

METHUEN STUDENT EDITION

ALAN AYCKBOURN



CONFUSIONS

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Front cover photograph by John Haynes:
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ISBN 0-413-53270-4



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AYCKBOURN *Confusions*

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WITH COMMENTARY AND NOTES

Confusions

A TALK IN THE PARK

A park

Four park benches, separated but not too distant from each other. On one sits Beryl, a belligerent young girl at present engrossed in reading a long letter. On another sits Charles who looks what he is, a businessman dressed for the weekend. He is slowly thumbing his way through a thick report. On another sits Doreen, middle-aged, untidily dressed, feeding the birds from a bag of breadcrumbs. On the remaining bench sits Ernest, a younger man. He sits gazing into space. The birds sing. After a moment, Arthur enters. He is a bird-like man in a long mackintosh, obviously on the look-out for company. Eventually, he approaches Beryl's bench

Arthur Is this seat occupied, by any chance?

Beryl (shortly) No. (She continues to read)

Arthur Great, great. (He sits)

A pause. Arthur takes deep breaths and gives a few furtive glances in Beryl's direction

Student, I see?

Beryl What?

Arthur Student, I bet. You look like a student. Always tell a student.

Beryl No.

Arthur Ah. You look like one. You're young enough to be a student. Quite young enough. That's the life, isn't it? Being a student. Not a care in the world. Sitting in the park on a day like this. In the sunshine. Rare enough we see the sun, eh? Eh? Rare.

Beryl Yes. (She refuses to be drawn into conversation)

Arthur Mind you, I shouldn't be here. By rights, I should be at home. That's where I should be. Inside my front door. I've got plenty of things I should be doing. The kitchen shelves to name but three. Only you sit at home on a day like today. Sunday. Nothing to do. On your own—you think to yourself, this is no good, this won't get things done—and there you are talking to yourself. You know what they say about people who talk to themselves? Eh? Eh? Yes. So I thought it's outdoors for you, else they'll come and take you away. Mind you, I'm never at a loss. I'm a very fulfilled person. I have, for example, one of the biggest collections of cigarette cards of anyone alive or dead that I know of. And you don't get that by sitting on your behind all day. But I'll let you into a secret. Do you know what it is that's the most valuable thing there is you can hope to collect? People. I'm a collector of people. I look at them, I observe them, I hear them talk, I listen to their manner

of speaking and I think, hallo, here's another one. Different. Different again. Because I'll let you into a secret. They are like fingerprints. They are never quite the same. And I've met a number in my lifetime. Quite a number. Some good, some bad, all different. But the best of them, and I'm saying this to you quite frankly and openly, the best of them are women. They are superior people. They are better people. They are cleaner people. They are kinder-hearted people. If I had a choice, I'd be a woman. Now that makes you laugh, I expect, but it's the truth. When I choose to have a conversation, I can tell you it's with a woman every time. Because a woman is one of nature's listeners. Most men I wouldn't give the time of day to. Now I expect that shocks you but it's the truth. Trouble is, I don't get to meet as many women as I'd like to. My particular line of work does not bring me into contact with them as much as I would wish. Which is a pity.

Beryl gets up

Beryl Excuse me. (She moves off)

Arthur Are you going?

Beryl moves to Charles's bench

Beryl (to Charles) Excuse me, is this seat taken?

Charles (barely glancing up) No. (He moves along his bench)

