

MOST of the events in Caryl Churchill's *Icecream* (Royal Court) take place before the play begins or between the scenes, like the plot of *Il Trovatore*. They include two killings, one fatal road accident, and the improbable admission into the United States of a pair of English waifs with no return air tickets and one duffle bag between them. Much is left to the imagination: that is the point.

What the imagination supplies, of course, depends on the quality of clues and data available, and the writing of this 75-minute diptych is surprisingly uneven, even careless at times. Two middle-aged

Americans — solemn Lance (Philip Jackson) and prattling Vera (Carole Hayman) — motor through Britain in search of their ancestors and distant, living kin. After roving across an Ireland, Scotland and Devon whose hills are idyllically, and identically, quilted like the covers of a pre-war Batsford guide (designer, Peter Hartwell), they fetch up in the scruffy East End of London with Phil (David Thewlis) and his sister Jaq (Saskia Reeves). Phil is unemployable; Jaq has had 36 jobs. In front of Lance, Vera and Jaq, Phil shoots the landlord who has been exploiting them.

MURDO MacLEOD



## THEATRE

'Icecream', 'Carmen'

'Mozart and Salieri'

### MICHAEL RATCLIFFE

Each couple approaches the other's country in a state of ecstatic ignorance embellished by tireless cliché: rude awakenings ensue. Lance and Vera look for history in Britain and find only the provincialism and deprivation of today. In the States (Act Two, no interval) Phil and Jaq look for the American culture they affect to despise on television, but find instead a fearful adult world quite as anarchic as their own, which offers sudden death, and confirms the need to murder in self-defence.

Churchill's moral critique is far from even-handed: the Americans are merely presented and come close to caricature; the British are explained. The cool tone snaps once, as Vera weeps to her shrink who rattles off an all-purpose interpretation of her dreams like a High Street checkout till: another cliché.

There is fine comic energy and poetic spareness to the most successful scenes, but for all its impacted story-telling, lucid performances and bold technical leaps — precisely and musically directed by Max Stafford-Clark — *Icecream's* brevity is frustrating because it rests on uncertain detail and familiar concerns.

## Ratcliffe on Icecream

Clipped By:



ianharris

Wed, Feb 26, 2020