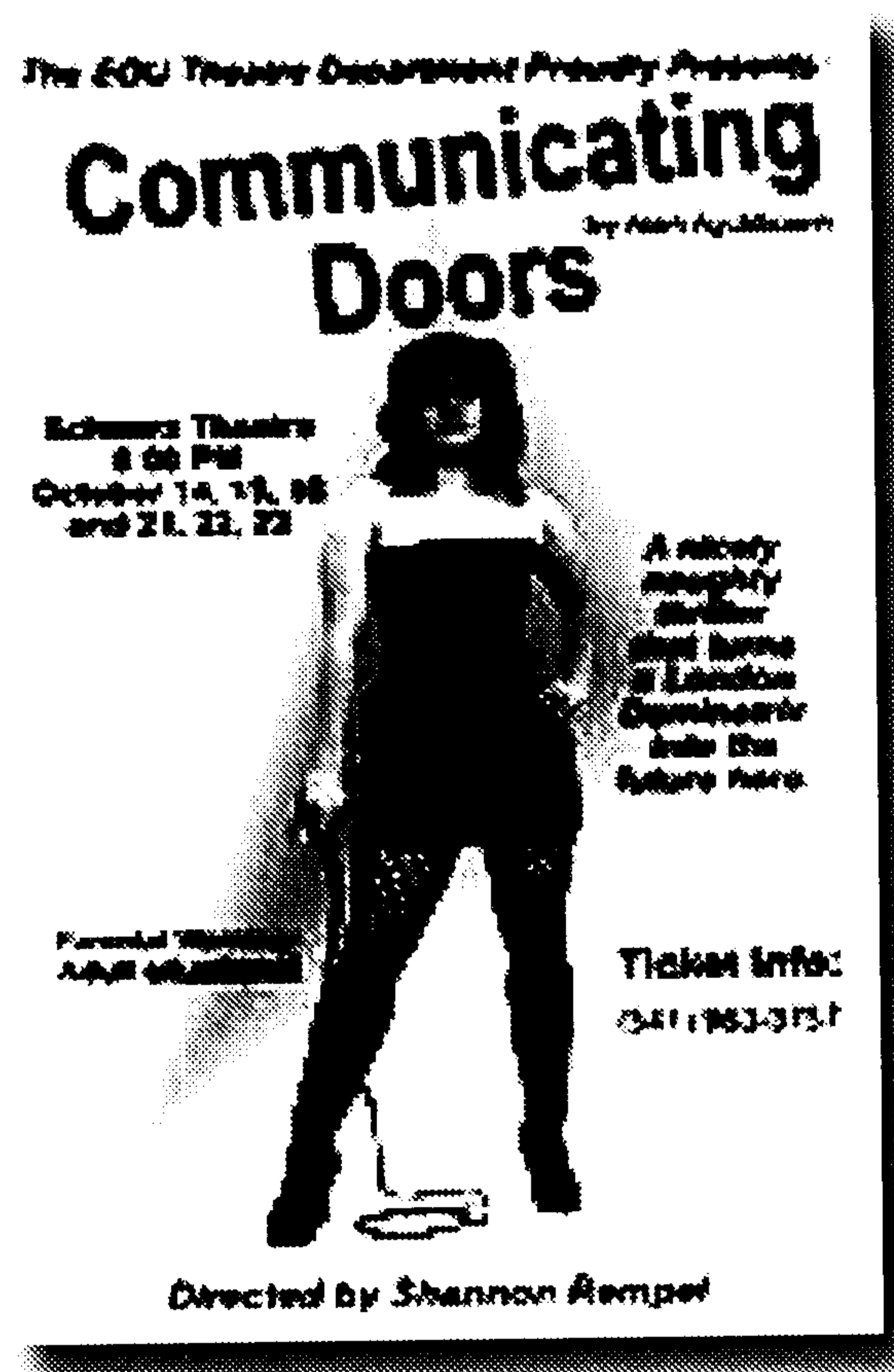


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