Beryl (sitting) Thanks. Sorry, only the man over there won't stop talking. I wanted to read this in peace. I couldn't concentrate. He just kept going on and on about his collections or something. I normally don't mind too much, only if you get a letter like this, you need all your concentration. You can't have people talking in your ear—especially when you're trying to decipher writing like this. He must have been stoned out of his mind when he wrote it. It wouldn't be unusual. Look at it. He wants me to come back. Some hopes. To him. He's sorry, he didn't mean to do what he did, he won't do it again I promise, etc., etc. I seem to have heard that before. It's not the first time, I can tell you. And there's no excuse for it, is there? Violence. I mean, what am I supposed to do? Keep going back to that? Every time he loses his temper he... I mean, there's no excuse. A fracture, you know. It was nearly a compound fracture. That's what they told me. (Indicating her head) Right here. You can practically see it to this day. Two X-rays. I said to him when I got home, I said, "You bastard, you know what you did to my head?" He just stands there. The way he does. "Sorry," he says, "I'm ever so sorry." I told him. I said, "You're a bastard, that's what you are. A right, uncontrolled, violent, bad-tempered bastard." You know what he said? He says, "You call me a bastard again and I'll smash your stupid face in." That's what he says. I mean, you can't have a rational, civilized discussion with a man like that, can you? He's a right bastard. My friend Jenny, she says, "You're a looney, leave him for God's sake. You're a looney." Who needs that? You tell me one person who needs that? Only where do you go? I mean, there's all my things—my personal things. All my—everything. He's

even got my bloody Post Office book. I'll finish up back there, you wait and see. I must be out of my tiny mind. Eh. Sometimes I just want to jump down a deep hole and forget it. Only I know that bastard'll be waiting at the bottom. Waiting to thump the life out of me. Eh?

Charles Yes. Excuse me. (*He gets up*)
Beryl I'm sorry, I didn't mean to embarrass you.

Charles No, no.

Beryl I just had to . . .

Charles Quite all right. Quite all right.

Charles moves over to Doreen

(*To Doreen*) Nobody here, is there?

Doreen What?

Charles Nobody here?

Doreen Nobody where? (*She looks round*)

Charles Sitting here.

Doreen No. No.

Charles Sorry. Do you mind if I do? (*He sits*) I won't disturb you. Girl over there's got boy-friend trouble. Comes and pours it all out on me—as if I'm interested. I mean, we've all been through it at one time or another. Why she should think I should be interested. I mean, we've all got troubles no doubt. But we all don't sit on a bench and bore some poor innocent stranger to death. I mean, that in my book spells S for selfishness. And have you noticed that it's invariably the young? They think we haven't been through it. Can't imagine that perhaps we were young, too. Don't know where they think we all came from. I mean, five years ago I had a house in the country, a charming wife, two good children, couldn't imagine a happier family. My wife dies suddenly, my children can't stand the place a moment longer and emigrate to Canada so I sell the house and there I am in a flat I can hardly swing a cat in. But I don't go round boring other people with it. That's life. I've had twenty—no, more like twenty-five, good years. Who am I to complain in for some bad ones. Things are going to get worse before they get better. Bound to. And you know an interesting thing about trouble? I always think it's a bit like woodworm. Once you've got a dose, if you're not careful, it starts to spread. Starts in your family and, before you know it, it's into your business. Which explains why I'm sitting here reading a report that's been put together so badly that I've got to read it through on my one day off and condense it into another report before I can even be certain whether I'm bankrupt. I mean, I don't know if you're interested but just take a look at this page here, this is a typical page. Can you make head or tail . . .

Doreen gets up and moves away

(*Muttering*) Oh, I beg your pardon.

Doreen moves to Ernest's bench

Doreen Excuse me.

Ernest Eh?

Doreen Excuse me. May I sit here for a moment? (*She sits*) The man over there has been—you know—I didn't want to make a scene but he—you know. I mean, I suppose I should call the police—but they'd never catch him. I mean, most of the police are men as well, aren't they? Between you and me, I have heard that most of the police women are as well. Men dressed up, you know. Special Duties, so called. So my ex-husband informed me. I mean, it's terrible, you can't sit in a park these days without some men—you know—I mean, I'm on a fixed income—I don't want all that. That comes from my husband. My ex-husband. He runs a pub. In the country. But I had to leave him. We got to the stage when it was either that or—you know. I love dogs, you see, and he would never—he refused, point blank. And the day came when I knew I must have a dog. It became—you know—like an obsession. So I left. I usually have my dog here with me only he's at the vet's. He's only a puppy. They had to keep him in. He's being—you know—poor little thing. He'd have seen that man off. He's a loyal little dog. He understands every word I say to him. Every word. I said to him this morning, Ginger-boy, I said—you're coming down to the vet's with me this morning to be—you know, and his little ears pricked up and his tail wagged. He knew, you see. I think dogs are more intelligent than people. They're much better company and the wonderful thing is that once you've got a little dog, you meet other people with dogs. And what I always say is that people who have dogs they're the nicest sort of people. They're the ones I know I'd get on with.

