

methuen | drama

JOHN GODBER

PLAYS: 3

UP 'N' UNDER • PERFECT PITCH

APRIL IN PARIS



Introduced by the author

B L O O M S B U R Y

John Godber

Plays: 3

Up 'n' Under, April in Paris, Perfect Pitch

Up 'n' Under: 'Hysterical one-liners and bawdy laddish rugby humour litter the dialogue' *The Stage*

Perfect Pitch: 'Godber's funny and cleverly turned piece. Takes what could be an episode from an edgy but cosy sitcom and makes of it something revealing. The play begins as a gentle parody of middle-class pretensions, a parody in which practical skills and sexual prowess are equated. It turns into a study of unkindness.' *Observer*

April in Paris: 'As for Godber he has arrived as playwright who can combine comedy, depth and feeling.' *Financial Times*

John Godber was born in Upton, near Pontefract, in 1956. He trained as a teacher at Bretton Hall College, Wakefield, did an MA in Drama and an MPhil/PhD in Drama at Leeds University. Since 1984 he has been Artistic Director of Hull Truck Theatre Company. His plays include: *Happy Jack*; *September in the Rain*; *Bouncers* (winner of seven Los Angeles Critics Circle awards); *Up 'n' Under* (Olivier Comedy of the Year Award, 1984); *Shakers* and *Shakers Restirred* (both with Jane Thornton); *Up 'n' Under 2*; *Blood, Sweat and Tears*; *Teechers*; *Salt of the Earth*; *On the Piste*; *Happy Families*; *The Office Party*; *April in Paris*; *Passion Killers* and *Lucky Sods*; *Perfect Pitch*; *Seasons in the Sun*; *Departures*; *Men of the World* and *Reunion*. Television and film work includes: *The Ritz*; *The Continental*; *My Kingdom for a Horse*; *Chalkface* (all BBC2), episodes of *Crown Court*; *Grange Hill* and *Brookside* and screenplays for *On the Piste* and *Up 'n' Under*. He is an honorary lecturer at Bretton Hall College and a D.Litt. of Hull and Lincoln Universities.

By the same author

Godber Plays: 1

(Bouncers, Happy Families, Shakers)

Godber Plays: 2

(Teechers, Happy Jack, September in the Rain,
Salt of the Earth)

JOHN GODBER

Plays: 3

Up 'n' Under
April in Paris
Perfect Pitch

Foreword by the author
Introduced by John Bennett

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A Chronology

- 1977 *Bouncers*, Edinburgh Festival; revived by Hull Truck Theatre Company at the Donmar Warehouse in 1984.
- 1981 *Cry Wolf*, Yorkshire Actors company
- 1981 *Cramp*, Edinburgh Festival; revived at Bloomsbury Theatre in 1987
- 1982 *EPA* (Minsthorpe High School)
- 1983 *Young Hearts Run Free* (Bretton Hall)
- 1984 *A Christmas Carol* (adaptation, Hull Truck)
- 1984 *September in the Rain* (Hull Truck)
- 1984 *Up 'n' Under 1* (Hull Truck, Edinburgh Festival; transferred to Donmar Warehouse)
- 1984 *Shakers* (with Jane Thornton, Hull Truck)
- 1985 *Happy Jack* (Hull Truck)
- 1985 *Up 'n' Under 2* (Hull Truck)
- 1986 *Cramp* (Musical. Hull Truck)
- 1986 *Blood, Sweat and Tears* (Hull Truck; then Tricycle Theatre)
- 1987 *Oliver Twist* (Hull Truck)
- 1987 *Teachers* (Hull Truck, Edinburgh Festival; revived at the Arts Theatre, 1988)
- 1988 *Salt of the Earth* (Wakefield Centenary; then Hull Truck, Edinburgh Festival; then Donmar Warehouse)
- 1989 *Office Party* (Nottingham Playhouse)
- 1990 *On the Piste* (Hull Truck, Derby Playhouse; then Garrick, 1993)
- 1991 *Everyday Heroes* (with Jane Thornton, Community Play, Bassetlaw)
- 1991 *Bouncers, 1990s Re-mix* (Hull Truck)
- 1991 *Shakers Re-stirred* (with Jane Thornton, Hull Truck)
- 1991 *Happy Families* (Little Theatre Guild, then West Yorkshire Playhouse, 1992)
- 1992 *April in Paris* (Hull Truck; then Ambassadors, 1994)

