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Just Between Ourselves

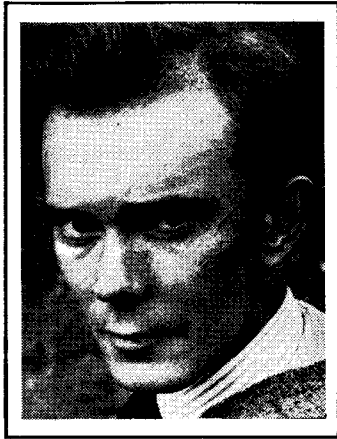
By
Alan Ayckbourn

Directed By
Roy Surette

September 14-24
1988

The Frederic Wood Theatre Magazine
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A Biographical Note On Alan Ayckbourn



Alan Ayckbourn was born in 1939 and educated at Haileybury. He has worked in the theatre since leaving school and has been a stage manager and actor at Edinburgh, Worthing, Leatherhead, Oxford, and with the late Stephen Joseph's Theatre-in-the-Round Company at Scarborough. He was a founder member of the Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent, and B.B.C. Radio Drama Producer in Leeds from 1964 to 1970. He is now Director of Productions of the Stephen Joseph Theatre, Scarborough.

Since 1959 he has written numerous full-length plays, mainly for the Scarborough Theatre-in-the-Round. His London productions include *Relatively Speaking* (1967), of which there have also been fifty-one productions in Germany alone; *How the Other Half Loves* (1970), starring Robert Morley, which ran for over two years; *Time and Time Again* (1972); *Absurd Person Singular* (1973), which received the *Evening Standard* Best Comedy Award; *Absent Friends* (1975); *Jeeves*, a musical, written in collaboration with Andrew Lloyd Webber (1975); *Confusions* (1976); *Bedroom Farce* (National Theatre, 1977); *Just Between Ourselves* (1977), winner of the *Evening Standard* Best Play Award; *Ten Times Table* (1978); and *Sisterly Feelings* (National Theatre, 1980). *The Norman Conquests* (London, 1974), the comic trilogy, won the *Evening Standard* Drama Award for Best Play of the Year, the Variety Club of Great Britain Award and *Plays and Players* Award. Alan Ayckbourn's plays have been translated into twenty-four languages and performed all over the world.

Ayckbourn on Ayckbourn

For better or worse I am middle class. I spent my childhood bang in the centre of the Home Counties as the stepson of a bank manager. Where you were born and how you were raised dictates the voice in your head. Today, nearly everyone's middle class. The term doesn't suggest a narrow layer any longer, though my feeling is for London suburbia. Maybe going as far as Reading but not further than that.

I dislike the actual business of writing so much I try to get it over as quickly as possible. I am strictly a one play a year man. For 360 days I think about writing, consider, contemplate, and successfully avoid writing. In fact, I suspect I would never write at all but for my other self - artistic director of the Theatre in the Round at Scarborough. The theatre has already announced its programme and is already taking money under false pretences from a public wishing to see this unwritten play. Eventually I write it. I have to.

I'm most comfortable with one-to-one relationships. When there are more together, I find it difficult to operate. You see my view of life is that of someone crouching behind a sofa. If there's only one person outside I'll come out. But if there are two I'd prefer to stay down.

I have a love of England's colloquial language, its flexibility. No one word ever means any one thing. Everything is rife with misinterpretation.

If you boil down your themes they sound terribly banal. Mainly I want to say things about the fear and distrust people have for each other, the fact that men and women still don't seem to understand each other very well.

I've stuck purely with theatre, and I think it's because I'm a total theatre nut. I love it, I've lived my life in it. And I think some of my strongest muscles wouldn't be employed at all on television. I'd feel like an oil painter who's suddenly been asked to work in water-colours.

The characters have to be allowed to control their own destinies. I sometimes say to one of them, "I wish you'd leave the stage, because that would give me a nice neat ending." And he refuses to go, and the ending is bungled. But then you find you're left with something much more interesting.

