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ABSENT FRIENDS

A Play

by Alan Ayckbourn

|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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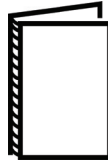


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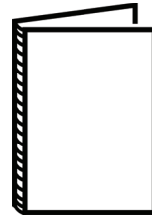
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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After a lifetime of playwriting (I first started as an unpublished writer at the age of ten!)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 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

ABSENT FRIENDS

First produced at the Library Theatre, Scarborough, on June 17th, 1974, and subsequently at the Garrick Theatre, London, on July 23rd, 1975, with the following cast of characters:

PAUL	Peter Bowles
DIANA	Pat Heywood
JOHN	Ray Brooks
EVELYN	Cheryl Kennedy
COLIN	Richard Briers
MARGE	Phyllida Law

The play directed by Eric Thompson
Designed by Derek Cousins

The action takes place in the open-plan living-room of a modern executive-style house.

ACT I Saturday evening, 3 pm

ACT II Immediately following

Time—the present

ACT I

The open-plan living-room of a modern executive-style house. Saturday, 3 p.m.

The room is primarily furnished with English Swedish-style furniture. A lot of wrought-iron for gates in lieu of doors and as used for room dividers: also artistic frosted glass. Doubtful pictures. A bar. Parquet floor with rugs. It all cost a great deal. Archways lead off to the kitchen and back doors, and to the front door and bedrooms, etc.

When the curtain rises EVELYN, a heavily made-up, reasonably trendily dressed, expressionless girl is discovered sitting on a bar-stool by a pram which she is absently rocking with one hand, whilst gazing blankly ahead. Near her, on a large coffee table, tea is laid out in the form of sandwiches, cakes and biscuits, under suitable coverings. Only the teapot and hot water jug are missing. EVELYN chews and sings to herself.

After a moment, DIANA enters from the kitchen. She takes a cigarette packet from the bench below the fire, finds it empty, and throws it into the fireplace. She takes a packet from her handbag, also on the bench, and lights it with a lighter from the bag. She is older than EVELYN, in her mid to later, thirties. She always gives the impression of being slightly strained. She smiles occasionally, but it is painful. Her sharp darting eyes do not miss much after years of suspicions both genuine and unfounded.

DIANA Have you got him to sleep?

EVELYN Yes.

DIANA (*looking into the pram*) Aaah! They look so lovely like that. Like little cherubims.

EVELYN (*unenthusiastically*) Mmm.

DIANA Just like little cherubims. (*Anxiously*) Should he be covered up as much as that, dear?

EVELYN Yes.

DIANA Won't he get too hot?

EVELYN He likes it hot.

DIANA Oh. I was just worried he wasn't getting enough air.

EVELYN He's all right. He doesn't need much air.

DIANA Oh, well... (*She looks about her*) Well, I think we're all ready for them. John's on his way, you say?

EVELYN Yes.

DIANA How is he these days? I haven't seen John for ages.

EVELYN He's all right.

DIANA I haven't seen either of you.

EVELYN We're all right.

DIANA Not for ages. Well, I'm glad you could come this afternoon. Colin really will appreciate that, I'm sure. Seeing us all. (*Pause*) Paul should be home soon. I think he's playing his squash again.

EVELYN Oh.

DIANA Him and his squash. It used to be tennis—now he's squash mad. Squash, squash, squash. Can't see what he sees in it. All afternoon hitting a ball against a wall. It's so noisy. Bang, bang, bang. He's not even out of doors. No fresh air at all. It can't be good for him. Does John play squash?

EVELYN No.

DIANA Oh.

EVELYN He doesn't play anything.

DIANA Oh, well. He probably doesn't need it. Exercise. Some men don't. My father never took a stroke of exercise. Till he died. He seemed fit enough. He managed to do what he wanted to do. Mind you, he never did very much. He just used to sit and shout at we girls. Most of the time. He got calmer though when he got older. After my mother left him. (*Looking into the pram*) Did you knit that little jacket for him?

EVELYN No.

DIANA Pretty. (*Pause. During the following she checks and arranges the dishes on the table*) No, there are times when I think that's the principle trouble between Paul and me. I mean, I know now I'm running myself down but Paul basically, he's got much more go—well, I mean let's face it, he's much cleverer than me. Let's face it. Basically. I mean, I was the bright one in our family but I can't keep up with Paul sometimes. When he has one of his moods, I think to myself, now if I was really clever, I could probably talk him round or something but I mean the thing is, really and truly, and I know I'm running myself down when I say this, I don't think I'm really enough for him. He needs me, I can tell that; he doesn't say as much but I know he does. It's just, as I say, I don't think I'm really enough for him. (*She reflects*) But he couldn't do without me. Make no mistake about that. He's got this amazing energy. I don't know where he finds it. He goes to bed long after me, he's up at dawn, working down here—then off he goes all day—I need my eight hours, it's no good. What I'm saying is really, I wouldn't blame him. Not altogether. If he did. With someone else. You know, another woman. I wouldn't blame him, I wouldn't blame her. Not as long as I was told. Providing I know, that I'm told—all right. Providing I feel able to say to people— “Yes, I am well aware that my husband is having an affair with such and such or whoever—it's quite all right. I know all about it. We're both grown-up people,

we know what we're doing, he knows I know, she knows I know. So mind your own business." I'd feel all right about it. But I will not stand deception. I'm simply asking that I be told. Either by him or, if not, by her. Not necessarily now but sometime. You see.

