



# Theatre Three double bill of 'House' and 'Garden' is an up-and-down scramble to manage

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Cory Norman clicks his stopwatch and signals the show to begin. Simultaneously he speaks into a headset to alert Terry Dobson, a floor below him. Exactly 30 seconds later, Mr. Dobson gives the signal for the second show to start.

The two are stage-managing *House* and *Garden* at Theatre Three. Alan Ayckbourn's double-trouble comedies are separate plays, performed by the same 14 actors portraying the same roles in two adjoining spaces. The big theater upstairs represents the library in an English country mansion. The smaller basement venue becomes the garden out back, where townspeople are getting ready for an annual bazaar.

Fifty-four times during each double performance, an actor exits one space to go up or down the 33 steps that divide it from the auditorium where he or she is about to make an entrance.

"It's 76 steps in all. Cory taped it off in our rehearsal space so that we would have the exact same number of steps to take every time," says Greg Forshay, who plays the innocent-minded village doctor.

It's all timed so precisely that Mr. Forshay must give the same sound cue – shouting in dismay after someone discloses a disturbing piece of information – twice, first downstairs and then, a minute or so later, above.

Of course, things sometimes get a little out of sync. A particularly responsive audience in one house can laugh so much that it stretches the running time by two or three minutes. The actors in the other space have had to learn how to improvise as they wait for somebody who is finishing up his scene in the other show.

The actors know it's a bad sign if they see Mr. Norman in the upstairs lobby, motioning them to hurry along. They can't expect much of a break, either. This is one cast that doesn't get to spend a lot of time resting in the greenroom, since they're doing two shows at once.

Theatre Three has a long history of performing Mr. Ayckbourn's work. By now he has written more than 70 plays, many of which involve some sort of formal challenge – not to say gimmick – like the simultaneous action in *House* and *Garden*. But the artists who do his plays usually discover there's an artistic reason behind the high-concept structures.

"The two shows here are part of the same story. I'm really helping to build characters for a single show," director Bruce R. Coleman says. "But the two plays do have their own individual personalities. *Garden* is more physical, also a little bawdier, but there's also a little more tenderness in it. Upstairs, *House* is more of a comedy of manners."

Even for an experienced performer, portraying a single character who goes back and forth between two plays can be a challenge. Emily Gray, the only native English actor in the show, actually speaks French throughout as a Continental movie star.

"I've played both spaces before, but to play them both at the same time is really difficult. The first night performing in two different spaces there was a frisson of excitement. Is it going to work? The first time we combined the two, I went to the wrong theater at the beginning!" Ms. Gray says. "I have to play the same character, with the same emotional dynamics – but take her

from a smaller to a much bigger house. Some nights it feels like I'm in a coliseum when I come upstairs."

The performer also admits to finding the trek between the spaces a bit of an obstacle course. The most chaotic moment comes when the entire cast must circulate between the two levels to do curtain calls for the two shows at the same time.

"I discovered at the first run-through I couldn't take the curtain call in my high heels, running up and down all those steps. I'm sure the audience wonders why there's an actor holding her shoes," Ms. Gray says. "And there have been times I've shouted, 'Get out of my way!' "

*House* and *Garden* are written so that each is an independent entity, standing on its own. But those working on the show acknowledge that it's a richer experience if you see both and discover how Mr. Ayckbourn has intricately dovetailed the two scripts together. Even so, not everybody who sees *House* can possibly see *Garden*, since the upstairs arena is so much larger.

"The playwright is no fool," Theatre Three executive producer-director Jac Alder says. "He puts in scenes that get you to wondering what happens in the other show."

In some cases, a character who's a major figure in one play may make only a single appearance in the other.

"On his Web site, Mr. Ayckbourn says that we're all supporting players in each other's lives," director Coleman says. "That's the theme of these two plays."

For instance, longtime Theatre Three star Terry Vandivort plays the gardener in *Garden*. He makes only a single – if very dramatic – appearance in *House*. He says that coming into that fancy room underlines the class differences between his character and the inhabitants of the mansion: He feels out of place.

Actually, though, he's just where he should be. Mr. Norman and Mr. Dobson work hard every performance to make very sure of that. Plan your life

*House* and *Garden* continue through Aug. 10 at Theatre Three, 2800 Routh St. Each show \$10 to \$40, with discounts if you see both. 214-871-3300, [www.theatre3dallas.com](http://www.theatre3dallas.com). **WATCH** how the plays come off. **GuideLive.com/video**

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