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Ayckbourn's Artificial People

Martin McGrath (Middlesex University)

This article explores how Alan Ayckbourn's science fiction, in particular the use of androids/gynoids in the plays *Henceforward...* (1987), *Comic Potential* (1998) and *Surprises* (2012), casts light on the themes that run throughout his work. It looks especially at how Ayckbourn characterises power relationships between men and women, and suggests that Ayckbourn's use of science fictional tropes brings his recurring concerns into sharpest focus. Although Ayckbourn's themes remain constant, the props of science fiction allow him to achieve a precise rhetorical effect not available to him in the straightforwardly domestic plays for which he is most famous.

In any discussion of Ayckbourn or his work it seems obligatory to begin by noting that while he is, by some distance, Britain's most successful living playwright, he is rarely the subject of critical analysis. There are numerous suggested reasons why this might be the case, and it is useful to take a moment to reflect on them as they help illustrate how Ayckbourn's writing is often categorized.

One common suggestion is that Ayckbourn's sustained and impressive popularity arouses the suspicion of the 'intellectual classes' who dismiss the popular as automatically second rate and unworthy of study (Billington 1990: 40). A second theory is that Ayckbourn's resolutely middle class settings, 'the sleepy atmosphere of a semi-detached' (Almansi 1984: 109), immediately mark him out as unfashionably orthodox, and apart from his contemporaries, such as John Arden, Harold Pinter and Arnold Wesker, who were pursuing a more radical theatrical agenda in the early 1960s. A third suggestion is that Ayckbourn's focus on technical, as opposed to formal, innovation in his plays gets dismissed as trickery, and his intense familiarity with and exploitation of the intricacies of theatrical production does not win him artistic credit (Holt 1998: 31). Michael Billington also suggests that Ayckbourn's prolific output suggests a lack of depth: 'a dramatist or novelist who reluctantly squeezes out a single work every decade [...] is going to be more highly regarded than one who produces two or three major pieces a year' (Billington 1990: 130).¹ A fifth possible explanation is that Ayckbourn's traditional approach to 'dialogue, individual characterization, theme and action' (Brown 1984: 8) has meant that his reputation has never escaped its early, rather damning, attachment to old-fashioned boulevardier playwrights such as Terrence Rattigan. Ayckbourn himself offers a sixth, and final, reason why his work may have been overlooked: his attachment to comedy. Critical appreciation only comes long after the death of the comic

writer: 'By which time, of course, most of the comedy is incomprehensible and can only be laughed at by scholars' (Ayckbourn 2004: 4).

Some of these criticisms of Ayckbourn's work have undoubted force. The world of his plays does hark back to an earlier era and can seem old-fashioned. His cast of characters reflect a rather distant England, overwhelmingly white, heterosexual, suburban and circling constantly around the institution of marriage. Aside from *Drowning on Dry Land* (2004), which was the first of Ayckbourn's plays to feature a black actress in its opening cast, Ayckbourn did not specifically write for a black character until *My Wonderful Day* (2009), his seventy-third play.² The suburban town of Pendon, the fictional setting of many of Ayckbourn's plays, was unusually homogenous in the 1970s: in the second decade of the twenty-first century it seems preternaturally so.

But, if some of these theories really do represent reasons that scholars have neglected Ayckbourn's work, then it is possible that academics and critics have missed the point. For example, commentators and reviewers frequently refer to Ayckbourn as a non-political writer. Simon Trussler describes him as a 'non-political Priestley' (Page and Trussler 1989: 6), writing apparently conventional plays about apparently conventional people, while Guido Almansi cites an (unnamed) critic who describes Ayckbourn as having the sole aim of making audiences laugh: 'His plays contain no message, offer no profound vision of the universe, tell us nothing about how to live our lives' (Almansi 1984: 120).