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- 1994 *Passion Killers* (Hull Truck, Derby Playhouse)
1995 *Lucky Sods* (Hull Truck; then Hampstead Theatre)
1995 *Dracula* (with Jane Thornton, Hull Truck)
1996 *Gym and Tonic* (Hull Truck, Derby Playhouse)
1997 *Weekend Breaks* (Hull Truck, Alhambra, Bradford)
1997 *It Started with a Kiss* (Hull Truck)
1998 *Unleashed* (Hull Truck, Edinburgh Festival; then Bloomsbury, 1999)
1998 *Hooray for Hollywood* (Hull Truck)
1998 *Perfect Pitch* (Stephen Joseph Theatre, Scarborough)
1999 *Big Trouble in the Little Bedroom* (Hull Truck)
2000 *Seasons in the Sun* (Hull Truck, West Yorkshire Playhouse)
2000 *Thick as a Brick* (Hull Truck)
2001 *This House* (Hull Truck)
2001 *Departures* (Bolton Octagon Theatre, then Hull Truck)
2002 *Moby Dick* (with Nick Lane, Hull Truck)
2002 *Young Hearts* (co-production with Bransholme Kingswood Secondary School, Ferens Art Gallery, Hull Truck then Edinburgh Fringe Festival)
2002 *Men of the World* (Sheffield Crucible Theatre, then Hull Truck)
2002 *Reunion* (Hull Truck)

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Foreword

I am lucky as a writer to be able to direct my own plays, and extra lucky to have a theatre, Hull Truck, in which to put them on. It was never planned like this, events simply developed and I responded to them. Over time I have come to realise that every play has its own special mechanics and reasons for existing – these three plays are no exception.

This collection serves as an example of three distinct styles of theatre, each with its own language and rules, brought about under distinct, unique conditions. It also illustrates my development as a writer after leaving teaching in 1983.

I joined Hull Truck Theatre Company as Artistic Director in January 1984. At the first board meeting I was informed that the company was insolvent and that drastic measures had to be put in place in order for it to survive. Box office figures were dreadful, and the good people of Hull were staying away from what was then Spring Street Theatre in their droves. Interestingly enough none of this was mentioned at my interview.

I had never run a Theatre Company before, but as a drama teacher at Minsthorpe High School, a West Yorkshire comprehensive, I had fantasised about the type of work I would programme if I was ever lucky enough to be elevated to run Leeds Playhouse. For a start the opening season would feature a collection of German Expressionist plays; popularism was out of the question. Having been influenced by the German Theatre expert Dr Mike Patterson whilst studying part-time for a Ph.D., at Leeds University I had dreamed of directing Kaiser, Büchner and Brecht. However the cold reality of running a theatre in Hull in 1984, convinced me to body swerve the expressionists and look at themes a little more local.

It was patently clear from that first board meeting that the company needed plays that would put ‘bums on seats’. With this in mind I took myself up to Whitley Bay with the intention of writing a play about Rugby League. *Up 'n' Under*

was sketched out in less than a week; a simple enough story, a kind of triumph in the face of adversity. With a limited budget – something that I had lived with as a teacher – I set out to make a piece of popular theatre that would attract the largely non-theatre-going public in Hull. I would use cod-Shakespearean verse, dream sequences, slow motions action, reverse action, direct audience address, voice over. Whatever is at the playwright's disposal I used in writing *Up 'n' Under*.

*

I have written extensively about my interest in physical theatre in the introduction to *Godber Plays: 1*, so I will avoid repetition here. Suffice to say that writing a play about rugby gave me the opportunity to experiment with physical theatre once more. A third of the play is an actual game of rugby, so we had to be inventive. As a writer I had to direct the play in my head as I worked out the physical moves.

We opened the play at the Edinburgh Festival in 1984 with the audience cheering every try; the play won the Olivier Award for Best Comedy in 1984 and played in the West End for almost two years making various return visits during the mid-nineties. As far as audiences in Hull were concerned they were happy to watch a play which reflected aspects of their social life. I would love to say that in one 'foul swoop' we had turned the theatre's fortunes around – almost but not quite. What was fascinating during the *Up 'n' Under* years was that whilst the game of rugby on stage was nothing short of a dance, not one of the professional rugby players who saw it said it was anything other than realistic. It became clear to me that things can be emotionally real without descending into superficial realism.

So is *Up 'n' Under* a great play on the page? Well, in all honesty, probably not. Is it an exciting evening in the theatre, and is it a good example of physical theatre communicating itself directly and evocatively to an audience? Unquestionably yes, and whilst there have been pale replicas, on its day, to use sporting parlance, there is very little to touch it.