Whatever else I am, I am a fairly good craftsman. If a chap is walking across the stage with the tea, I tend to give him enough lines to get to the other side.

Some Notes On Alan Ayckbourn

Alan Ayckbourn is famous for his success around the world, and for writing his plays rapidly in three or four days immediately before rehearsals start. He directs all his plays himself at his own theatre in the Yorkshire seaside resort of Scarborough, far from London's West End. The building is still recognisably the school it once was, the theatre seats 300 in-the-round and two or three years ago I found Ayckbourn cheerfully filling in as barman. He is prolific: ten revues, for which he has written more than a hundred songs, and 37 plays. The 36th, *Henceforward*, opens in London in November; the 37th, *Man of the Moment*, opened in Scarborough in August, the film of the 35th, *A Chorus of Disapproval*, is due for release soon.

Ayckbourn's distinctive ingenuity is seen first in *How the other Half Loves*, in which a couple attend two different dinner parties, on different days, at the same time. (As Ayckbourn's titles rarely point unmistakably to content, distinguishing between the plays is initially difficult) *Absurd Person Singular* has its three scenes on three consecutive Christmas Eves, in three different kitchens, featuring the same three married couples: a fastidious tidiness. *The Norman Conquests* is a trilogy about the events of one weekend; it shows what is happening in a dining-room, a sitting-room and garden, the plays designed to make sense in any order, or indeed if only one is seen. *Sisterly Feelings* has alternative second and third acts (the choice of which is to be played determined by tossing a coin at the end of Acts 1 and 2) leading to the same fourth act. In *It Could Be Any One of Us* Ayckbourn essays the comedy-thriller, with five different endings convicting each of the suspects. The mind-boggling *Intimate Exchanges* has two first acts, 4 second acts, 8 third acts and 16 fourth acts. Each episode concludes with a choice, and Ayckbourn has written the scenes for both choices. Further, the time between acts is always five days, then five weeks and finally five years, and the fourth acts are all in a churchyard, variously involving weddings, christenings, funerals and Harvest Festivals. To make his task even harder, the whole is for one actor and one actress, playing two or three parts in every version.

Ayckbourn's first attempt to write, in his phrase, "a truly hilarious dark play" is *Absurd Person Singular*. In the middle act a woman attempts suicide by various methods, while a stream of kind visitors fail to see her misery and instead clean her oven and mend her light. The comic-sinister ending has an obnoxious man dictatorially imposing party games on a group who want nothing to do with him. In *Absent Friends*, the most restrained and sombre piece, five people gather to cheer Colin, whom they have not seen for some years and whose fiancée drowned two months before. Colin proves to be cheerful, exposing the unhappiness of the rest.

Some plays of the last few years represent changes of direction. *Way Upstream* is about three couples struggling with a cabin-cruiser on a week's river

trip. As their journey is to Armageddon Bridge, the intent is allegory: the decent, unassertive moderates (Social Democrats, perhaps) eventually realise that they must fight authoritarianism, capitalism and the idle rich. *Women in Mind*, extends what might be termed Comedy of Pain. Hit on the head by a garden rake, a concussed wife copes with her unsympathetic family and fantasizes an ideal family as well - which might not be as delightful as it seems. The curious *Henceforward* is science-fiction, about making robots. *A Small Family Business* traces the growth of evil, one little sin prompting another, culminating in the first on-stage murder in Ayckbourn's work. The frame may be a philosophical world-view, but more likely refers directly to Thatcher's Britain.