Such attitudes seem, at best, superficial. It is possible, perhaps, to watch one Ayckbourn play and to miss the gnawing sense of wrongness that pervades the lives of most of his characters, distracted perhaps by the audience's laughter. But it is surely not possible to pay serious attention to the body of his work and miss that he has chronicled a distinctively British revolution. While playwrights like Pinter and Wesker were trying to change the world through radical theatre, Ayckbourn was recording the transformation that was actually taking place. Even as the working-class communities beloved of kitchen-sink dramatists were being obliterated by economic and political forces beyond their control, Ayckbourn was writing about the lives of those who looked like they were winning. He was tracking the rise of the ambitious middle classes, whose votes were assiduously pursued by both Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair, and whose appetites were endlessly studied by their spin doctors. They formed the vanguard for a decade or more of profound social change.

Ayckbourn records their aspirations and their deepening discontent. As one profile in *The Economist* put it, his work 'profitably holds a mirror up to his buyer's destructive weaknesses' (Anon 1998). If his early plays do seem to retain a lightness, a sense that things *might* turn out okay, the arc of his work through the second half of the 1980s and beyond is towards an ever darker

sense of disillusionment. Ayckbourn's middle class characters lose faiths: faith in God, yes, but also in society and community, in love and friendship, in each other and even in themselves. They try to compensate, stuffing the gaping hole in their lives with money, technology, power and sex. But none of it satisfies or sustains them.

Ayckbourn is in no sense a radical writer. Billington calls him a 'reflex libertarian' (Billington 1990: 10), but it is a particularly British libertarianism – of the Ealing comedy, such as *Passport to Pimlico*, *Whiskey Galore!* (both 1949) or, more pertinently, *The Man in the White Suit* (1951). His focus has remained unflinchingly on the sometimes uncomfortable but overwhelmingly familiar suburbs of Middle England, even as Britain has become ever more politically divided and culturally diverse. In 1987, at the height of Thatcherism, he reflected: 'I sit, I suspect, in the middle of most English opinion. The Tory party right wing fills me with total despair, as indeed does the Labour party left wing. I suppose the nearest I get to being political is that I'm rather attracted to things like the Social Democrats ... I really like things to be fair' (Watson 1988: 90). It is precisely this desire to be 'in the middle' that makes Ayckbourn's work essential as a record of a moment when his country changed. The political content of Ayckbourn's work is important precisely because, for so many of his critics and much of his audience, it is invisible, masked by the day-to-day background noise of their own preconceptions.

Ayckbourn's Science Fiction

Given Ayckbourn's reputation as an intimate chronicler of the British middle class, it is notable that, since writing *Henceforward...* in 1987, Ayckbourn has frequently included elements from the horror, fantasy and science fiction genres in his plays (see Appendix). Of the thirty-two adult plays Ayckbourn has written since *Henceforward...*, fifteen have contained some genre element – including time travel, body swapping and ghosts – making him possibly unique amongst major British playwrights in the depth and longevity of his interest in science fiction and fantasy. He has also written a further thirteen family plays in that time that contain elements of the fantastic.

The roots of Ayckbourn's interest in science fiction run deep. One of his earliest surviving works is *The Season*, a juvenile play written, at the latest, in 1958 when the author was eighteen, although it was never performed. It is a time-travel story which, seeming to anticipate a more famous British time traveller, follows *The Girl* and *The Traveller* as they move from medieval England to a post-apocalyptic future (Murgatroyd 2013: 91). Ayckbourn's fourth professional play, which came close to being his first to transfer to the West End, was *Standing Room Only* (1961) set in a distant future – 1997 – in which

overpopulation has run rife and a family dodge bureaucratic interference in their lives while living on a bus caught in a permanent gridlock on Shaftesbury Avenue.

