

A bad night for adolescents in Stratford

THE RSC seems strangely obsessed with the American playwright Richard Nelson. The company's new-writing policy is patchy at the best of times, but of one thing you can be sure: if Nelson pens a play, the RSC will put it on.

Sometimes one understands why. *Some Americans Abroad* was a hilarious study of Yanks on the British heritage trail, *New England* a fine, almost Chekhovian portrait of a troubled family. But at other times Nelson seems a minor, semi-detached playwright, with no distinctive voice.

Goodnight Children Everywhere is Nelson's ninth RSC play, and turns out to be a creepy and not always persuasive piece about incest. Like Andrea

Newman's *A Bouquet of Barbed Wire*, it keeps you hooked with voyeuristic fascination, but it is hard to escape the feeling that Nelson has little of interest to say.

The action is set in 1945, at the end of the war, and a shattered family is beginning to pick up the pieces. Seventeen-year-old Peter returns to the family flat in Clapham after being evacuated for more than five years in Canada. His older sisters, Betty, a nurse, Ann, who is married and pregnant, and Vi, a flirty actress on the make, are there to greet him, but not his parents, both of whom were killed in the war.

This family doesn't convince. Would these

Theatre

Goodnight Children Everywhere
The Other Place
Stratford-upon-Avon

apparently respectable girls be so uninhibited in front of their long-lost teenage brother, stripping off to their underwear on the flimsiest pretext? Nor is Nelson's command of Forties English spot-on. "I think the guy's a joke, a moron," says Vi of a suitor, but the line is surely pure American.

The fatal flaw is that I never believed that the prickly, pregnant Ann would so promptly seduce her teenage brother. The scene in which she peers at him in his tin bath, spots his

erection and brings him to a climax, which all takes place under cover of a clothes horse, brought me out in a flush of embarrassment, and must have been mortifying for the teenage boy I could see sitting with his parents.

Cathryn Bradshaw as Ann and Simon Scardifield as Peter give excellent individual performances, but the sexual spark that would render their passion credible fails to ignite. They babble on about their love for each other, but somehow you are never made to feel it.

There's no doubt that Nelson is excellent at scenes of social embarrassment, well caught in Ian Brown's production, with its evocative Forties domestic setting by Tim Hatley. I was also touched by the submerged grief of the siblings for their dead parents, and their response to the song *Goodnight Children Everywhere*, which reminds them of their loss.

But though Nelson is capable of wit, subtlety and real feeling, he sometimes turns embarrassingly mawkish, and his depiction of incest finally seems like a desperate measure to ginger up an underpowered play.

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