



Relatively Speaking

by Alan Ayckbourn
at Oldham Coliseum

Reviewed by John Waterhouse and Charlie Britten, April 2018

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Alan Ayckbourn is one of the most performed living playwrights in the world, with an astonishing repertoire of over seventy plays covering fifty plus years and heâ€™s still writing! A lot of Ayckbourn plays are somewhat mediocre, like listening to a 1980â€™s album by Paul McCartney and wondering if this really was the same man who wrote so many Beatles classics. On that analogy, *Relatively Speaking* is Ayckbournâ€™s Sergeant Peppers; a clever, witty comedy which keeps a certain suspense running right up to the last line.

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First performed in the mid 60â€™s and Ayckbournâ€™s first big West End success, *Relatively Speaking* is

one of the key plays on which the writer's reputation as a true master of comedy theatre hinges. It is also a play which, unlike many other others of the time, comes over as remarkably undated and it is a pleasure to see it given another airing.

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A very good way to judge if a play has been enjoyable or not is to pose a simple question: would it be fun to sit through it all again, even with foreknowledge of how the plot unfolds second time round? In the case of Alan Ayckbourn's classic tale of deceit and incomprehension, the answer is an emphatic yes.

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The plot itself is deliciously twisted from start to finish, yet that was just one of the three elements that made this a compelling watch. The audience was kept tantalised throughout by the knife-edge on which the storyline ran between an ongoing charade and the complete and explosive revelation of the truth. Even so, one truth is kept hidden right until the end. A number of Ayckbourn's "comedies" amount to little more than sitting in the public gallery of a divorce court, were such a thing allowed, with the humour just centering around typically three on-the-face-of-it happy marriages descending into bitterness and misery, but that is certainly not the case with *Relatively Speaking*; a clever play from start to finish.

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