Standing Room Only would, however, be the last science fiction play written by Ayckbourn for almost thirty years. In those three decades he established himself as an acute observer of middle-class domestic dramas and a chronicler of the tensions of a class in transformation. Although earlier plays, like *Absurd Person Singular* (1972) and *Way Upstream* (1981), had indicated Ayckbourn's concern with the damage wrought by growing materialism, by the second half of the 1980s his work was becoming darker and more violent. Disenchantment with the costs of the Thatcherite reshaping of British society had become a recurring theme in his plays. At this point Ayckbourn returned to science fiction with *Henceforward...*, a near-future dystopia. It marked the start of a new period in Ayckbourn's work, one in which he would increasingly intersperse his familiar domestic comedies with plays that made use of tropes from the horror, fantasy and science fiction genres.

However, while Ayckbourn's set dressing changed during this period, the essential concerns that motivate his writing have remained remarkably constant. At the heart of Ayckbourn's writing has always been the relationships 'between men and women and the particular strains which the process and state of marriage inflict' (Holt 1998: 12), and the abuse wrought by the strong upon the weak. As Paul Allen puts it, the stakes are 'not life or death, or even love [...] but mental health, sanity, hope or despair; the possibility of happiness and the probability of messing it up. In an age of relative material well-being our ability to make each other and ourselves wretched is a major issue facing advanced society' (Allen 2002: x). Far from offering escapism or watering down Ayckbourn's preoccupations with human relations, the fantastic elements in Ayckbourn's later works have served to allow him to repeat his primary messages with greater force in ways that are more challenging for his audience and more difficult to ignore.

Henceforward...

Henceforward... is set in a dystopian future London where the all-female gang, the Daughters of Darkness, battle the all-male Sons of Bitches for control of the streets. Jerome is a composer divorced from his wife, Corinna, whom he has driven away – ironically because of his obsessive quest to 'express the feeling of love in an abstract musical form' (Ayckbourn 1989: 30). He lives on his own behind heavy steel shutters, surrounded by technology with only a malfunctioning robot nanny, Nan 300F, for company. Jerome wants his daughter, Geain, back, largely because he believes she is the key to lifting the mental block that has

prevented him writing music since his divorce. He uses Nan to impersonate his notion of a perfect partner in the hope of tricking his wife into believing that he is responsible enough to care for Geain.

A number of Ayckbourn's works feature women who have been so damaged by their circumstances that they retreat into eccentricity or madness. *Absurd Person Singular* (1972) features Eva, who spends much of Act 2 failing to commit suicide while being ignored by her friends and her husband. *Woman in Mind* (1985) is told from the point of view of Susan, whose fantasy world bleeds into her banal everyday existence as she suffers a nervous breakdown. Ayckbourn's frequent use of mental breakdown is not just a simple portrayal of hysterical women incapable of coping with their world. Instead, his portrayal of women slipping into madness seems to echo the way in which some feminist authors have embraced insanity as a legitimate form of escape from the inequalities and iniquities of a patriarchal society. Carl Freedman, discussing the work of Joanna Russ, notes a 'kind of Foucauldian feminism [...] after a certain point there are few, if any, possibilities for feminine development that can wholly escape the taint of madness' (Freedman 2000: 143). Madness becomes, then, not just an issue of mental wellbeing but a political statement – a refusal to be bound by hegemonic limits on acceptable behaviour. If the world in which you have been forced to live is made unbearable by the relationships of power that bind you then any escape, even into madness, would seem to be preferable.

Nan may be a robot, but it is clear that she – like Eva and Susan – has been brutalized beyond her capacity to cope by the expectations and limitations placed upon her by the role she is forced to play. In an early stage direction, Ayckbourn describes her as a 'Jekyll and Hyde creature. Her sunny side is the result of her initial "nanny" factory programming, her darker side the result of subsequent modifications by Jerome himself' (Ayckbourn 1989: 5–6). But perhaps it is not just Jerome's tinkering that explains Nan's Jekyll and Hyde nature. Nan is 'unfulfilled' and Jerome wonders if 'the biggest mistake they made was to make a machine so sophisticated and then give it too small a function. I mean I think a machine that complex needed more than just a child to look after. Otherwise there's bound to be stress' (Ayckbourn 1989: 19–20). Ayckbourn's target here is not just Nan's programming but the restrictions placed on many women in a patriarchal society.