*

April in Paris is a two-hander which tells the story of Al and Bet as they break out of their humdrum life in Hull and discover Paris for the first time. The play was commissioned for the Hull Festival in 1992, and had the same job as *Up 'n' Under*, to put 'bums on seats'. A number of metropolitan critics took exception to Al and Bet's journey, contesting that no one of their age had not been to Paris in the 1990s, and that their conversion to becoming art-lovers was too easy. Now, of course, I would disagree, that's obvious, but few observers actually picked up on the heightened sense of language in the play and the poetic way in which Al and Bet communicate. This language kicks the play away from reality and places the characters in a parallel theatrical world. We recognise the world we are watching, but it's a long way from Zola. I suppose I mustn't be too upset by critics, after all, we are all critics.

The first act of *April in Paris* takes place on a ten-foot piece of white plastic, this serves as Al and Bet's home, and the ferry in which they cross the North Sea. Whilst writing the play I worked with designer Rob Jones just to see how little we would need to make the transformations from one location to the other. Again, it was important for me to allow the play to be theatrical. By choosing to write a play about a trip to Paris we had to take the audience on the voyage with us. Of course most of the voyage was in the imagination of the audience. There are clearly compromises whenever you start writing, the limits of one's imagination for a start, that's a fairly big one, the other major one in my experience has been money. Two actors in a play may be a producer's dream, but it certainly raises huge questions for the writer.

Should these two actors only play themselves, should they speak to the audience, should they play other characters? As with *Up 'n' Under* I was able to draw on a variety of theatrical techniques in order to allow two actors to tell their story, and get us out of the 'room'. *April in Paris* certainly uses direct audience address, but the physical aspects of the show are much less rigorous than the earlier play. The Paris

that Al and Bet experience is described from their point of view, and the graphic image is created in the mind of the viewer, there is much less sweat here.

Whilst *April in Paris* is distinctly less energetic, it does boast a development in style within the work. The play starts with Al and Bet grunting at each other. These grunts are a kind of poetry – the couple have worn together like two stones, constantly bickering and argumentative. They speak, but they do not listen. They exist with each other but have forgotten how to care. However as they begin their journey they are given to express themselves with more panache and detail. When they eventually board the boat they speak directly to the audience, and indeed they describe how they feel about Paris, before returning to their grunting existence on return home. They have come full circle, but the paradox is clear, the more you know, the more you know you don't know.

Theatre need not be a 'slice of life viewed through a temperament'. Within certain conditions anything can happen as long as the rules are laid out clearly from the start, and then even those rules can change at times.

*

Perfect Pitch, written some six years after *April in Paris*, and commissioned by the Stephen Joseph Theatre Scarborough, is a different proposition altogether. This was the first time I had written specifically for a space that was in-the-round. However, the onus to fill the theatre was just the same, as were the cast limitations.

Scarborough threw up a new challenge, and one which I didn't fully appreciate straight away. I mentioned that in the previous two plays the characters spoke directly to the audience to evoke various places and feelings. However, when working in-the-round this was less easy to do since if you addressed the audience you would have your back to the other three sides. Consequently *Perfect Pitch* was a first for me; essentially a piece of fly-on-the-wall realism.

My plays start out as films in my head – then I have to use all the skills at my disposal to turn them into theatrical events. Being unable to address the audience directly, as I

had done in *Up 'n' Under* and *April in Paris*, *Perfect Pitch* presented me with a range of problems, problems which the dramatists of the 'well-made play' had wrestled with a hundred years earlier. I had to write a play which took place in a single location. How dull, I thought!

Since I had set *Perfect Pitch* on a caravan site on the Scarborough coast, I began to wonder how I could add my innate sense of theatricality to this jejune location. Should the play be set in real time, would that work, was there a way of cutting through time, fast-forwarding so that I could get a sense of pace to the piece? Clearly the thought of being in one space for two hours worried me. I had often said in interviews that I didn't want to leave my room at home to sit in someone else's room in the theatre for two hours. In the end I decided to introduce the play with a number of so-called 'stills'. Short scenes which might consist of a line or two but which gave a sense of atmosphere and allowed time to pass. This created – in my head at least – a filmic sense of pace.

This restriction on the so-called 'style' of the play frustrated me at first since I was writing a play which 'anyone' could write. A bog-standard piece of fourth wall realism in essence. My previous work including the plays listed above had always rallied against the confines of the fourth wall. They were flamboyantly anti-naturalistic, they looked for theatrical style where ever they could, and often, even by my own admission at the expense of the content. Their form searched tirelessly for the theatrical excitement that had first plugged me into theatre as a live and special event quite distinct from television.