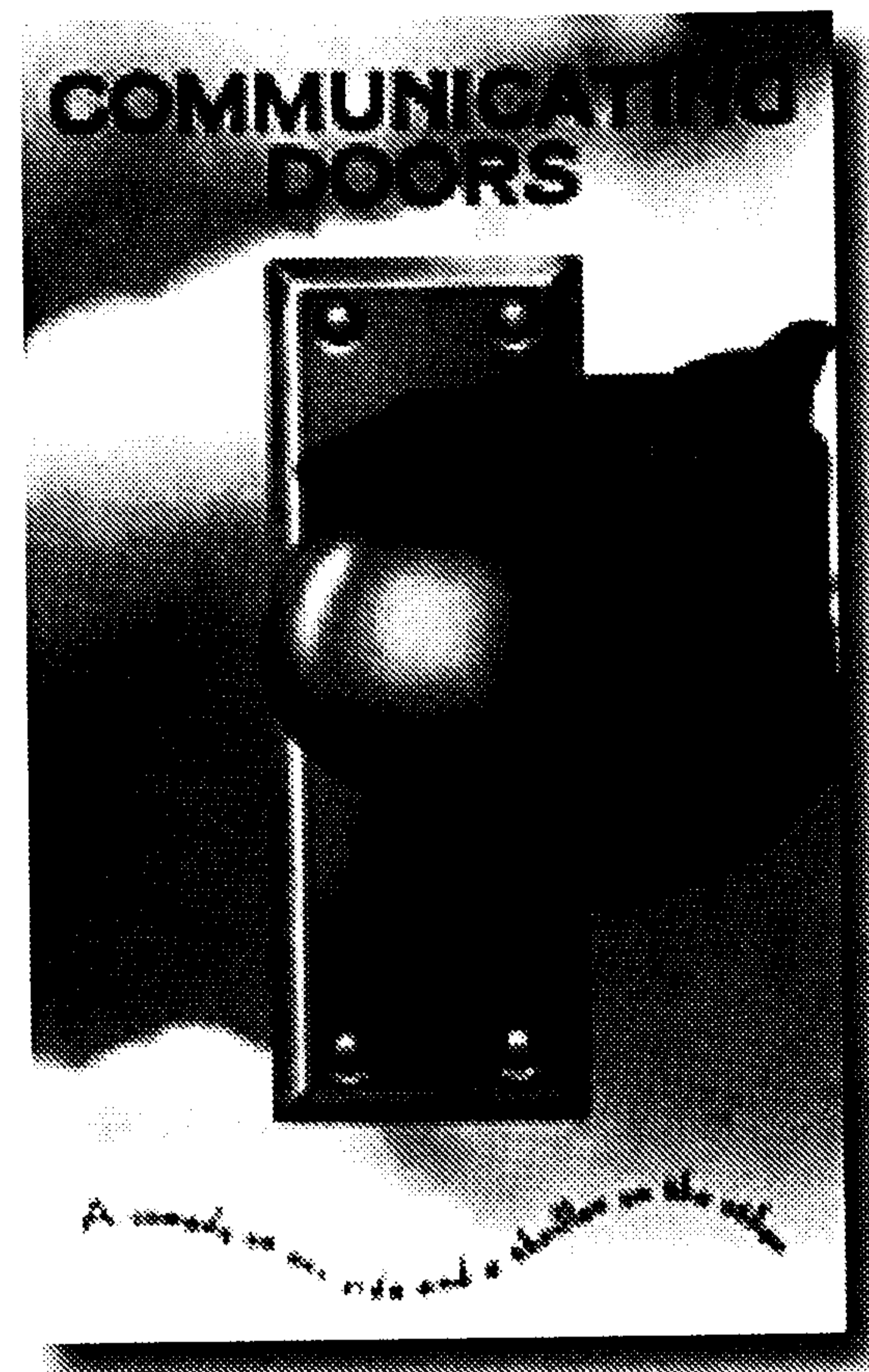
Book Review