Jerome, meanwhile, is unable to 'distinguish between substance and shadow, between the things that affirm our common humanity, and those which isolate us' (Wu 1996: 126). When forced to choose between Nan and human company, he cannot come up with a good reason to opt for humanity. 'That woman,' he declaims when Nan's honour is impugned, 'has more dignity, more sense of loyalty and responsibility than any other fifty women you can name

put together' (Ayckbourn 1989: 66). It is an outburst that reveals more than just Jerome's inability to relate to other people, it reveals the limiting expectations that men like Jerome place on their partners.

Nan gets a brief moment to fulfil her basic programming through Geain, who has arrived dressed as a member of the Sons of Bitches and demanding to be called a boy. Nan takes the adolescent wild child in hand and, almost instantly, transforms her back into a 'normal' child. It is a moment of triumph in which she demonstrates that she is more capable than any of the humans around her. Her true potential is revealed and, for an instant, she is no longer a thing of comedy but something formidable and accomplished. However, outside the situation is worsening. The Daughters of Darkness are furious that Jerome is giving refuge to Geain, who they have seen entering dressed as one of their enemies. Corinna and Geain leave, offering Jerome the chance to come with them, to give domesticity another chance, but he abandons them to the gang. As the Daughters of Darkness storm Jerome's fortress he fiddles with music that will never be heard. Nan, meanwhile, sits ignored gradually counting down to her own oblivion. Her maintenance has been neglected by Jerome, she has been pushed beyond the bounds of her programming and, in a final indignity, just at the moment when she can finally fulfil the role for which she has been created, the opportunity is ripped away from her. Ignored by Jerome 'Nan's countdown reaches zero and she shuts down' (Ayckbourn 1989: 75).

Nan has been created to carry out a job that is far beneath her capabilities – a job which, even in its most challenging and seemingly intractable form, she completes in moments. But even this satisfaction is denied her. Instead she has been forced to attempt to adapt to the desires of a man who never takes seriously what she needs or the limits of her endurance. She is reshaped to serve Jerome's selfish goals, pushed beyond her ability to cope, neglected and, ultimately, destroyed by him. As Holt points out, many of the women in Ayckbourn's work are victims of self-obsessed men who do not notice the damage they are doing. Nan may not be an actual woman, she may even be a figure of fun, but like many of Ayckbourn's other women she seems 'doomed to disappointment and lack of fulfilment. Small wonder that they frequently reach breaking point' (Holt 1998: 27). Her quiet, ignored expiration is chilling.

Comic Potential

First performed in 1998, *Comic Potential* is in part a satire of television production, born of Ayckbourn's own frustrating experiences, and part a comedy about the importance of a sense of humour in relationships. In 'the foreseeable future where everything has changed except human nature' (Ayckbourn 2001: 5), Adam Trainsmith visits a television studio owned by his uncle's company. He has

come to see a once talented but now washed-up director, Chandler Tate, who is producing low-quality soap operas using defective 'actoids' (android actors), one of which, JC F31 333 (Jacie), keeps laughing at unexpected moments. Adam is hoping to make a comedy rather like those of Ayckbourn himself, but there is no room for that kind of material in an age where executives like the fearsome Carla Pepperbloom hold sway.

Adam is a familiar Ayckbourn character: the innocent young man who blunders into a situation and upsets the status quo simply through his naiveté, echoing characters like Greg in *Relatively Speaking* (1965) and Guy in *A Chorus of Disapproval* (1984). Adam treats Jacie as a human, she having endeared herself to him by her laughter and her appreciation of humour – characteristics which others (including Jacie herself) regard as a fault. This sets in motion a chain of events that change Jacie's life forever. Towards the end of the play, Chandler tells Adam that 'She was only a poor machine. You screwed her up Adam. It was your fault entirely. Poor thing didn't know whether she was coming or going. Just another sad victim of cupid's custard pie' (Ayckbourn 2001: 110). Both men, however, have underestimated Jacie.