Just Between Ourselves is set in a garage, Ayckbourn having previously explored the possibilities of suburban dining rooms, kitchens and bedrooms. The ingenuity in this case is confined to setting each scene on a character's birthday: the expectations of the occasion create stress, as with Christmas, funerals, picnics and dinner parties in other works. This play is especially sympathetic to the women - at least, the two younger ones. One has a husband whose idea of helping is limited to "mending or fixing" and the other has lost confidence since becoming a housewife: "There was a time when I thought it would be nice to work with old folk, you know, but you need to have qualifications for that." *Just Between Ourselves* was Ayckbourn's first "Winter play," written for January production in 1976 when "the pressure that had always been on me to produce a play suited primarily to a holiday audience was no longer there." The extraordinary climax of the third scene is wildly funny and deeply tragic, hilarious and dark, while the image in the final scene, of the women silent in the garden in January, is as bleak as any in Samuel Beckett.

Vancouver has seen fifteen of Ayckbourn's plays since the Playhouse staged *Relatively Speaking* in 1972. The Playhouse followed with *How the Other Half Loves* and *Season's Greetings*. The Arts Club has offered *Absurd Person Singular*, *Bedroom Farce* and *Taking Steps*. White Rock Summer Theatre first presented the three-part *Norman Conquests*, repeated by Fly-by-night at the Waterfront. *Time and Time Again* and *Just Between Ourselves* (in January 1980) also appeared at White Rock. West Coast Actors put on *Absent Friends*, City College produced *Confusions* and *Sisterly Feelings* at Studio 58, and Roy Surette directed *Joking Apart* for Burnaby Summer Theatre. Ayckbourn comes after Shakespeare (twenty in the last twenty years) in the number of different plays performed in the city, far ahead of such runners up as Bernard Shaw and Bertolt Brecht.

Michael Billington once tried to place Ayckbourn as "a left-wing writer using a right-wing form: even if there is nothing strident, obvious or noisy about his socialism, it is none the less apparent that he has a real detestation for the money-grubber, the status-seeker and the get-rich-quicker." Martin Bronstein emphasizes the feminism: "He's the only contemporary playwright who shows the real plight of the average woman in today's world." Ayckbourn himself has never admitted to such intentions; instead he speaks of examining "the Chekhovian field, exploring attitudes to death, loneliness, etc. - themes not

generally dealt with in comedy." All Ayckbourn's work is amusing and ingenious; his greatest moments are those that combine laughs and true seriousness about the human condition - or at least the present condition of the English middle class.

Malcolm Page

Professor Malcolm Page teaches at Simon Fraser University. He has sought out Ayckbourn performances in Scarborough, London, York, Harrogate, Pitlochry, Seattle and Calgary, as well as Vancouver. His compilation, *File on Ayckbourn*, will be published by Methuen in their series, "Writers on File," early next year.

"Something's Gone Wrong": Ayckbourn and the Modern British Theatre

In 1956 John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* shook the English theatre to its foundations, announcing the arrival of "the angry young man" who loudly challenged the complacency of an England which would not admit that things had changed, radically changed, in the post-war world. From his attic flat, Osborne's Jimmy Porter railed against the hypocrisies of government, church, and class system; he howled with rage his complaints about the lack of intensity and enthusiasm with which those around him lived their so-called lives. Bearing the brunt of his anger, his hopelessly middle class wife Alison could only mumble in bewilderment, "Something's gone wrong somewhere, hasn't it?" At the end Jimmy and Alison hunker down in the shelter of their room, resigned to nothing more than a mutual dulling of what Jimmy calls "the pain of being alive."

Alan Ayckbourn's *Just Between Ourselves* (1976) tells something of the same story. Twenty years later the setting is suburban and most of the anger is gone, along with any overt attempt at political analysis. But the spiritual condition of English life, what C.W.E. Bigsby calls its "profound sense of dislocation," is seen as fundamentally unchanged. British theatre since 1956 has continued to tell disturbing and unflattering stories of a society gone wrong somewhere. (And not just the theatre, either. Think of *A Clockwork Orange* or the novels of John LeCarré.) In the plays of this period the middle class - i.e., the new ruling class - suffers from a chronic malaise that leaves a void at the centre of things. Impotent men can't make things work, and powerless women often bear the consequences. Home and family, the social microcosm, provides the stage on which this drama is played out most vividly. Enter Alan Ayckbourn.

