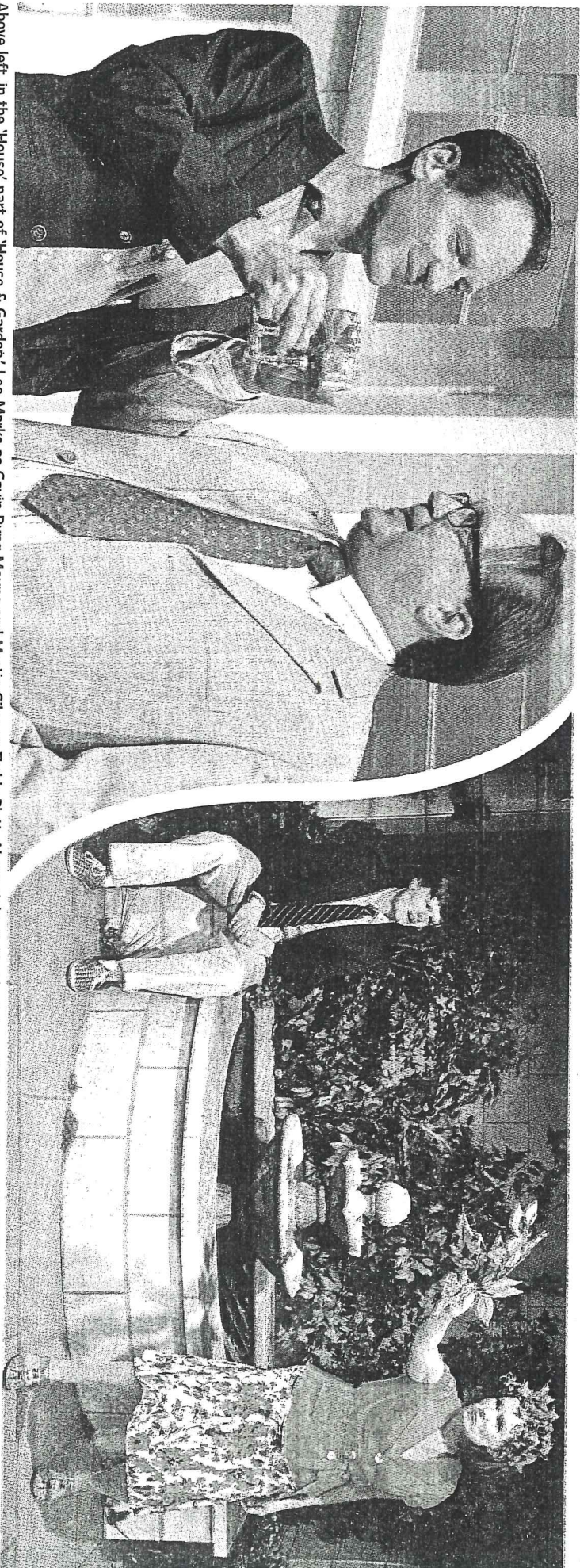


**THEATER**

# Ayckbourn, Indoors and Out



Above left, in the 'House' part of 'House & Garden,' Leo Marks as Gavin Ryng-Mayne and Martin Giles as Teddy Platt. Above right, in 'Garden,' Sean Melliott as Jake and Beth Hytton as Joanna.

**REVIEW**

Terry Teachout

House & Garden



Above left, in the 'House' part of 'House & Garden,' Leo Marks as Gavin Ryrng-Mayne and Martin Giles as Teddy Platt. Above right, in 'Garden,' Sean Melloitt as Jake and Beth Hylton as Joanna.

Suellen Fitzsimmons (2)

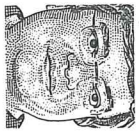
## REVIEW

### Terry Teachout

#### House & Garden

Pittsburgh Irish and Classical Theatre, Stephen Foster Memorial, 4301 Forbes Ave., Pittsburgh. (\$20-\$50 for each play), 412-394-3353, closes July 17

*The two plays are performed simultaneously on separate stages. Both plays will be presented twice in one day on July 9 and 16*



#### Pittsburgh

**WHEN IS A STUNT** not really a stunt? When it's dreamed up by Alan Ayckbourn. In addition to being the most prolific playwright of modern times, Mr. Ayckbourn is also a master of ingenuity, as New York audiences discovered two years ago when London's Old Vic brought its revival of "The Norman Conquests" to Broadway. But "The Norman Conquests," three interlocking plays set in different parts of the same country house on a single weekend, is far more than just a piece of consummate cleverness. So is "House & Garden," a 1999 diptych consisting of two plays

that take place simultaneously in the sitting room and garden of the same house and are designed to be performed in adjacent theaters by the same cast, with the actors racing from stage to stage as needed. (Only the audiences stay put.)

