

# Richard Nelson Abroad

By Gerard Raymond



Nelson (L) with director Howard Davies at the MTC. Joan Marcus

Chicago-born playwright Richard Nelson is more frequently produced in London than in New York. But that's not so surprising when you're a house playwright at Britain's Royal Shakespeare Company. The 45-year-old American is best known here for *Some Americans Abroad* (at Lincoln Center) and the 1992 Broadway production *Two Shakespearean Actors*, both of which originated at the RSC. Now a year after its successful RSC run in London, his latest play, *New England*, opens in New York on November 7 at the Manhattan Theater Club.

In *Some Americans Abroad* Nelson wittily observed the often boorish behavior of a bunch of American tourists in London. In his new play, a black comedy of manners, he has turned his keen eye in the opposite direction. The characters of *New England* are self-imposed English exiles in America; they gather together at a farmhouse in Western Connecticut for the funeral of a family member. Literate, intelligent, and equivocal, Nelson's English characters are too often unaware of their own contradictions. Of course, that is part of the fun watching a Nelson play—if only the characters could see themselves with the clarity of the author. We

talked to Nelson recently about his new play.

**TheaterWeek: What was the starting point for *New England*?**

**Richard Nelson:** One thing that interests me is writing about groups of people; *Some Americans Abroad* is about a group of people, *Two Shakespearean Actors* is about two groups of actors. For this play I had the general idea of a group of English people in America, and [their] feeling of displacement.

There is a line in the play: "The barbarians are sweeping over us and all we do is kiss their ass." If you spend a lot of time in England, or anywhere outside of this country, there is phenomenal love-hate relationship [with America] apparent right now; being the only super power, America carries a lot of baggage. The post-Berlin Wall-world situation of people trying to deal with this monolith America really interested me. [The characters] are not just visitors, these are people who have actually made a choice to live in America. They either love or hate that choice, but they are living it. [Also] the evolution of the English characters has a lot to do with what I know, having spent a lot of time in England. I can tell you I have been at

many a dinner party where people have done their American accents.

**How did you feel being the American at those parties?**

Sometimes they'd forget [I'm American] and it's very funny. I have a lot of friends there, very close friends, and in the course of conversation people start criticizing America. We forget how big and important, how important a symbol even, America is in the world. We mean something—good and very bad as well—in the rest of the world right now. People are faced with it constantly every time they walk out of the door. There is always an American something somewhere.

**How did people in London react towards your writing a play about English characters?**

If you had asked me this question a year ago, I would have said I would be thrown out of the country because I am an American and I wrote a play with only English (and one French) characters. Except for a couple of radio plays, I have never written English characters before. One can imagine what it would be like if an English writer comes to America and writes a play with only American characters talking about England; the pitfalls are absolutely immense. But in fact the reaction was that

somehow I'd gotten under their skin. A few people actually said I was too generous to them.

**Was it difficult to write dialogue for English characters?**

I have a belief, in terms of my own dialogue, that you don't try dialects as a writer. English actors who are playing Americans almost always feel like they have to do an American accent, and it usually comes out Southern. I keep on telling them to do an English accent: You need just a couple of sounds and you'll sound like you are from New York or Connecticut, they are not that different. What is different is the head, the thinking.

It is a question of character as opposed to a question of sound. So if I have got the characters right, if I knew who these people were—and they were English in my own head—then that would be enough for the actors themselves. There was never any talk about what part of England they were from. And because all the characters had been in America for quite awhile, there are a lot of Americanisms in the play, whether the characters are conscious of it or not. That's a fun thing for an actor to play.

**Did you make the choice to work mostly in London? All your recent work has premiered at the Royal Shakespeare Company.**

It is not so much as choice as you follow your fate; you go where the work is, where it is interesting. I was involved in American Theater in a very strong way: I had done a lot of work in the regional theater, Manhattan Theater Club, Playwrights Horizons, and The American Place, and I was literary manager of the BAM theater Company. But in 1986 my friend David Jones directed *Principia Scriptoriae* at MTC, [and then] wanted to do it at the RSC. It did very well there and they commissioned a new play, so I wrote *Some Americans Abroad*.

