# Richard Nelson

by Gerard Raymond


Sipping a latte at one of the ubiquitous Starbucks coffee shops in downtown Manhattan, Richard Nelson tells me that he often runs into people in New York City who invariably assume he's visiting from London. "No, I live here," he says to them. "I've always lived in America, in upstate New York." But it's an easy mistake to make. Nelson is a house playwright at Britain's Royal Shakespeare Company. And since 1987, all of his plays have been commissioned by that prestigious institution, and they have all premiered in England before making their way over to America.

Not surprisingly for someone with strong cross-Atlantic connections, the 45-year-old American playwright frequently explores the nuances of Anglo-American relationships; he is a canny observer of both cultures. In his best known play *Some Americans Abroad* (written in 1987), Nelson wittily portrayed the often boorish behavior of a bunch of American cultural tourists in London. In his new play, a black comedy of manners titled *New England* (staged this month at Costa Mesa's South Coast Repertory), Nelson turns 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. Like so many of Nelson's creations, they are literate, intelligent and equivocal, too often unaware of their own contradictions. Of course, that's part of the fun watching a Nelson play — if only the characters could see themselves with the clarity of their author.

"I like writing about groups of people," says Nelson, as the steady line of Manhattanites file past us to get their caffeine-fix. In his historical comedy-drama *Two Shakespearean Actors,* his next play after *Some Americans Abroad,* he focussed on two groups of actors (American and British, of course). His starting point for the current play was the group of English exiles in America. But what interested him on this occasion, he says, was their feeling of displacement in their adopted country.

The characters in *New England* live far-flung across the United States, and they bear a curious love-hate relationship to America. They've come here by choice, and although they continue to live and work here, they maintain a snobbish attitude towards the natives. One of them complains, "The barbarians are sweeping over us and all we do is kiss their asses."

"Being the only superpower, America carries a lot of baggage," says Nelson. "The post-Berlin Wall-world situation of people trying to deal with this monolith America really interests me. 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 — to the rest of the world right now, and people are faced with it, constantly, every time they walk out of the door. There is always an American some-

thing, somewhere."

Having spent a fair part of the past nine years in England, Nelson has had the opportunity to observe firsthand the ambivalence people from other cultures have towards America. "I have a lot of friends in England, very close friends, and in the course of conversation these people start criticizing America," he says. "I can tell you I have been at many a dinner party where people have done their American accents. Sometimes they forget I'm American, and it's very funny," Nelson adds laughing.

Nelson's wit and sense of humor keeps even his most satirical portraits from becoming acid. "I wish to describe how I see things — in all its complexity, in all its confusion and ambiguity, and with all of its humor and all of its sadness. These are the people I see every day. The joy is letting the audience see them as they are, not as they wish to be seen. So hopefully, the audience is 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. We live in a very complex and rich world."

Born in Chicago in 1950, Nelson started writing plays at the age of 15, greatly influenced by Broadway musicals, to which he was introduced by his mother, a former chorus-line dancer. He continued his writing at Hamilton College, a small liberal arts school in New York State, and received a year's travel fellowship to Manchester, England in 1972. But his ties to the London theater were still over a decade into the future. Nelson returned home to continue writing and eventually received his first professional production (a play titled *The Killing of Yablonski*) at the Mark Taper Forum Lab in 1975.

Working with regional theaters across the country in the mid-seventies, Nelson forged his career in the not-for-profit world of the American theater. His work was produced at several major regional and New York resident companies, and in 1979, he was appointed literary manager of the (now defunct) Brooklyn Academy of Music Theater Company.

Then in 1986, Nelson's friend David Jones, a director at the Royal Shakespeare Company, decided to stage in London, Nelson's *Principia Scriptoriae*, a political drama set in Latin America which received its premiere at New York's Manhattan Theater Club. On the strength of Jones' production, which was enthusiastically received by London audiences, the RSC commissioned a new play from Nelson.

