

Theatre

The General from America RSC, Swan, Stratford

turned Arnold against his fellow countrymen.

Beautifully staged and acted in Howard Davies's Swan Theatre production, the play is set around 1780 when sympathies between civilian politicians and the American military are becoming decidedly strained. The Committee of Pennsylvania has brought charges of war profiteering against the General. James Laurensen's imposing Arnold responds by referring to his courageous record in the field and by accusing the committee of wanting a civil war rather than a revolution. We hear of the thuggish violence with which these men repress opposition, and the climate of fear and suspicion they have created in equating true, upright Americanness with church-

going Christianity. The sense grows of a revolution that is losing its way.

Of course, there's a good deal of personal pique as well as principle in Arnold's decision to turn traitor. His tentative epistolary overtures to the enemy become active resolve only after - as a sop to public opinion - he's declared guilty of two of the charges by his friend and father figure George Washington. As the latter, Corin Redgrave wonderfully shows you the deep pain buried under the husky, sardonic humour. But Nelson's refusal to find Arnold a self-interested fraud is reinforced by one tellingly implied contrast. He makes Adam Godley's John Andre, the English spy with whom Arnold communicates, a social-climbing amateur actor whose exemplary behaviour at his death is put down to mere thespian bravado.

The Commander in Chief of the British Army in North America (John Woodvine) happens to have a massive and embarrassing crush on Andre. The fact that the Americans

capture and execute this bungling spy is therefore very bad news indeed for the newly recruited Arnold, who is considered a wretched substitute in a play that is full of career and / or emotional rivalries. Nelson chooses not to dramatise the traitor's exploits as Brigadier General in the British Army but dwells instead on the bleak, disowned future our hero faces in exile in the Brompton Road with a young wife (Jay McInnes), who has only accompanied him because the bigots have

turned her out of Pennsylvania, and with a creepily devoted sister. Reflecting on what he would miss, were he ever to leave his country, Arnold had earlier specified the "uncompromised earth" of untouched American nature. A description that is revealing of both the troubled psychology of the hero and of the deftness of the writing throughout this fine work.

■ To 5 Oct. Booking: 01789 295623

PAUL TAYLOR



Arnold (James Laurensen) embraces his wife Peggy (Jay McInnes) Photo: Stuart Morris

General Paul Taylor Independent



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