I mentioned at the beginning of this ramble, that this collection demonstrates something of an arc in my development. That is not to say that I consider my graduation to fourth-wall realism as unquestionably a good thing. Whilst *Perfect Pitch* is widely regarded as a 'good play', it doesn't have any of the verve or theatrical panache that *Up 'n' Under* enjoys. But then again its characters are grounded and three-dimensional, and that case cannot be put for *Up 'n' Under*, and I have to admit to myself that it is

more carefully written – perhaps experience is a defining factor here?

What has become clear to me over time, is that quite often the play and the subject matter picks the style. Looking back it would have been impossible to make *Up 'n' Under* into a well-made play and still play a game of rugby on stage. In any case David Storey had done that twenty years earlier with *The Changing Room*, and since I had written an MA Thesis on David Storey I was keen not to re-plough that territory.

Scholars will no doubt recognise a number of recurring themes in these three plays; all three concern themselves with leisure activities, they are not work plays. It is probably fair to say that the characters are from working-class backgrounds, and that redundancy plays a major part in all their lives. Whilst they may change in style there is also a sense of humour and a dryness of wit which is I suppose very much in a gritty Yorkshire tradition.

It is fascinating to fleetingly apply oneself to consider the nature of one's work. When working in a producing theatre, lack of time and the meeting of deadlines often precludes such analysis. I suppose in a way there is always a constant repositioning of what makes good theatre and what makes a good play. A strong literary tradition is often cited as the backbone for a good play, but we have all witnessed 'good plays' die, and equally, the effusive energy of physical comedy has been known to have its off days. What keeps theatre a source of inspiration and frustration is the plethora of potential styles at a writer's disposal. For me, the way he or she tells a story is just as important as the story itself – form and content co-exist but can often counter-point. Whatever the relationship between form and content, and whatever style a writer might settle on, we have to acknowledge that theatre remains an organic and ever-shifting target, and as some one who has worked in it for twenty years that's both reassuring and unsettling.

John Godber
Hull 2003

Introduction

The plays in this collection, *Up 'n' Under*, *April in Paris*, *Perfect Pitch*, demonstrate the range of a playwright primarily associated in the minds of the theatre-going public with his earliest play, the youth-oriented, 'in-yer-face' physicality of the four male, multi-character performers in *Bouncers*. These three later plays provide a useful taxonomy for the extensive and wide-ranging Godber canon; a range that includes the physical (*Up 'n' Under*), but also encompasses the ritualised biographical (*April in Paris*) and the later, more naturalistic, class-conflict based work (*Perfect Pitch*).

The three plays share a genesis of a specifically northern commission by, respectively, Hull Truck Theatre, the Hull Literary Festival and the Stephen Joseph Theatre in Scarborough. They were each initially written for a particular audience but have gone on to demonstrate national and even international resonance; *April in Paris*, for example, has been staged in New York, Israel, Denmark and, naturally enough, Paris.

The plays are markedly different in form, ranging from the cartoon-like dynamism of *Up 'n' Under* to the naturalistic credibility of *Perfect Pitch* via the stylised economy of *April in Paris*. However, despite the different initial audiences and differing performance styles there are common themes underpinning all three: active women coping with passive men, domestic relationships and friendships under strain and the potential transformative power of leisure. This latter element of transformation will be discussed in greater detail in relation to each of the plays. They also share a mission to entertain – to attract and retain an audience that may be more 'at home', literally and metaphorically, with a televisual and cinematic culture than with the 'willing suspension of disbelief' which characterises the performative contract of fourth-wall naturalism.

Above all else, they are significant examples of popular theatre – a theatre accessible to an audience sometimes ignored by mainstream performance values, an audience for

whom the choice of leisure activity is not so much a question of where but who, not where to holiday but who am I? Many in Godber's popular theatre audience can identify with characters exercised by how they choose to spend their usually all-too-brief or otherwise enforced and lengthy leisure.

- I might be a butcher by occupation but I'm also a Rugby League player
- I might have a mindless job but I can still exercise my mind by entering competitions
- I might be part of what some perceive as the unemployed under-class but I'm a first-class breeder of bull terriers
- I might have a job that requires little imagination but I can choose to spend the occasional evening in the imaginative world of live theatre

These are frequently the parameters of Godber's characters' lives. The plays, written during the middle-to-late period of Margaret Thatcher's administration, consciously construct leisure, rather than work, as the determining factor in positive self-definition.