Critic Janet Watts has described Ayckbourn's plays as "portraits of people's unawareness, of the sometimes horrific damage they can do to one another without even noticing. They are a sort of Grand Guignol of British suburbia." His genre is comedy of desperation. ("All the best comedy is rooted in deeply serious things," Ayckbourn said. "It throws light upon aspects of life we're frightened to think about.") And around the time of *Just Between Ourselves*, his comic dissection of middle class domesticity became increasingly dark. "I discovered that I could start to strip the layers off people a bit and find, perhaps, less typical emotions than you find in your average light comedy, like anger and jealousy and fear and rage and lust: I mean real, burning, destructive desire, all those sorts of things that one normally associates with Tennessee Williams and the swampland."

Typically, Ayckbourn's plays feature one character adept at traversing the swampland without being sucked under. He does so with a kind of desperate cheerfulness, a complacent energy that skims over problems, getting things done, but shoddily and always at others' expense. And he offers no help for the drowning. In *Just Between Ourselves*, Dennis' facile prescription for life's ills ("There's only one life, you know. . . Laugh and enjoy it while you can.") is of no use to wife Vera, who sinks deeper and deeper into paralysis under his patronizing pseudo-care, nor to friend Pam who just manages to stay afloat. To her direct appeal Dennis can only mutter, half-indignant, "Well, I don't know. I mean, what do you want?" Women, even their own wives, are either a complete mystery to Ayckbourn's men or subject to the most simplistic diagnoses. "Women need a rock, you see. A rock," insists Neil in explanation of his own marital failure. "Trouble is, I'm a bloody marshmallow."

The ineptitude of Ayckbourn's men is symptomatic. The play opens with Dennis at his workbench, surrounded by tools with which his father once carefully crafted beautiful things. But Dennis can't make anything, nor can he repair what's broken - not the garage door that won't open or the car that won't start, or the electric kettle, symbol of the modern English hearth and home, which he's busy trying to mend. (This last is a visual quotation, on Ayckbourn's part, from Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker*.) Dennis has mastered the *appearance* of competency, as well as that of intimacy. His refrain to Neil, the phrase that gives the play its title, is deeply ironic, suggesting a conspiratorial bond between men who know what they're about, a sharing of confidences for mutual benefit. But there is no real connection. It also suggests the exclusion of others, and that part at least is true. As the play moves from February to January, winter to winter, Vera becomes increasingly distant, disconnected from the travesty of Home that Dennis and mother Marjorie have blithely cultivated, and finally, like Jimmy and Alison Porter, from the pain of being alive.

Jerry Wasserman

Jerry Wasserman teaches English and Theatre at U.B.C., and recently completed a lead role in the feature film *Quarantine*.

Just Between Ourselves

By

Alan Ayckbourn

Directed By
Roy Surette

Set Design by
Robert Eberle

Costume Design by
Rosemarie Heselton

Lighting Design by
Ian Pratt

CAST
(in order of appearance)

Dennis. Jason Smith
Vera. Barbara Cormack
Neil. Roland Brand
Marjorie Lois Anderson
Pam. Mindy Forrester

ACT ONE

Scene One: February, Saturday morning

Scene Two: May, Saturday morning

ACT TWO

Scene One: October, Saturday evening

Scene Two: January, Saturday morning

There will be one 15 minute intermission.