DIANA *goes to the kitchen.*

EVELYN *sits expressionless.*

DIANA *returns with an ashtray, which she puts on the bar.*

I know he is, you see. He's not very clever and he's a very bad liar like most men. If he takes the trouble, like last Saturday, to tell me he's just going down the road to the football match, he might at least choose a day when they're playing at home. *(She lifts the tablecloth and inspects the sandwiches)* I hope I've made enough tomato. No, I must be told. Otherwise it makes my life impossible. I can't talk to anybody without them... I expect them, both of them, at least to have some feeling for me. *(She blows her nose)* Well?

The doorbell rings.

Excuse me.

DIANA *goes out to open the front door.*

MARGE *(offstage)* Only me.

DIANA Marge!

MARGE *(offstage)* I've been shopping. Don't laugh.

DIANA Leave your coat?

MARGE Oh yes.

There is the sound of shopping bags dropping, then laughter.

DIANA How's Gordon?

MARGE Not too bad.

MARGE *bustles in laden with bags. DIANA follows.*

Poor little thing—lying there—with his face as white as a sheet...

DIANA Poor thing...

MARGE (*putting the bags on the sofa*) He looks dreadful... Hallo, Evelyn.

EVELYN Hallo.

MARGE Oh! (*Going to the pram*) Look who's here! Little baby Walter.

EVELYN Wayne.

MARGE What?

EVELYN It's Wayne. His name's Wayne.

DIANA (*laughing*) Walter...

MARGE I thought it was Walter.

DIANA Marge, honestly. You can't have a baby called Walter.

MARGE Well, I don't know. Somebody must have done... (*She screams with laughter. Peering into the pram*) Oh look. Look at his skin. It's a lovely skin, Evelyn.

EVELYN Thank you.

MARGE Beautiful skin. Hallo, Baby Wayne. Hallo, Wayne. Google—google—google.

DIANA Ssh, Marge, she's just got him to sleep.

MARGE (*quieter*) Diggy diggy diggy. (*Whispering*) Lovely when they're asleep.

DIANA Yes...

MARGE (*whispering*) Looks like his daddy. Looks like John.

DIANA You don't have to whisper, Marge. Just don't shout in his ear.

MARGE (*going back to her carriers, etc.*) Look at all this lot. I can't go anywhere.

DIANA What have you got there?

MARGE You know what I'm like. You know me... Oh, guess what I did get? (*She puts the bags near the sofa*)

DIANA What?

MARGE Are you ready?

DIANA Yes.

MARGE Brace yourself. I got the shoes.

DIANA You bought them?

MARGE Just now and I don't care. I passed the shop on the way here. I thought it's no good, I don't care, it's now or never, I'm going to have them, I must have them. So I got them.

DIANA I must see.

MARGE Just a minute. Gordon'll go mad... (*Rummaging*) Now, which one did I put them in?

DIANA It is a shame about Gordon. Gordon's ill, Evelyn, he can't come.

EVELYN Oh.

MARGE No. He finally got it. It's been going round and round for months, I knew he'd get it eventually. He was perfectly all right last night, then he woke up this morning and he'd got it... (*Finding her shoe bag within another bag*) Here we are... (*Finding something else*) Oh—nearly forgot. That's for you.

DIANA For me?

MARGE It's only a little thing. But I saw one while I was in there and I knew you'd seen mine and wanted one...

DIANA Oh, yes...

MARGE (to EVELYN) It's a holder. For those paper towels in the kitchen. Paper-towel holder. Have you got one?

EVELYN No.

MARGE Remind me, I'll get you one.

DIANA That's so thoughtful (*Going for her handbag*) I must pay you for it.

MARGE You'll do no such thing.

DIANA No, Marge, I insist. You're always buying us things.

MARGE I enjoy it. I like buying presents.

DIANA (*producing her purse*) How much?

EVELYN *rises and moves to the door to the stairs.*

MARGE I won't take it, put it away.

DIANA How much was it?

MARGE Diana, will you put that purse away this minute.

DIANA No, I'm sorry, Marge, I'm going to pay you.

MARGE Diana, will you put that away this minute. Evelyn, tell her to put it away...

DIANA (to EVELYN) You all right, dear?

EVELYN Fine.

DIANA Where are you off to then?

EVELYN To the lavatory.

DIANA Oh. I see. Beg your pardon.

EVELYN *goes out upstairs.*

(*selecting coins from her purse*) Twenty p. There you are. I don't know how much it was but there you are.

MARGE Oh, really. (*She leaves the money on the table*)

DIANA Am I glad to see you!

MARGE Why's that?

DIANA She's been here for ages.

MARGE Who do you mean—oh, yes. Miss Chatterbox.

DIANA I know she's been up to something. I don't trust her.
I never did.

MARGE I must show you my shoes. (*She starts to unpack them*)
How do you mean?

DIANA I know that girl's been up to something.

MARGE Oh, you mean wit...?

DIANA She and Paul. I know they have.

MARGE Well... (*Producing a pair of very unsuitable shoes*)
There, you see. Aren't they nice?

DIANA Lovely.

MARGE They had them in blue which was nicer, actually. But
then I had nothing else that would have gone with them.

DIANA He didn't want them to come round here today. That's
how I know they're up to something.

MARGE Who? (*She tries on the shoes*)

DIANA Evelyn and John. He didn't want them round.

MARGE Who? Paul didn't?

DIANA No.

MARGE (*parading around in her shoes*) Look, you see—these
tights aren't right with them but...

DIANA I mean, why should he suddenly not want them round?
They've been round here enough in the past and then all
of a sudden he doesn't want to see them.

MARGE Odd. There was another sort, you know, with the strap
but I found they cut me across here.

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