*

A popular leisure activity and one that contributes more than a little to a positive sense of self, particularly in Godber's native Yorkshire, is the playing or watching of Rugby League. It is important to note a significant regional distinction here, as the professional game of Rugby League is primarily seen as province of the northern working man and woman, whereas the once-amateur game of Rugby Union is traditionally associated with the south of the country. Godber has experience of both games, having played union at university and watched league games to assist the writing of *Up 'n' Under* and to research one of the passions of his Hull audience.

It is difficult to gain a true sense of the theatrical impact of *Up 'n' Under* from reading the text. The piece is not so much a play as an event, drawing its audience into the heat of the game and encouraging vocal support for the

struggling Wheatsheaf team. Successful productions have the audience leaping from their seats, cheering the training and the tries and sighing with partisan fervour as the final kick misses its mark. This vocal and emotive audience participation provides a useful key to a reading of the play as a particular kind of popular theatre – melodrama. Reg is clearly the villain, corrupt, manipulative and keen to exploit the naivety of Arthur and the team who become combined *de facto* heroine, out of their depth and in dire need of rescue. Enter Hazel, our trans-gendered hero, who not only transforms the team in a matter of weeks but joins them in the David vs. Goliath struggle of the climactic match. There is a consistent use of music to underscore emotive moments in the play (melodrama translates as ‘music drama’) from the use of the evocative *Rocky* theme to the team’s choric singing of an earthier version of Billy Bennett’s 1920s music-hall staple, *She Was Poor But She Was Honest*.

This passionate audience engagement is due to the quality of Godber’s stagecraft. Critics dismiss Frank and Hazel’s blank verse parodic chorus speeches as owing too much to early Steven Berkoff plays such as *East* but they fail to appreciate Godber’s knowing, irreverent, post-modern juxtaposition of high and low-culture, of William Shakespeare and Sylvester Stallone – *Henry V* meets *Rocky I*. Another crucial element of this stagecraft is the intense physicality of the play, the ‘sweat’ as Godber calls it. This is vital to the enjoyment of the last scene in Act One and drives the genuine tension of the final match. These scenes’ playful intertextual referencing of the *Rocky* theme music and ideals lift spirits onstage and in the auditorium.

The most significant moment of theatrical invention is the staging of the match itself. Rather like Anthony Shaffer’s 1970 thriller, *Sleuth*, original programmes for *Up ’n’ Under* suggest a cast larger than actually appears onstage in order to not, appropriately enough, give the game away. The moment when the actors, in their double-sided kit, run down-stage and spin through one hundred and eighty degrees to reveal their Cobblers Arms identity to the audience never fails to produce a cheer and spontaneous

applause in any decently-staged production; it is a genuine *coup-de-théâtre*. The match itself is a joyous mix of real-time, slow motion and fast forward action, allowing the audience's expertise as sports fans a rare moment of high-culture legitimacy or, as Alastair Macauley described the play in the *Financial Times* in 1995, 'they come knowing all about rugby, and they leave learning much about theatre'.¹

In *Up 'n' Under*, Godber has created a contemporary melodrama without the traditional ending of last-moment rescue. The hero, Hazel, manages to transform the fortunes of the team to the point where they have a chance of victory but the 'heroine' Arthur misses the vital kick. This is a consciously incomplete transformation and lends the play more credibility than a simple happy ending ever could. I would suggest that it is its very lack of well-made play credentials; its fast-paced, two-dimensional, cartoon-like quality that makes it a rare play, a popular contemporary melodrama that engages its audience in a truly theatrical event. Some of the dialogue may be overly economic at times and the characters may not stand detailed Chekhovian analysis of their motivation but I have yet to see an audience stamp and cheer in recognition of the exquisitely crafted moment of the shooting in *Uncle Vanya* in the way they support the expertly choreographed, match-turning half-time try of Arthur Hoyle. As Godber, citing the pioneering theatre designer and critic Edward Gordon Craig, states in his programme notes to the original production of *Up 'n' Under*, 'it is the dancer and not the poet who is father to the theatre'.²

*

After achieving a coveted Fringe First at the Edinburgh Festival in 1984 and winning the Society of West End Theatres award for best comedy in the same year, *Up 'n' Under* enjoyed a long run at the Fortune Theatre in London's West End. The plays of John Godber do not always enjoy such metropolitan success; London audiences, proud of their sophistication in so many respects, seem to struggle to accept the specific regional nuances of dialect and general 'Yorkshireness' of some of the later Godber

works. *April in Paris* played at the Ambassadors Theatre in London for fifteen weeks in 1992. There was an unusually famous cast: the late Gary Olsson as Al and the singer Maria Friedman as Bet. Reviews were mixed but Malcolm Rutherford described Godber, as ‘one of the best contemporary British playwrights’.³