Alan Ayckbourn. *Communicating Doors*.
London and Boston: Faber & Faber, 1995. Pp125

Prapassaree Kramer
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*The Schwarz Theatre, Eastern Oregon University
La Grande, OR 2004*



*Variety Arts Theatre
New York, 1999*

In 2014 a female dominatrix, dressed in leather with her bag of tricks, enters the hotel bedroom of a rich elderly tycoon who has difficulty even tying his shoelaces. The setting and stereotypes will have

the typical viewer or reader—at least those alert to convention—anticipating a bedroom farce (as is implied in the poster top left). However, it turns out that what the elderly tycoon requires is the dominatrix’s signature on his confession, and the use not of her sexual services but her delivery service. The play has suddenly changed its direction and the reader now anticipates a murder mystery (as is implied by the poster, top right). Later on, Poopey, the protagonist, finds a portal that transfers her back to the past (hence the title, *Communicating Doors*). Finally, the readers are lead to think that they have “got it”: they are watching a time travel science fiction. In fact, there is much more to be reckoned with in this play.

Alan Ayckbourn is one of the most prolific playwrights writing in English: he wrote sixty four plays from 1959 to 2004. His plays have been translated into thirty five languages and produced worldwide both on stage and on television. In 1991-2, he was a professor of contemporary theatre at Oxford University. He is very successful commercially and has received numerous awards. Interestingly, his commercial success and his choice of comedy as the genre he works in has to some extent diminished his critical reputation, since academia did not pay much attention to his oeuvre in scholarly work until about ten years ago. In fact, Ayckbourn is very versatile and he always finds new approaches to dramatize his themes. His comedies are often farcical in structure but not trivial in substance, even when relying on motifs drawn from popular culture. Ayckbourn has played with science fiction, for example, in an earlier play, *Henceforward* (1987), in which one of the characters is a nanny robot, NAN 300F. Although much of his success has come in the old and usually conservative genre of living-room comedy, he is also one of the most consistent

innovators on the modern stage, stretching the boundaries of theatre more than many a more prestigious modern dramatist. In *How the Other Half Loves* (1969) two scenes are played simultaneously on the same set. In *Woman In Mind* (1985), the protagonist weaves in and out of her real world and her imaginary one: the idealized family and its problem-filled counterpart live side by side on the same stage. In *The Norman Conquests*, three plays take place among the same characters over the same time span, but each drama occupies a different room of the house. Ayckbourn's fans can reliably count on some surprise in any of his plays.

In *Communicating Doors*, Ayckbourn may be attempting to encapsulate what he is trying to do with the play in the opening scene. By thrice upsetting his reader's expectation of what kind of play they are supposed to be reading, Ayckbourn implies that there is more to this play than the surface farcical incidents. The readers may be contented with the mixture of genres in the meantime but their expectation will be thwarted once more by the end of the play.

Generally, the play follows the tradition of a murder mystery. Poopey is pursued by the corrupt businessman J. S. Goodman, who does not want his secrets revealed through Reece's confession. Goodman would have accomplished his mission of permanently silencing Poopey if she had not stumbled upon the portal to the past. As the play progresses, it is revealed that two of Reece's former wives were killed by Goodman. Ayckbourn employs the cliché motif of the damsel in distress and thriller film: helpless women (often running around in nightgowns) being hunted by a villain. Ayckbourn also makes use of farcical recipe reminiscent of Joe Orton's *What the Butler Saw* : the women hustle around trying to hide the dead body

of their nemesis, putting the body in a cart to transfer it from one room to another. Once the women get rid of their murderer, they subsequently change their life and their future. The two wives, who were supposed to be murdered in the “first version” of their destiny, instead enjoy long and happy lives after the fantastic intervention from the future changes their fate. Poopey is transformed from a “sexual consultant” to a happily married professional woman. Even Reece the old tycoon has a change of heart: he becomes more gentle and loving because the evil influence of Goodman on his life retroactively vanishes before he can do much damage to Reece’s family. For this aspect of the play Ayckbourn relies on the tradition of time travel science-fiction in which the protagonist (usually a man) goes back to change the past, though he is typically unsuccessful because he forgets small details, producing a cascading “butterfly effect.” The happy ending in *Communicating Doors* is thus both atypical of the genre and quite unusual for Ayckbourn. Maybe there is more than what meets the eye.

