

Play review of richard
nilson's some
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Some Americans Abroad Order No. 237075 August ' 08 Some Americans Abroad Some Americans abroad, a play by Richard Nelson and directed by Gordon Edelstein is being staged at the Second Stage Theatre in New York. The play is a comedy about a group of American college students accompanied by English literature professors embarking on a literary tour of England. It is a satire on how atrociously this group behaves in London. The characters in the play are played by veteran and some new actors. The ensemble includes actors like John Cunningham, Pamela Payton-Wright, Tom Cavanaugh and Emily Bergl.

The plot is about the literary pilgrimage a group of academics and their students undertake every year. The play revolves round Joe Taylor, who is the new head of the English department of a New England college, his colleagues and students. On the tour they race from one literary landmark to another. As they do so the director showcases the character of these people. They are shown as spineless, arrogant, penny pinching, pompous individuals who in spite of all the knowledge they have are quite ill-equipped to handle conflicts that arise when they come out of their orderly campus and step into the real world. Mr. Nelson's script is finely crafted pointing out a basic fact concerning tourists. Tourists are often too busy rushing from one tourist attraction to another without actually seeing. Even though the script was written nearly twenty years ago, the story is still topical and interesting and does not appear outdated. The comic and the serious elements that run throughout the play make for some interesting viewing.

Gordon Edelstein, the director, has been able to get some fine performances from the cast. The acting is strong throughout the play and all the characters, though stereotyped at times, come across as fully formed

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characters. They are convincing and professional in portraying their empty but complicated and tense lives. Tom Cavanagh is excellent as Joe Taylor, the department head, who is friendly but aloof. John Cunningham and Pamela Payton-Wright play the politically incorrect Anglophiles. Anthony Rapp is good as the timid Henry, who is shown taking desperate measures to save his job (even dressing like his boss). Emily Bergl, who plays Betty, Henry's loyal wife, has a small part to play but stands out in the crowd with a compelling performance that has bitterness and anger written all over it. John Cunningham, a veteran and seasoned actor is able to make the audience laugh as the retired department chair with a mean streak. All the characters have a common thread among them, their unwillingness to face the truth.

The sets by Michael Yeargan are stark and simple. Very cleverly, Edelstein puts forth the metaphor or rather the imagery of the play by making the actors move the furniture from each scene. New tables and chairs representing the various pubs and restaurants the group visits are brought as new props. For each scene the old props are merely moved to the back of the stage and by the end, the once empty stage is filled with tables, chairs, dishes and crushed napkins. This mess stands for the characters' emotional messes and the accompanying untidiness. This also showcases the increasing messiness of the trip. The chairs and tables are almost like mementos of the trip. Donald Holders lighting is able to evoke London's infrequent sunshine and the gloomy atmosphere of the rains. Jennifer von Mayrhausers costumes capture the casual looks of the 1980's. John Gromada has provided melodies which are in contrast to the messy and untidy proceedings on the stage.

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Many in the audience felt, that some of the characters of *Some Americans Abroad*, were trivial and obnoxious and the situations and satire not funny enough. Some felt that the play was outdated. However one feels that Nelson has scripted a genteel comedy and does not try to invoke cheap laughter. The characters he creates may be slightly obnoxious but are human. Nelson puts forth a perfect example of tourists and their holier-than-thou attitude which gives tourists a bad name. As Judd Hollander (2008) says, the play is “ a satire on American tourists trying to see all they can in the short time they are on foreign shores, its also a much more serious look at the concepts of pseudo-superiority and ‘ ugly Americans’.” This may not be a perfect production, but certainly this is one of Richard Nelson’s best plays.

References

1. Hollander Judd, 2008, *The Epoch Times*, Retrieved from [http://en. epochtimes. com/n2/arts-entertainment/theater-americans-abroad-1830. html](http://en.epochtimes.com/n2/arts-entertainment/theater-americans-abroad-1830.html)