However, some critics accused Godber of an ‘unearned optimism’ in the play, considering the transformation of Al from morose, monochrome malcontent into sprightly, technicolour optimist to be, rather as the five-week transformation of the Wheatsheaf Arms from no-hopers to giant-killers, insufficiently justified by the text. What they failed to appreciate was the frustrated artistic potential of Al. Frustration is a common theme in Godber’s more biographical work, the frustration of a man – sometimes a woman as in *Blood, Sweat and Tears* – with a desire to express him or herself but not the means, knowing that there must be more to living than existing but unsure how to access something more fulfilling. They also missed the poetry of the phatic dialogue that forms much of the first half of the play, the Pinteresque conversations where little is said but much is meant and even more is misunderstood. The short, non-verbal sounds, the ‘ee’s’ and ‘ah’s’ do not carry the same resonance for a southern ear as for a northern:

What they’d missed was the nuance. What they couldn’t get was the: Alreet? Alreet! To them that was just – all right! To a northern audience, it’s music, it’s poetry: How you feeling then? Not bad! That to me, that is an orchestra.⁴

The full subtlety of the play would have been available to anyone seeing the premiere at Hull Truck’s Spring Street Theatre as Godber himself played Al and his partner, the playwright and actress Jane Thornton, played Bet. Godber, for reasons of economy as much as anything else, has appeared in many of his early biographical plays such as *Happy Jack*, *September in the Rain* and *Cramp*. *April in Paris* was to be his last venture on to the stage, apart from occasional

unplanned performances when he has been forced on as an unlikely understudy due to cast illness.⁵ This is a shame as, by many accounts and reviews, Godber the actor is every bit as theatrically effective as Godber the writer and director. It certainly meant that in this original production, there was very little that was missed in the way of the non-verbal tics and gestures that can be the hallmark of a marriage spent almost exclusively in each other's company.

It is worth noting that Godber directs the premieres of all his own plays and manages to elicit rounded performances and a wider emotional range than subsequent directors who, in general, have a tendency to go for the broad comic moments at the expense of the understated integrity of the characterisation. In his direction, Godber always manages to maintain a balance between the strident comedy of desperation and the quieter pathos of frustrated, unfulfilled lives. That is not to say that *April in Paris* is a genteel study of a relationship in decline, far from it. Lines such as 'Every time you get a bath there's a line of scum left around the bath. It's like your skin's peeling off. I have to get a cloth and scrape it off' are funny yet brutal testaments to a relationship failing due to the forced intimacy of people who would ordinarily spend much of their time at work and apart from each other.

The inventive stagecraft seen in *Up 'n' Under* is again employed here with the two actors conveying the cramped Paris Metro, the height of the Eiffel Tower or the unsteadiness of the ferry crossing purely through body posture and carefully choreographed rhythms. Godber's keen visual sense of theatre is also evidenced in the play through the simple use of a swinging light-fitting to suggest movement, or the placing of a life-belt to denote a change of scene from the interior of a room to the exterior of a ship or, the transformation of the minimal white walls of the Act One setting into the sumptuous, multi-coloured spectacle of a detail from Pierre Auguste Renoir's 1881 painting, *The Luncheon of the Boating Party*. If the plot of *Up 'n' Under* owes something to the *Rocky* films, then the design and narrative tone of *April in Paris* is indebted to *The Wizard of Oz*.

Popular theatre techniques are also evident; the local references as they sail from Hull, the direct address, and the emphasis on the virtuoso actor creating a performance without recourse to elaborate make-up or staging. As an aside, it is interesting to note that Al's comment on the transvestite Parisian cabaret at Madam Arthur's, 'I'd never thought I'd sit through owt like that, but I'll tell you this, they worked bloody hard', resonates with a comment from John McGrath's seminal work on popular theatre, *A Good Night Out: Popular Theatre, Audience, Class and Form*, where he talks of a working-class audience appreciating *effort* in performance; 'They like clear, worked-for results . . . They know it comes from skill and hard work, and they expect hard work and skill'.⁶ *April in Paris* forms part of what has been described as Godber's 'Britons Abroad' trilogy, which includes the later Club 18–30 inspired play *Passion Killers* and the more famous skiing comedy *On the Piste*. All deal with the fish-out-of-water experience of the unsophisticated English traveller and the strain placed on already creaking relationships by the temporary licence to be somebody as 'different' as the exotic locations these couples holiday in.

