

The English Theatre of Hamburg

Established 1976

Presents

SNAKE IN THE GRASS

A mystery thriller

by Alan Ayckbourn

STUDY GUIDE

Premiere on 3 September, 2020

Preview Performances at reduced prices on 31.8 and 1 and 2 September

Performances Tuesday to Saturday at 19.30 Hours

**Matinee Performances weekly either on Wednesday or Friday at 11.30 Hours
beginning 8 September**

The English Theatre of Hamburg

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Established in 1976

The English Theatre will premiere **SNAKE IN THE GRASS** on 3 September, 2020 with the usual preview performances at reduced prices on 31 August, 1 and 2 September. You can use the cover of this publication to advertise the play in your school or workplace. Bookings have already started. The text of the play may be obtained at theatre@samuelfrench-london.co.uk or amazon.com. Teachers interested in being invited to a dress rehearsal of the play on 30 August should contact marketing@englishtheatre.de

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alan Ayckbourn is probably Britain's most prolific living playwright. Born in London in 1939, he has been writing and directing for the theatre for more than 60 years. He has written numerous plays, most of which have been seen all over the world. However, it was not until his seventh play, **RELATIVELY SPEAKING**, that Alan Ayckbourn had his first London success in 1967. This smash hit was soon followed by one sell-out production after another. Most of Ayckbourn's plays deal with middle-class English life within the framework of a very funny bourgeois comedy. During the past decade, there have been major revivals of **SEASON'S GREETINGS** and **A SMALL FAMILY BUSINESS** at the National Theatre; **COMMUNICATING DOORS**, **RELATIVELY SPEAKING** and **HOW THE OTHER HALF LOVES** in the West End and, at Chichester Festival Theatre, **THE NORMAN CONQUESTS**. In addition to serving many years as Associate Director of Britain's National Theatre, Alan Ayckbourn was also, until 2009, the Artistic Director of the Stephen Joseph Theatre in Scarborough, where most of his plays were first produced. He has received numerous distinguished awards throughout his long career and was knighted in 1997 for outstanding services to the theatre. He has received many Honorary Doctorates including, happily, in 2018 the very first Honorary Doctorate from Coventry University Scarborough. A recipient of the Critics' Circle Award for Services to the Arts, he has been inducted into American Theatre's Hall of Fame and became the first British Playwright to receive both Olivier and Tony Lifetime Achievement Awards.

ABOUT THE PLAY

Audiences that see a performance of **SNAKE IN THE GRASS** may have trouble guessing what comes next. Just when you are sure you know what is going to happen, Ayckbourn cleverly creates a twist followed by another twist. There are no actual snakes in this play. According to the Oxford English Dictionary the expression "snake in the grass" refers to "a treacherous or deceitful person." The question becomes who in the play fits that description. After her father's death Annabel Chester returns to the childhood home she fled 35 years ago. She has inherited the entire estate and intends to sell the house and move with her sister to another part of England where they can both find work. However, there are two people who make it difficult for Annabel to carry out her plans: Miriam, the younger sister she abandoned when she fled from home because of an abusive father, and Alice Moody, a nurse who took care of their father until she was fired by the younger sister. Alice claims that Miriam fired her so that she could cause her father's death by increasing her father's doses of medicine without being caught. Alice has a letter sent to her from the dying man in which he claims that Miriam is trying to kill him. She is using the letter to extort one hundred thousand pounds from Annabel. If she does not pay up Alice will notify the police and Miriam will have to go to prison for murdering her father. Miriam looks for a way to "neutralize" Alice. Giving more details of the plot will only spoil the enjoyment of the play. It is a comedy, ghost story and a psychodrama in one. You can expect to laugh, get the chills and perhaps even gasp.

"A creepily, scarily, eerily enjoyable evening." (*Sunday Times*)

"Alan Ayckbourn feels the urge to make people jump." (*PlaysInternational*)

Summary of SNAKE IN THE GRASS

Time: A late afternoon in August

Place: The garden of the Chesters' house

Act I, Scene 1

After a long flight from Australia to England, Annabel, now middle aged, returns to her childhood home following the death of her father. She looks at her deceased father's rocking chair on the dilapidated back porch of the family house and glances at the tennis court where her father, against her will, brutally tried to force her as a child to learn how to play tennis. Her mother, having died when she and her sister were quite young, was not present to protect her and her sister Miriam from their father's cruelty.

An unfamiliar woman comes into the garden and introduces herself as Alice Moody, the nurse who took care of the ailing father until, as she claims, she was wrongfully fired by Miriam, Annabel's younger sister. She asserts that the real reason she was fired was so that Miriam could kill her father by giving him triple and quadruple doses of his medicine. She adds that Miriam confessed everything to her including the fact that she pushed her father down the stairs to finish him off.

