“England People” deeply flawed

England People Very Nice, by Richard Bean, at the National Theatre, London

Paul Bond
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Directed by Nicholas Hytner, until 9 August

Richard Bean’s latest play *England People Very Nice* is an overview of immigration into East London. With a cast of 22, it covers four centuries of migration into the area. It is a fast-paced, boisterous work. But the play fails both artistically and, given its subject matter, politically.

England People Very Nice is set in an immigration detention centre. During the six-month wait for the result of their asylum applications, a group of detainees put together a play about migration into Bethnal Green in London’s East End. Their play within a play careens through the arrival of the Huguenots from France in the 17th century, the Irish, East European Jews, Lascars, and Bangladeshis. It also points to earlier waves of migration that formed the “native” British population. Based on Daniel Defoe’s “The True Born Englishman” (1701), a satire in verse, the opening song sets the background of successive invasions by the Romans, Saxons, Danes, and Angles.

The play shows the backlash against each wave of new migrants. Local Guild weavers attack the looms of Huguenot workers; Irish immigrants are attacked in the anti-Catholic Gordon riots of 1780; fascist parties recruit against Asians. As each wave of immigrants is successfully assimilated into the local culture, Bean shows them then becoming a vehicle for racist attacks on subsequent waves. Those who arrived earlier are identified as thoroughly “English,” as opposed to the new arrivals.

Bean sets out his stall early on: he is promoting “British” assimilation against multiculturalism. In a previous play, *The English Game*, he used cricket as a metaphor for the disintegration of national cohesion.

Much of this is shown through recurring gags and characters in the pub that is a constant throughout the play. A fascist tells Rennie, a Caribbean regular, that he is as “British as hot tea in a flask” and that the dispute is no longer about skin colour.

At the beginning of the play, Ida the barmaid curses the Huguenots: “My grandfather didn’t die in the English Civil War so’s half of France could come over here and live off the soup!” By the time the Irish arrive, Ida is the daughter of a Veronica Popineau, demanding that her landlord should give her mother’s flat to a “French” family. Towards the end of the play Asian residents are complaining that they are losing housing to newly-arrived Somalis.

How far does this approach get us? The play’s repetitive, cyclical structure only shows Bean’s observations to be banal, his portrayals patronizing. What conclusions is he seeking to illustrate? Writing on the National Theatre Web site Bean talked about assimilation taking three generations. As the Bangladeshi population from Sylhet has not yet been established for three generations, he wrote, “their project is unfinished.” For Bean, the “current issue” is their “process of integration, or lack of it.”

Bean deals only in the broadest and coarsest of racial stereotypes. The Irish are promiscuously incestuous, the French swooningly romantic. Nor is this just a parody of bad acting by the detainees, as these stereotypes are not confined to the play within the play. The detainees are as one-dimensional as the characters they portray, and the stereotype is usually negative: a Nigerian father endorses the beating of his daughter, a Palestinian is always being reprimanded by detention centre staff for comments about Israel implying anti-Semitism.

This is unpleasant stuff, which appeals to prejudices of the worst sort. It gives the lie to Bean’s claims to be “not really a political beast.” In an interview with the *Guardian*, the playwright made a revealing comment: “You go to a dinner party and raise the subject of immigration, and immediately you’re the rightwing loony. But we should talk about it, because this is what our nation does: we develop and change partly because of the different types of immigration we’ve had.”

Of course immigration should be spoken about. But what does Bean have to say?

He compared his recent experience of living in Bethnal Green unfavourably with living in neighbouring Stoke Newington. In Stoke Newington, he said, there are “different races, creeds, classes, and everyone rubs along fantastically well.” Bethnal Green remains “ugly and intimidating.”

To the non-Londoner, this may be somewhat obscure. Bethnal Green remains a deprived area, despite pockets of gentrification. It has a large and generally poor Bangladeshi population, making up over 40 percent of the area and non-white groups constitute a significant majority. Stoke Newington does indeed have an ethnically diverse population, with a large Afro-Caribbean

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community. But it has undergone rapid gentrification and attracted a layer of affluent professionals who may occasionally brush past representatives of poorer ethnic groups or eat in their restaurants, but nothing more.