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The most recent play in this collection, *Perfect Pitch*, was a commission for Alan Ayckbourn's theatre in Scarborough. This is an interesting relationship as Godber and Ayckbourn are increasingly bracketed together by critics as champions of, respectively, a particular brand of accessible mainstream and popular comic theatre: Ayckbourn is the only living playwright in the country whose work is performed more often than John Godber's. *Perfect Pitch* differs from the other two plays in this collection in that it is entirely naturalistic; there is no direct address to the audience, no multi-character acting and no stylised stage setting. It is played in compressed real-time with no fast-forward or slow motion moments. There is a physicality of action of sorts in the play but the sexual gymnastics of Grant and Steph occur offstage and are suggested by sound. The play is an observational comedy of class differences with the middle-class regimented lives of Ron and Yvonne brought into sharp relief by the

free-wheeling indulgences of their working-class neighbours – readers with knowledge of the Nietzschean approach to the Greek classics will recognise an Apollonian versus a Dionysian code. In this first professional liaison between Ayckbourn and Godber, the playwright has skilfully managed to satisfy both Scarborough and Hull audiences by taking characters who would be at home in an Ayckbourn play, Ron and Yvonne, and juxtaposing them with characters more likely to be found in one of Godber's plays – it is not difficult to think of Grant as one of the eponymous *Bouncers* or Steph trapped in the monotony of a waitressing job in *Shakers*.

Apart from notable exceptions such as *Up 'n' Under II* and *September in the Rain*, Godber does not write sequels, the plays tend to spring from immediate or recalled biographical incident or a particular anxiety over an element of the *Zeitgeist*. However, in this case it is possible to trace a reasonably direct link with an earlier play, *Gym and Tonic*: here the central character, Don, sees the solution to his mid-life crisis as being the purchase of a caravan 'and an awning for a barbecue.' The awning is one of the key metaphors in *Perfect Pitch* for the declining relationship between Ron and Yvonne. Godber clearly intends his audience to draw a parallel between Ron's difficulties in erecting the awning and another type of erection problem. The passionate, vocal love-making so apparent from their neighbours serves only to underscore this dysfunction and it gradually becomes clear that Grant and Steph are leading more fulfilled, more passionate lives than the supposedly culturally superior but rather cold couple next door.

The pivotal scene in the play occurs when Steph persuades Yvonne to see the male strippers in the local theatre. Having religiously abstained from alcohol whilst training, on this particular 'good night out', Yvonne succumbs to temptation on every level. In a characteristic piece of Godber stagecraft, the audience is presented with a double focus, the sight of Steph and Yvonne appreciating the physical prowess of the unseen male strippers as they, in actuality, gaze upon the distinctly paunchy Ron as he

undresses for bed. The repetitive, nightly ritual that Yvonne must have witnessed for many years is neatly juxtaposed with the singularity of the special event that, whilst initially reluctant, Yvonne enjoys with a vigour that one suspects is never shared with Ron in their more intimate moments. It is surprising to note that later, non-Godber directed productions, actually have ‘real’ strippers on stage, which, apart from being prurient, dilutes one of the most powerful images in the play.

Matters reach their most brutal when Ron challenges Yvonne over the details of what happened during the night out and Yvonne, incensed by Ron’s apathy and reserve, describes how the night with Steph and the strippers was ‘the first time I’ve felt any excitement’; at this point, Ron slaps her across the face. It is a genuinely shocking moment and usually elicits gasps of disbelief from the audience. We have been led to believe that Grant and Steph are the brutal Neanderthals – at one point Steph has a black eye that is either the result of over-enthusiastic sexual activity or domestic violence (Godber intriguingly leaves this for the audience to decide), but there is no such equivocation in the attack on Yvonne, who then fights back, and husband and wife ‘wrestle awkwardly’. Grant enters, we assume, disturbed by the noises coming from Ron and Yvonne’s caravan. The semi-articulate villain of the first half now appears as pot-bellied hero, reminding Ron that ‘tha’s not at school now!’ and lecturing him on violence against women. It is an effective and entirely credible role-reversal and gives the play an unexpected yet satisfying edge.