Annabel does not believe the story until Alice produces a photocopy of a letter that Annabel's father sent to Alice telling her that Miriam was indeed trying to kill him. He also informed her that he had excluded Miriam from his will and was leaving the house and all of his money to Annabel, his sole beneficiary. When it becomes clear that Alice is trying to extort money from her by threatening to go to the police and have Miriam arrested for murder, Annabel angrily tells her to leave. Resolute in her effort to get money from Annabel, Alice agrees to leave but says she will return the next day when Miriam is present.

After Alice goes, Miriam appears from inside the tennis court where she has been hiding and eavesdropping. She comes out of the court and embraces the big sister she has not seen for many years. Miriam already knows about Alice's intentions and she is terrified. She tells Annabel that during his last months her father was so harsh and unkind to her that it was unbearable. After a lot of prying, Annabel finds out from Miriam that what Alice told her is true. Miriam tells her that Alice wants one hundred thousand pounds to remain silent about how the father died. Annabel is shocked by this large sum. She tells Miriam she does not have that kind of money so they will just have to tell Alice to go "whistle for it."

Act I, Scene 2

The next day, the sisters talk about a way to raise the money and Annabel gets distressed. She reveals that she always keeps pills with her because she has had a heart-attack and needs the medication to keep her from having another one.

Alice turns up as expected and accepts Miriam's offer of a glass of wine. They sit on lawn chairs and drink wine that Miriam has brought from the house. Annabel tells Alice that she cannot possibly pay her the money she wants but she will make what she calls a "compromise offer" of five thousand pounds. Alice refuses the offer and, after drinking three glasses of wine, she falls to the ground unconscious. Miriam has poisoned Alice thinking it was the only way to keep from going to prison. Annabel is stunned by what Miriam has just done. With very little help from the frail Annabel, Miriam drags Alice's body over to a well, opens the hatch to the well and dumps Alice in it, then closes the hatch.

Annabel is horrified by the thought of Alice falling thirty feet into a well. She desperately reaches for her heart pills and takes some to help her calm down. Miriam tells her they will still not be safe until they recover the original blackmail letter, and she says that Annabel will have to be the one who goes into Alice's flat to look for the letter. Miriam explains that she can't do it herself because she might be recognized. Alice's address and the key to her flat are in Alice's handbag so it should be easy, Miriam thinks. Annabel can get in and out without arousing any suspicion. At first Annabel is unwilling to do this but gradually understands that she must.

Miriam calmly pours the rest of the poisoned wine onto the grass and takes the wine glasses and the bottle into the house. Trembling, Annabel goes to the well and knocks on the hatch saying, "Hallo. Are you all right down there? Are you still alive?" There is no response. She goes back to her chair near the tennis court and a tennis ball violently smashes into the fencing inches from her face. She screams and rushes off towards the house.

Act II

It is midnight of the same day, and the lights in the house have gone out. Miriam and Annabel walk from the house to the garden carrying storm lanterns so they can find their way. Annabel asks Miriam why the lights in the house are all of a sudden not working. Miriam says she thinks the whole place needs rewiring because the lights have gone off and on before for no apparent reason. Miriam gets rid of Alice's handbag by dropping it down the well. Then she closes the hatch and takes a swig from the bottle

of wine she brought from the house.

Meanwhile, Annabel sits on a bench next to the tennis court examining the letter she retrieved from Alice's flat. After looking at it carefully she determines that it is indeed a forgery. Miriam does not want to believe it, but after inspecting the letter closely, she comes to the same conclusion. She knows now that she killed Alice for nothing.

Miriam pulls a chair over to where Annabel is sitting and asks her if she is seriously considering selling their childhood home as she has previously said. Annabel tells her that apart from the house giving her the "willies", selling it and moving to another town where they can both work without having to commute is the practical thing to do.

Then Miriam interrogates Annabel about her fear of the tennis court stemming from the terrifying experiences she had there with her father when she was a child. She offers to help her sister overcome her anxiety by holding her hand and entering the court with her. When Annabel flatly refuses to do this, Miriam decides to tell her what she refers to as a "ghost story" instead. Annabel is not interested, but Miriam proceeds to tell her about one of the most painful experiences of her life.

Miriam recalls a time when she was twelve years old and there was a disco in the village. Her father told her she could not go, but Miriam was determined to join her friends and have a good time dancing. So she told her father she was going to her room to do homework and have an early night. Instead of doing homework, however, she put on her "glitzy-ritzy party frock" and climbed down the drainpipe outside her bedroom window. She was free to flee to the village where she danced late into the night with her friends. When she came home her father was sitting in the rocking chair on the back porch. He said he would have to punish her so he put her over his knee and lifted her dress. She waited for the slap but it never came. "It was worse than the pain. It was worse than anything. Ever. In my whole life." Annabel is shocked to hear that Miriam had been sexually abused as a child by their father, and wonders why she never told her about it. Miriam says it wasn't something she could put in a letter.

