

**Richard Nelson's
The General, at
Stratford, is a hit
and miss affair**

Mess upon mess

ROOTLESSNESS and
Anglo-American cul-
tural misunderstanding
are the constant
themes of the Chicagoan dis-
missal, Richard Nelson, and
they combine with fair ac-
cuses in The General from
America at The Swan, Strat-
ford-upon-Avon.

Nelson deals with Benedict
Arnold also, during the War of
Independence, became the
most famous traitor in Amer-
ican history. On one level, his
plot is a history lesson. We see
Arnold, who has been an im-
pious soldier, being accus-
ed in 1780 from the Pennsyl-
vania politicians that he has
been guilty of serious prodi-
gality. George Washington,
his long-time leader, finds
him partially guilty and im-
pudently pushes him off to
command the fort at West
Point. Arnold hands the British
plans of attack and it is
only the incompetence that
prevents them capturing the
fort and Washington himself,
thereby saving the war.

Nelson tells a good story
well. But the lasting ques-
tion is why Arnold did it, and
here Nelson implies that Ar-
nold was a corrupt proce-
dure, that the Washington
he had a genuine sense of
grievance against meddling
politicians and that he was
torn between a love of Amer-
ican heritage and an interest
in the British. May the
viewer ever be disappointed
for treason, but in supplying
or any answer Nelson
leaves us puzzled as to the
source of Arnold's treachery.

Where the play scores is in
its ironic portrait of national
incompetence. The Brits
see America as a business
god forsaken colony, while
the Americans correctly ad-
mire British civilisation.
The best scenes repeat the
incompetence of British claims
to superiority. A series of
farces in the British of-
fices in New York are
largely an excuse for a
good farce. And Sir Henry
Clayton, the Commander-in-
Chief, finally entrusts negotia-
tions with Arnold to a pro-
cocking Major with whom he
is infatuated. It may be ex-
aggeration to suggest Britain
lost the American colonies be-
cause of a homosexual pas-
sion but the point about the
futility of the gentleman-
code comes clearly across.

Nelson's use of a black-the-
atrical production captures the
conflict between American
confidence and British
complexity. James Lan-
caster also suggests that Ar-
nold's theater connects a
rootless uncertainty and there
is no doubt support from
Rachel Joyce as his devoted
sister, Colin Hanks as a
morally testing Washington
and John Wood as a so-
berly incompetent Clinton. It
is a superb production, but it is
an over-the-top play that in-
vents the origins of a special
relationship founded on
misunderstanding.

in rep at The Swan, Stratford-
upon-Avon (01783 29022).

Michael Billington

General Billington Guardian



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