A careful examination of the play’s structure and conventions yields several interesting results. The characters are divided into two groups, good versus evil (to use melodramatic terms), according to their genders. The good side comprises the three women and the evil side are Reece the tycoon (in his original incarnation), J. S. Goodman and the gullible and bribable house detective. The detective and science fiction genres, which normally belong to male protagonists, have gone through some transformation here and are usurped by three women. Significantly, it is Ruella, the second wife, who does most of the thinking, solving the major mystery and finding the solution that saves all the women’s lives. By contrast the male characters are just

functionaries. The convention of the damsel in distress reinforces the feminist reading here. These women are potential murder victims but there is no knight in shining armor to rescue them: they have to fend for themselves. In this case what is missing is as important as what is present, omission as significant as convention. The disappearance of the rescuer signifies women's independence and solidarity, overcoming their stereotyped helplessness. What is impressive is Ayckbourn's talent in dramatizing the women's solidarity underneath the farcical structure. In the balcony scene, in which Ruella is hanging onto the bedsheet from the balcony on one side and the two other women are struggling to pull her up on the other, Ayckbourn dramatizes a cliché scene from a physical comedy but at the same time the reader can imagine (or the audience can see) three women hanging on to the same sheet and willing themselves not to let go, preferring to "die trying." Their attempts to save each other, even though they do not have to, reinforces this theme of solidarity among women. This issue is also dramatized by feminist playwrights such as Caryl Churchill in her play *Top Girls* in which she suggests that one woman's ability to break through the glass ceiling does not constitute progress in the feminist movement. What is missing in that play is female unity.

