



exploring the illusion of the cohesive nation state.

Edgar has hit on a fascinating dramatic metaphor, and one follows eagerly the conflicting arguments about the fresco's date and authenticity. But in the second half, Edgar widens the territory so much as to burst open the dramatic form. A gypsy group of international refugees — led by a Palestinian and including Kurds, Afghans, Sri Lankans, Bosnians and Latvians — take over the church, hold the Western occupants hostage and threaten to set fire to the fresco unless they are granted sundry forms of asylum. At this point Edgar seems to be writing a different play about the refugee crisis, the dangers of an inward-looking Euro-centrism and the elevation of high art above human need. The play eventually returns to its starting point but not without several lurches into hectic melodrama.

Edgar's point seems to be that national identity is itself a myth: as the museum-curator who discovers the fresco puts it: "we are the sum of all the people who invaded us". Given the Babel-like complexity and diversity of Europe, Edgar implies that we should think globally rather than nationally and give basic human imperatives, such as the search for shelter and food, top priority. It is a powerful argument but it omits certain points — such as the danger of multi-national companies

Global warning . . . Charles Kay and Linal Haft in the impassioned Pentecost

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superseding individual states — and it is not worked out wholly convincingly.

Edgar throws too much into the pot. But at a time when plays are becoming ever narrower in their focus, that is a forgivable fault: it is a big, broad, challenging, public work. Michael Attenborough's production also marshals the 20-strong cast with exemplary skill; and there are strongly defined performances from Charles Kay as the dryly impassioned British scholar, from Jan Ravens as the local curator, from Linal Haft as a sceptical American professor and from Katharine Rogers as a vehement Palestinian, refugee. Tragical-comical-historical-polemical-political? Edgar's play partakes of all of these Polonius-like categories. But, for all its imperfections, it boldly confronts many of the issues raised by George Steiner in his great Salzburg lecture on Europe this year: above all, the supreme irony that Utopian dreams of unity are currently accompanied by the reality division, fissure and tears of fragmentation.

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At The Other Place, Stratford-upon-Avon (0789-295623).

## Billington On Pentecost Part Two

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