Jacie, like many Ayckbourn women, is superior to the men around her, even if she is not at first aware of her own capabilities. She learns quickly, however, and rapidly surpasses Adam in everything he attempts to teach her but, before she can reach her full potential, she has to overcome the limitations imposed on her by her status in society. She learns to read in moments, aided by Adam and a Bible in a seedy hotel room, but the first passage she reads on her own is Genesis 3:16, which tells her that 'I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception: in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband and he shall rule over thee' (Ayckbourn 2001: 93). While Adam thinks he is offering her freedom, Jacie quickly realizes that what he is actually offering is just another role, one that she can't fulfil: 'I can't be what you want me to be. You're asking too much of me Adam. Yes, I can *play* your Jacie. I can play her just as you want her to be. I'm good at that. That's what I was built for. But I can't be your Jacie' (Ayckbourn 2001: 94).

Jacie is stronger than Adam physically (she saves him from a pimp who believes they are trying to muscle in on his operation) but also mentally and emotionally, better able to grasp the reality of her position. Adam is injured during the fight with the pimp and, while he is unconscious, Jacie decides that she cannot cope with the demands Adam has placed upon her and leaves to have herself melted down and her supposed faults rectified. She returns at the end of the play, but the separation has changed her. She has come to terms with her own strength and she is poised, self-possessed and entirely in control. When she is offered the role of executive she confidently displaces the

disgraced Pepperbloom. Adam naively thinks that this is *his* happy ending and that he is now going to get his own way – that Jacie will naturally allow him to make his comedies – but, as we might now expect from Ayckbourn, this is only an *almost* happy ending. Adam will get his show but only in the style that Jacie permits. She has again surpassed him.

While most reviews have assumed that the play ends in a straightforwardly romantic fashion, Allen is right when he insists that *Comic Potential* actually reflects 'our longing for paradise and our capacity for spoiling it' (Allen 2002: 301). This is not a straightforward retelling of the Pygmalion myth and Allen argues that its conclusion owes more to the expulsion of humanity from the Garden of Eden, and the ending leaves us 'with that sinking recognition that the innocent idyll of their love will not be allowed to last' (Allen 2002: 301). The ending of *Comic Potential* places Jacie in a position of pre-eminence, which the audience recognizes as a moment of victory, but it also contains both the promise of Adam's future disappointment and the seeds that will destroy any long-lasting relationship between the two would-be lovers. Jacie's ascent carries her beyond the romantic notions contained in Adam's hopes.

Surprises

Another of Ayckbourn's future stories, *Surprises*, was first performed in 2012. Lorraine Groomfeldt is a high-powered lawyer trying to avoid being reminded of her sixtieth birthday while dumping her unfaithful husband. Unlike the robots discussed so far, the play's android, Jan, is male: a janitor with a serious crush on Lorraine. Jan's modifications comprise a subroutine inserted into his programming which, unlike most androids, allows him to lie harmlessly on occasion. But the modification comes with a serious drawback, if it is used too frequently it will shut down the modified unit permanently. If Jan lies too much, he will drop dead. The situation is complicated by Jan's belief that the modification may also be responsible for his ability to feel love for Lorraine.

Franklin, an older man who has his own troubled relationships, tells Jan: 'If you happen to row – and believe me, if you spend any time in a woman's company, you're both of you bound to argue eventually – never ever try to win. On the rare occasion that you do win, you'll almost certainly live to regret it' (Ayckbourn 2012: 68). Jan takes him literally.