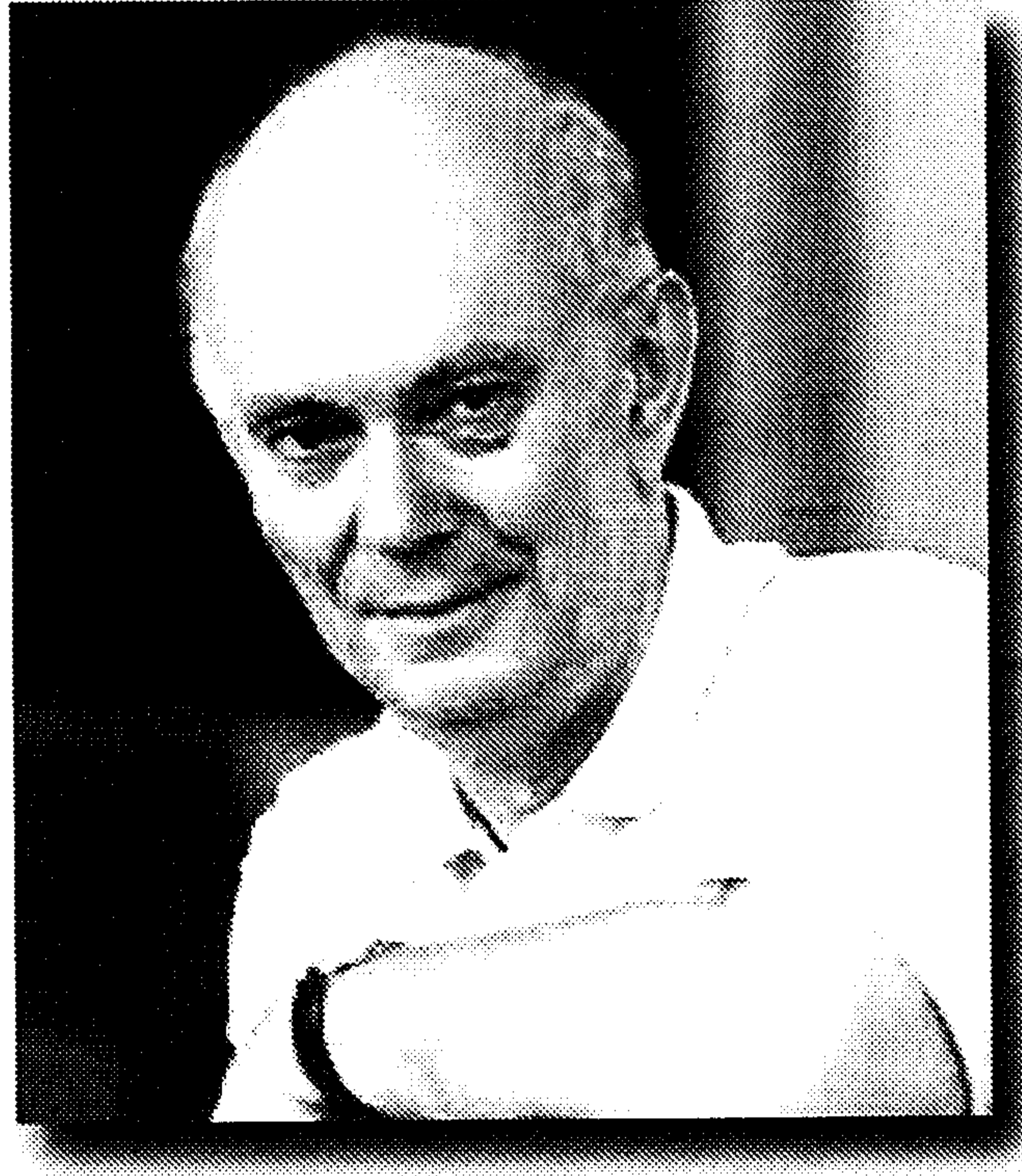
A reader might ask whether this feminist reading is too far fetched for a farce, but Ayckbourn manipulates the components of structure and the subversion of genres too carefully and consistently for it to be a coincidence. Even small details such as the protagonist's dual names reinforce this reading. "Poopey" (meaning "doll" in French) stops being a sexual toy and resumes her real name, Phoebe (a Greek goddess) in her new life once she has unleashed her hidden

potential. Ayckbourn, moreover, has a long history of empathizing with women's struggles. For example, in his twelfth play *Absurd Person Singular* (1972) a woman is attempting to commit suicide during a Christmas celebration and nobody notices, not even her husband. The woman's plight is obvious in this dark comedy. Similarly, in *Woman In Mind* the protagonist, Susan (an unhappy wife and mother), creates an idealized alternative family as a refuge from unpleasant reality. As the play progresses, the tension between the real and the imaginary worlds rises and she finally suffers a nervous breakdown. The play ends with Susan unable to speak coherently while being carried away in an ambulance to a mental institute. What is Ayckbourn actually communicating, then, in this later play: does he mean that the women can be successful if they are determined and aware of solidarity among them? Or, since the genre is science fiction and the plot depends on a "time machine," is he implying that the time has not yet come, that we have to wait until 2014 for the time machine to help us transform the world? Readers must decide for themselves whether the play raises optimistic possibilities or simply leaves us stranded in an impossible utopia (literally "nowhere").