Reviews of *Perfect Pitch* were very positive; one critic described it as ‘Godber’s funniest and most acutely observed play’.⁷ Ron hopes that the purchase of a new caravan will also buy them a new lifestyle and possibly new lives; yet Godber makes it clear that they bring their old lives with them, the light classical music, the David Lodge novel, the imagery of the preserved Betaware containers all suggest a transportation of a lifestyle, rather than a transformation. It is Yvonne who travels the furthest distance metaphorically, her evening with Steph transforms her into a more

elemental creature, someone capable of living in and being of the moment rather than the more traditional, middle-class, deferred-gratification existence she has lead so far. The whole situation is beautifully underscored by Ron finally finding the elusive assembly instructions for the awning, suggesting that he may have also discovered his libido (or at least the instructions for it) but this is too little too late; Yvonne is listening to the sounds of Grant and Steph's passionate love-making at the end of the play.

These three plays show something of the range of one of this country's most popular playwrights. They demonstrate differing experiments in form, physical theatre, minimalist storytelling, naturalism; and an unerring instinct in matching this form to a variety of content. *Up 'n' Under*, *April in Paris* and *Perfect Pitch* are good examples of Godber's particular brand of popular theatre, where he debates frustration and transformation, the nature of leisure as empowerment but also as artistic, social or sexual impotence. A final link, which, I hope this introduction has made clear, is the proactive nature of the female characters in all three plays, Hazel, Bet and Yvonne all pursue an activity they enjoy, whether it is physical training or the mental exercise of entering competitions, they do something for themselves rather than, as their male partners, complain about what is, or has been done to them. For a writer sometimes accused of creating exclusively male-centred work, these plays have a surprisingly feminist streak to them.

John Bennett
 Liverpool
 April 2003

References

- 1 Alastair Macaulay, 'A Playwright Scores Sweetly', *Financial Times*, 11 March 1995.
- 2 Edward Gordon Craig, *On the Art of the Theatre*, Theatre Arts Books, New York, 1982.
- 3 Malcolm Rutherford, 'April in Paris', *Financial Times*, 3 February 1992.

- 4 John Godber in conversation with Jude Kelly at the West Yorkshire Playhouse, 21 November 1995. Full transcript available from the John Godber website, www.johngodber.co.uk.
- 5 Hull Truck Theatre usually does not provide understudies and John Godber has had to read in for indisposed cast members on various occasions; he once appeared as a stand-in for an actress playing a 15-year-old female pupil in his 1999 musical, *Thick as a Brick*.
- 6 John McGrath, *A Good Night Out: Popular Theatre, Audience, Class and Form*, Methuen, 1981.
- 7 Lyn Gardner, 'Perfect Pitch', *The Guardian*, 21 October 1999.

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Up 'n' Under

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To the Rugby League fans of Hull

Up 'n' Under premiered at the Assembly Rooms of the Edinburgh Festival in August 1984. The cast was as follows:

Arthur	Peter Geeves
Frank	Richard Ridings
Steve/Reg	Andrew Dunn
Tony	Chris Walker
Hazel	June Clifford
Phil	Richard May

Directed by John Godber

Sound designed by Alan McDevitt

Music by Steve Pinnock

Act One

Frank, Hazel, Tony and Phil enter. *They stand along the back.*

Frank takes a rugby shirt from the hooks and passes it across to

Hazel. *She catches it and places it carefully over the sit-ups rack.*

Frank takes up the speech.

Frank Here on the very playing fields of Castleford your eyes will gaze in awe at splendid sights unseen . . . Your mind will jump and question the wisdom of our tale . . . But we care not. So, let battle cries be heard across our fair isle, from Hull . . . to Liverpool. Let trumpets sound and brass bands play their Hovis tunes.

Hazel *throws the ball (which she has by now picked up from the bench) to Frank, then retreats back to her position.*

For here, upon this very stage, we see amateur Rugby League, a game born of rebellion, born of divide in eighteen ninety-five. For the working class of the North, for the working class. All around, pub teams throng the bars, club teams meet in lowly courts, amateurs all. Yet even as I speak a game commences in this battling competition; the Crooked Billet from Rochdale, play the Cobblers Arms from Castleford: unbeaten gods of amateur Rugby sevens, unbeaten many seasons with greatness thrust upon them. Yet many know this to be true, still, one man takes the stage – our hero: Arthur Hoyle, a very lowly figure, yet the stature of a lion, a painter and decorator by trade. His quest will be within our two-hour traffic, to challenge the might of the Cobblers, to throw down the gauntlet and hope to break the myth that is the Cobblers Arms . . . His journey may be long and weary, and though you must travel with him, you never can assist, no matter how you pine to; your role is but to sit, and watch. Yet soft, for as you gaze upon our breezeblock ‘O’ Reg Welsh appears, manager of the Cobblers, and trainer of their team; a very big fish on this our dish of amateur Rugby League. Here before your very eyes, two rivals meet: Reg and Arth.