Ernest gets up

Have you got a dog, by any chance?

Ernest ignores her and creeps behind the trees to Arthur

Ernest (*sitting down next to Arthur*) Excuse me. Just taking refuge. Nut case over there. Bloody woman prattling on about her dog. Ought to be locked up. Thinks every man's after her. I mean, look. Look at it. After her? She'd have to pay 'em. You know the sort though, don't you? If you let her talk to you long enough, she'll talk herself into thinking you've assaulted her. Before you know it, she's screaming blue murder, you'll be carried off by the fuzz and that's your lot. Two years if you're lucky. I mean, I came out here to get away from the wife. Don't want another one just like her, do I? I mean. That's why I'm in the park. Get away from the noise. You got kids? Don't have kids. Take my tip, don't get married. Looks all right, but believe me—nothing's your own. You've paid for it all but nothing's your own. Yap, yap, yap. Want, want, want. Never satisfied. I mean, no word of a lie, I look at her some mornings and I think, blimey, I must have won last prize in a raffle. Mind you, I dare say she's thinking the same. In fact, I know she is. Certainly keeps me at a distance. Hallo, dear, put your money on

the table and she's off out. Don't see her for dust. Sunday mornings, it's a race to see who can get out first. Loser keeps the baby. Well, this morning I made it first. Here I am in the quiet. Got away from the noise. You know something interesting? Most of our lives are noise, aren't they? Artificial man-made noise. But you sit out here and you can listen—and—well, there's a bit of traffic but apart from that—peace. Like my mother used to say. Shut your eyes in the country and you can hear God breathing. (*He shuts his eyes*)

Arthur (*leaning across to Beryl*) Hey—hey—psst! I've got a right one here. Thinks he's listening to God breathing . . . (*He laughs*)
Beryl (*leaning across to Charles*) He's talking again. To me. What do you do? (*She smiles*)

Charles (*leaning across to Doreen*) There she goes again. What did I tell you? Chapter Two of the boyfriend saga.

Doreen (*leaning across to Ernest*) He's talking to me. If he does it any more, I'll call the police . . .
Ernest (*to Arthur*) Oh, blamey. Why doesn't she go home? Hark at her. Can you hear her? Rabbitting on . . .

The following, final section, is played as a Round. Doreen finishes first, then Charles cuts out, followed by Beryl, Arthur, and then Ernest

Arthur (*to Beryl*) Hey—hey.

Beryl *continues to ignore him*

Oh, suit yourself.

Beryl (*to Charles*) Psst—psst.

Charles *ignores her*

Oh, be like that.

Charles (*to Doreen*) I say, I say.

Doreen *ignores him*

Oh, all right, don't then . . .

Doreen (*to Ernest*) Excuse me, excuse me, excuse me.

Ernest *ignores her*

Oh, really.

Ernest (*nudging Arthur*) Oy—oy.

Arthur *ignores him*

Oh, all right, then. Don't then. Might as well talk to yourself. They all sit sulky. The Lights fade to a Black-out, and—

the CURTAIN falls

Notes

(These notes are intended to serve the needs of overseas students as well as those of English-born users.)

Mother Figure

- 1 *dinkie* — baby-talk for a drink.
- 1 *toothpegs* — baby-talk for teeth.
- 1 *botty* — baby-talk for bottom.
- 3 *transfer charge call* — telephone call in which the person who receives the call agrees to pay for it.
- 4 *door chimes* — instead of an ordinary door-bell some houses have an instrument which, when the door-bell is pushed, produces either a sound of chiming bells or even a simple tune.
- 4 *pudgy* — short and fat.
- 5 *sotto voce* — musical term meaning 'in a quiet voice'.
- 5 *choccy bics* — baby-talk for chocolate biscuits.
- 7 *idle loafer* — workshy layabout.
- 10 *nutter* — colloquial for idiot or lunatic.
- 11 'George Porgie', etc. — well-known children's nursery rhyme.
- 11 *Sleep tight* . . . *Hope the bugs don't bite*. — rhyme often used by parents to young children after putting them to bed.