*The Odyssey Theatre Ensemble, Los Angeles, California
August 2002*

Theatre Awards



- 1973: **Evening Standard Best Comedy Award (Absurd Person Singular)**
- 1974: Evening Standard Best Play Award (The Norman Conquests)
- 1974: Play and Players Best Play Award (The Norman Conquests)
- 1974: Variety Club of Great Britain Playwright of the Year
- 1977: Evening Standard Best Play Award (Just Between Ourselves)
- 1978-79: Tony Award Best Play (Bedroom Farce)
- 1979: Shared Plays and Players Best Comedy Award (Joking Apart)
- 1985: Evening Standard Best Comedy Award (A Chorus Of Disapproval)
- 1985: Olivier Best Comedy Award (A Chorus Of Disapproval)
- 1985: DRAMA Best Comedy Award (A Chorus Of Disapproval)
- 1987: Evening Standard Best Play Award (A Small Family Business)
- 1988: Plays and Players Best Director Award (A View From The Bridge)
- 1989: **Evening Standard Best Comedy Award (Henceforward...)**
- 1990: Evening Standard Best Comedy Award (Man Of The Moment)

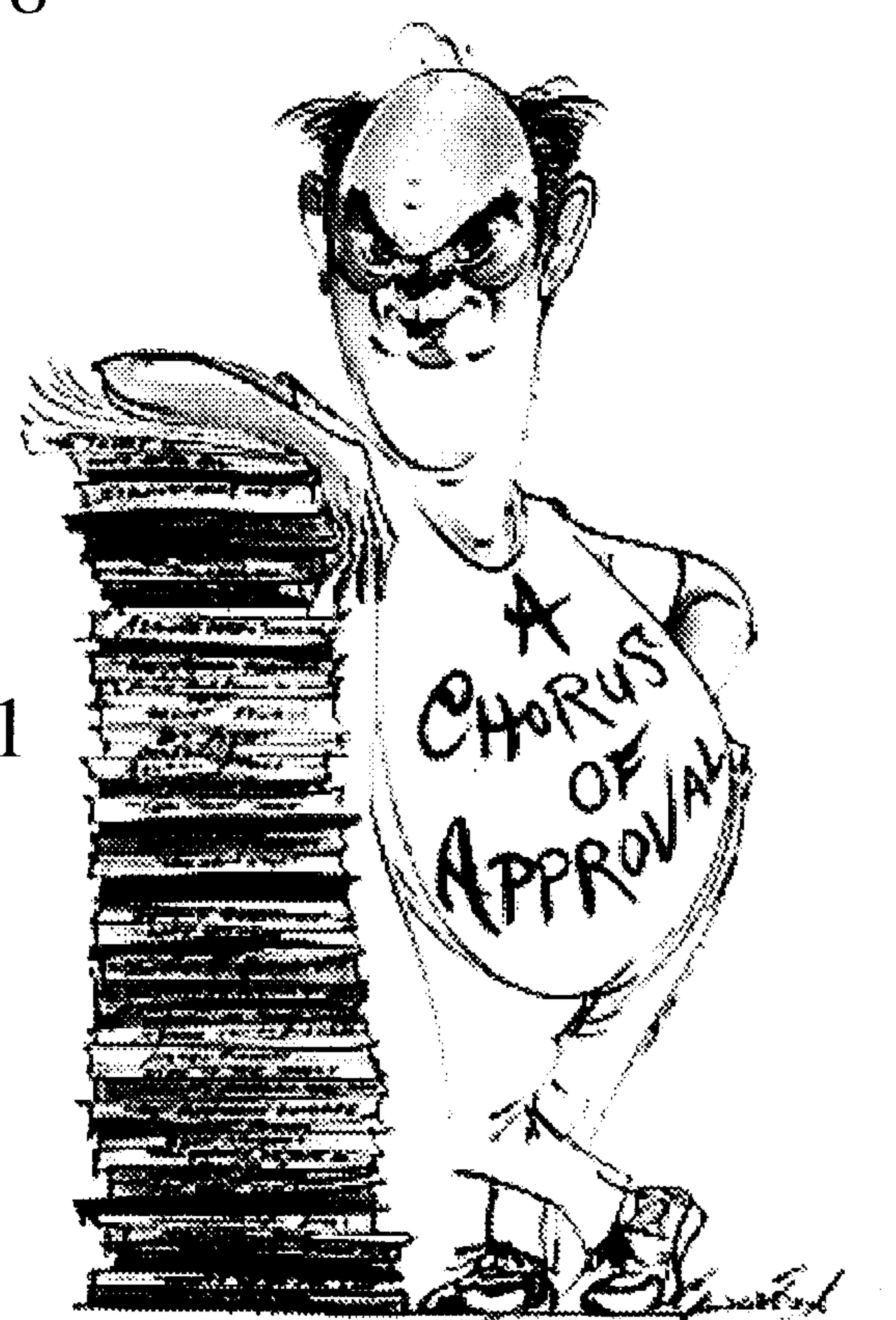
- 1991: **Drama-Logue Critic Award (LA) (Henceforward...)**
1993: Writers' Guild of Great Britain Lifetime Achievement Award
1993: John Ederyn Hughes Rural Wales Award For Literature
1994: Montblanc de la Culture Award for Europe
1996: TMA Regional Theatre Awards Best Musical (By Jeeves)
1996: **Writers' Guild of Great Britain Best West End Play
(Communicating Doors)**
2001: Sunday Times Award for Literary Excellence
2003: Moliere for Best Comedy: Things We Do For Love

