

England calling

A Chicagoan gets Chekhovian about the English abroad

Michael Billington

NO ONE writes better than Chicagoan Richard Nelson about Anglo-American relations. In *Some Americans Abroad*, he dealt satirically with his fellow-countrymen's exaggerated respect for English culture. Now in New England at *The Pit*, he returns the compliment by exposing the myth that we transport our irony, detachment and emotional reserve to America: the result is a wonderfully explosive Chekhovian tragi-comedy.

Nelson's setting is a farmhouse in Western Connecticut: all his characters, save one, are English. What draws them together is the suicide in the very first scene — an echo of Hampton's *The Philanthropist* — of a moody, sixtyish music professor, Harry Baker. Alice, Harry's mistress, quickly takes charge, summoning his three children and twin brother from all over the States for the funeral. What follows is a weekend full of rage, recrimination and passion laconically observed by Alice's ex-brother-in-law: another exiled Brit who teaches English accents to American actors.

Nelson doesn't go in for easy generalisations: everything flows out of specifics. But he sharply shows how

the English can never shake off their colonialist condescension: Harry's eldest daughter is a painter who sees the New Mexico landscape in terms of Africa or India a century ago and his script-developer son Paul, though claiming to love LA, bangs on about Americans' unedited conversation and want of irony. Faced with a family crisis, however, these caustic exiles lapse into a clannishness and hysteria that wonderfully mocks their claim to self-awareness.

What, Nelson implies, makes the English so comic is their capacity for self-delusion: their belief in their own detachment when they are just as crazy and self-absorbed as anyone else. And his model is quite obviously *Three Sisters*, which he translated in 1984. Like the Prozorovs, the Baker family may war amongst themselves but unite solidly against outsiders: their treatment of Paul's French wife, who is seen as a bossy pain, given to long telephone arias, precisely matches that of Natasha in Chekhov's masterpiece.

Its form is also fascinating: 100 minutes straight through which makes me wonder, after *My Night With Reg*, if we are not gradually returning to the sustained one-act play. And Peter Gill, who has always been a master of stage naturalism, comes up with his best production in years: a genuine evocation of the emotional reversals and mood-swings that accompany a family-crisis. Fine performances too from David Burke as the sudical prof and his mellow twin, from Angela Thorne as his mistress bravely concealing how little she knew of the dead man and from Selina Cadell as his intemperately explosive younger daughter and Mick Ford as the embarrassed outsider. It's a rich play and a strangely timely one in that it shows how the supposed Anglo-American "special relationship" is based on the myth of a common identity.

At *The Pit* (071-638 8891).

Billington On New England

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