"House & Garden" is a high-speed whirligig of theatrical trickery, but as always with Mr. Ayckbourn, there's more to it than that. In between the riotous farce-style sequences, he paints a bleak portrait of the dilapidated state of modern marriage as seen through the eyes of two unhappy couples, and the funnier the jokes, the darker the shadows. It makes for an impressive package—but one that can only be performed by a company that has access to two stages on the same site.

That's where Pittsburgh Irish and Classical Theatre comes in. Founded in 1996, PICT operates out of the University of Pittsburgh's Stephen Foster Memorial, a purpose-built theatrical complex that looks like a Gothic-style church. It contains two houses, the 454-seat Charley Randall Theatre and 153-seat Henry Heymann Theatre, that are connected by a backstage spiral staircase, making it possible for PICT to mount "House & Garden" with relative ease. Just because you can do something doesn't mean you should, but PICT has taken the measure of

"House & Garden" and put together a cast whose members are equal to the challenge of conveying its technical and emotional complexities.

Summarizing the interwoven plots of "House" and "Garden" is a bit like trying to describe a Möbius strip to a blind person. That said, both plays are mostly about Teddy Platt (Martin Giles), a smarmy, self-important gent who is having an affair with Jo (Beth Hylton), the scatterbrained wife of Giles (David Bryan Jackson), his next-door neighbor and—yes—best friend. Giles is the only person in the immediate vicinity who doesn't know that Teddy and Jo are sleeping together. What's more, Trish (Helena Ruoft), Teddy's wife, is so angry about it that she's stopped speaking to her husband. Really stopped: Trish pretends that Teddy (a) isn't there and (b) doesn't exist, even when other people are present.

Both plays get rolling a few minutes before Gavin (Leo Marks), a successful novelist with friends in high places, shows up for lunch. He's come to Teddy's country house in order to sound him out about running for a seat in the House of Commons. Also scheduled to dine that day is Lucille (Nike Doukas), a sexy French film star who doesn't speak very much English and likes to jump into bed with strange men shortly after meeting them.

That's not the half of it—literally—but you get the idea. Comic chaos ensues as soon as "House & Garden" gets under way. At the same time, though, an undercurrent of anguish and humiliation flows just below the surface of the frenzied goings-on at the Platt house. Each of the play's principal characters is touched by it, Trish most of all, and it is Trish who brings home the point of the proceedings in a bitter speech in which she describes love as a "ridiculous dance" round a maypole of mutual misunderstanding: "Clinging on to our ribbon, terrified of deviating in case we get hurt or lost or rejected. But the older we get, despite all our efforts, the more we get entangled with other people. Yet never for a minute do most of us ever dream of doing the obvious and letting go."

Every member of PICT's 14-person cast (not counting the eight children who have nonspeaking roles in "Garden") is wholly believable, though never predictable. Mr. Jackson, for instance, plays Giles as a tragic Elmer Fudd, a preposterously oblivious figure of fun who stops being funny when he finally figures out that he's been betrayed. Amwen Darcy, a young woman cast as the 17-year-old daughter of Teddy and Trish, rises to that special challenge with impressive in-

sight. As for Martin Giles, he is so scrupulous about steering clear of cartoonish caricature that he even manages to make you feel the least little bit sorry for Teddy—though never too much.

PICT has assigned the two plays to separate directors, "House" to Andrew S. Paul, the company's artistic director, and "Garden" to Melissa Hill Grande. Their joint efforts are completely consistent in tone, as well as logistically impeccable. If any of the actors knocked each other over en route from one stage to the other, the results were never apparent to the audience.

Mr. Ayckbourn has written "House & Garden" so that the two plays, in his words, "can be seen singly and in no particular order." That said, you really have to see both plays in order to get the most out of them—and the Charley Randall Theatre, where "House" is playing, is more than three times as large as the downstairs Henry Heymann Theatre, where "Garden" is playing. This means that if you want to see all of "House & Garden," you'd better buy tickets to both shows right away.

Mr. Teachout, the Journal's drama critic, blogs about theater and the other arts at [www.terryteachout.com](http://www.terryteachout.com). Write to him at [teachout@wsj.com](mailto:teachout@wsj.com).

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