The urgent question for Bean is how to achieve other suitably gentrified boroughs. There is a running gag about migration out of East London to the suburbs of Essex, presented as a way of avoiding the "unassimilated" migrants.

Bean told the *Jewish Chronicle* that he saw two models of multiculturalism. One covered those things that had "enriched the culture of this country": food, music, and clothing. He described this as "ephemeral." The other model he called the growth of "little cantons." His opposition to the "little cantons" takes the form of a right-wing appeal to "a clear culture which is based on the rule of law. British law."

Bean describes himself as a "liberal hawk." He has claimed that the British theatre suffers from a lack of political diversity, telling the *Guardian* that "In journalism, you have people like Nick Cohen, David Aaronovitch, Rod Liddle, who are democrats and liberals, who occasionally say things that are unpalatable but are in my opinion true. Among playwrights, you don't have that broad church."

Who are these journalists? All three embody the decay of liberalism and its lurch to the right. Facing what they see a direct threat to their own privileges and wealth from below, they respond in ever more reactionary ways. Aaronovitch summed up the tendency when he referred to farmer Tony Martin's fatal shooting of an unarmed burglar in 1999, writing "Most non-criminals hate burglars more than we hate paranoid farmers."

Cohen signed up to the liberal imperialist Euston Manifesto, calling for a "new progressive democratic alliance" to defend military intervention. It won the praise of US arch-neo-Conservatives such as William Kristol, a co-founder of the ultra-right Project for the New American Century. Liddle is a former Labour speechwriter who has advocated bombing Iran. In 2005 he presented a television documentary entitled *Immigration is a Time Bomb*.

Bean implies that by expressing artistically this reactionary political outlook he is posing a challenge to some "radical" orthodoxy in the theatre. This hardly bears scrutiny. Bean's play is in the main house of the National Theatre, where it was directed by Nicholas Hytner, the National's director.

In 2002 Bean co-founded the Monsterists, a group of playwrights dedicated to "large-scale, large concept" productions. Among the aesthetic concerns outlined in their 2005 manifesto were:

Meaning implied by action (not by lecture)
Characters caught in a drama (not there to facilitate a polemic)
The exposure of the human condition (not sociology)
Inspirational and dangerous (not sensationalist)

Not "lecturing," not "polemical," not "sociology," but an exposure of the "human condition." A bold claim, but one clearly directed against left-wing playwrights and their didactic tendencies—real or imagined. In Bean's latest work, the manifesto becomes a justification for a polemical, tendentious, and hostile response from the right. It is no accident that his representation of political activity in his latest play is so cynical: attempts at organizing Jewish tailors and Irish dockers are conducted by the rich girl reacting against her father, who is himself buying off Jewish radicals, for example.

The National under Hytner has actively supported plays produced by Monsterist playwrights. Moira Buffini's *Dinner* was first produced at the National Theatre Loft before its West End transfer. *Dinner* dealt with the collapse of middle-class certainties. Buffini has said, "Post-September 11, I felt I needed to write about a world out of joint. So I deliberately made the characters in *Dinner* intelligent, educated, liberal, selfish miserable people, with a spiritual and moral vacuum at their heart."

Another Monsterist, David Eldridge staged *Market Boy* at the Olivier in 2006. Set in a declining 1980s Essex street market, the hero moved out of street trading and into the City. Maddy Costa in the *Guardian* described it as a "celebration of the 'anything-goes spirit of the 1980s'," while Eldridge himself said he was interested in what the play had to say about today, "because we are Thatcher's children."

None of this is encouraging as a way forward for the theatre. The emphasis on the scale of shows is largely a cover for the somewhat thin (and often retrograde) ideas at their heart.

There is more to a raucous theatricality in any case than a big cast and bad jokes. Bean has often cited Joe Orton as a playwright who could unerringly find an open wound and pour salt into it. But Orton, apart from having a much tighter grip on comic writing, worked for the most part on a small scale: *Loot*, a scabrously funny play about brutality and authority, has a cast of six. Within its miniature framework, Orton establishes a social milieu and situation that Bean does not achieve in his larger sprawl. In *Loot*, the one innocent character is condemned to protect a murderess, two bank robbers, and a corrupt policeman. This is some way from Bean's approach, in both form and, more importantly, in content.

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