm all right.

JACK Right.

They appear to have run out of conversation.

Good.

KEN, **YVONNE**, **ANITA** *and* **UBERTO** *exit through the front door.*

JACK *goes back into the hall. As he does so,* **POPPY** *returns from the front door having said good-night to the above guests.*

POPPY It's supposed to be a party this, you know, not a party political broadcast.

JACK Sorry, I've already said sorry. I've apologised.

POPPY *(hugging him)* I was so proud of you. Really proud.

JACK Oh, well...

POPPY If the whole bloody world was as good as you there'd be no problem, that's all I can say. *(Kissing him briefly)* I love you very much.

JACK I love you.

POPPY Only don't make any more speeches or we'll never get anything to eat, all right?

JACK *(smiling)* Promise.

JACK *starts upstairs.* **POPPY** *goes into the sitting-room through the far door to check all is well. Simultaneously,* **TINA** *comes out through the near door with an empty crisp bowl in her hand.*

TINA Don't make too much noise when you're up there, will you, Dad? Kevin and Michelle are asleep.

JACK *(pleased)* Oh, have you brought the terrible terrors?

TINA We had to. Marianne's gone home to Germany for a fortnight.

JACK Roughing it, are you? Why, in my young day...

TINA Times change, Dad. I keep telling you...

JACK German nannies! You staying the night?

TINA Yes. Roy and I are in the spare room with Kevin. Michelle's in with Sammy.

JACK Didn't Sammy object?

TINA She didn't have any choice.

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