By the end of act two, Jan and Lorraine are dancing together and, by act three – set decades later – they are married, though it is a marriage of companionship since, like all Ayckbourn's artificial people, Jan is not equipped for physical intimacy. Still, Lorraine and he are 'still very much in love [...] Fifty years and never an argument' (Ayckbourn 2012: 91). But, the marriage has taken its toll on Jan. Lorraine had always been used to taking charge and being

right – and Jan has fed this need by always avoiding confrontation. But as Lorraine has got older (life extending technology means she is now 120), she has become forgetful and cantankerous. Jan, locked into a set of behaviours that has ensured fifty years of happy companionship, is forced to bend the truth more and more frequently to keep her happy. He is lying himself to death. Jan's inability to change his ways or renegotiate his relationship with Lorraine is an example of the way in which many of Ayckbourn's characters are 'quite incapable of traversing the boundaries of their circumscribed lives' (Page and Trussler 1989: 6). At the same time, Jan fears that tinkering with his modification will alter his feelings for Lorraine. So, trapped between his limitations and his love, he faces destruction. Lorraine, meanwhile, is blissfully unaware of the damage her behaviour is doing to her partner.

Surprises reverses the usual relationships in Ayckbourn's plays – for once the woman is in the position of power – but the mechanics are the same. The lower-status partner – this time the power differential is based on class relationships – is being ground down by the other person in the relationship. As is often the case in Ayckbourn's work, this is not through malice, or even deliberate action, but simply through the accommodations necessary to maintain a lengthy marriage and inattention to the needs of a partner. As Laura Thompson argues, Ayckbourn moves 'his usual cast of anxious suburbanites into a world of time travel and hyper-longevity' (Thompson 2012), but he does not see human nature significantly changing. We will continue to be obsessed with, and damaged by, love.

A Modest Catachresis

Ayckbourn's introduction of elements from *sf* and other genres does not represent a shift from his foundational concerns with 'the destructiveness, the incomprehension, the predatoriness of marriage; the failure of men to understand women' (Billington 1990: 51). But if Ayckbourn's concerns are unchanged then, what is the point of using science fictional imagery? Are Ayckbourn's artificial people merely window dressing?

Despite the continuities in theme, Nan, Jacie and Jan do bring something unique to Ayckbourn's work. These artificial humans allow him to push his core concerns further, to make literal the metaphors he has used in other works. Nan can actually die of Jerome's neglect, Jacie accelerates beyond Adam's grasp far faster than a natural woman could, and Jan can really destroy himself to preserve his love.

In this sense, Ayckbourn's artificial people allow him to perform an act of *catachresis*. In rhetoric 'catachresis' is the misuse of language – choosing the wrong word or mixing a metaphor – for rhetorical effect (King John's begging

for 'cold comfort' in Shakespeare's play, for example). The term was taken up by Michel Foucault to represent a fundamental property of language. He argued that as there is no inherent link between meanings and signs so words can 'change positions, turn back upon themselves, and slowly unfold a whole developing curve' (Foucault 2001: 126). Even allowing for language's unavoidable fluidity of sense, catachresis remains potentially subversive. The abuse of signs threatens our sense of an ordered universe. When the symbols that are supposed to apply to one thing (and that carry with them an array of expectations and understanding) shift to something quite different we are left momentarily adrift. This disturbance opens a space in which the subject is allowed to look again at those things that are taken for granted – questioning the labels and categories that are applied to physical and social hierarchies. It achieves, if only for a moment, 'the irruptive extension of a sign proper to an idea, a meaning, deprived of their signifier. A "secondary" original' (Derrida 1982: 255). This act of violence maps out the fault-lines in our understanding, creating a language of its own that 'emerges at a given moment as a monster, a monstrous mutation without tradition or normative precedent' (Derrida 1982: 123). The violence of catachresis threatens our ability to distinguish between *proper* meanings and the deviational and in this moment of disturbance we are able to see the world differently. It allows, as Foucault says of philosophy, the 'displacement and transformation of the limits of thought, the modification of the received values and all the work done to think otherwise, to do something else, to become other than what one is' (Foucault 1988: 201).

