

Michael Billington at the Royal Court

PLAYS are getting shorter. Caryl Churchill's *Icecream* at the Royal Court runs a mere 75 minutes. But it packs an astonishing amount into that time. Using shock cuts and rapid transitions, it relies on the ability of a TV and movie-trained audience to supply missing information for themselves. It is a sharp reminder of how much play-writing is changing in the video age.

Ms Churchill's theme is the false view the Americans and British have of each other's countries. Americans look to us for history, tradition and cream-teas and then stub their toes against a primitive violence. We likewise are fed tourist-trap images of Disneyland, the Grand Canyon and the Everglades and then find ourselves confronting the kind of oddball solitude and religious fervour that Studs Terkel recently uncovered in *The Great Divide*.

The first act is set in Britain. Lance and Vera, sightseeing Americans, are cruising the tourist-spots from the Highlands to Devon and searching for family. Finally they dig up remote third cousins in East London: the boy, Phil, is a surly paranoid and his sister, Jaq, a spiky-haired drifter. But, having found the roots they were after, Lance and Vera become unwitting accomplices to murder when Phil bumps off his extortionate landlord and

buries him in Epping Forest.

Back in the States the American couple are haunted by their nightmare. Vera reports the murder to a disbelieving shrink, Lance all but confesses it to a colleague in a bar. Then Phil and Jaq turn up trailing gory clouds and importing their peculiar affinity with death. Phil comes to a sticky end and Jaq takes to the road meeting born-again Christians and an itchy professor before plunging Lance and Vera once more into guilt by association.

Structurally and thematically, I was reminded of the movies: *The Man Who Knew Too Much* meets *Paris, Texas*. The first half is exactly like a Hitchcockian movie in which a pair of holidaying Americans turn up in Europe and find themselves in a dizzying whorl of violence. The second half is a truncated road-movie that sees rural America as a disquieting place filled with pockets of eccentricity.

Simply because of its cryptic brevity, the writing is highly comic. "What have we got that's old?" asks Lance surveying some crumbling English ruin. "Sofa. Freezer," mutters an uncomprehending Vera. Ms Churchill also pins down well the American hunger for genealogy and for some tangible past. As Phil relates how his parents are deceased and how a loony uncle in Brighton shot himself, Vera incredulously inquires, "Do you not like family?" What Ms Churchill seems to be saying is that we are all innocents abroad and that our dream-images of each other's countries — fed by travel brochures and popular culture —

can lead us into temptation.

I found the play darkly funny and mentally bracing: it is like one of those puzzles in which you complete a picture by linking up the dots. But its elliptical cartoon-like speed contains its own danger which is that Ms Churchill begs too many questions. Isn't there something a touch patronising about the assumption that American reverence for family would lead to connivance at killing? Isn't there something a bit odd about Phil's ability to get away with murder without any repercussions? In a longer play, one would ask questions; but the quickness of Ms Churchill's hand almost deceives the eye.

Max Stafford-Clark's production, however, has a clarity of outline that exactly matches the writing and the actors imply more than they state. As the Americans, Philip Jackson, earnest in tartan trews, and Carole Hayman, fretful in white ankle-socks, suggest they are burdened with a troubled conscience. David Thewlis, lean and ragged as a pipe-cleaner, and Saskia Reeves, solemn and aggressively quiffed, are deeply disturbing as the murderous Brits. And Allan Corduner plays a variety of roles with quick-change precision.

In the theatre, the play works like a short, sharp shock: an acidly entertaining statement about mutual cultural incomprehension. It is only when you get home afterwards that you begin to suspect it contains the kind of lurking chauvinism expressed by Dr Johnson when he remarked, "I am willing to love all mankind, except an American."

Billington on Icecream

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