Miriam now takes Annabel's hand and tells her it is time for her to face her fears. She pulls the reluctant Annabel towards the dark tennis court to show her that there is nothing to be frightened of. But as they approach the court Annabel's breathing grows heavier. A night bird lets out a shriek as it flies away and Annabel screams and runs from the court back

to the safety of her lantern. She wants to go back in the house where she feels secure, but Miriam insists that she tell her a "ghost story" first. Annabel refuses and heads for the house, but finds that the door is locked. Angry and afraid, she returns to the garden and shows Miriam what she found on the door handle. It is Alice's wet scarf which leads Annabel to believe that Alice has managed to escape from the well and is lurking somewhere in the dark. She seems to have what appears to be the start of another attack. Miriam gets her sister's pills, but Annabel declines to take them because she's already taken so many since she arrived.

Frightened now, Annabel demands that Miriam give her the backdoor key so she can go into the house, but Miriam refuses. She insists that she will give her the key only if Annabel tells her a "ghost story". Left with no other choice, Annabel reveals the details behind her failed marriage and the beatings she endured from her husband until she could take the abuse no longer. She escaped from him and came back to her childhood home to be with Miriam.

Miriam muses that everything that has happened to them has somehow been "tied in with love." She thinks that Annabel stayed with her abusive husband as long as she did because she kept hoping he would show her the love they had shared in the early part of their marriage. Their own father, after punishing them always said it was for their own good so he must have done it out of love.

Annabel is not so sure she agrees with Miriam's theory, but does not want to discuss the matter. She asks again if she can go in the house and Miriam says yes, but they are stopped abruptly when one of their two storm lanterns goes out.

ATTENTION

If you want to be surprised when you see this play in the theatre, do not read the rest of this summary.

When the second lantern goes out Miriam disappears in the darkness. Alone now, Annabel hears her father's voice calling her name from the tennis court and hears tennis balls crashing against the fence of the tennis court. Already terrified, Annabel sees the hatch of the well open, and Alice crawling out. She is covered with blood. Annabel can take no more. This shock is too much. She has a heart-attack and dies in the garden.

Miriam reappears carrying a ghetto blaster with which she had played her father's recorded voice to

scare Annabel. Alice walks over to her, dressed in clothing covered in fake blood, and gives her a kiss. The two have arranged a ghoulish plan to scare Annabel to death so they can acquire Annabel's inherited fortune.

Alice walks toward the house to clean herself up and Miriam asks her to turn the lights on inside, warning her that there is a lot of water on the floor in the basement where the switches are.

Alice takes the key to the door from a secret hiding place and enters the house. After a while there is a crackling, whizzing sound and an explosion as the house lights flicker and go out. Miriam smiles and says "whoops" knowing Alice has been electrocuted

as she had planned. Now she will not have to share Annabel's inheritance with anyone. Removing her coat, she stands in the garden wearing the "glitzy-ritzy party frock" from her youth. Having killed her sister and Alice, it is now Miriam's turn to be frightened. One of the lanterns flickers on and her father's empty chair starts to rock on the porch. A man's voice calls her name repeatedly. "Miriam, Miriam, Miriam." She cries out "Father, father, father, NO!!! What she is seeing and hearing does not exist. Miriam has completely lost her mind.

Still slumped against the tennis court fence where she fell, Annabel's eyes open in a final deathly stare.

CURTAIN

Study Questions

1. Annabel flew from Australia to England to (a. start a new company, b. return to her childhood home, c. kill her father).
2. Alice is a (a. school teacher, b. lawyer, c. nurse).
3. Miriam's father (a. taught her to play tennis, b. trusted her to care for him, c. abused her as a child).
4. Annabel refuses to give in to (a. extortion, b. begging, c. flattery).
5. Miriam wants Annabel to sneak into Alice's flat to get (a. a necklace, b. a letter, c. money).
6. Annabel wants to (a. renovate their house, b. sell the house, c. rent the house to students).
7. The three women drink wine together and discuss (a. fashion, b. money, c. the weather).
8. Miriam wants Annabel to tell her (a. a ghost story, b. a fairy tale, c. about Australia).
9. Annabel's husband was (a. abusive, b. romantic, c. generous).
10. After Alice drinks wine served by Miriam, she (a. gets drunk, b. starts telling jokes, c. appears to lose consciousness).
11. Miriam puts Alice in a (a. costume, b. a well, c. a cage).

Answer Key:

1. b. 2. c. 3. c. 4. a. 5. b. 6. b. 7. b. 8. a. 9. a. 10. c. 11. b.

Interpretative Questions

1. How are Annabel and her younger sister Miriam's experiences in life different? How are they the same?
2. What do the three characters in the play want most?
3. Which of the characters fits the description of "a snake in the grass?" Explain.