Drinking Companion

- 13 *three-star hotel* — hotel offering moderate degree of luxury.
- 13 *muzak* — background music over loudspeakers.
- 13 *the ringing tone* — sound indicating that the phone is ringing out at the number you have dialled.
- 13 *large ones* — usually denotes a double measure of a drink.
- 13 *Mason's* — (fictional) local departmental store.
- 15 *charge it to Room two-four-nine, please* — put the costs of the drinks onto the final bill of room number 249.
- 16 *Playing the field* — going out with several men.
- 16 *Luton* — town thirty miles north of London with a reputation for being boring.
- 16 *Shepherd's Bush* — unfashionable district of London.

We have reached a lull in the proceedings which takes us gently into the startling revelations of Milly's pregnancy and Gosforth's unsympathetic reactions. Once the microphone has been dropped and it is obvious to the audience that the conversation is being broadcast, the pace must pick up again in preparation for Stewart's explosive entrance.

The sight of this earnest, very red-faced young man in full scouting regalia shouting swear words at the top of his voice is one of the first visual triumphs of the play. He is completely beside himself and must play the scene for all it is worth until his collapse into the chair as he mutters incredulously 'Four acres. Four acres...'. The rain begins to hammer down and Stewart, indulging in unfamiliar alcohol, gets progressively more tipsy. Homeruths are exchanged between Milly and her rather dull fiancé and even the vicar gets in on the act adding more fuel to the fire.

With the entrance of Gosforth carrying the tea urn the activity begins to forge ahead yet again. The pace of the play quickens as we approach its climax. Mrs. Pearce arrives bespattered with mud as a result of misdirection by the cubs. Gosforth begins his speech of welcome as the vicar succeeds in jamming the tap on the tea urn. The frantic attempts to stem the flow of liquid with innumerable plastic cups is punctuated with the strains of well-known camp-fire songs rendered by the drunken Stewart. Mrs. Pearce's Party Political Broadcast is lost during the ensuing melee and her reward is electrocution. Once again the vicar manages to involve himself in these shocking events. All hell is let loose. Gosforth's final, desperate endeavours to bring order out of chaos end in his being catapulted out of the tent into the pouring rain and churned up mud as Stewart's home-made podium collapses around him. Fitting retribution indeed for his misdeemeanour with the hapless Milly.

This is English farce at its best. It combines hilarious visual images with frenzied dialogue. The secret is to keep everything going once it is launched. The synchronization of dialogue and action is paramount and needs careful rehearsal. Everything in this final section builds to the electrocution of Emma and must be pointed in that direction. It must be plotted cold-bloodedly so that the laughter from the audience is controlled and built to a crescendo at the right moment. Even then it must be kept bubbling along to rise once more as Gosforth pitches out of the tent entrance.

As with *Between Mouthfuls* the playing has to be precise and

uncluttered. Even though so much is going on the audience must not miss a trick. The successful acting of farce calls for great discipline on stage, for ensemble playing of a very high order and a well-developed dexterity in handling stage properties. If it is successful it should leave the audience not only with sore ribs but also gasping in admiration. The potential for this is certainly present in the final stages of *Gosforth's Fete*. It is, technically, the most difficult section of the five-play collection. By now the audience is ready for a break. A gradual wind-down is called for and this is provided in the gentle finale to *Confusions*.

A Talk in the Park

This short, revue-type piece of writing is seen by Alan Ayckbourn as a curtain call for the five actors. It is a way of saying goodnight and at the same time underlining the basic themes of loneliness and misunderstanding which have caused so much confusion in what has gone before.

As a direct contrast to what we have seen earlier this piece does not use any tricks but relies almost entirely on the dialogue for its effect. It is a picture of desolation designed to focus our attention keenly on the plight of the protagonists. They give vent to their innermost feelings. The audience takes on the role of confessor since no-one in the play seems prepared to listen. We are aware that some form of human chess is being played in front of us which we are powerless to control. Thus it is that the characters' frustrations become our frustrations. They impress themselves upon us more strongly because of the simplicity of the presentation.