Happy Birthday To You by Mildred J. and Patty S. Hill
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PRODUCTION

Technical Director. Ian Pratt
Properties Supervisor Sherry Milne
Costume Supervisor Chelsea Moore
Set Construction Don Griffiths, John Henrickson,
Robert Moser, Alan Brodie
Costume Assistant Jean Driscoll-Bell

Stage Manager Darryll Patterson
Head Scenic Artist. Kairiin Bright
Scenic Artist. J. Cricket Price
Sound Design Darryll Patterson
Make-up Nick Davis
Lighting Operator Nik von Schulmann

Box Office Carol Fisher, Linda McRae, Jason Smith
House Manager Laura K. Burke
Business Manager Marjorie Fordham
Production Robert Eberle

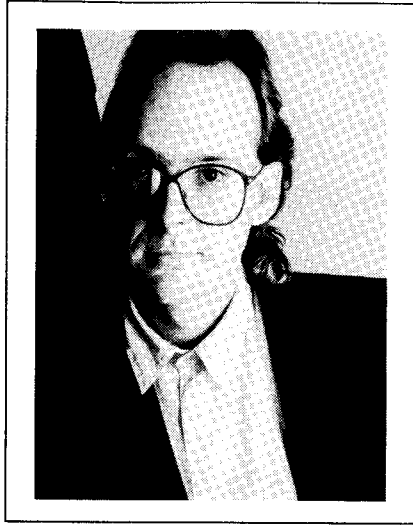
Assistant Director John Pozer

Dialect Coaches. Rod Menzies,
Rosemarie Heselton

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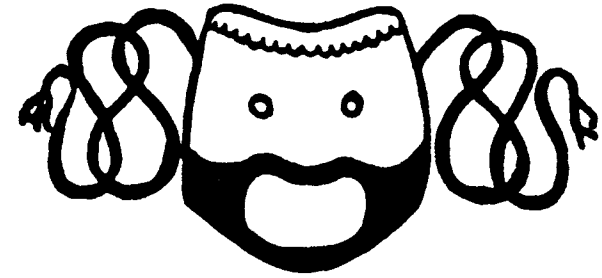


The Director - Roy Surette

Roy Surette is one on Vancouver's busiest young professional directors. He is going into his fifth season as Artistic Director for Touchstone Theatre, a company originally founded by U.B.C. Theatre graduates in 1976. His work with Touchstone has led to the development of many new Canadian plays including *Life Skills*, *Sex Tips for Modern Girls* and *El Crocodor*. Touchstone also produces works that have premiered elsewhere in the country such as *Farther West* by John Murrell, *White Biting Dog* by Judith Thompson, and this fall, two works by Vancouver born Joan MacLeod, *Toronto*, *Mississippi* and *Jewel*. Roy has also worked for many of Western Canada's Theatre companies including W.C.T.C., Axis Mime, Carousel, Green Thumb, The Arts Club, Theatre Calgary and Stage West.

No stranger to Alan Ayckbourn's work, Roy directed (with Michael McLaughlin) the acclaimed Fly by Night Theatre production of *The Norman Conquests* which played to record crowds at the Waterfront Theatre in 1984. He has also directed *Taking Steps* for Western Canada Theatre Company and *Joking Apart*, another of Ayckbourn's 'winter plays' for Burnaby Summer Theatre. Roy credits his enthusiasm for Ayckbourn to Antony Holland and Studio 58 Langara where Roy studied, acted and assisted with the direction of several Ayckbourn productions.

Currently, Roy's production of *Bones* by Peter Anderson is being performed at the Vancouver Fringe Festival.



The Link: UBC, Touchstone, et al.

University theatre programmes often point to their famous alumni with pride, as well they might. These examples lend the universities some proof of the practical value of their training, some demonstration of the soundness of their methods, some reflected glory from the magical aura of "professional theatre", and even (dare we say) some vague promise of future fame to dangle before potential recruits or stage-struck freshmen.

It is less common for a professional theatre to acknowledge its academic parentage. Touchstone Theatre, the company that Roy Surette now leads, is a refreshing exception. Touchstone was founded in 1976, the company's printed history tells us, by a group of U.B.C. theatre graduates with a common interest. In a retrospective article about those early years, Touchstone's co-founder Ian Fenwick writes about U.B.C. providing the fledgling group with rehearsal space and with its first audiences and first reviews. He also writes, with some affection, of "the subtle influence and encouragement of Norman Young, U.B.C. professor."

