Play turns adults loose on holiday

By BOB DARDEN
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Pat Cook and the students at the Baylor Theater have developed an unusual relationship with Alan Ayckbourn, arguably the greatest living English playwright.

Ms. Cook has taken a number of students to England to visit with Ayckbourn and observe plays at the playwright's theater. Over the years, a feeling of mutual respect and admiration has grown between the two.

So it makes perfect sense for Baylor's next production to be Ayckbourn's "Season's Greetings," a contemporary comedy.

Ms. Cook, associate professor of theater arts, said her students visited Ayckbourn while he was still polishing what would become "Season's Greetings."

"We didn't know it at the time, but he was using the preview audiences to help him rewrite the play," she said. "After it was over, he asked our opinions and we talked about what we liked and disliked about 'Season's Greetings.' We took endless photos of the session and sent him back some of the best."

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A few years later, while Ayckbourn was directing his latest play, "Course of Disapproval" at the National Theatre in London, Ms. Cook asked him about her idea of changing the setting from London to Dallas.

"I wanted to do it Texan, with the main villain a J.R. Ewing-type," she said. "He thought about it a minute and said, 'It just might work at that.'"

"But when it actually came time to mount the production, I gave up the idea of doing it in Texas. Part of the fun of the show is that the English are so much more reserved than we are. The subject — even the word 'sex' — absolutely destroys the fabled English poise and aplomb.

"Texans, I think, are more open about certain topics. Still, all human beings shy away from talking about intimate topics. Ayckbourn uses sex here, I believe, as a metaphor for all intimacy. Everybody is hung up on intimacy. And that makes the reactions all the more enjoyable."

Ms. Cook said "Season's Greetings" takes place in the modern home of a young English couple, Belinda (Kathy Keyes) and Neville (Tim Decker), who have their entire family over for Christmas.

The entourage includes an uncle hooked on television, a cousin pregnant with her fourth baby, an alcoholic aunt, another uncle who is a lousy doctor and whose hobby is doing puppet shows for kids, and an unmarried sister who brings over her hoped-for hot novelist boyfriend.

"Even though the two families get together and the kids are talked about all the time, they are never seen," Ms. Cook said. "And that allows the adults to act like little children over the holidays. Alan told us the play came about from his own experiences, looking up from the knees at adults at the holidays.

"The triggering device is the fierce competition between the two sisters for the young novelist. That triggers all kinds of hidden passions — and shows how the different characters channel those passions.

"The actors play their roles in a shy sort of way regarding the opposite sex. There are quite a few misinterpretations, exemplifying the way people fumble along with the opposite sex in real life. The result is a hysterical black comedy."

Ms. Cook said under the surface comedy, Ayckbourn is making a telling point about the gap between expectations and reality. We expect so much out of Christmas.

"This was a difficult play for me as director," she said. "It is a complex play, one where the playwright is intertwining five or six actions that are all going on at once, actions that only touch occasionally. He's a modern Chekov in that respect.

"It's also an endlessly detailed mosaic, where everything has to be real. It has a million props, all those ongoing plots and a lot of witty, sharp dialogue. It's like a big family where something is always going on in another part of the house. Keeping all those threads crystal clear is both challenging and fun."

In recent plays, Ms. Cook has noted Ayckbourn's increasingly pessimistic outlook on life.

"Ayckbourn basically presents well-intentioned, decent people who stumble and fumble into messes," she said. "This is the first time he has a true villain."

"And always ready to rear its ugly head and create more messes is even the mention of the word 'sex.'"

The Baylor production also will feature "Season's Greetings" best-known sequence, the riotously inept puppet show featuring the three pigs. Theater students strung a number of marionettes to present an incredibly mistake-ridden puppet show that also serves as a much larger metaphor for the entire play.

The "Season's Greetings" cast also includes John Beard of Dallas as Uncle Harvey, the relative hooked on TV, and Burton Curtis of Magnolia portrays the part of Uncle Bernard, the puppet lover.

Monty Hicks of San Antonio plays Patty, the pregnant cousin, and Janette Lowell of Oklahoma City acts the part of Aunt Phyllis. Suzanne Wilcox of Ennis portrays Rachel, the single sister.