Arthur is desperate for companionship. Talking to himself has lost its appeal. His inconsequential chat about his collection of people and cigarette cards demonstrates the quality of his loneliness. The inanimate objects are real; his human acquisitions imaginary. They have been ships that pass in the night making only a superficial impression on him. He chooses women to talk to because he feels they will listen. He cannot cope in a man's world and is desperately trying to recapture his childhood security.

However Beryl is the wrong woman to choose. She has had her share of companionship which has turned sour and she abruptly leaves to unburden herself on the respectable looking Charles.

Beryl's problem is that whenever she seeks advice she never listens. Her mind is already made up. The obvious solution is starting her in the face. However she is so utterly besotted by the man who continually ill-treats her that she is unable to stand back

and view the situation rationally. Hers is a self-enforced loneliness. She lacks the courage to act positively and yet tortures herself with an analysis of the situation out of which she may never escape. She simply needs to get it off her chest before returning to do battle once more. It is almost as if she is seeking absolution. The venom and air of self-destruction in her speech sends Charles running for cover.

Despite his apparent affluence he too is a sad figure. A born pessimist who is content to blame fate and the world in general for all his trials and tribulations. After the death of his wife, 'woodworm' has eaten into his life. He has given up trying. His business is shaky and, despite his protestations that he doesn't 'go around boring people' with his problems, this seems to be the only way left in which he can express himself. Disaster is inevitable and non-one will persuade him otherwise. He too has lost his ability to cope. If we are to believe what he says about his life five years ago then this acceptance of impending doom and the degeneration of middle age make his situation even more pathetic.

Doreen's predicament is that, basically, she cannot stand men. The masculine image which they propagate is too much for her and deep down inside, while she is still fascinated, she has tried to reject them. She is now pouring out her 'affection' and reason for living on to her dog. Her obsession has taken over and her puppy has become her substitute male companion. However she has just taken him to the vet to be neutered. When she tells him of his visit 'his little ears prick up and his tails wags'. She has at last got her own back. She is now the dominant one and can make all the decisions. Her inadequacy in the normal world and her unhealthy preoccupation with the male species naturally causes Ernest to flee for his life.

This young man refuses to accept his responsibilities. On the surface he is self-assured and 'one of the boys'. However his superficial attitude to everything around him has created a rift in his marriage which is obviously going to widen as the years go by. He is much happier to 'cut and run' rather than face his problems and try to do something about them. To some extent we sympathize with his feelings of emasculation yet censure his lack of positive action. His retreat from the noise of 'the man-made world' is an act of cowardice.

As an audience we sit and listen as the words come pouring out and in doing so are reminded of our own failings. How often have we ignored those around us because we are too busy running our

own lives? We become blinkered to the needs of others as we retreat deeper into our own concerns.

The concluding round of pleading followed by the acceptance of rejection and the final line 'might as well talk to yourself' says it all. The curtain comes down leaving us somewhat disconcerted in our seats.

As already stated Alan Ayckbourn is a self-confessed commercial playwright. He has probably reached a wider public than any other author in the last fifty years.

In *Confusions* we are faced with a small-scale sweep of his capabilities. His craftsmanship is not in dispute. He is equally at home with comedy of character and high farce. He can make us roar with laughter and move us to tears. Above all he is, as Arthur says in *A Talk in the Park* a 'collector of people'.

For our part we must look deeper into his work. His beautifully wrapped packages contain hidden messages for us all. It is usually after the plays are over that we begin to question our motives as we recognise the seriousness of the subject matter.

It is in this way that the memory of an Ayckbourn play remains with members of his audiences for a long time and brings us back over and over again. It is not just the laughter which is remembered but the human collisions that we have witnessed, which possess the power to awaken our compassion. At one of his plays we are 'taken out of ourselves' in the real 'theatrical' meaning of that phrase, which surely is a total vindication of Alan Ayckbourn's achievements as Britain's most popular playwright.