

About three years ago, playwright Richard Nelson was taking the tube in the London Underground when his attention was seized by a poster for an exhibition at Britain's War Museum. "It was an amazing photo of a girl of about eight, all bundled up with suitcases around her and a luggage label round her neck. This picture really caught me," recalls the New York-based writer. "I have two daughters, and I had been away from home for some time." The exhibition focused on an extraordinary episode in British history: the mass evacuation in September 1939 of two million peo-

ple, mostly children, prior to the bombing of England during World War II. "Just think about it — children ripped from their families at train stations, not knowing where the hell they are going," Nelson continues. "I had been wanting to write about childhood for some time and I thought, 'Here is a context.'" The play inspired by that exhibition, *Goodnight Children Everywhere*, is currently being presented at Playwrights Horizons in a production directed by the author.

*Goodnight Children Everywhere*, which borrows its title from a popular song of the period written for those

scattered children, actually takes place in 1945, six years after the evacuation. The war is over and families are being reunited. A boy, now 17, returns from Canada to join his three sisters, two of whom had been evacuated to Wales. "The situation of the play allows an adolescence to be expressed in a very intense way over two and a half days," explains Nelson. "Sometimes, the best way to write about things that matter to you is to give it perspective and distance by going into another culture."

By now, of course, Nelson is quite comfortable writing about English culture. The 48-year-old Chicago-born writer has been a house playwright at the Royal Shakespeare

Company since 1987, and many people mistakenly believe he lives in England. Nelson's best known plays, *Some Americans Abroad*, *Two Shakespearean Actors*, and *New England* — as well as this current play — were all commissioned by the RSC and received their world premieres in England. Not surprisingly, for someone who straddles two cultures, Nelson most often writes about displacement and exile. In *Some Americans*, he wittily observed the antics of boorish American culture vultures in London. In *New England*, he turned his keen eye on snotty English expatriates in America. In

one sense, *Goodnight Children* is another exploration of Nelson's favorite theme. "The greatest outsider in the world is an adolescent," says the playwright. Nelson is confident that *Goodnight Children Everywhere* will transcend its particular historical context. The family dynamics in the play echo those of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, and indeed the themes resonate with a far more calamitous contemporary situation if one starts to imagine the effects of displacement and arrested adolescence on the children of Kosovo. Nonetheless, Nelson was only too aware that, as a foreigner, he was "playing with fire" by taking on a

# Family TIES

Richard Nelson takes on adolescence in *Goodnight Children Everywhere*.

By Gerard Raymond

defining moment in English culture. In its premiere production, the play was extremely well received, although some people found it hard to reconcile the behavior of the characters with the usual picture of post-war England. Throbbing with carnal appetites, Nelson's characters behave with a sexual license (even breaking taboos like incest) that would have mortified the genteel romantics of Noël Coward's 1946 movie *Brief Encounter*.

But Nelson has done his homework. He has tapped into a little window of confusion that existed in England just after the war — a time

when food was rationed, families were in disarray, women far outnumbered men, and gender roles were undefined; when, in short, everything was up for grabs. The American author Edmund Wilson proved a valuable source, says Nelson. Wilson had traveled extensively and observed English life in the summer of '45, during exactly the same time period as the play. Nelson even has a line in the play describing a shop that sells only dead crows (as a meat substitute), which is directly lifted from Wilson. More telling was Wilson's portrait of Londoners living life as if there were no tomorrow.

"There are descriptions of middle-class people fucking in the early evening in Clapham Common (the public green near where the play takes place) without really caring to hide the fact," says Nelson. "I think there were similar instances in the tube stations and in the air-raid shelters. But then, in a short time, the country put a lid back on."

English social history merely provides the backdrop for *Goodnight Children Everywhere*; Nelson mentions August Strindberg, whose work has greatly influenced the psychological core of the play. Nelson became acquainted with the Swedish playwright's work when he began his 1996 adaptation of Strindberg's *The Father* for the Roundabout Theatre Company. He says he wasn't able to get a handle on Strindberg until he discovered the playwright's introduction to *Miss Julie* (which Nelson has since adapted for a forthcoming Roundabout production). Strindberg had written that a multiplicity of



**Playwright/director Richard Nelson (c.) with the cast of *Goodnight Children Everywhere* (from l.): Heather Goldenhersh, Robin Weigert, Chris Stafford, and Kali Rocha.**

JOAN MARCUS

motives for every action is a definition of the times. He was referring to the 1880s, but Nelson believes this holds true for the 1990s as well. "And that opened up a whole new kind of play that I had never known how to address before," says Nelson, who kept the Strindberg quote on his desk while he was writing *Goodnight Children*.

The notion of multiple and even contradictory motivations also provides a key to the unsettling times in the world of the play. Mike, the older man who has married one of the sisters, seems to play the roles of husband, father, lover, and brother in that household. And in one of the play's most striking moments, a sister embraces her brother and tells him she can see the boy, the brother, and the man, flicking by like the pages in a book — all at the same time.

Looking to the future, Nelson —

for a change — has more projects lined up on this side of the Atlantic than the other. Coming up is his 1996 play *The General From America*, about Benedict Arnold's defection from George Washington's army, which has thus far only received only one American production, at the Milwaukee Repertory Theater. And, for the first time in more than a decade, he may have a play open in New York before London; producer Gregory Mosher is planning a commercial production of Nelson's latest, titled *Madame Melville*, next spring. ("It's a surprise," teases the author, refusing to divulge anything about the work, except that it is set in Paris.) The playwright is also associated with Mosher's production of *The Dead*, an adaptation

with music of the James Joyce short story, which was originally announced for this past season.

Whether working in England or in America, Nelson has forged a unique career for himself by associating with the RSC and doing new adaptations of classics like *The Father*. "When I was in my late 20s, I felt that there was very little contemporary American theater that was pushing things out in a way that interested me," he says. "I made a calculated, conscious decision at the time to do two things — to work within a classical company and try to get employment as an adapter and translator — both for the single-minded purpose of becoming a better playwright. Both have allowed me to earn a living, but the reason was always to grow artistically." He adds, "And if anyone wants to commission for a *Cherry Orchard*, just holler!" ■