I was amazed by one of the first comments I got from them: "Too bad there aren't more characters." The play has 13 actors in it! Because they are a Shakespeare company they are always matching shows with Shakespeare productions, and these are in the 26-28 actor category. One of the things they were interested in, at that particular time, was new plays of a certain scale. This was an opportunity I couldn't refuse.

I had been working on some scale in

America, I had written this play *Rip Van Winkle or The Works* which had a cast of thirty, and which was done at Yale [1981], and I had been getting involved with classical theater, doing translations. But no one in America had ever said give me more characters. And no theater at that time seemed to have any interest in a relationship with a playwright beyond the play at hand. That continuity, so that you know you are not starting from zero every time, is very, very nice.

**Have all the plays you have written since *Principia Scriptoriae* been commissioned by the RSC?**

Yes, and I have just finished a new play which is on commission as well. It's called *The General from America*, about Benedict Donald, the great traitor of the American Revolution. He was perhaps the most successful field general in the Revolution and then he changed sides and lived out the rest of the life in London. If the RSC chooses to do it, they will do it in the season beginning in the summer of 1996.

**Reviewing *New England*, some critics noticed parallels with Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*, which you previously adapted. Was that play a conscious model for *New England*?**

I didn't set out to write *The Three Sisters*, but, yes, the notion of the Prozorovs, a family, in their mind, in the boondocks, away from civilization and their glory, seemed to me a fantastic image for what I wanted to do in *New England*: a group of people whose glory has faded. There is a line in the play where the painter talks about being in New Mexico and how it makes her feel better just by looking out at the landscape and saying to herself 'Africa' or 'India.' It makes her feel better because that was when they controlled something. Obviously many things go on in [Chekhov's play], but the sense of being dislocated from one's power and place in the world is really an essential theme of my play.

**Do you regard yourself an expatriate?**

Not at all. I can't tell you how many times I run into people who say, "Oh, you are visiting," and I say, "No, I live here." I have always lived in America, in upstate New York. I live in England when my shows are in rehearsal; for *New England* I was there for two and a half months. I have a wife and two daughters and I am

an American and I enjoy living in America.

**Do you feel dislocated in England?**

Oh, I feel dislocated everywhere. I feel out of step with my country in many ways—though fascinated and wishing to be engaged; and in some way [out of step] with my profession here as well. But there I am an American. I am different, an outsider, a guest and a visitor.

Once I wrote a play called *The American Comedy* in which two writers are having an argument over home. One says home is where you hang your hat, the other says home is where your heart is, and they go on and on. It is as simple or as complex as that.

**Don't the English characters in *New England* face the same question?**

The thing is you can't not live in America. It is the New England for everyone. Whether you are in Japan, or anywhere else in the world, in part, you live in America. That is what is so extraordinary about the end of the 20th century. And there is a lot of resentment about that, as there should be. It is a wonderfully rich theme for 1995.

**Would you say that's the theme of *New England*?**

I think that finally, even though I talk about all these themes, the job of a playwright is a completely descriptive one. I wish to describe how I see things—in all its complexity, in all its confusion and ambiguity, with all of its humor and all of its sadness. So for audiences coming in to watch, hopefully, they are let in on a world which has not already been judged. That world is foolish, stupid and mean-spirited, and yet loving, needy and helpful. Writing really evil or deranged characters doesn't interest me, either. These are the people I see every day. The joy is putting them up and letting the audience see them as they are, not as they wish to be seen. There are no lessons in my plays I think, except that we live in a very complex and rich world.

*Anyone interested in the collaborative art of the theater should read Richard Nelson and David Jones's **Making Plays**, published recently by Faber and Faber. In a series of insightful interviews with each other, Nelson and Jones (who has directed several of Nelson's plays, including *Principia Scriptoriae*) explore the writer-director relationship in the theater.*