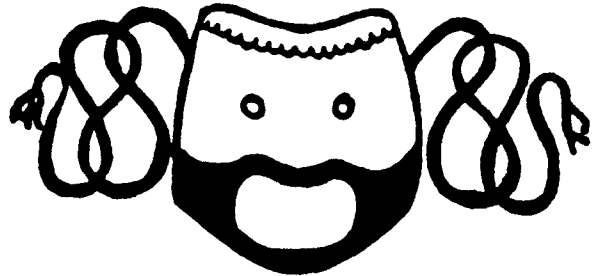
The influence of U.B.C. on Vancouver theatre has not been confined to recent companies or to present faculty. Professor "Freddy" Wood was a moving spirit in the founding of the Vancouver Little Theatre in 1921, a company which was vital to local theatre for a quarter-century and more. In addition, many of the key people in Vancouver's first post-war professional theatres -- Everyman, Totem and Holiday -- had trained at U.B.C. under Dorothy Somerset and Sydney Risk. More recently, Tamahous Theatre and later Touchstone were created by U.B.C. graduates on principles of artistic adventurousness and cooperative direction -- principles undoubtedly nurtured in their university experience. And above all these companies loom the youthful spirits of individual ex-U.B.C. students who have "made it" in show biz: Richard Ouzounian, Larry Lillo, Eric Peterson and John Gray, to name just a few.

But these accomplishments need to be placed in a broader perspective. U.B.C. and its faculty are not alone in their catalytic effect on Canadian theatre. At least the same credit may be claimed by the University of Toronto, for example, where the revered Robert Gill trained a whole generation of actors for the new post-war professional theatres in eastern Canada, most notably at the Stratford Festival. How much did Emrys Jones' encouragement (at the University of Saskatchewan) have to do with the accomplishments of Frances Hyland? Or James Reaney's poetic vision (at the University of Manitoba) with those of John Hirsch? More recently, how many theatre artists in Canada have been produced by the conservatory training at Alberta or York, or by the liberal arts programmes at Guelph or Queen's? Since the rapid expansion of post-secondary institutions in the mid-1960's, most of Canada's new actors, directors, designers and writers have cut their professional teeth in university and college drama programmes. In its contribution to Canadian professional theatre, U.B.C. is one (albeit a very prominent one) among many.

What of cause and effect? Is it good training that enables the Larry Lillos and the John Grays to rise to the top of their profession, or are they simply talented, motivated people who found a nourishing bit of soil here in which to grow? What U.B.C. Theatre must do is both to attract exceptional talent and to train that talent well. If the department can continue to offer opportunities for both artistic and intellectual growth, the talent will come. And, with the special advantages of an endowment, a beautiful campus and a good physical plant, U.B.C. can show off its fine theatrical tradition by inviting alumni as professional guest artists -- even adopted alumni like Roy Surette, whose theatre company attended U.B.C. even if he did not.

Denis W. Johnston

Dr. Denis Johnston is a post-doctoral fellow affiliated with the U.B.C. Theatre Department, where he teaches Canadian theatre history. He is the author of *Swimming Up the Mainstream*, a forthcoming book on Toronto's alternative theatres, and is currently researching post-war theatre in Vancouver.