Works

1. The Square Cat 1959
2. Love After All 1959
3. Dad's Tale 1960
4. Standing Room Only 1961
5. Christmas V Mastermind 1962
6. Mr Whatnot 1963
7. Meet My Father * Relatively Speaking 1965
8. The Sparrow 1967
- 9. How The Other Half Loves 1969**
10. The Story So Far... * Me Times Me Times Me * Family Circles
1970
11. Time And Time Again 1971
- 12. Absurd Person Singular 1972**
13. Fancy Meeting You * Table Manners (Norman Conquests) 1973
14. Make Yourself At Home * Living Together (Norman Conquests)
1973
15. Round And Round The Garden (Norman Conquests) 1973

16. Absent Friends 1974
17. Jeeves 1975 (Re-Written 1996 As *By Jeeves*)
18. Confusions 1974
19. Bedroom Farce 1975
20. Just Between Ourselves 1976
21. Ten Times Table 1977
22. Joking Apart 1978
23. Sisterly Feelings 1979
24. Taking Steps 1979
25. Suburban Strains 1980
26. Season's Greetings 1980
27. Way Upstream 1981
28. Making Tracks 1981
29. Intimate Exchanges Consisting Of 8 Plays 1982
30. It Could Be Any One Of Us 1983
31. A Chorus Of Disapproval 1984
- 32. Woman In Mind 1985**
33. A Small Family Business 1987
- 34. Henceforward... 1987**
35. Man Of The Moment 1988
36. Mr A's Amazing Maze Plays 1988
37. The Revengers' Comedies 1989
38. Invisible Friends 1989
39. Body Language 1990
40. This Is Where We Came In 1990
41. Callisto 5 Re-Written In 1999 As Callisto 7 1990
42. Wildest Dreams 1991
43. My Very Own Story 1991

44. Time Of My Life 1992
45. Dreams From A Summer House 1992
- 46. Communicating Doors 1994**
47. Haunting Julia 1994
48. The Musical Jigsaw Play 1994
49. A Word From Our Sponsor 1995
50. The Champion Of Paribanou 1996
51. Things We Do For Love 1997
52. Comic Potential 1998
53. The Boy Who Fell Into A Book 1998
54. House (House & Garden) 1999
55. Garden (House & Garden) 1999
56. Virtual Reality 2000
57. Whenever 2000
58. Gameplan (Damsels In Distress) 2001
59. Flatspin (Damsels In Distress) 2001
60. Roleplay (Damsels In Distress) 2001
61. Snake In The Grass 2002
62. My Sister Sadie 2003
63. Drowning on Dry Land 2004
64. Private Fears in Public Places 2004



(*) retitled

Plays in **bold** were referred to in this review.