In a modest way, this is what Ayckbourn does for his audience when he takes the themes of love and suffering, marriage and relationships, and substitutes his defective, obviously inhuman, androids and gynoids. They are a misused sign that subverts our sense of order. If these unreal, comic, mechanical things can suffer so much damage by being caught up in the relations that we take for granted, then a space opens in which his audience can consider their own behaviour, their treatment of others and how they, themselves, are treated. By tracing the faults of our familiar world onto these inappropriate new landscapes Ayckbourn seeks to lead his audience to read the maps by which they have understood the world in new ways, to see the world as other than they have taken it to be.

This is not to heap too heavy a weight of meaning on Ayckbourn's work which remains, after all, popular comedies of relationship and manners. But it is to recognize that, as a playwright, Ayckbourn has worked a consistent theme of estrangement and domestic desperation that cannot lightly be dismissed. Further, it is to argue that when a playwright like Ayckbourn – deeply versed in theatrical tradition and somewhat more than comfortably successful in a

particular genre – systematically deviates from his well-worn path, it is worth exploring what he might hope to achieve.

Conclusion

Ayckbourn is a writer who deserves to be taken seriously. He has established a unique niche for himself as an acute observer of an English class during a period in which they were afforded significant influence, transformed their nation and suffered significant trauma. But he has also assiduously mined themes that are fundamental and familiar even if the aggressively homogenous society in his imagined worlds has always been, and has become rapidly more, anachronistic. The significance of Ayckbourn's increasingly frequent use of the tropes of horror, fantasy and science fiction is not that it marks a break with his long-term and rigorous thematic focus, but that it marks a playwright who has been willing to pursue new methods of making his concerns strange and affective for his large audience even at the risk of alienating them by disrupting a successfully lucrative formula.

Ayckbourn's artificial people – Nan, Jacie and Jan – bring into sharpest focus the playwright's on-going preoccupation with our ability to damage those around us, even as we believe we are cherishing them. They demonstrate Ayckbourn's concern with the unequal distribution of power in relationships and the casual, often unwitting, cruelty of those who can exercise power over others. And they show Ayckbourn's belief that, too often, the limitations attached to the social roles imposed on women by the structures and expectations of our society are damaging, not just to women (though clearly it is most often the women who suffer) but to men as well.

Through his creation of these artificial people Ayckbourn offers a modest catachresis – a moment in which by breaking familiar metaphors his audiences, though already intimate with his cast of put upon women and hopeless, casually cruel men, see the world they know mapped onto the absurd. It is surely Ayckbourn's intention that, in this moment, his audience might become open to difference and that they might, however, briefly, break from their usual assumptions and think otherwise of the relationships of power in which their lives are enmeshed.

Appendix: Ayckbourn's Science Fiction and Fantasy

Android plays

Henceforward... (1987)
Comic Potential (1998)
Surprises (2012)

Family plays

Callisto #5 / Callisto #7 (1990)
The Champion of Paribanou (1996)
My Sister Sadie (2003)

Other plays with horror/fantastical or sfnal elements

Standing Room Only (1961)
Invisible Friends (1989)
Body Language (1990)
Wildest Dreams (1991)
Dreams from a Summer House (1992)
Haunting Julia (1994)
A Word from Our Sponsors (1995)
Communicating Doors (1995)
Virtual Reality (2000)
Snake in the Grass (2002)
If I Were You (2006)
Life and Beth (2008)
Awaking Beauty (2008)

Additional family plays

Christmas V Mastermind (1962)
This Is Where We Came In (1990)
My Very Own Story (1991)
The Boy Who Fell into a Book (1998)
Whenever (2000)
The Jollies (2002)
Champion of Champions (2003)
Miss Yesterday (2004)

Endnotes

¹A 'definitive play list' of Ayckbourn's produced and unproduced work is available at: <http://plays.alanayckbourn.net/page11/index.html> (accessed 22/09/17).

²Simon Murgatroyd, 'Drowning on Dry Land: In Brief', <http://drowningondryland.alanayckbourn.net/styled-9/index.html> (accessed 22/09/17).

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