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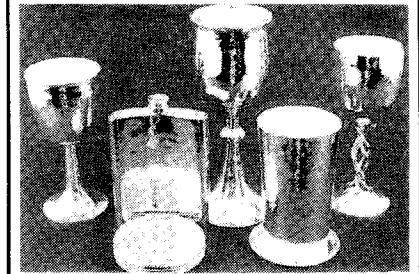
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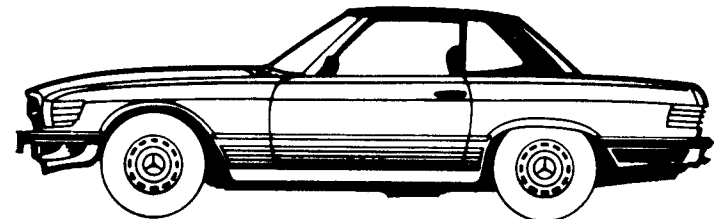
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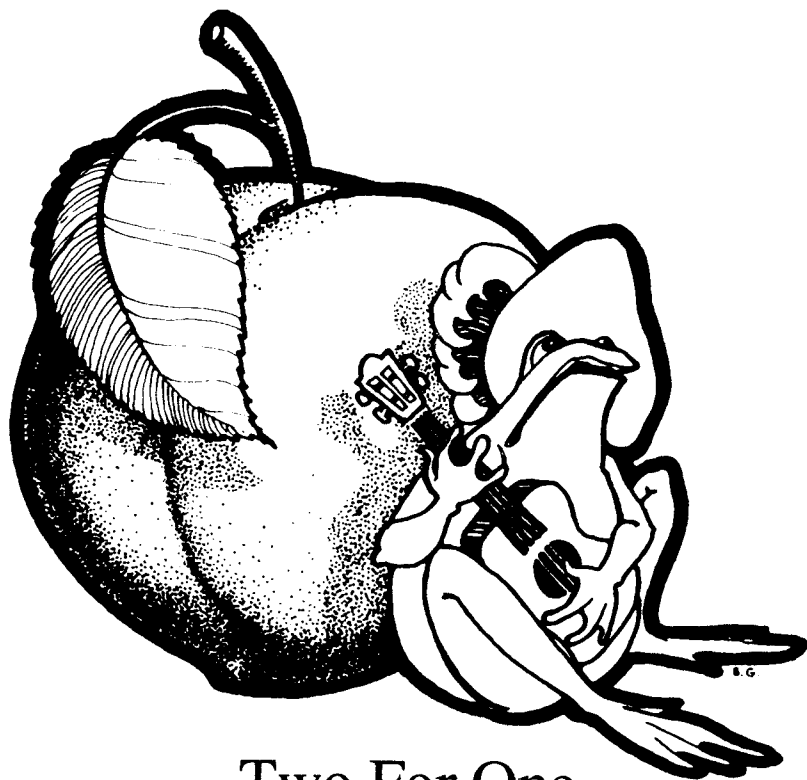
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James Barber said recently:

Character is more important than theme, and developing it takes time, patience and a special ability to out-bluff the bank manager. Good, comfortable, character restaurants, which offer honest eccentricities instead of waiters in sailor suits, are hard to find, and known generally only to a few similarly eccentric, demanding clients. They don't get much publicity because they can't afford it, and there are too many new theme restaurants churning out press releases.

Jack Moore observes:

If you have never been there, The Frog and Peach is a Tenth Avenue treasure of a place where for years an eccentric man named Diederik Wolsak has been allowing his more talented customers to do drawings of frogs (and peaches) on napkins, which are then framed and become a large part of the decor.

In James Barber's *Best Eating In Vancouver*, two restaurants were rated the best Continental Restaurants in Vancouver: The Frog and Peach and The Restaurant at Pacific 819. A few weeks ago Baz Lee of '819' sold his establishment and joined forces with The Frog and Peach.

Jack Moore writes:

He is like Diederik, one of the very best red-hot restaurant guys in the city. To say these two will likely do something interesting at The Frog and Peach is to underestimate the situation completely. Neither of these guys is capable of letting any restaurant become stale or humdrum, and both of them in the same place constitutes a sort of creative hive. So there is more to come out of this.

At the centre and perhaps most important is a wonderfully talented chef. Mary MacKay has infused Menu and presentation with a gently creative flair which is unmatched in the city. Chef MacKay is complemented during lunch by a formidable French talent named Marie José Henry, who shares Mary's unwavering commitment and love for culinary artistry.

Jack Moore Concludes:

The Frog and Peach has been entirely worthy of consideration these past nine years or so, and continues to be so. And as for the future, well stay tuned!

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