For *Some Americans Abroad*, Nelson says he took characters familiar to him and placed them in a situation that was easily recognizable to the RSC audiences. The American tourist taking in a Shakespeare production in Stratford is an all-too-familiar, and often hilarious sight. The show was an immediate success, but the RSC had one complaint. "They said, 'Too bad there aren't more characters,'" Nelson recalls. "I was amazed. The play has 13 actors in it!"

At the time he wrote *Some Americans Abroad*, Nelson says he had just gotten interested in writing large-scale plays. In fact, his 1981 play *Rip Van Winkle or The Works*, which was produced at Yale, called for a cast of thirty. But, he says, "no one in America had ever said give me more characters." Since the RSC mainly produced Shakespeare — plays with usually 25 or more characters — and they liked to uti-

**Penny Fuller and Larry Bryggman in *New England* which will be at the South Coast Repertory through May 12.**

lize the same number of actors in the new plays that run in repertory with their Shakespeare productions, the company actively sought out large-scale work. "This was an opportunity I couldn't refuse," says Nelson smiling.

Furthermore, the RSC had a reputation for establishing long-term relationships with their playwrights. American theater companies at the time, Nelson says, seemed to have no interest in the author beyond the play at hand. Ever since that first commission, the RSC has offered Nelson a new commission on the opening night of his current play. Thus, in the past decade, he's had the enviable luxury of knowing that there will be a home for his next play. At the RSC, his work includes the epic *Columbus and the Discovery of Japan* and *Misha's Party*, which he co-wrote with Russian playwright Alexander Gelman. In one of his rare non-RSC undertakings, Nelson authored the book of the Broadway version — of the musical — *Chess*.

Nelson's latest play will also premiere at the RSC, at the company's home base in Stratford-Upon-Avon this coming July. Titled *The General from America*, the play is about Benedict Arnold, the great traitor of the American Revolution (from the American vantage point, that is). Arnold was perhaps the most successful field general in the war. Then he changed sides and went to London, where he spent the rest of his life. A perfect Nelson scenario! If it hadn't actually happened, he would have had to have inventeed it.

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Back in Starbucks, I ask Nelson if he had any qualms about writing the English characters in *New England*. "If you had asked me this question before the play opened in England, I would have said I thought 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, Nelson had not written English characters before. "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." As it turned out, English audiences, for the most part, felt the author had somehow gotten under their skins.

*New England* demonstrates that Nelson is one of the few American playwrights who can write convincing English characters. But he says he did not consciously try to write dialects. "It's a question of character as opposed to a question of sound. So if I have gotten the characters right, if I know who these people are — and they were English in my own head — then that would be enough for the actors themselves." Furthermore, he adds, because this particular group of English characters have all been in America for quite a while, a lot of Americanisms have slipped into their speech, whether they are conscious of them or not.

Several critics have invoked the name of Chekhov when discussing Nelson's group of displaced English characters and their yearnings for the old England. Nelson, who has adapted several classics (most recently the Broadway production of Strindberg's *The Father*), has also written an adaptation of *The Three Sisters*. With *New England* he did not set out to write a contemporary version of the Chekhov play, Nelson says, but he acknowledges that the notion of the Prozorov sisters — "a family who are, in their minds, away from civilization; a group of people whose glory has faded"— is a perfect image for his play.

In *New England*, one of the characters, a painter who lives in New Mexico, says that it makes her feel better just to look at the landscape and say to herself "Africa" or "India." "It makes her feel better," Nelson explains, "because that was when they controlled something. The sense of being dislocated from one's power and place in the world is really an essential theme of my play."

Which brings our conversation around to why the characters in the play harbor an anger and bitterness towards America. "The thing is you can't *not* live in America," says Nelson. "That's what is so extraordinary about the end of the 20th century. Whether you are in Japan, or anywhere else in the world, in part, you live in America. And there is a lot of resentment about that, as there should be. It is the New England for everyone."

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